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Fig. 1 Dana Lixenberg (2007) *Nathan Weyiouanna's House.*

Imperial and geopolitical relationships in Iñupiaq climate change narratives: extinction and cultural survival in *The Last Days of Shishmaref*

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Landscape representations of the north, especially the circumpolar north, are often depicted as dedifferentiated spaces of snow and ice. This reflects a long tradition in polar expeditions, where, as Lisa Bloom has demonstrated, the "blank spaces" on nineteenth century maps authorised explorers' access and possession, "preceding and legitimating" their

desire to know and define the landscape (1993: 1-2). In Euro-American conceptualisations, the icy north features as a site of scientific examination, heroic exploit, and endurance (Kaalund 2021: 4). Similarly dedifferentiated photographic representations often fail to engage with geopolitical aspects of place, indigenous experiences, and human/non-human relationships. Contemporary European photographic practices that depict indigenous experiences work towards acknowledging cultural specificity and existential challenges such as the impact of climate change, but as this chapter will demonstrate, documentary representations both limit the understanding and conceptualisation of the contextual impact of geopolitical inequalities whilst also offering some interesting and nuanced depictions of cultural survival.

This chapter specifically analyses several representations of Shishmaref in Alaska, which is situated just south of the Arctic Circle, and is ice-bound for part of the year. Home to around 600 Iñupiat residents it has featured in the book and documentary film *The Last Days of Shishmaref* (Lixenberg 2008; Louter 2008). Central to these representations is the narrative of climate change impact on the erosion of the place and on subsistence practices. Examining these representations enables a geopolitical analysis, sensitive to the cultural survival of the Iñupiat, to emerge. In these representations, the *placeness* of Shishmaref matters, even though people and culture are strongly foregrounded. This is perhaps not a surprise given that for Iñupiaq communities outside of metropolitan centres, subsistence practices, and close ties to ecology and the non-human world, are paramount to their existence and cultural identity (Sakakibara 2020). Alaska, however, is also part of the USA, and this means that Shishmaref is also connected to, and affected by, the global economy through imperial relationships. Central to this discussion is the representation of cultural survival and the production of imperialist knowledge, which is both caught *in* geopolitical relations, and is also the outcome *of* geopolitical relations. Whilst contemporary

anthropological approaches rightly foreground resistance, creative adaptation and continuity, this potentially overlooks the unequal relations produced through geopolitics. This chapter, then, analyses the book and film *The Last Days of Shishmaref,* through the lenses of anthropology, geopolitics and critiques of imperialism.

Geopolitics and imperialism

Analytic geopolitical frameworks have the potential to enrich our understanding of the circumpolar north. Dodds (2019: 3) claims that there are three qualities to geopolitics:

> First, […] geopolitics is concerned with questions of influence and power over space and territory. Second, it uses geographical frames to make sense of world affairs … [including] 'sphere of influence', 'bloc', 'backyard', 'neighbourhood', and 'near abroad'. Third, geopolitics is future-oriented.

Dodds advocates for a critical geopolitical approach, which "focus[es] on how the interactions between the human and the physical produces 'geopolitics'" (ibid: 3). The 'north' of this chapter is a place called Shishmaref, just a few miles south of the Arctic Circle, in Alaska. Alaska's status within the United States of America is that of a peripheral 'backyard', physically disconnected from the US by a lack of a shared border but part of the wider north American landmass. Alaska, certainly in the popular imagination, is associated with wilderness imagery, spectacular scenery and charismatic wildlife. However, Alaska is also the US's strategic state in the Arctic, providing access to Arctic 'resources' such as gas and oil. The wider international awareness of Indigenous peoples' perspectives is inconsistent but becomes activated commonly through climate change discourses where Indigenous

activists have had success in bringing their plight, and their relationship to the US and energy companies, to wider attention. This awareness of the geopolitical dimension enables the discussion in this chapter to consider imperial and commercial relationships for Indigenous communities in Alaska, as well as considering the current and future impacts of climate change. This approach includes a space for Indigenous perspectives, which "imagine, mobilize, and interact with the wider world" (ibid: 9).

Jairus Victor Grove (2019: 2) has developed a critical approach to geopolitics that acknowledges how power imbalances in the realm of international relations have led to the "right of survival *for some*", acknowledging the impact on both human and non-human living beings. Grove continues by claiming that "geopolitics is violence against life. It is connected to war, power and selection of life. It involves lethal force" (ibid: 3). Grove sees geopolitics as a shaper of the world, indeed, he says it is an "obstacle to any other version of our world, whether plural or differently unified" (ibid: 5). Eschewing ideas of the Anthropocene due to its depoliticization (ibid: 39), Grove frames European colonialism as the Eurocene, a maker of the world as homogenization rather than differentiation, spreading Eurocentric world views that produce terraforming, atmospheric engineering, and ecological catastrophe within the power politics of a Euro-American global order (ibid: 43). Grove's account of geopolitics is fundamentally a violent *Savage Ecology* of European making.

Such critical accounts of the idea of the Anthropocene abound. Kathryn Yusoff, for example, frames the sudden concern of white people for the environment, climate, and way of life, in contrast to the experiences of black people, who have experienced such impacts for centuries (2018: xiii). For Yusoff, the framing of these large-scale changes as recent history excludes longer historical specificities by prioritising white geo-trauma, perpetuating an on-going violence against Black and Indigenous subjectivities (ibid: 59-60). The changes wrought over centuries to people, environments, living beings, and cultures, have been

monumentalised into a "cultural edifice" that is extractive, racialised and industrialised (ibid: 59). The "White Anthropocene," she claims, "takes the epistemology of the particular into a 'general expression' without a collective refashioning" (ibid: 61). Similarly, T.J. Demos, in his book *Against the Anthropocene* (2017: 18) rails against the large-scale refashioning of the planet as 'human' or a species activity, instead noting that deforestation, ice melt and large-scale pollution are the activities of corporate industries. Demos further notes that Anthropocene rhetoric, produced through images and texts, universalises complicity, disavows responsibility, obscures accountability, despite the relatively small-scale or insignificant individual or cultural contributions that some people and cultures have made to the ecological crisis this rhetoric signifies (ibid: 19).

The loss of languages, connected as it is with a loss of "worlds" (Grove 2019: 55), leads to a loss of life. Combined with worldviews that aim to overthrow the human-centric perspectives and priorities of thinking about planetary-scale changes from Western and dominant perspectives, Black and Indigenous epistemologies have become resurgent. Unlearning the dominance of imperial epistemologies has become vital. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay in her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019) is a case in point. The starting point for her writing acknowledges that work undertaken to undo or understand imperialism continues to perpetuate imperial relationships in the present and that our current ways of unlearning imperialism often remain hegemonic (ibid: xv). In similarity to Grove and Demos (and others working with ideas of worldings), Azoulay's concern is for the different cultural ideas of 'world', yet she also analyses how the onto-epistemological structures of imperialism contain, limit and destroy these worlds, whilst simultaneously trying to rescue them for intellectual discourse. Photography is intrinsically part of this imperial discourse. Whilst it is the case that the limiting, partial epistemological frameworks precede photography's invention, photography has a tendency, nevertheless, through its framing, use

of perspective and the slicing of time, to produce units of knowledge or representations which are partial at best, and thoroughly incorporated within imperial discourse at their worst.

Imperialism across the world created the conditions for looting, violence, the destruction of alternative worlds and epistemologies, and in the process it also created a new world (Azoulay 2019: 3); one that Grove sees as universalising and limiting, and fundamentally European in its world view. The study of people, places and objects that was created by imperialism was only for a select few (Azoulay 2019: 4). In Azoulay's thesis, photography (and specifically the shutter) creates three dividing lines: time (before and after the photograph); space (who is in front and who is behind the camera); and the body politic (those who practice photography or labour within it, and those who are depicted by the shutter) (ibid: 5). The pervasiveness of photography has, however, helped to blur the lines of responsibility, creating by its very prevalence a sense of neutrality. The extraction of knowledge, including cultural knowledge, created "imperial divisions and imperial rights", which those subject to its power have some recourse to draw upon, yet only through acceding to the epistemological world of imperialism. The violence of imperialism is therefore recreated through such acts as reparation without recourse to the reconstruction of the worlds already extinguished in its creation. Azoulay continues:

> Unlearning imperialism is an attempt to suspend the operation of the shutter and resist its operation in time, space and the body politic in common cause with those who object to it. Unlearning imperialism attends to the conceptual origins of imperial violence that presumes people and worlds as raw material, as always already imperial resources. (Ibid: 8)

Subjects of imperialism are made "agents of progress" and they seek "to destroy what is cherished by them… namely their worlds and modes of being with others" (ibid: 12). Indeed, finding potential history means not privileging imperial accounts and instead retrieving other "modalities of being in the world" (ibid: 16). In contrast to postmodern accounts of Indigenous culture (Clifford 2013) Azoulay sees ideas of the "new" and "progress" as "both the reason and excuse for destruction and its remedy, the preferable way to deal with the wreckage left behind producing ever-increasing ruination" (Azoulay 2019: 18). She maintains that:

> To rewind history is to insist on the existence of different patterns and incommensurable modalities of citizenship experienced prior to colonisation by different groups of people who shared their world as cocitizens of different sorts in the societies in which they lived. (Ibid: 19)

The current, predominant task of museums and archives, then, is to create a past for imperial citizenship. This is predicated on the 'preservation' of the past through these different cultures, yet they also simultaneously and implicitly create a museum to the violent destruction of the worlds from which these artefacts emerged (ibid: 19). Azoulay sees these objects of veneration as not for study but as objects which enshrine the "rights of violated communities… they constitute part of the material worlds out of which people's rights are made manifest" (ibid: 30). Azoulay's thesis, however, does not stop there, sounding a warning about the speaking position of scholars and experts who study these artefacts:

> When research focuses mainly on oppressed groups, I argue, it contributes to the socialisation of citizens to act as privileged subjects who can afford to care about

> what is done to others, thus reproducing the radical difference between them, rather than as cocitizens who care for the common world they share with those others and who are committed to dismantling the principle of differentiality that organises it. When ruling is differential, citizenship is a privilege and a light weapon against all other groups of the governed population. (Ibid: 37)

This last section of Azoulay's work issues a challenge to scholars such as me. Writing in a European context with privileged access to cultural products and knowledge, I risk reproducing the kinds of differentiated citizenship-as-concern that bypasses addressing the imperial violence of the production, distribution, and consumption of representations, however well-meaning my intentions, or the intentions of the makers of those representations. Azoulay's own work is supported by "companions" who assist in ensuring that the ways in which representations, objects, and histories are analysed in the context of seeking reparations are undertaken without repeating the pitfalls of imperialist thinking. She also analyses various creative practices and interventions into the spaces of the museum and archive that actively decolonise institutions. Unfortunately, decolonisation is often partial. Some institutions have yielded to the demand for the repatriation of objects, but continue to impose imperialist thinking by stipulating that restored artefacts are contained in Western-type museums, where light levels, humidity, and security are controlled, ensuring that they remain subject to imperial 'expert' framings. These stipulations hinder the recognition of the objects' vital meanings in living cultural practices within their original communities. Azoulay acknowledges the loss of worlds that accompanied their removal, seeks restorative justice and restoration of those worlds. Arguing that researchers and academics should "refuse to relate to these … objects of study" (ibid: 446) and instead engage with "worldly caring" (ibid: 321),

Azoulay understands that imperial relationships are all too likely to be reproduced through the analysis of representations even where attempts at critical thinking are deployed.

In this chapter I want to analyse a series of representations associated with a culture beyond my personal experience that is affected by geopolitics, imperialism, colonialism, unequal relationships in trade and commerce, and climate change. I can attempt to 'unlearn imperialism' and work for the restitution of rights but I am also a viewer of these products, far from their site of production, and closer to the centres of power where their production is enabled, a situation within which both the production and consumption of documentary film and photography continue long-established imperial relationships based on knowledge extraction. (Knowledge extraction, occurs in this instance through the Iñupiaq community sharing their traditional knowledge about environmental thinking and subsistence, together with the narrative of their environmental peril, which risks being assimilated into Western knowledge for the purpose of commodification and for exploitation within environmental campaigning (Grosfoguel 2020:209-10)). My viewpoint is produced through imperialism's lens, but I can work to fight for the non-destruction of this differentiated world. My interest here, then, is in the rights of an Iñupiaq community to be heard, appreciated, valued and acted upon in the name of the continuity of multiple worldings, even though the risk here is that this account will also result in the continued production of imperial knowledge and the increase of my own cultural capital through the performance of concern. The aim of this analysis is to examine the kinds of messages and implications created by representations of endangered landscapes and communities whose worlds are both geopolitically located in, and epistemologically beyond, the power base of Europe and USA. This analysis will specifically consider the representations of the landscapes and people of Shishmaref in Alaska. In drawing upon these European representations of Shishmaref, this account will focus on the purpose of the performance of care and concern for both people and place.

The Last Days of Shishmaref

Shishmaref is a small city on the island of Sarichef in Alaska, on the edge of the Chukchi Sea. Shishmaref is home to around 600 Iñupiat inhabitants who are losing their island and their houses to erosion exacerbated by climate change.

The Iñupiat in Shishmaref have been active in bringing their plight to the attention of the wider world through activism and they have featured in many films and news reports including Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim 2006). Notable amongst the visual representations is *The Last Days of Shishmaref* (Jan Louter 2008; Dana Lixenberg 2008), which is both a documentary film and a photobook. Shishmaref's residents and their story is also more recently recounted in the British Museum's *Arctic: Culture and Climate* (2020) and in Bryan Adams' book *I am Inuit* (2018), although the plight of Shishmaref is not the focus of these two books.[1] The book and film *The Last Days of Shishmaref* include photographs of the island and its landscape, portraits of the residents, and photographs of everyday life. In these representations of Shishmaref, the close connection between people and place is emphasised through their subsistence practices, which are dependent on the sea, land, its ecologies and seasonal patterns of living, hunting and gathering food.

Subsistence, however, is also threatened as loss of sea ice has an impact on hunting seal, and the migration patterns of caribou are changing. At the time of the making of the film and photographs, Shishmaref residents wished to relocate to Tin Creek, a site further inland and relatively close to the island (Lixenberg 2008: 44). American authorities, however, are offering relocation to an existing Alaskan city, Nome, which raises concerns within the community about cultural assimilation, the influence of alcohol and drugs, and whether the younger members of the community will retain their language and cultural identity. The

[1] Collectif Argos also covered Shishmaref in their book *Climate Refugees* (2010).

predominant aim in both the book and the film, whilst there are significant differences between them, is to make the audience aware of the specific loss of place due to climate change, and to foreground the community's desire for cultural continuity. This dovetails with the desire of one of the people filmed – Ardith Weyiouanna – who believes that if people knew about their plight, something would be done to help them.

The film, *The Last Days of Shishmaref* deals with the end of a world: the extinction of a place, a culture and way of life, concern about changing ecologies and subsistence practices. This concern is expressed directly through the title *The Last Days…* Imperial relationships abound, though, in discursive spaces surrounding Indigenous identities and cultural practices. Extinction narratives, especially when concerning people and culture, are reminiscent of the 'dying race' theory prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century in colonised places (McGregor, 1997), where the extinction of races was conveyed in the tones of melancholic regret, but was also seen as inevitable in the face of progress. Dying race theory has traditionally both *openly* acknowledged the impact of colonialism and imperialism on people and cultures beyond Europe whilst presenting this demise as unavoidable. Importantly, imperial powers continue to disavow responsibility for the extinction and refashioning of the world (Yusoff 2018: 27). Extinction narratives, then, are fraught with pitfalls for those who produce and engage with them. *The Last Days of Shishmaref* is made with the co-operation of a community who actively campaign for their sensitive and safe relocation, and it is made within the space of broader concern for the practices, languages, ecologies and customs that constitute a diversity of worldly being. It is made to address those who want to support the continued existence of the richness of the world. There are several questions to address, then, in analysing the book and film, together with the associated material. Firstly, to what extent does the melancholic tone of the film assist with the community's activism and what are the pitfalls of using this particular form of

communication? Secondly, what are the differences and potential advantages of the book, which emphasises family relations instead of producing an elegy? Thirdly, how do contemporary geopolitics affect opportunities to maintain a world and culture that is both in and beyond American and European epistemologies and stereotypical identities? This will bring together concerns about imperial relationships as depicted through the film and photographs towards Shishmaref as a place and towards the people who live there and their culture. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to analyse the kinds of extinction narrative that are set up by the film and the book *The Last Days of Shishmaref.* To answer these questions, it is worth undertaking a fuller examination of the film and the book, noting the overall narrative arc and key differences between both cultural products.

The narratives in the Last Days of Shishmaref

The Last Days of Shishmaref, directed by Jan Louter, is in many respects a conventional documentary film. It introduces Shishmaref as a place, using wide shots of the landscape, and it also introduces key members of the community. Whilst several members of the community speak in the film, a significant narrator and subject is Ardith Weyiouanna. Her reflections, worries and descriptions of cultural practice provide the structure and pace of the film. The film observes everyday activities, including family meals, community gatherings, such as bingo night, teenagers hanging out in their bedrooms listening to music, subsistence practices, including hunting and the preparation of food. Attention is paid to collecting ice for water and specific cultural activities such as carving, fishing through the ice and keeping huskies. Snowmobiles and their maintenance are frequently depicted as this is the more usual mode of transport. The use of hunting grounds such as Serpentine Hot Springs, and seasonal subsistence practices at Tin Creek are depicted. The soundtrack of the

film combines mournful string music with voiceover accounts of living in Shishmaref together with the voices and interviews from community members. The film follows a calendar year, from winter to winter. Signs of modernity appear throughout the film: modern housing, vehicles, references to the island's airstrip and connections with the wider world, television, computer games, music and food, as well as consumer goods and fashion.

After the establishing shots set the scene for an ice-bound landscape, we are introduced to Ardith Weyiouanna who is washing up [fig. 2]. Ardith describes her arranged marriage to Johnny before introducing other family members. Her account opens with the words: "I am Iñupiat, full blooded. I am an Eskimo and I am also American because we are part of the United States. But first of all, I am Iñupiat."

Insert Fig. 2 Still frame from Jan Louter's (2008) film *The Last Days of Shishmaref,* 04:27

Ardith introduces the subsistence practices which are the focus of the film and the dependence on sea ice for the capturing of walrus and bearded seal. The shortened winter season, and the reduction of sea ice as a consequence, increasingly reduces the hunting season. Perry Weyiouanna, Ardith's son, has a key role in hunting (we see him hunting both

caribou and seal) and he reflects that “Our people have always worked with nature.” Ardith concludes: “It is a lot of work but if we don’t do it then our family is hungry. But nowadays everything is different. Everything is changing.” Water is also important: Shishmaref has no running water or sewerage, making the collection of ice for water necessary, and every household has a “honeybucket” for waste. The community’s desire for running water and sewerage is mentioned several times in the film, and support from the US government has not been forthcoming. Whilst Shishmaref has a shop that stocks Western food, gas (petrol), clothes and consumer goods, the expense of a mainstream American diet is noted. Joel Magby, another significant person introduced in the film, explains that a T-bone steak costs the same amount as five gallons of fuel, which is sufficient for hunting two-to-three caribou. For the residents of Shishmaref, having a snowmobile and gas means more food.

The community’s awareness of climate change is articulated through several means. Ardith and others expressly talk about changes to the weather: storms in the autumn are stronger, fall is later, and spring is coming earlier. But the residents of Shishmaref often gather in their families to watch representations of climate change on television: whether Al Gore on Oprah, excerpts of his film *An Inconvenient Truth,* or news bulletins about Shishmaref, the destruction of the village is described in urgent and desperate tones. The documentary cuts to the northern edge of Shishmaref, which is perilously close to the sea, and included in the footage is evidence of the houses falling into the sea as the shoreline is eroded. Two younger residents of Shishmaref map the location of their family and community members, both in the present and the past, signalling their awareness of change in their community. The city is being swept into the Chuckchi Sea, a few metres at a time, and in bad storms the changes are more dramatic and threatening. Later in the film Joel Magby reflects on the lack of interest and support from the Federal Government and Ardith further worries “What is to become of our people?” Joel believes the place is coming to an end, the

residents will be refugees and that his son, Cody, will not remember Shishmaref. Ardith talks about the offer of being relocated to Nome, but she is worried about the effects of alcohol and drugs; this is part of a wider concern about whether young people will connect with their culture. Instead, the residents have voted to move to Tin Creek, although Ardith acknowledges that it will be hard to imagine living in the hills. The end of the film finishes with Ardith: "How would Shishmaref be if it washed away and if people went different ways? If we are not together anymore, I think we will become weak and lost. It is painful to think about and heart breaking." The final shots of the film are of Ardith and Johnny, her husband, walking over the snow into a wide expanse of white. Ardith states that she does not want to be buried at Shishmaref and worries about her bodily remains being washed out to sea.

Whilst the use of mournful string music is not continuous throughout the film, it does periodically support the emotional trajectory of a community mourning their home and expressing its worries about the future, both from the point of view of maintaining subsistence practices, and in the emotional upheaval of relocating (even the preferred location brings its changes and worries, although moving to a city brings the greatest fears around cultural continuation). The periodic shots of wide-open landscapes, people either working together or alone in the expanse of the landscape, suggests isolation. Yet these shots are also complimented with footage of community activities such as basketball, bingo and eating together. The landscape, though, never seems to be populated, even in the shots of the city. In depicting the city as quiet, the isolation of the community is strongly suggested.

The book, by noted photographer Dana Lixenberg, is different although similar themes emerge.[2] The book contains photographs, with captions and intersecting chapters of

[2] The photographic project, developed alongside the film, was supported by Paradox, a non-profit organisation based in the Netherlands, dedicated to stimulating the development of documentary photography (Paradox).

text. Each photographic section focuses on an extended family, and paragraphs of text at the start of each section outlines kinship relationships. There are numerous portraits, photographs of dwellings (both interior and exterior) and photographs of the wider village, as well as landscape photographs that depict the island of Sarichef and its surroundings. Portraits of individuals and family units form an important part of the book, and the photographs of Shishmaref, dwellings and surroundings are used to contextualise the place where people live. Photographs of hunting and preparing food (such as skinning a caribou and seal) are included and some portraits include visual references to subsistence practices. Short chapters report on the impact of climate change, which is the main content of the chapter 'Relocation' (Lixenberg 2008: 43-45), and other chapters cover 'Cultural Identity' (ibid: 83-84), 'US Institutions and Infrastructure' (ibid: 123-125), 'Subsistence' (ibid: 163-165) and 'Modern Life' (ibid: 203-205). The book opens with a short Iñupiaq story on the creation of Sarichef Island (ibid: 5), as told by Ardith Weyiouanna to her granddaughter Emma Bessie. The photographs are made on a large format camera and are compelling in their formal rigour and in their depiction of the relationship between people and place. The book, devoid of an emotive soundtrack, is significantly less melancholic than the film.[3]

The film and the book are well contextualised, providing details of Iñupiaq history as well as outlining the challenges of moving as a community. Both are moving testaments to the life of the Iñupiat and their ability to organise and campaign for their culture. However, reading this film and book is complex and the telling of the Iñupiaq story of Shishmaref is fraught with pitfalls. Of concern here is the apparent similarity between salvage ethnography and the type of narrative that emerges from *The Last Days of Shishmaref,* particularly in the documentary film.

[3] Associated educational workshops were developed alongside the photography, including a video workshop for children in Shishmaref.

Salvage ethnography, extinction narratives and mourning

The dominant narrative strategy used in the film is one of elegy. The film is slow-paced, using long takes of people engaging in everyday activities. Many of the people who speak about their way of life reflect on change, such as subsistence practices and the availability for processed foods, although some change is actively sought (such as access to running water). Perry Weyiouanna expresses regret at the loss of the "old ways". Hunting and subsistence are becoming harder as the changing climate alters the environment and animal behaviour, and this is repeatedly mentioned throughout the film. The vulnerability of Shishmaref to coastal erosion is clear in a long panning shot, where houses are both hanging off the edge of the sand island and in immediate peril of joining those that have already been destroyed. Frequent concern is expressed about the violence of the recent destructive storms and the truncated timescale for the safe relocation. Joel Magby expressly articulates his fear of Shishmaref "coming to an end", of the residents being "refugees" and his sadness at the loss of the place where his family has been resident for generations. The fate of Shishmaref has already been accepted by the residents: we are told more than once that in ten to fifteen years the island will no longer be there as the place will be swept away in a storm or will be uninhabitable. Pervading the film is a sense that Shishmaref has already been surrendered.

Extinction narratives have become common across a range of literary, televisual and photographic contexts and are not new. However, this era of unprecedented climatic upheaval and declining biodiversity has been called the 6th mass extinction (Kolbert 2014) and has spurred the production of numerous responses to biodiversity loss. The extinction not just of charismatic megafauna but also of insects, flora and entire ecosystems have been of major concern, yet the definition of extinction and its parameters is contested (Kolbert 2014; Heise

2016). Given that a lot of the living world is still yet to be identified and quantified by Eurocentric scientific means, measuring extinction is a complex activity. Yet many scientists and amateur natural historians, as well as members of Indigenous populations, are noting species decline in significant numbers and across numerous contexts. Ursula Heise (2016: 5) has argued that "biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell." In Heise's analysis, extinction narratives often follow set templates: "the idea that modern society has degraded a natural world that used to be beautiful, harmonious and self-sustaining and that [it] might disappear completely if humans do not change their way of life" (ibid: 7). Furthermore, Heise notes that Indigenous, "ecologically grounded" practices form a politically powerful contrast to the unsustainable and destructive modern practices of agriculture, extractivism and consumption. Heise, following both theoretical development in flat ontologies and environmental justice, rejects simple binaries between nature and culture. She sees species extinction narratives as a critique of modernity (ibid: 32), which leads to mourning and melancholia. Whilst Heise notes that many extinction narratives envision extinction as a "narrative endpoint" she notes that there are possibilities for new beginnings and different narrative possibilities of continuation. Avoiding a naïve and unsophisticated account of endings-as-beginnings, Heise further argues that without questioning who and what is deemed worthy of being included in an appreciation of species diversity (discussions that can be positively fuelled by either flat ontologies or by the concerns of environmental justice), there are risks that familiar anthropocentric frameworks will exclude many species from consideration, including non-human species and those people and their languages and culture who are less likely to be deemed important for saving.

Heise argues (2016: 23) that elegies often involve narratives of regret for modernisation and colonisation, producing a sense of loss in response to a "narrowing of

culture." In the film we experience a sense of loss for the environment and ecology that is part of Shishmaref as the landscape itself is vulnerable: it is highly likely that what we see in the film will not exist in the future. Perry Weyiouanna also states that the "Modern way has put us in a vulnerable position," indicating ambivalence about the impact of modernisation on and in the community. It is here that frameworks of understanding Indigenous cultures become strained, demonstrating imperial fractures. Historically, narratives of salvage ethnography demonstrated a desire to document cultures before they became extinct (Clifford, 1989). In the late Nineteenth Century such narratives existed due to the common belief that Indigenous peoples were unable to adapt and change and would therefore 'die out'.[4] In reality, many Indigenous peoples around the world were adapting to modernity, not least to imperial and colonial demands, and this partly fuelled colonial concerns about cultural specificity and its loss. A double-bind was created in which Indigenous concerns about culture were all too often not recorded.

The melancholy desire to save both Shishmaref and its residents' linguistic, subsistence and cultural practices, raises questions about the similarities and differences to salvage ethnography from the late 19th Century. Indeed, the narrative structure of elegy, whilst driven by the desires of the Iñupiat to save their community and culture, also fuels the desires of a modern European sensibility to 'save' a place and a culture that is threatened by both climate change and modernity. What other ways can the mourning of a place and its culture be understood? Answering this question means engaging both with the significance and expression of mourning, and a closer look at salvage ethnography.

[4] Concerns about cultural loss were expressed racially, with 'full blooded' descendants being perceived as legitimate members of a race and those who were 'mixed blood' were not (McGregor 1997: 16). Such terminology is often considered unacceptable today, although some Indigenous peoples use such language and concepts, including some members of the Iñupiat in Shishmaref.

Ashlee Cunsolo (2017: xiv) has examined the impact of climate change on Inuit communities in the Arctic north finding that there are effects on the Inuit relationship to place, nature, sustenance, and wellbeing, all of which have consequences for mental health. Cunsolo has further reported that Inuit communities frequently see land as a person, who is also capable of expressing loss and reciprocity (2017a: 171). Indeed, in worrying about the future impact of climate change, many Inuit communities also experience anticipatory grieving, yet these representations fail to appear in the wider media. She concludes: "Mourning provides the opportunities to learn from deaths, or the potential deaths, of bodies beyond our own, and beyond our species to unite in individual and global action and response" (2017: 172). Sebastian Braun (2017) has further argued that mourning expresses kinship, because mourning is social, and it is often an essential part of representations for members of communities affected by climate change (65). Unlike grieving, which is private, Braun also sees mourning as being linked to pragmatic resilience and adaptation. Cunsolo and Karen Landman (2017: 15) see "resistant mourning" as a means of using "experiences of loss and associated grief … [to mobilise and expose] systematic marginalisation, political injustices, and systemic violence." Mourning, therefore, is not reducible to disempowered expressions of regret and it has resonance in both Euro-American and Indigenous communities. In the film *The Last Days of Shishmaref*, the expression of mourning, both for what has been lost so far and in anticipation of further losses, the Iñupiat are expressing their activism, refusing marginalisation, and finding ways of expressing the violence of climate change.

As a western viewer, however, I am troubled by the similarities to salvage ethnography. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, across colonised countries, ethnographers, commercial and amateur photographers took part in a dispersed activity of collecting information and representations of Indigenous cultural practices and people

(Clifford 1989). These representations of cultures caught on camera were fuelled by preoccupations with racial purity of Indigenous subjects, disavowing continuity through diasporic lineages and cultural adaptation (Morton 2005: xii-xv), but some photographers were also concerned, on occasion, with the rights and dignity of the subjects themselves (Peterson, 2003: xi). Salvage ethnographies situate photographers, anthropologists, and museum collectors as saviours of Indigenous knowledge, often in problematic ways, and these accounts frequently deny Indigenous agency. As James Clifford demonstrated (1989: 73), salvage ethnography, whilst considered "old fashioned", continues to exist, not least in travel narratives and ethnographies. Of particular concern in relation to the film is a worry that Indigenous activism is overlooked and emphasis is placed on tradition over, perhaps, more nuanced understandings of how tradition and modernity are temporally synchronous and sometimes intertwined.

However, understanding Iñupiaq culture does not necessarily require splitting cultural practices into 'modern' and 'traditional' distinctions. As Clifford and others have argued, Indigenous cultures are not static and unchanging, and in the context of globalisation, "Indigenous vitality requires a degree of tactical conformity with external expectations and at least a partial acceptance of multicultural roles and institutions" (Clifford 2013: 17). Clifford's later work not only eschews ethnocentrism, but considers power relations which are often deeply unequal, together with possibilities for cultural renewal and survival. Part of this Indigenous revival and survival is dependent on media-disseminated imagery, of which *The Last Days of Shishmaref* can be seen as an example. Importantly, Clifford avoids the pitfalls of the "teleological narratives of a civilising modernity" (ibid: 23) whilst acknowledging that "tradition and its many near synonyms … denote interactive, creative and adaptive processes" (ibid: 29). In Clifford's view there are "determinations without determinism" in contemporary Indigenous experiences (ibid: 40).

Not only can traditions be understood as living and dynamic, but contemporary Iñupiaq subsistence practices use modern technologies such as ski mobiles and drones. The Iñupiat have adopted some modern practices and aspects of Western culture and they are now intrinsically connected to American politics and policy. At once highly adept at looking after themselves, and articulating their challenges, they are dependent on wider geopolitical powers to facilitate their relocation, not least the US government. The visual and written representations of Shishmaref partly capture the complexity of Iñupiaq lives: the desire to hold onto subsistence practices and cultural identity, their acute attachment to place and negotiation of both American and Iñupiaq culture. As Chie Sakakibara (2020: 10) notes, technology can be a vital part of Iñupiaq practices:

> This reality does not mean that subsistence is *less* indigenous than what was in the precontact past. On the contrary, modern subsistence activities proactively support a traditional economy that requires special skills and a complex understanding of local environment.

The issue of change, whether modern (as in the use of technology or dwellings) or about place (the erasure of Sarichef Island caused by climate change) also needs to be understood in relation to the developing discourses surrounding ecologies and worldings, which are both producing and fuelling a desire to retain and reinstate different kinds of worlds: both cultural and ecological. Both Clifford and Sakakibara, as anthropologists, approach Indigenous subjects with deep respect for lived experiences and the desire for Indigenous sovereignty. Yet as Azoulay and Grove have also argued, the geopolitics and power of imperialism continue to contribute to the destruction of worlds, and the imposition of a new world order in different parts of the world. Indeed, Shishmaref residents are dependent on global

communities agreeing to limit carbon emissions to check continued climate change, on the US government to fund their relocation and to imperial powers at large to respect their traditions and culture.[5] Some Inuit cultures in Alaska are also the subject of negotiations with both governmental and commercial interests in the extraction and distribution of oil and gas, which can result in internal community tensions (Sakakibara 2020: 102); and commercial interests, particularly oil, are globally connected. Perry Weyiouanna's concern about Iñupiat culture being connected to globalised culture, is telling and reveals the fault lines of the effects of imperialism on the residents of Shishmaref. Whilst incorporating modern technologies prove the Iñupiat's ability to adapt (in a narrow sense around ideas of modernity), these technologies are often intrinsically connected to the causes of climate change and imperial dominance. No wonder Perry Weyiouanna's relationship with modern ways, and the coexistence of modernity in subsistence practices, is experienced as fraught and problematic; at once modernity aids survival but it is also fuelling loss.

Portraits, kinship and activism

It is perhaps time to consider the book in more detail. The narrative of climate change and place extinction is addressed through an Iñupiaq short story on the formation of the island which is at the start of the book (Lixenberg 2008: 5). Family and kinship are visually and structurally prioritised throughout the book, with families being grouped together in sections, punctuated by the written chapters mentioned earlier in this essay. The overall narrative of the book is much looser and more open than the film and there is more emphasis

[5] Judith Butler (2016) has noted that the recognition of life and its precarity is unequally recognised politically, including within the boundaries of a nation state. We could therefore see the lives of the Inupiat as precarious but not fully acknowledged by the US government. Indeed, the US government is enthralled to the production and consumption of carbon, yet this is the same authority to which the Inupiat turn to be protected from the ensuing violence, both in terms of the immediate impact of extraction, and in the longer term impact in terms of climate change.

on life in the summer months, as well as living in ice-bound conditions. The text in the book, whilst avoiding specific information about the causes of climate change, provides more information on the community's activism, specifically through the formation of the *Shishmaref Erosion and Relocation Committee*, which formed in 2001 and the high school group *Save our Shishmaref* (Lixenberg 2008: 44). The text informs the reader that the community have successfully engaged Congress in looking at their situation, and that they have garnered extensive media attention (ibid: 44). The island is depicted in some detail, including summer flowers, ice, detritus, and numerous views of the dwellings. An important aspect of the photographs of the interior of the homes is the frequent occurrence of family photography on the walls: extended families and their memories are important to the Iñupiat. [fig. 3] The interweaving of traditional culture and modernity is clear in many of the photographs, including a few detailed photographs of hunting or cultural practices, and references to subsistence practices are frequently included as part of the portrait photographs. Individual photographs have captions, naming people and frequently stating time of day, or the ownership of the location (associating specific interiors with specific families, for example). The photographs are engaging, encompassing a range of visual styles to create a portrait of both people and place, intimately connected. The text mentions cultural revival (ibid: 204) although there are no specific photographs of events that foster an ongoing interest in Iñupiaq traditions, with the exception of subsistence practices.[6]

[6] Such images appear in *Climate Refugees* by Collectif Argos (2010) and *I am Inuit* by Bryan Adams (2018).

Insert Fig. 3: Dana Lixenberg (2007) *Minnie Olanna's home*

The ambiguity of the photographs is notable, although Lixenberg's documentary intent, the representation of a marginalised community affected by climate change, is clear. The images in Lixenberg's book are anchored in their meaning by the captions, maps, diagrams, and the short chapters, but the images also lend themselves to uses in other contexts. Of note here is the availability of some of the images through Lixenberg's gallery, GRIMM. Fourteen images are presented on the website and cover a range of subjects: individual portraits, family portraits, interiors, scenes of the city, images of food, one image of the precarity of Shishmaref [fig. 1], and one image of a view that looks out to the Chuckchi sea, depicting old ice melting in June. GRIMM's website provides biographical information, which in addition to drawing attention to Lixenberg's editorial photography,

states that Lixenberg makes “stripped down portraits” that avoid “social stereotyping” of “marginalised communities” (GRIMM n.d.) and *The Last Days of Shishmaref* is given as one such example. There are captions for these images, but the photographs lack an introductory statement, which severs the imagery from the social and political aspects of the project and its direct link to climate change.

Insert Fig 4. Dana Lixenberg (2007) *Nora Iyatunguk*

Nora Iyatunguk, 2007 [fig. 4], a beautiful, close-up portrait of a young woman from Shishmaref, represents *The Last Days of Shishmaref* on GRIMM's website, and it also opens the last section of photographs in the book (2008: 169). Her fur collar and simple background frame her face as she looks to the right. Nora's face is available for our gaze, and it is likely that her collar is made from subsistence fur. In the book, the portrait signifies independence, strength, and her membership of a specific community. The text opening this section informs us that Nora has a boyfriend and two sons, as well as outlining her other kinship relations and the names of other members of her household. Nora Iyatunguk makes an appearance in several photographs in this section of the book, including with her boyfriend, Tim Nayokpuk, and her sons. The image's appearance within the world of contemporary art, however, results in the meanings of the image becoming less specific. The inclusion of Nora's images, and other portraits of Shishmaref's residents, is typical of documentary and editorial photographs that successfully negotiates a variety of contexts.[7] Nora's image becomes an object of beauty linking her image to Lixenberg's portraits of both famous and less famous Americans, and the presentation of *The Last Days of Shishmaref* on GRIMM's website situates Lixenberg's practice as socially engaged.[8]

[7] Lixenberg started her career as an editorial photographer but like many photographers, she has worked across different contexts, and her editorial work is as likely to be presented in a gallery as it is in the pages of a magazine.

[8] Lixenberg is keen to ensure that print sales from *The Last Days of Shishmaref* are sensitively placed in collections where the values of the work are maintained and that avoid commodification (LIxenberg 2022).

Insert Fig 5. Dana Lixenberg (2007) Ardith Weyiouanna

The portrait of Ardith Weyiouanna in Lixenberg's book [fig. 5], together with another image of Ardith skinning a seal, create contrast to Louter's portrayal of Ardith. In both of

Lixenberg's images, Ardith is depicted as a strong woman full of vitality. The portrait inside their home shows some details of their kitchen, but the emphasis is on Ardith's face, clothes and jewellery (made of carved bone). Ardith is shown smiling, upright and composed. In Louter's film, whilst Ardith is an important person, bookending the narrative and appearing frequently, she is often working, preoccupied, reflective, and she expresses grief and worry about the future. Lixenberg's portrayal of Ardith, however, suggests an active, vital person, who is resilient and hopeful. Lixenberg's portraits, which feature individuals and group shots, together with the information on kinship relations, creates a sense of a community held together by relationships: relationships to each other, their relationship with the place they live, and their relationship to food, especially subsistence practices. The images, in the vein of portraiture, convey dignity for the individuals and the community, and yet they remain ambiguous, able to move across contexts and perform the cultural capital of art. This ambiguity, however, also allows room for different emotions to emerge. Concern and worry for the future still feature in the text, as does mourning, but the emphasis on family and the written references to activism suggest also hope for cultural continuity in the future.

Conclusion

Both the film and the book have wider relationships with the ongoing violence of imperial representations. The Iñupiat have been subject to both imperial and colonial demands and expectations, including the requirement that they give up their language at the turn of the 19th and 20th Century (Lixenberg, 2008: 84) and experienced imperial influence on a regular basis from 1901 onwards. Like many communities across the circumpolar north, the Iñupiat of Shishmaref are enmeshed with the commerce and politics of Alaska, eating Western food, buying goods, and using modern forms of transport (both locally and in terms of wider travel across the state). Their ties to the broader political, social and cultural

environment of the US are pervasive, even though there are good questions to be asked about the extent to which this threatens their cultural survival. Nonetheless, Shishmaref's residents are not equal citizens in the US, nor equal traders in the world of commodities, and they experience marginalisation and its violence on several levels. The film, whilst made with the permission and input of the community, with Perry Weyouianna as one of the producers, facilitates the transportation of knowledge out of the community to a broader public, and to scholars such as me. This enmeshed interdependence involves a series of unequal power relationships typical of imperialism. Whilst Lixenberg's book is more optimistic about the future of the Iñupiat, the imagery circulates within an economy of goods that mirrors the tradition of using Indigenous subjects and their cultural knowledge for imperial curiosity and potentially for benefit as well. The film, in particular, with its melancholic tone and absence of the representation of the community's activism, produces a portrait of a community that is resilient but dependent and waiting for a decision, federal action and funds to help them. The funds and decision are significant, but this overlooks the activism of the Iñupiat themselves, their energy, organisation, and determination. The global geopolitical dimension of the causation of climate change is not addressed and the representations, on the whole, avoid addressing the global picture of responsibility, keeping the decisions to the internal politics and imperialism of the United States.

The contemporary context is not the same as the late 19th Century context, despite parallels between the two regarding the loss of Indigenous lives. Like many forms of salvage ethnography, the representations capture both a changing culture *and* the traditions of that culture. The book and film include an acknowledgement of the importance of place and ecologies, and the central role of Indigenous voices. The film's lack of engagement with the form of activism that the residents of Shishmaref engage in, then, is a significant oversight and one that risks reproducing paternal and imperial relationships between Indigenous

subjects and those who have access to the means to media production. Louter, the director of the film, in not highlighting the activism, either through narrative voiceover or through visual representations, risks showing the residents as passive subjects of representation, rather than drivers of media engagement. However, the elegy of the film, at once signifying the loss of place, and potentially the loss of cultural specificity, also communicates the anticipatory mourning of the community regarding their sense of place, their culture and for broader changes in weather and environment. Their worries about cultural continuity and subsistence practices are vividly conveyed in the film.

Sakakibara (2020: 24) studied Iñupiaq resilience. Whilst she acknowledges that links to "psychology and psychiatry are inevitable, resilience should also be understood as inherently an Indigenous concept that elucidates … culture and society and contributes to a process of decolonisation through the integration of personhood with the community, land and environment". Sakakibara further elaborates that resilience is embedded in families, organisations, communities, and the natural environment, including subsistence practices. The community-based movements function on local, national, and international levels. The film and book, made by European photographers and filmmakers, are entangled with Indigenous activism, and the expression of this activism happens *through* the film and book rather than being depicted *in* the film and book. Whilst, as Yusoff encourages us to note, white populations have only relatively recently started to engage with the implications of large-scale destruction of the world, overlooking Black and Indigenous knowledge and experience, in the case of *The Last Days of Shishmaref,* white concern for environment and diversity of culture results in media representations that advance already-existing Indigenous activism.

The broader geopolitical aspects driving the violence of climate change, remain invisible and unnamed, especially in the film, although they are partially implied through the

inclusion of news reports and the excerpt of Al Gore's film. The wait for support from the US government, which also subsidises and supports oil and gas extraction from Alaska, feels particularly bleak in this regard. On the one hand, as viewers, we can connect to the subjects of imperial violence, but we do not see the positive impact of activism on a wider world. The film and the book are assumed to do that work *for us* and *on us*, even though it is not clear what that impact might be. Climate change is a form of violence, including the erasure of history and culture, erasure of human and non-human relationships, erasure of non-human species, and erasure of cultural continuity. Imperial relationships become fraught, weaving interdependence. Whilst this can be part of cultural continuity (Clifford 1989) it is also causing cultural erasure in many ways. Imperial relationships are never equal, just as geopolitical ones are not. This does not eradicate opportunities for reinvention, opposition, and creative adaptation, but a geopolitical framework such as Grove's enables us to see the unequal power relationships and forms of violence driving such necessities and strategies for survival.

The end of Shishmaref is taken as a foregone conclusion. However, the film leaves the question open about the future of the community: the walking away suggests finality, but it also enables the community to express their grief at the loss of a place and to express concern about their own death and place in the world after they have gone. Such concerns are not unusual in Iñupiaq communities: Sakakibara's anthropological work in Point Hope, a relocated city about 150 miles north of Shishmaref, shows that concern for cemeteries and its association with ancestors, memories and spiritual beings is very strong. Indeed, spiritual relationships with the old city continue long after relocation (2020: 132). However, the end of Shishmaref's Iñupiaq community and their subsistence practices is not taken for granted in the book; the structure of family and kinship, suggests cultural survival and revival (although in similarity to the film, the efforts at cultural revival are not depicted).

The Last Days of Shishmaref, then, can be seen to perform distinctly important functions in relation to extinction narratives. In highlighting the precarity of Shishmaref and the desire for cultural continuity and self-determination, we see the Iñupiat as *important* in relation to extinction: Louter and Lixenberg are advocating for appreciation of this specific group of people, their lives, and their culture. The melancholic tone of the film, whilst indebted to the traditions and pitfalls of salvage ethnography, advances already existing Indigenous activism, and reinforces the case of the Iñupiat for assistance in moving; it also enables the subjects, particularly Ardith Weyiouanna, to express their anticipatory mourning for the loss of their home. The book, in contrast, emphasises more of the activism of the residents of Shishmaref, but also highlights kinship relations. Both the book and the film advocate for cultural continuity and self-determination, whilst also depicting the co-existence of traditional and modern practices of living. The book and the film link the residents geopolitically to questions of climate change, oil extraction, energy use and the Eurocene, which is embedded in the lives of Iñupiat. This leads to the expression of regret, at least by Perry Weyiouanna, who sees the adoption of modern ways as linking the erosion of Shishmaref to the changes in their culture, but aspects of modernity also, for now, enable subsistence practices to continue. Importantly, it is evident that whilst the lives of the Iñupiat are entangled with modernity, their responsibility for climate change is limited and they are at risk of being homogenised through their relocation to a larger metropolitan district. Their precarity, however, it not just a question of subsistence, but it is also politically and socially at stake through increased exposure to modernity and their removal to a site not of their choosing will be an act of violence. Whilst the film and book have the potential to become a "museum to the violent destruction of the world" from which they emerged (Azoulay 2019: 19) they have the potential to manifest the rights of the Iñupiat.

The witnessing of these rights and potential violence is both imperial in its nature *and* part of worldly caring. The use of salvage ethnography and elegy potentially positions Europeans, including me, as a troubled white saviour viewer, able to acquire cultural knowledge about others and imagine contributing to the longevity of the community, or witnessing, in a voyeuristic way, the community's demise. There was at least some collaboration in the making of *The Last Days of Shishmaref* as both book and film, and we can read both as extensions of Iñupiaq activism, but there remain important questions about how to *read* or encounter such cultural products in sensitive ways, without appropriating Indigenous knowledge and experience. Ensuring the absence of exploitative or extractivist ways of thinking when practicing criticism of representations of Indigenous peoples whose lives are imperilled by climate change has to be a part of the challenge of redressing the historical and contemporary power imbalances in the geopolitics of the north.

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