

Book Review

The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet. By Sheila Watt-Cloutier. University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 352 pp.

Reviewed by Magayo Macêdo

In *The Right to be Cold*, readers will have the opportunity to realize that a variety of regions within the Circumpolar Arctic are no longer the same, either due to climate change or cultural colonialism transforming the very ways in which Indigenous communities lived for generations. The book begins with a foreword section by Bill McKibben in which he talks about Watt-Cloutier's personal experiences growing up in the Arctic in the late 1950s and early 1960s, making the point that gradually Inuit wisdom has been largely replaced by programs and institutions from southern Canada.

Born in 1953 in the town of Kuujuaq (at the time known as Fort Chimo), Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and being the youngest child of four, Sheila Watt-Cloutier has dedicated much of her life to the protection of Inuit people, occupying positions of leadership such as elected corporate secretary of Makivik Kuapuriisat (Makivik Corporation), an organization representing the Inuit of Nunavik (1995–1998), and chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (2002–2006), whose interests lie in the promotion of rights and cooperation among Inuit throughout the Circumpolar Arctic.

The book represents a contribution to the fight against climate change, by suggesting that climate is a vital component of sustainable development, and therefore actions to foster its stability, either by mechanisms of adaptation and/or mitigation, should be seen as human rights protection strategies. In the first pages, the author alludes to the significant growth of her hometown due to southern Canada's influence. One notable point made is the absence of environmental concerns following the establishment of the American air force base Crystal I in Kuujuaq during the Second World War. The facilities were later abandoned, leaving behind hundreds of tar barrels that would only be removed by the city decades later, well into the author's adulthood.

On more personal notes, Watt-Cloutier briefs readers on her family's history. Her grandmother met a Scotsman in the 1920s and had three children with him. Years later, she says, the man left Kuujuaq and never returned to his Inuit family, marrying a *qallunaat* woman (non-Inuit woman). Her grandmother was forced by life difficulties to give Watt-Cloutier's aunt, Penina, then a two-year-old girl, to another family in the community, the Shipaluks. As time passed, eventually both the author's mother and uncle began working to contribute to the family's finances.

History oftentimes tends to repeat itself and, as it happened, in addition to an adopted child named Elijah, Mrs. Watt-Cloutier's mother had three children of her own, with men who relinquished their paternal obligations and left, forcing the family to go through relatively similar experiences as those faced by the author's grandmother. However, Watt-Cloutier makes it clear that both women worked tirelessly to raise the children as comfortably as possible. She teaches that in Inuit culture, children "learned to behave by watching the adults around" (p. 12). Girls were trained to make clothes and prepare animals for food, whereas boys would traditionally master the art of building *qamutiik* (sleds) and *illuwigait* (igloos). Everyone, however, would learn to fish from a young age. The initial part of the book ends with Watt-Cloutier's recollection that she and a friend named Lizzie were chosen to go to what would become known as a residential school. In her own words, they were chosen to "attend school in the south as part of a federal program that selected promising Inuit children with a potential for leadership to be educated outside of the Arctic" (p. 22).

In Chapter Two—*From Dog Teams to Miniskirts and Rock 'n Roll*—the author reveals how at the age of ten years old she frequently experienced feelings of homesickness. Now living in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, not only was she deprived of contact with her family and people, but she was also subject to identity loss. In fact, virtually everything was different from the author's experiences in the North: food, music, clothing, and, most importantly, language. Being forced to live and communicate exclusively in English took a heavy toll on Watt-Cloutier's ability to speak in her original language, Inuktitut. This issue, coupled with the fact that she started to get questioned about her identity, since she looked *qallunaanjjuk* (white), led her to change. She explains that after learning about her grandmother's passing due to cancer, for example, she felt "as if being sent away had shut down my emotional responses, as if the acceptance that I had forced to embrace had muted everything for me. Life just went on" (p. 35). Following Nova Scotia, at the age of twelve years old she and Lizzie were sent to Churchill, Manitoba, to attend a school for students aged 12–17, so she was therefore one of the youngest students. The continuous initiatives promoted during the 1960s and 1970s by the Canadian government and Christian groups to strip Inuit youth

from their Indigenous identities and practices have had drastic effects. The author mentions the case of a fellow student named Paul Meeko who was attacked by a polar bear and died from his injuries. She argues that had he been taught—as he likely would have been in the North—to track bears while keeping a safe distance, he could potentially have survived, but instead boys at the school were solely introduced to carpentry, welding, and other skills in demand in southern Canada. In summary, she indicates that “about 150,000 children in all were taken from their families to be ‘re-educated’ in English/French and Christianity” (p. 47). Decades later, then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper would formally apologize for such practices after a class action lawsuit that resulted in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement and establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

The following chapters of the book continue to focus on the author’s experiences as a leader for Inuit affairs, while attempting to show readers how the Canadian Arctic has changed significantly. One excerpt in particular translates some of these scenarios, when Watt-Cloutier mentions how upon her return to the Arctic, still as a teenager, she noticed how snowmobiles were much more prevalent than she had ever remembered seeing in her childhood days. In her own words, “I hadn’t seen any dog teams” (p. 54).

Inuit identity is still being threatened. Now, with the advent of climate change, it has become even more crucial for governments to cooperate for its protection. In summary, *The Right to be Cold* ultimately seeks to reaffirm the necessity for more cohesive, inclusive, and Inuit-oriented practices in environmental protection agreements for the Arctic. Sustainable development in the region has to be planned in consultation with its Indigenous inhabitants, she argues, who are at the forefront of global climatic changes. In the long run, one will not exist without the other.

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