Frozen In Place: European American Ideologies and the Inuit

Douglas J. Buege
West Allis, WI

It has been claimed by Hugh Brody that European Americans maintain strong ideological connections between Inuit people and the Arctic environments they inhabit. I expand upon this claim, giving three primary ideological connections that tie the Inuit directly to their environments. These are termed the natural, temporal, and material connections. Textual examples are given to illustrate each type of connection. I also show how each ideological connection serves to disempower the Inuit by situating them within the confines of "nature" while empowering European American patriarchs who conceive themselves as existing "outside of" or "beyond" nature. These three connections, working together with other ideological tools, serve to subordinate the Inuit and other Arctic peoples to larger political and economic powers. In the conclusion, I suggest that these ideological connections must be examined, understood, and abandoned in order to improve the quality of life of the Inuit.

Hugh Brody, a social philosopher who has written many insightful books concerning Canada's Inuit, declares in one of his books:

> The great social and intellectual distance between Whites and Eskimos is emphasized in the minds of Whites by the harshness of the Arctic and the intimate closeness of Eskimo life with the land: the harsher the environment, the closer to nature must be the people who are able to inhabit it. . . . In the minds of the Whites, far out there, on the bleak, windswept, rocky land lives the image of the real Eskimo; he was there, everywhere, in the past, and he lives on, reincarnated, in every Eskimo today.[1]

Explorations in Ethnic Studies **Vol. 17, No. 2 (July 1994): 143-154.**

Brody identifies a fundamental ideological connection between the Arctic as a physical environment and European American perceptions of the people who live in that circumpolar region.[2]

When European American people think of other cultures, especially those cultures we term "indigenous" or "Third-World" cultures, we are prone to situate these peoples in terms of nature, time, and natural resources. I am primarily concerned with connections between our perceptions of climate, geography, animal and plant biota, and other aspects of what we call the physical environment and our perceptions of the people that inhabit Arctic regions.

In this paper, I will explore these connections in relation to the Inuit of Canada's Arctic, the focus of this paper, but what I say is also applicable to the Dene, the Cree, the Aleut, and other indigenous groups living in the Arctic. I begin with some observations made by European Americans who have travelled in the Arctic. Then I discuss three ways that European Americans express their ideology which connects the Inuit so strongly with their physical surroundings. These three connections I term naturalistic, temporal, and materialistic. I will discuss how these various ideological connections function to oppress the Inuit people.

My task here is not to show that the Inuit, or any other group, are not "parts of nature." The simple and historically-popular beliefs that there is a separation between humanity and nature, and that different cultures conceive their relationships to nature in vastly different ways are not of concern to me in this paper. I recognize the difficulties in setting up a continuum between "nature" and "humanity" and, then, attempting to situate various peoples within that continuum.[3] Instead, I am examining how certain ideologies prevalent in European American society serve to oppress certain groups. Westerners have traditionally viewed ourselves as essentially separate from "nature"; "nature," as well as the people we identify as "parts of nature," has become that division of the world we control and exploit for our benefits.

It would also be wrong to credit me with disproving several wide-spread "facts." As I will point out below, some scientific facts, despite their truth-values, serve to perpetuate systems of oppression. The truth of some claim is independent of that claim's uses in perpetuating racism, sexism, classism, and any other forms of oppression. For example, the once wide-spread belief that certain "races" had intellects "inferior" to others did not justify the subordination of the "inferior" races. Likewise, evolutionary science accounts detailing the "adaptation" of Inuit to the Arctic do not justify treating the Inuit as simply "part of nature."

Connecting the Physical Environment with Its Dwellers

It is not difficult to find textual evidence for the connection that Brody identifies. Consider the following quotation from an Arctic

adventure entitled *On the Edge of Nowhere*:

> The country was wild enough—blizzards, and sixty-below cold all the winter months, and floods when the ice tore loose in spring, swamping the tundra with spongy muskegs so that a man might travel down the rivers, but could never make a summer portage of more than a mile or so between them. And the people matched the land.[4]

This final sentence, "And the people matched the land," illustrates the popular views of which Brody speaks; the Inuit are linked directly to their environment. This implies that understanding the people simply involves understanding their physical surroundings.

Most of us probably have vaguely-developed ideas concerning the Arctic as a physical environment. Ice and snow dominate our mental images of the Arctic. Indeed, ice and snow are key components of the landscape, as are rock, wind, clouds, and water. Yet what are more revealing are the adjectives and metaphors we use to describe this physical environment. Gontran de Poncins, a French scientist who travelled in the Canadian Arctic in the late 1930s, described the areas surrounding his Post as "grim, barren, inexorable, and virtually lifeless" and similar to a "detention camp."[5] Duncan Pryde described an area he visited as "bleak and utterly desolate, a blotchy brown flatland devoid of life, a vast panorama of emptiness, so bleak and so desolate that it possessed its own unique beauty."[6] Marie Herbert's preliminary description of the Arctic seeks to draw sympathy for her predicament:

> A razorback ridge of featureless rock stretched on either side. No light shone on it or was reflected back. The bleak monotony of it was broken only by the scars and scratches of the cutting winds which had swept it clean. There seemed no space for man or beast on this barren rock: and this was where I had brought my baby to live for a year.[7]

These visitors to the Arctic capture many of our commonly held notions concerning the austerity of the Arctic environment: bleak, lifeless, desolate, featureless.

Certainly when explorers present such visions of the landscape, emphasizing the harshness and emptiness, they distance themselves from their fellow European Americans by showing that they can brave such cruel environments. But these narratives tell us more than the writers intend; they also send messages concerning the native peoples of the Arctic. Once we accept the severity of the Arctic as a fact, we

make many assumptions of the people who live there: these people are different from European Americans, they are rugged and savage, they live ascetic life-styles, bereft of comfort and security. I have identified three ways that Inuit peoples have been ideologically linked with their physical environment.

Naturalistic Connections

One way to connect any type of organism to its physical environment is to employ biological information that details how that being is particularly well-suited to that specific environment. Rare plants inhabit certain areas to which their particular needs are adapted. Animals such as the polar bear and the Arctic wolf are cited as exceptionally well-adapted to their Arctic environment; their physiology has evolved so that they can live only in very cold climates. This type of explanation, an "evolutionary-adaptational" model of explanation, maintains that the organisms are inextricably connected to their environments. Such naturalizing explanations are quite prevalent when discussing indigenous peoples.

British newscaster Sam Hall, who is otherwise a staunch defender of the Inuit and their way of life, presents an evolutionary-adaptational explanation for Inuit physiology:

> Another extraordinary characteristic, which developed as the Eskimos moved deeper into the polar regions, was a shortening of the arm below the elbow, and the leg below the knee. In proportion to their bodies, these extremities are stubbier than in any other race in the world. The reason is simple. In such excruciating cold the body was forced to adapt in order to survive. The shorter the distance to the extremities, the greater the chances of survival.[8]

Thus, the Inuit are connected with their environment because that environment has shaped Inuit physiology. Evolutionary-adaptational explanations focus on physical characteristics rather than social influences. When such explanations are used, they imply that Inuit people are evolutionary products of their environment, just as are the polar bear and the Arctic wolf. Even though such explanations may be empirically justified, the evolutionary-adaptational connections that are posited for the Inuit and their Arctic environment imply more than mere biological fitness for the Inuit.

There are other ways of offering naturalistic connections between people and their environments besides the evolutionary-adaptational approach. For example, Raymond Chipeniuk connects Canadian

peoples to their physical environments using the terminology of ecology. In his article, "The Vacant Niche: An Argument for the Re-Creation of a Hunter-Gatherer Component in the Ecosystems of Northern National Parks," he claims, "Indians and Inuit and the peoples who proceeded them functioned very much as big game *predators* across most of Canada" [italics added].[9] Because these peoples meet certain ecological conditions, Chipeniuk concludes that "they were a *natural* component of natural ecosystems" [italics added].

One implication of positing naturalistic connections between peoples and their environments is that we can employ such explanations to link those people to nature and, thus, distance those people from us. By using the language of evolutionary biology and ecology, we imply that the Inuit are more akin to the creatures of the world who rely on adaptation to survive in their environments. European Americans, on the other hand, are no longer viewed as evolutionary products of our environments; we view ourselves as "rational beings" produced through social forces such as education and, thus, insulate ourselves from the needs of adaptation through "civilization." Thus, if we accept such explanations, we "socially-determined animals" can distance ourselves from the Inuit whom we view primarily as biological beings.

Donna Haraway, who in her studies of primatology unearths many of the Western ideologies underlying our constructions of race, argues that race "as a natural-technical object of knowledge is fundamentally a category marking political power through location in 'nature.'"[10] Evolutionary-adaptational explanations of Inuit physiology, such as that given by Hall, thus serve to place the Inuit within the politically-disempowered realm of "nature," thereby giving more "socially-advanced" European Americans the political power to oversee these people. These are serious political consequences of what may seem an innocent way of explaining Inuit physiology.

Another implication of the use of evolutionary-adaptational explanation is that the explanation essentializes the people whom it seeks to explain. All dwellers of the Arctic share an evolutionarily-determined essence because they share an evolutionary history. We know that when a biologist tells us that the Arctic wolf is suited to living in the Arctic, it cannot dwell in warmer climates. Similarly, when we say that the Inuit are particularly suited to life in the Arctic, we imply that they are not suited to live elsewhere. In other words, we place them in an evolutionarily-determined niche from which they cannot easily remove themselves. Whereas European Americans' biology does not specify particular environments we must inhabit, in our ideology the Inuit are restricted to the Arctic.

The Inuit are also restricted in what they can do in that Arctic environment. Westerners expect the Inuit to be doing what is necessary for survival: hunting, fishing, building snow houses, making and wearing

caribou-hide clothing. To do otherwise is to step outside of the biological role the evolutionary-adaptational explanations demand. Thus, the acceptance of evolutionary-adaptational explanations entails ideological limits on what European Americans will view as "real Inuit" practices. These limits are expressed when Westerners insist that the Inuit should not use rifles and snowmobiles, watch TV, or move into the 20th Century.

Temporal Connections

One need go no further than the dust jacket of de Poncins' *Kabloona* to find reference to the connection between the Inuit and their environment. The summary reads, "A white man, journeying alone among the Eskimos [*sic*] describes their lives, customs and amazing social code in a series of powerful and unforgettable sketches of a people whose civilization is a throwback to the ice age."[11] Indeed, the term "ice age" refers to the physical environment, occupied by ice, as well as the people who inhabit that land of ice and serves as a bridge between environment and denizens. Duncan Pryde, in *Nunaga*, similarly employs the term "stone age" to connect Inuit people with their environment: "Its native inhabitants were nomadic Eskimos, barely out of the Stone Age." The dust jacket to *Nunaga* claims that "Pryde tells of his discovery of a remote and primitive way of life."

Terms such as "ice age," "stone age," "remote," and "primitive" serve to distance the Inuit from European American civilization.[12] This remoteness can be measured both spatially and temporally. The spatial remoteness of the Arctic is consistently emphasized in narratives of the Arctic. One-hundred years ago, the Arctic was certainly out of reach of most people on this planet. But in our day, European Americans have access to the Arctic via airplane. Flights are expensive and infrequent yet, given the advanced state of our travel technologies, the spatial remoteness of the Arctic can be easily overcome.

Temporal remoteness cannot be overcome in the same way. We have vehicles to traverse great expanses of the Earth; we do not have the ability to cross time. Thus, when the Inuit are perceived as "primitive," when their society exists in the "ice" or "stone age," we place an unnavigable temporal boundary between us and them. These *temporal* boundaries are primarily a marker to emphasize our superiority over the Inuit. We coin terms such as "stone age" to refer to specific types of people existing in a pre-agricultural stage of development. Once these terms become accepted parts of our language, we can extend their uses to include employing them as temporal barriers.

Johannes Fabian examines this temporal distancing in his *Time and the Other*. By placing a people within a different time through the use of language, situating them in a distant past such as that evoked by

the term "ice age," we deny their status as contemporaries in our "modern" world. Fabian focusses on anthropological work but his conclusions are equally applicable to the travel narratives given above. Temporal distancing, or the "denial of coevalness," Fabian's preferred term, is one of the few tools Westerners still have for making contemporary indigenous peoples our "Other". He writes:

> The distance between the West and the Rest on which all classical anthropological theories have been predicated is by now being disputed in regard to almost every conceivable aspect (moral, aesthetic, intellectual, political). Little more than technology and sheer economic exploitation seem to be left over for the purposes of "explaining" Western superiority. It has become foreseeable that even those prerogatives may either disappear or no longer be claimed. There remains "only" the all-pervading denial of coevalness which ultimately is expressive of a cosmological myth of frightening magnitude and persistence.[13]

Thus, terms such as "ice age" and "primitive" not only connect the Inuit people with their environment; they are also one of the few ideological tools remaining to distance European Americans from the Inuit. This ideology gives the Inuit a status as less-developed humans who need our stewardship to survive in the 20th Century.

Materialism Connection

Another physical characteristic of the Arctic that has influenced Western ideology concerning the Inuit involves the material goods that we find of value; I term this the "materialism" connection. Consider the following claim:

> Once European visitors had arrived, their preconceptions and expectations led them to emphasize some elements of the landscape. . . . These were the natural products that could be shipped to Europe and sold for a profit in order to provide a steady income for colonial settlements.[14]

This quotation, from William Cronon's history of New England, is equally applicable to European American colonialism in the Arctic. The abundance of marine and fur-bearing mammals such as whales, seals, and Arctic fox in Arctic regions motivated some Europeans to exploit these resources. Naturally, the Inuit were (and are) used as factotums for the collection of these "resources." These "original" perceptions of the Arctic as a cache

for furs, whale oil, ivory, etc., persist in our contemporary perceptions of the Arctic. We learn more of the Inuit through the goods we have acquired from them than through direct interaction with the Arctic or the Inuit. For example, the European outcry against the killing of seals was possible due to our familiarity with furs exported from the Arctic and sub-Arctic; meanwhile, few European Americans are aware of the economic catastrophes that struck the Inuit once European Americans began a fur boycott.[15]

Ideologically, the Inuit become laboring bodies for European Americans: trappers, sealers, hunters, guides, stone-carvers, or whatever we want them to be. Neither trapping nor stone-carving were major activities of the Inuit prior to their exposure to Europeans. It is interesting to note that the market in Inuit soapstone carvings has become lucrative primarily because European Americans have created a market for these art pieces. European American interests strongly determine what Inuit carvers can sell. Art critic Guy Brett notes that when "the Inuit (Eskimo) craft-producing co-operatives began to be set up in northern Canada after the Second World War to aid the ailing Inuit economy, . . . everything produced had to meet a definite requirement which was somehow neither traditional nor modern but 'primitive.'"[16] The works that earn the greatest amounts of money for carvers are carvings that depict the Inuit connections to the animals and the environment of the Arctic, works that reiterate the connections between Inuit people and their physical surroundings. Brett relates the story of a soapstone carving of Elvis's head which was slated for demolition until some civil servant rescued it from the sledge-hammer; this bust simply did not fit in with European American perceptions of the Inuit.

One result of European Americans viewing the Arctic as a bed of resources and the Inuit as the people who deliver these resources is that we lose the ability to see Inuit individuals as anything other than laborers. Thus, we may ignore the existence of Inuit politicians, storytellers, poets, actors, and guitarists. We do not understand their values and their desires. We become blind to ways that Inuit do not relate to the resources we crave, blind to who they are to themselves.

The Consequences of European American Ideology

We maintain our ideology that Inuit people are intimately tied to their environment for many reasons. I have already argued that temporal and naturalistic connections help us to distance the Inuit people from us ideologically. Our materialism, our need to gather resources from the Arctic, leads us to pigeonhole the Inuit in economic roles that are intimately linked with their environment.

The practical consequence of these ideologies is that we are able to rationalize our actions against these people. By maintaining a

belief that the Inuit are dwellers in the ice age, we temporally dislocate them and, thus, situate ourselves in a position of power. We are the holders of knowledge, be it used for scientific, military, political or economic purposes, and we can use that knowledge for the "betterment" of the Inuit, as well as ourselves. Thus, we build schools where Inuit children can learn English and Western ways. We set up political bodies to govern the regions where Inuit live. We distribute welfare to those whom we see as deserving it. At the same time, we exploit the natural resources we desire and use the Arctic for our own purposes.

All these activities take power from the Inuit, a people who got along quite well without us for thousands of years. The Inuit are now in a precarious position; they require Western goods to survive and they need to have income to do this, yet the European American markets determine what goods are marketable. Thus, the Inuit are economically dependent upon us.

They must also appeal to the Canadian government in order to regain governance of the lands they occupy and to insure that their children are educated in Inuit culture. Acculturation, a product of education in the English-speaking schools, is destroying their traditional ways of life. Children are sent to distant settlements for their education, residing in boarding schools where they are isolated from their families. The Inuit people have been fighting the government for decades, trying to get Inuktitut, their native language, taught in these schools.

There are some signs that European American ideologies are changing. Major steps toward Inuit autonomy are currently being taken. The Nunavut agreement, which divides the Northwest Territories into two provinces, one being the 136,000 square mile Nunavut which will be governed by the occupants of the territory, the majority being Inuit, is one step toward the Inuit attaining this autonomy.[17] The Inuit also have their own representation in the Canadian parliament. Inuktitut is being taught in some schools. Most of these steps are the direct results of Inuit organizations rallying to be heard and represented. But much more can be achieved once European Americans abandon our patriarchal notions concerning these denizens of the Arctic.

Conclusion

European Americans have a remarkable history of ransacking the world for resources. We see crude oil deposits because we desire oil. We see stone carvings because they tease our aesthetic senses. But we ignore that which is not to our economic advantage. Thus, we remain ignorant of Inuit social structure, of Inuit belief-systems, of Inuit language, and of Inuit knowledge. We ignore these aspects of Inuit culture because we do not need them, despite their importance in giving us a more complete understanding of that culture.

In the face of much counter-evidence, we maintain our ideologies concerning the intimate connections between the Inuit and the Arctic. Even though the Inuit live in houses with oil heat and traverse the tundra on skidoos, we still want to view them as primitive people, trapped in some romantic past like insects in amber.

However, we must realize that the Inuit are our contemporaries, more akin to us than foreign. We must then realize that we have acted inhumanely toward our Inuit brothers and sisters. Johannes Fabian writes, "It takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West (and to anthropology) if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by Time of its Other."[18] I have offered a diagnosis of how some of our ideologies function to make the Inuit our "Others." We must now use our imaginations to abandon these ideologies and begin to see the Inuit as our contemporaries. Only then can we begin to address the issues that will allow these people to continue their lives in the Arctic.

NOTES

This paper was originally delivered at the Interdisciplinary Research Network on the Environment and Society's conference, "Perspectives on the Environment 2: Research and Action," held at the University of Sheffield, September 13-14, 1993. I would like to thank Susan Kollin, Dan Flory, and Yvonne Holl for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank the people responsible for this IRNES conference who had many helpful ideas and have been a great inspiration.

[1] Hugh Brody, *The People's Land: Eskimos and Whites in the Eastern Arctic* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1975), 81.

[2] I choose the term "European American" because Europeans and North Americans have had the greatest impact upon colonization in the Canadian Arctic. I will also use the term "we" throughout this paper. I use "we" to refer to those responsible for the idologies I discuss, a group of which most of us are members; it is not my intention to exclude those amongst us that are not of Euro-American descent yet have participated in the perpetuation of these ideologies.

[3] Indeed, the natural/unnatural or natural/human dichotomy is a problem for anyone who employs it. Other theorists, most notably Murray Bookchin, solve this problem by viewing the human relation to "nature" is a dialectical relationship. See Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982).

[4] James Huntington, *On the Edge of Nowhere* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1966), 3.

[5] Gontran de Poncins, *Kabloona* (Garden City, NJ: Garden City Publishing, 1943), 30.

[6] Duncan Pryde, *Nunaga: Ten Years of Eskimo Life* (New York: Walker and Company, 1971), 12.

[7] Marie Herbert, *The Snow People* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), 7.

[8] Sam Hall, *The Fourth World: The Heritage of the Arctic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 13.

[9] Raymond Chipeniuk, "The Vacant Niche: An Argument for the Re-Creation of a Hunter-Gatherer Component in the Ecosystems of Northern National Parks," *Environments* 20:1 (1989): 50-59.

[10] Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 153.

[11] As one reviewer noted, it is not fair to credit de Poncins with the remarks made on the dust-jacket of his book. Despite the difficulty in determining who is responsible for this blurb, it is important to recognize that such "authorless" writings are influential in creating and perpetuating cultural stereotypes. It is likely that the cover is more likely to be read than other parts of the book. Furthermore, advertising of the test is also likely to make some of the same references.

[12] One reviewer of this article noted that the meanings of "Stone Age" and "Ice Age" that I assume "do not reflect modern archaeology and social anthropology." I would hope not. The common meanings of these terms, the ones used outside of exclusive academic circles, the meanings I am referring to in this article, are the ones in operation in oppressive ideologies. And these common or "received" views are informed by historic works in anthropology. One must remember that it takes considerable time for academic trends to supplant prevalent beliefs in society.

[13] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 35.

[14] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 20.

[15] See "Anti-Sealing Lobby Severely Hurting Inuit Hunters," *Native Perspective* 2:7 (1977): 8.

[16] Guy Brett, "Unoffical Versions," in *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. S. Hiller (New York: Routledge, 1991), 122.

[17] For a good presentation of Nunavut see Jim Bell, "Nunavut: The Quiet Revolution," *Arctic Circle* (January/February 1992): 12-21.

[18] Fabian, 35.