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“Let Me Breathe of It”: A Circumpolar Literary and Ecological Perspective

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Article abstract

The commercial hunting of harp seal pups galvanized animal rights in the 1970s, culminating in the banning of sealskin products in Europe and the curtailment of trade in the United States. The seal in animal rights discourse is a type of object that needs saving in the form of protective measures to keep her safe from the rapacious greed of capitalism. However, in Indigenous discourse, the seal is another relative, a relation whose presence makes all certainties about hierarchy, use-value, moral exemption, and human exceptionalism impossible. This essay re-thinks the figural dimensions of seals in Yupiit and Inuit storytelling practices alongside debates around over-harvesting, competing global interests, and animal rights to develop current activism for environmental justice for both humans and seals in a time of rapid change. I suggest that focusing on practices of care rather than commodity circulation reframes the relationship of humans and seals beyond binary systems of interpretation that make humans subjects (with “culture”) and seals objects (in “nature”). Inuit stories, legal statutes, and environmental conservation rhetoric all appear to be different, if not contradictory, types of narratives. Nevertheless, when read together, they reveal a shared ethics of care for the wellbeing of the seal. This care, I suggest, momentarily frees seals from their entrapment in an economy of use and provides a basis for understanding the North as a lived environment.

"Let Me Breathe of It": A Circumpolar Literary and Ecological Perspective

Allison K. Athens

In 2011, Scotland reinstated a seal cull in order to protect fish stock on northern European fish farming operations, a move that concerned many in the international community. Canadian sealers from the Gulf of St. Lawrence were especially angered, given that their profit from trade in sealskins had been severely curtailed by the European Economic Union, some of whose members were now involved in the hunt. The conflict between animal welfare advocates and commercial operations (fish farms and sealers) is an ongoing dispute that is, at its heart, more than simply about economic self-interest or the lives of seals. Seals are a species that represents — even symbolizes — changing, contested, and, ultimately, shared relationships in the North. In the following discussion about human and seal liveliness beyond the confines of international management projects, I propose an orientation to the world that contributes a multispecies ecological perspective in a precarious time of rapid change in the North.[1]

Politics and the movement of global capital structure the engagements amongst the nations involved in animal protection and exploitation in the North. Nonetheless, it is also important to consider human and animal ecologies and how they often interrupt and intervene in the flow of capital. Thus, in order to activate a critical engagement with seal and human ecologies in northern North America, one must put seals — and seal cultural and political histories — in a dynamic zone of figural and material mixing. In this perspective, resources and economic zones take on a liveliness along with the bodies they seek to manage with statutes and directives.

In stories about seals, whether they are in the form of an environmental study, administrative memo, or oral tale, the language of the narrative organizes life — the lives of people and seals — and not all languages are heard equally. In a time of rapid change in the North, it seems that action for the preservation of the region's endemic species is more pressing than reflection on the comprehension of different

types of stories. Nonetheless, it is essential to keep in mind filmmaker and cultural and environmental activist Alethea Arnaquq-Baril's insistence on a "different kind of animal rights activism" that is local and appropriate to each environment (Dean). Only through understanding the relationships between people and place as told in stories can one remain, in her words, "thoughtful and respectful of indigenous peoples in whichever country or region you're dealing with, because they tend to be at the forefront of defending the environment and the wildlife" (Dean). Therefore, I propose a close reading of the aesthetic language, rhetorical devices, and ecological specifics of two popular stories of northern communities in Alaska and Canada, revealing several languages at work in the ecological management of people and seals in the North. The Yupiit story from Toksook Bay, "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals," and the Inuit story from Igloolik, "Arnaqtaaqtuq: The One Who Gets a Mother," demonstrate Arnaquq-Baril's type of activism as they also engage audiences in the work of care for northern species and peoples. Beginning with the understanding that the North is a lived environment, an attention to the literary qualities and the ecological conditions of "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals" and "Arnaqtaaqtuq" provides a fuller, more worlded, grasp of environment and environmental justice.[2]

Despite living in fairly different climatic zones, the Yupiit of Alaska and the Inuit of Canada and Greenland are linguistically related, and there is enough cultural continuity between the groups for shared political discourse and action. Therefore, these regional stories possess continuities that enact a critical circumpolar network of shared cultural and environmental concern. The stories tell us many things about what it means to be a person in Yupiit and Inuit culture; moreover, they give us the means by which to theorize the relationships between humans and nature, especially in the context of an environmental ethic in the North that includes humans.

Paul Watson and the crew of his anti-sealing vessel, *Sea Shepherd*, are active representatives of an animal welfare ethic that keeps humans and the animals they exploit in separate ontological realms. Watson and his crew have been on the front lines of saving immature harp seals from the commercial hunt since 1976. The lengths that the *Sea Shepherd* activists have gone to protect seals from northeastern Canada to Scotland since the mid-1970s are considerable, including direct action (activists

chaining themselves to sealing vessels) and indirect action (developing harmless dyes that ruin the marketability of pelts). The Canadian government's mobilization against the activists in protection of the sealing industry reveals a deep level of interest in the continued functioning of the trade in sealskins.[3] While some have argued that the animal rights activists and the European sealskin bans are directed at the St. Lawrence sealers and their ability to engage in a market economy, the involvement of the government points to more national economic interests at stake.[4]

Nicole Shukin explains the assumptions behind the government's market-based approach in her study of "animal capital." She argues that different types of bodies (human and animal) have uneven access to political power; animal bodies, in particular, are made materially powerless in the commodity circulation of late capitalism. Shukin's analysis of the "material unconscious" of animal lives in symbolic and monetary economies — lives that drive capital both intellectually and physically — is helpful for understanding how non-human animals are caught within human-centric systems of late capitalist circulation of wealth and goods. As she explains, "'Animal capital' simultaneously notates the semiotic currency of animal signs and the carnal traffic in animal substances across [the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries]. More accurately, it signals a tangle of biopolitical relations within which the economic and symbolic capital of animal life can no longer be sorted into binary distinctions" (7). Shukin identifies the conditions of animal exploitation as a blurring of the material life and figural presence of the animal. She argues that the material pelt of the beaver and the symbolism of the beaver (such as its use in advertising) function as "animal capital" for broader national interests in Canada. Moreover, in the recent debates about seal harvesting, the seal as commodity and sign is doing similar work to include those on the marginalized northern edge of Canada's national consciousness.[5]

While the St. Lawrence sealers are also, like Inuit, on the frontlines of preserving an economic structure that allows them to stay in their communities, the Canadian government's efforts are oriented toward maintaining a market that is cost-effective for the geographic and climatic conditions in which it takes place. Rather than seeking alternative industries or economic opportunities that would allow people to stay within their communities, the choice appears to be the commercial seal market or another environmentally exploitative form of employment,

such as in the Alberta oil sands.[6] It is a contentious and complex issue and sealers ask, if Inuit are to retain rights to hunt seals, why should non-Native hunters be punished for engaging in the same practice? Watson and his crew point to some possibilities for understanding, if not resolving, these questions. One is the method of killing. Commercial sealers targeted harp seal pups that congregate together in nurseries during a period of time when they are unable to swim. In order to protect the coat from damage, the seals were clubbed over the head. Hundreds of thousands were killed in a season for the international clothing market, because whitecoat (baby harp seal) pelts are soft, easily dyed, and desirable in the clothing industry. Inuit generally do not hunt either adult or immature harp seals because they are not a species of seal that is eaten. Instead, species such as ringed and bearded seals are targeted because they are food staples and their skin is tougher and more durable for arctic winter wear.[7]

The 1983 European Economic Community Directive to ban seal products attempts to include the presence of Inuit as harvesters of seals with a cultural dependence on this hunting practice. The directives clearly state that it covers only "products not resulting from traditional hunting by the Inuit people" (Seal Ban). Later renewals of the directive (1985 and 1989) continue to protect traditional hunting, although "there are increasing doubts with regard to the effects of non-traditional hunting on the conservation of harp seals in the East Atlantic, the Barents Sea and the White Sea, where [the seals] are, in addition to hunting, also affected by the depletion of prey fish species and entanglement in nets along the Norwegian coast" (Seal Ban). The language of the directives, nonetheless, dictates the terms for how the seal is brought into a relationship with the hunter of an Indigenous community with "a tradition of seal hunting in the geographical region" (Seal Ban). While the biopolitical sign of "seal" has not been appropriated to the extent of "beaver" to promote Canadian values and commodity circulation, the seal and Inuit identified in the directives are circumscribed by identity, location, and activity.

The Inuit relationship to seals — predicated on the fact that they appear to hunt and kill seals *like* western commercial seal hunters — always presented a difficulty for the anti-sealing campaign. Animal rights activists chose to treat Inuit seal hunting similarly to commercial hunting given that Inuit used — and continue to use — modern tech-

nology such as guns and motorboats. According to George Wenzel in his book about the conflict between Inuit hunters and animal rights activists, *Animal Rights, Human Rights*, activists claimed that since Inuit did not live or hunt "traditionally," they therefore had no legitimate claim to hunt at all (94).[8] Wenzel makes an important distinction between Inuit and commercial hunts that is only partially legible in the language of the ban. The language of the ban uses the term "traditional" to identify a cultural relation that pre-dates Western contact; it does not stipulate that a harpoon and dog team must be the only technology used in a seal hunt. Animal rights activists, however, interpret "traditional" as a temporal category that designates that the technology of the hunt must pre-date contact.[9] Wenzel insists that both these positions fail to encompass how Inuit actually hunt: they may use modern technology, but the technology is incorporated into the fabric of the culture, not the other way around. Having a high-powered rifle and a boat does not necessarily guarantee even a single kill for an Inuk hunter and many hunters return from trips empty-handed.[10] Often financed and subsidized by the Canadian government, the commercial seal hunt, by contrast, proceeds from large ships that target young seal pups on ice floes at a time when they are unable to escape into the ocean.

When Inuit present themselves at international assemblies, the discussion revolves around Inuit hunting practices that appear to be like the exploitation of animal capital. In defense of their ontology, the former students of the Inuit Studies Program of Nunavut College presented a paper entitled "The Seal: An Integral Part of Our Culture" to the Third International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences in Copenhagen in 1998. The Arctic College students talked about biology, ecology, technology, and Inuit history in relation to seals. When the Nunavut college students presented their paper, it was not a plea for the international community to stop killing seals or to preserve seal habitat so that their numbers might increase; it was, instead, to advocate for the right of Inuit to continue to hunt seals. While it is true that seals have a commodified existence in which they are worth more dead than alive, the end of the story about seals and humans does not wrap up quite so well. The ability to understand Inuit-seal co-constitution matters for not only Inuit and their ability to hunt seals, but for an understanding of seals that is more than their biopolitical commodification in international management practices.

While the contemporary Western narrative of human relationships with seals is, as represented in the preceding examples, one of protective statutes and exploitative markets, the aforementioned stories concerning seals from Inuit and Yupiit communities portray a plurality of non-hierarchical positions. I offer an argument for Inuit and seal mutuality through an explication of the stories "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals " and "Arnaqtaaqtuq." I outline the clash of worlds between conservation and Inuit discourses about hunting seals in order to identify how some practices of care for the seal have not been legible in the fora designated to legislate the life of the seal. Taking these practices of care into account may help us determine Arnaquq-Baril's "different kind of animal rights activism" that can account for all lives affected in welfare campaigns and trade agreements (Dean).

Seals are particularly potent signifiers in northern stories.[11] Stories about seals do not, in and of themselves, constitute a genre of story, such as the brother-sister story or the orphan story.[12] Nonetheless, as the following narratives reveal, the presence of seals in a northern Indigenous story or song often suggests a mode of attention for learning how to act in the world. Seals function as an archetype in narrative that marks what is at stake when one encounters difference, otherness, and ambiguity. Stories about the actions of seals — or humans toward seals — reveal what it means to be human, but this human is not the individual subject of Western philosophy. Rather, a "person" inhabiting a human-shaped body is a relational being that looks remarkably like another sort of person, a seal. The northern seals represented in "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals" and "Arnaqtaaqtuq" are bearded seals, spotted seals, and ringed seals, but these figural seals are never very far from their material selves out on the ice.

These two stories come from opposite sides of the North American Arctic: one originates in Toksook Bay on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of Alaska and is known as "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals" or "The Boy Who Went with the Bladders." Knud Rasmussen first recorded "Arnaqtaaqtuq" in an Iglulingmiut (meaning, the "people of Igloolik") community of northern Canada, a settlement that became Igloolik of Nunavut Territory. The residents of Toksook Bay are predominantly Yupiit while those of Igloolik often identify as Inuit.[13] Yupiit live in an environment that is vastly different from the stereotype of the Arctic: the delta where the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers meet

is a flat, marshy plain crisscrossed with water "highways." The region is below the Arctic Circle, summer days can reach up to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and the vegetation and coastal waters support a variety of wildlife. The town of Igloolik, in contrast, is situated on an island of the same name off the coast of Melville Peninsula, oriented toward Baffin Island. Just above the Arctic Circle, Igloolik experiences much more ice and snow, and for longer periods, than Toksook Bay. The Iglulingmiut, like the Yupiit, lived in semi-subterranean houses most of the year before enforced settlement in the twentieth century, but they also employed (and still build) the ubiquitous snow hut on occasion.

If these two northern coastal peoples come from different arctic environments, which helped shape differences in culture, how can we explicate a Yup'ik story alongside an Inuit one? Or, to put it another way, after Keavy Martin's diligent work putting specificity back into the northern Indigenous literary archive in her important study *Stories in a New Skin*, why risk erasing geographic and cultural difference in order to talk about seals? On the one hand, Knud Rasmussen obviates this difference through compelling evidence of linguistic and narratologic continuity across the North American Arctic, gathered from his famous "Fifth Thule Expedition" from 1921 to 1924. And on the other, the Inuit Circumpolar Council "emphasizes the unity of Inuit as one people across four countries" (Arctic Governance Project; Inuit Circumpolar Council).

Keeping both positions in mind, I will focus on the similar concept of personhood for the Yupiit and Inuit as a compelling reason for building an interpretative strategy from these two stories. Jarich Oosten points out that "the concept of inua [for Inuit, or speakers of Inuktitut] (or Yua) [for Yup'ik] [meaning] 'its person' refers to independent spirits as well as to a particular type of soul. The word is derived from the root inu- 'human life' and is best translated as 'its human being' or 'its person'" (186-87).[14] The term is not species specific; rather, all species and spirits have an inua (or a Yua). In the Yup'ik story, "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals," distinguished orator and elder Paul John describes the arrangement of bodies in the men's house. In the English translation, this description reads: "The ones on the sleeping platforms circling the *qasgi* walls were competent men" (39). This seems like a normal gathering of community members, except that these competent men are bearded seals.[15] The boy has joined his bearded seal host and

gone to an underwater community that parallels his own. The Yup'ik original does not distinguish competent animals from competent men; both are designated with the Yup'ik term *Yuut*, or "people." In the story of "Arnaqtaaqtuq," there is a similar use of *inu*. In the Inuktitut, before Arnaqtaaqtuq gets his name at the end of the story, he is called the *inuugami*, which Rasmussen translates as "this being who was just born" (Blaisel 42). "Being" refers to neither human nor animal and has something of the potentiality of both.

In Yup'ik elder John's account of "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals," a young boy's parents wish him to grow up to be a great hunter. Following the advice of a shaman, he becomes a ringed seal and goes to live with the other seals in their parallel world under the ice for one year. During this period, the boy learns about human actions that please and displease the seals — actions that either encourage or discourage the seals from "allowing themselves to be overpowered" and taken by human hunters (3). The fact that the boy lives with the seals for the specified amount of time of one year is an important detail, encoding both an ecological perspective and a complex biological affinity between humans and seals. In the story, the most basic congruence between human and seal is on the level of appearance. Bearded seals are the largest of the northern seals and have prominent facial whiskers while ringed seals are quite small and unassuming in comparison. The analogy between species is also constructed from biological similarity: ringed seals, like humans, gestate for nine months and usually only have a single pup. After weaning her pup, the mother will likely mate again, but the implantation of the embryo will be delayed. The seal will give birth the next spring, almost one year later (covering the one year that the boy "gestates" with the seals). In order to responsibly hunt seals — that is, to continue to have a future with seals — northern Indigenous people have to have an intimate knowledge of seal life cycles. Inuit and non-Inuit both have access to the useful knowledge of seal gestational cycles and nursery behaviours from direct contact with the species and biological reports. For northern Indigenous people, however, this is not objective data. The lived affinity between species becomes an integral facet within the story and the resemblance of physicality and manners confers ontological consideration and obligations between humans and seals.

The hero of John's story is the "only child of his parents." This is an important qualifier: his "only child" status locates the boy as especially valued because he is his parents' connection to the future and the past: names, like souls, are finite in number in Yup'ik and Inuit culture, and this unnamed fictional boy would have the name and soul of a recently deceased relative.[16] In effect, the boy *is* his namesake, a recycling of matter and spirit that closely resembles the way seals are also always singular in nature, endowed with the knowledge and capabilities of the seal it was before. This is also a recognizable genre of story: orphans and only children are often the heroes of stories that bring back new knowledge — knowledge of geography, physical laws, social mores, and of other people, other animals, and other spirits.[17] The children bring new knowledge to their people and the stories bring new knowledge to listeners and readers. John, a celebrated orator, situates his telling of the story, which eventually became part of the bilingual volume *Stories for Future Generations*, as instructional by designating his audience as "young children," metonymically placing himself in the role of the bearded seal and the listeners in the role of the young boy and the other *Yut'eraraat*, young people and/or ringed seals. While the bearded seal teaches the boy about actions that have consequences in the world of the seal (such as keeping waterholes clear for thirsty seals or shovelling snow from around the houses to keep the paths open for the seals to travel), John's audience learns the same lessons. A person who does not spend a great deal of time thinking, considering, watching, and engaging with the sea during times spent on or off the water, we learn, will appear as if floating through air when out in his kayak to the seals who are always watching, judging, and gossiping with each other (41-45).

Understandably confused after his transformation into a seal, the boy is reassured when his companions tell him they are returning home. They arrive at a seemingly normal looking *qasgiq* (the large communal men's house) and the boy sees that "[t]he people sitting right below the platform on the floor had sores on them. They didn't sit still. They continually scratched [their bodies]. . . . The ones on the mats were small people, not very big, with round faces and big round eyes" (39). The boy soon learns that "the ones . . . with sores that they were continually scratching were spotted seals. The small people with the big eyes were ringed seals . . . [he] saw them in human form" (39-41). The "people" with sores all over their bodies are performing a very specific identity

related to modern Yup'ik history: the spotted seals have the appearance of a person infected with smallpox. In the mid-1800s, diseases that spread through contact with Russian traders, sailors, and missionaries had a devastating effect on the Yupiit. "Entire villages disappeared," explains Ann Fienup-Riordan, and as "much as 60 percent of the Yup'ik population . . . were dead by June 1838" (*Boundaries* 29). While a "first-telling" is impossible to pinpoint, John's telling of the story for a group of students in 1977 highlights the story's dynamic possibilities as a repository for Yupiit to record and teach historical events in a manner that instructs, delights, and preserves cultural and environmental knowledge.

Encoding modernity on the other side of the Arctic, Edmund Carpenter in 1959 published *Anerca*, a collection that celebrates the poetic qualities of songs and stories previously collected or noted by early arctic ethnographers Knud Rasmussen and Diamond Jenness. With *Anerca*, Carpenter introduced these poetic works to a broader audience while initiating the still popular genre of the edited collection. Concurrently, the volume inaugurated a tradition of taking seriously the work of Indigenous artists who describe, in his words, "images powerful enough to deny [the] nothingness" that is the Arctic (n. pag.). Excising the songs and stories from their ethnographic frame and placing them into an established literary tradition, these works could now reach a wider audience. Fifty years later, Martin reflects on the status of the Inuit literary archive, asking, "Is an Inuit Literary History Possible?" Working through the ethnographic record and the Carpentarian legacy, Martin seeks a literary history that remains attentive to Inuit cultural and political specificity, while also foregrounding the political and social struggles of the North's Indigenous people. In effect, she seeks a literary history that is, itself, both traditional and modern.

Although Carpenter's legacy was to increase interest in the literary value of the content of Inuit narrative, the tradition he generated of anthologizing and adapting Inuit cultural work was, and still is, largely absent of actual Inuit voices. Martin, in contrast, offers a mediating approach using theories of interpretation that originate within traditional and contemporary Inuit texts. In order to navigate "Inuit intellectual geography," she argues that one must "learn to see well"; this "can be a painful process and might require you to put your trust in something unfamiliar or even uncomfortable" (11). According to Doris Sommer, it

is the exact qualities of literature and literary study that teach one how to trust: "Literature . . . is what exceeds or defies habitual patterns of communication, because it notices difference and requires continuous translations" (3).

Responsive to the modern political gains of the Inuit, Martin proposes the analogy of the temporary, contingent, and sometimes even ambiguous, transformations inherent in the Inuit literary trope of "skins." Skins, she writes, "have much to say about the challenges and potential of adaptation" (8). Inuit adapt the skins of other animals, such as seals, for the necessary clothing and tools for arctic life, but the harvesting of another being for one's own use carries with it certain risks and uncertainties that require constant attention to — and translation of — the metaphors, stories, and obligations one proposes for these activities. But perhaps the question isn't so much (or shouldn't be) do Inuit have a literary history (which is also, in the terms of Carpenter's legacy, asking if Inuit make poetry *like us*), but is literature expansive enough to include, even profit from (and I use this term advisedly), the discomfort of difference that is Inuit and Yupiit? Closely following the multidimensional being that is a seal (the seal as commodity, relation, agent, person, metaphor, breath carrier) redirects our sight to encoded histories of dynamic possibilities in a time of change. The arrival at a shared ethics of care for the precarity that now delineates what North is can only be accomplished through a literary practice that includes the lively potentiality of humans and their other, worldly, relations. The questions of poetry and Inuit, which are also questions about discomfort and difference, foreground the ecological parameters of how the lives and deaths of seals are managed in and around circumpolar nations.

Keeping in mind Sommer's definition of literature as that which marks difference and requires translation, Carpenter's use of the word *anerca* takes on particular resonances. *Anerca* is a word derived from the Inuktitut (or Inuit language) word *anirniq*, which means both soul and breath. He states in the introduction to his anthology, "In Eskimo [sic] the word to make poetry is the word to breathe; both are derivatives of *anerca*, the soul, that which is eternal: the breath of life. A poem is words infused with breath or spirit: 'Let me breathe of it', says the poet-maker and then begins."[18] Breath, along with an ancestral name and a spirit-form, make up the soul in Inuit cosmology, and it is the same matter for all "persons," human, caribou, or seal (Oosten 192;

Blaisel 36). While Carpenter follows Rasmussen in calling the short pieces "poems," if we rethink them in their original guise as "song" (that is, that they were first spoken or sung and later written down by ethnographers), a *topos* integral for the understanding of Inuit literary ecology becomes apparent: within *anirniq*, we find the interrelated and codependent terms "breath-soul-life."

A more thorough examination of the *topos* breath-soul-life, in the context of "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals," yields a discovery. When it is time for the boy to return to the human world, the bearded seal first looks for the hunter whom he lets himself be killed by each year. Death comes as a soporific sleep sent on the wings of a seabird and the boy comes back to his human form after the saved seal bladders are blown up with human breath and returned to the sea in the final point of a ritual exchange during the yearly bladder festival. As Oosten explains,

> [T]he souls of animals are thought to reside in the bladder of the animal. . . . By inflating the bladder a man induces his own human life force into the bladder and animates it. By piercing the bladder (an action metaphorically associated with copulation) he sets it free so that a new animal can develop. Thus the hunter seems to add a crucial element in the regeneration of the game: his breath. (192)

This is an important vector in Inuit cosmology, providing evidence that the northern Indigenous literary tradition is more than just an archive of printed stories. In order to save the bladders of the seals caught over the winter for the bladder festival the following autumn, the bladders are first blown up like a balloon, they are filled with the breath of the hunter. The breath is, as Oosten points out, crucial for making new life in the form of a return of seals and the avoidance of starvation for the Inuit and Yupiit.

Once dried, the breath stored inside the bladders is released, as when a person releases air to sing. Thus, the ritual storage of seal bladders follows the same action as the making of song. The correlation of the *topos* breath-soul-life, or *anirniq*, with seal constitutes a literary tradition that depends upon a relationship to another, who turns out to be a subject participating in a communicative — and didactic — act rather than an object or tool for the poet-maker's own self-fashioning. This Yupiit literary ecology continues to translate what constitutes meaning-

ful relationships between humans and seals and is a literary tradition that is multi-species at its core. While literature might depend on the letter, it would be reductive to think that the letter is always a silent one. This literary tradition requires a communicative act that inspires *and* creates — the seals are created anew through the breath of the hunter, the hunter is created anew through the act of breathing, and Paul John and other Yup'ik elders continue to tell the story anew for audiences of young people for the continued life of Yupiit and seals.

Finally, my reading of "Arnaqtaaqtuq: The One Who Gets a Mother" further explores the potentiality of birth and death for humans and seals. In the story, a fetus is aborted and fed to the dogs. After being consumed, the fetus is reborn as a dog and his dog-mother urges him to eat because he "never gets enough / because [he] was scared" (21).[19] Once he learns how to eat like a dog, he decides to travel as a fetus through all the animals, wandering through a seal, wolf, caribou, walrus, and back to seal.[20] Anthropologist Xavier Blaisel analyzes "Arnaqtaaqtuq" for how it structures the cosmology of the Inuit and the animals they hunt and eat. Blaisel argues that the story "turns on the sacred pact between humanity and prey" (19). Moreover, the type of prey is crucial to the "bringing into being" of human people:

> The continuity [between a seal killed by the hand of a man and the fathering of a human child] is underlined by the terms employed to designate the wandering hero, rendered explicit by the overlap between the death of an aborted fetus or newborn, hunting at seal breathing holes and the birth of a human being. The [sacred] pact supposes a sort of privileged affinity between the seal and the child being born, one that contributes more than just the materiality of the body to the making of a human person. (19)

While Blaisel structures his argument purely on the relationship between human and seal, the wandering fetus learns something that is particular to each species — both predator and prey.

When he returns to being a seal, the *inuugami* ("wandering fetus") lets himself be taken by a human hunter. At the moment that the harpoon pierces the head of the fetus-seal, the seal and the hunter are transported to the home of the hunter in a paronymous transformation of *aglu* ("seal breathing hole") into *iglu* ("house"). In the original Inuktitut, at the point of this transformation, it is unclear whether the subject of the sentence refers to the hunter or the seal "going home quickly" (24).[21]

Blaisel helpfully footnotes this ambiguity: "The term can be applied to one or the other of the two protagonists. According to informants, the reason for the ambiguity is simple: there is the belief that the breathing hole where a seal is killed by a man functions as a 'house' at the precise moment of slaughter" (24). Blaisel points out that in the story a series of equivalences are set up between actions that are proper to seals and those that are proper to humans. For example, the word for the action of a seal looking at the surface of the water before breathing (*ituatuq*) is used to describe the fetus's movement before his (human) birth (25). The hunted seal and the human fetus are equivalent beings that descend from the same spiritual circulation, although they end up in different bodily forms (36). The pun of *iglu* ("house") and *aglu* ("seal breathing hole") is given another level of meaning when the hunter's wife, "who never had any children" (24), becomes pregnant as the wandering fetus leaves the seal and "prepare[s] to go inside" the *iglu* provided by the wife's uterus that functions as a "little bed" (24). In a reverse of the boy who returns with his seal companions to *their* house underwater, when the seal that houses Arnaqtaaqtuq is killed, he returns to "his house," the womb of the hunter's wife.

Human and animal in this cosmology are not concepts with attendant categorical boundaries (such as humans, and not animals, have language, art, or abstract thought). Rather, humans and non-humans are relational beings with similar claims to culture, history, and ecological presence. "[A]nimals and spirits," Eduardo Viveiros de Castro writes, "see themselves as humans: This 'to see as' refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts. . . . In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons" (470). Understanding that the "to see as" refers to the act of seeing, an act always located in a specific body, shifts the perspective from a focus in these stories on the metaphoric relationship between human and animal (the animals as "merely" humans in disguise) to the acknowledgment of the irreducible liveliness of the other that is also like oneself. Viveiros de Castro continues, "Since the soul is formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere — the difference is given in the specificity of bodies. . . . Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours" (478).

He offers an expansive understanding of "body" not as a distinctive shape or substance, but as "an assemblage of affects or ways of being

that constitute a *habitus*" (478). The body, as "a bundle of affects and capacities," is the origin of perspectives. In "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals," the boy becomes human only through an affective, that is, *bodily*, identification with his seal companions. The boy tells the woman who finds him at the seal-breathing hole that (in the words of John) "his companions had left him behind. He told her that even though he wanted to go with them, they said they weren't going to take him and went ahead and left. He cried wanting to go with them. . . . He became visible in human form at that time" (55). The boy *identifies* himself as seal, not human, and wants desperately to return to his underwater home beneath the ice. The story emphasizes that humans do not cross boundaries, or invite others to cross, thoughtlessly and without consequences, given that the danger of crossing boundaries to someone else's world is the risk of acculturation. And as we can see, the boy is transformed in the crossing over, and not just physically. Although he returns to the human world with "special knowledge" gained in the encounter with the world beneath the ice, he also obviously leaves something of himself behind too, something given freely, whether we want to call it love or some other emotional attachment. This attachment is what gives the boy, when he grows up to be a "great hunter," his ability: he knows and acknowledges the depth of his relational connection to seals.

"Arnaqtaaqtuq" and "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals" are examples from a literary tradition that offers Sommer's literary difference combined with the mobility of a "traditional modernity."[22] Yupiit and Inuit archives, rather than being static windows on the past, are open to interpretation, encode competing readings, and offer complex relationships with the orderings of desire, nostalgia, and tradition. What is deemed human and what is made seal through the matrix of breath-soul-life-seal gives us the tools for a critical practice that allows access to these northern archives while remaining attentive to their difference. The encounter with difference is the possibility that these narratives provide, as they teach us how to be better readers. And better, more *knowledgeable*, readers make better relational companions in the world with practices of care that can account for multiple types of lives. By refusing to fall back on interpretative frameworks that either assimilate difference or keep it wholly other, in the formation of an animal rights activism that is inclusionary and site specific, I argue for the inhabita-

tion of new bodily capacities that dwell in the perspective of difference marked by the *habitus* of what the literary and the seal have to offer.

Notes

[1] I include animal rights efforts with the commercial hunts under the rubric of projects that seek to manage how seals are brought into human meaning-making systems. While animal rights advocates clearly want to keep seals alive and are in direct opposition to commercial harvesting, a similar discursive structure is at work that keeps humans and seals ontologically divided.

[2] Donna Haraway explains "becoming worldly" in *When Species Meet*: "The kinds of relating that these introductions [of different stories of human, animal, microorganism, and environments] perform entangle a motley crowd of differentially situated species, including landscapes, animals, plants, microorganisms, people, and technologies. . . . Whether grasped two-by-two or tangle-by-tangle, attachment sites needed for meeting species redo everything they touch. The point is not to celebrate complexity but to become worldly and to respond" (41). Becoming worldly is not a position for a subject outside relationships, a point of ontological security that maintains boundaries through cultural relativism. When one is worldly, one actively incorporates the messy present of late capitalism, histories of colonialism, and webs of entanglements that might end in death for some species in a contingent and mobile praxis.

[3] At the height of the protests, it is estimated that the government spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on measures to protect the sealers against activists, including hiring military escorts. See Barry.

[4] Christopher Daley presents a nuanced look at the two sides of the sealing debate in northeastern Canada; nevertheless, his analysis never questions the St. Lawrence sealers' need for market access.

[5] Canadian commercial seal hunts typically occurred in the Gulf of St. Lawrence on the northeastern edge of Canada. While sealers from Newfoundland and Labrador also participated in the hunt, the majority of large-scale operators were from Québec.

[6] Katherine de Guerre notes, "Fort McMurray's population is now largely comprised of inter-provincial and international migrants. For example, the population of Fort McMurray is comprised of 17% Newfoundlanders, the largest population of Newfoundlanders outside of Newfoundland" (9).

[7] See Betty Kobayashi Issenman's *Sinews of Survival: The Living Legacy of Inuit Clothing*. A recent controversy around seals, commercial hunting, and Inuit was sparked by popular American talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres when she raised money from a celebrity self-photograph, or selfie, and gave the funds to the Humane Society International to protect baby harp seals from commercial hunting. Her large donation and the resulting outcry from Inuit prompted the HSI to clarify its stance: "Unlike Inuit sealers, commercial sealers almost exclusively target baby seals who are less than three months old. Inuit hunters kill seals primarily for meat" ("Sealfies"). Inuit responded to DeGeneres with "sealfies" on social media that depicted Inuit in sealskin clothing eating seal meat. In "Canadian Inuit Snap 'Sealfies' to Defend Way of Life," Kate Woodsome and Ryan Kohls report that the movement is not just a war of memes; rather, the "#sealfie campaign, coupled with new findings about food insecurity and a suicide epidemic, has cast a spotlight on a serious issue. Canada's Inuit are in crisis, and they say seal hunting is one of the few traditions keeping their people and culture alive."

[8] Inuit use modern rifles, motorboats, and snow machines to access areas for hunting seals and other animals. Although dog teams are still used by Inuit, so-called traditional technology such as bone harpoons and stone knives are rare. In the conflict that Wenzel studies, animal rights activists suggested that post-contact technology invalidates the Inuit right to hunt a "traditional" food source.

[9] As Hugh Brody explains in *Living Arctic*, "Either they should live like us . . . or they should live in genuine, aboriginal isolation. . . . [We] force a moral choice upon aboriginal peoples. We consign them to one of two possible categories: traditional or modern" (174-75).

[10] See George Wenzel's *Animal Rights, Human Rights* and Hugh Brody's *Living Arctic* for more in-depth discussions about the extremely difficult practice of Inuit hunting, which even with modern technology continues to have uncertain outcomes. The tools of modern hunting — guns, boats, and snow machines — require more capital, but government settlements where one can earn a wage are also much farther from ideal hunting locations.

[11] Seal hunts are uncertain activities centered on the ambiguously natured seal. Seals are one of the animals created from the finger joints of the Mistress of the Sea, sometimes called Sedna or Nuliajuk, a temperamental figure who holds back game if displeased (Laugrand and Oosten 155). However, it is not just traditional stories that encode uncertainty, danger, and liminality around human interactions with seals. Recent films utilize the ambiguous nature of killing your closest relative (the seal) to, in fact, staging the problematic of killing your closest (human) relative. The comedic portrayal of a seal hunt in *Nanook of the North* (1922) is reframed in Zacharias Kunuk's 2002 film, *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner*. Kunuk's film features a doubled hunt: a successful seal hunt alongside a welcomed pregnancy as well as a failed seal hunt at an *aglu* (seal breathing hole) that ends in the death of the group's leader by the hand of his son. Most recently, in the 2011 film *On the Ice*, by the Inupiat director Andrew Okpeaha MacLean, it is the activity of going on a seal hunt that ends in the death of a young man that sets the stage for the conflict on and off the ice.

[12] Martin has an in-depth discussion of Inuit story tropes and topoi in *Stories in a New Skin*.

[13] Although Yupiit will strategically identify as Inuit in international fora, within the state of Alaska, identifying as Inuit for Yupiit, Cupiit, and Inupiat has no political or social currency. In Canada, however, identifying as Inuit, rather than Iglulingmiut, has had profound political and social impact. For a more detailed discussion of strategic nationalism in the North, see Martin's "Is an Inuit Literary History Possible?"

[14] For Oosten, "the yua and the inua are terminologically equivalent in respectively Yupik and [Inuktitut]" (187).

[15] The original Yup'ik reads thus: "Tamakut-wa-gguq inglermi nutaan uivetmun uitalriit, yuut tua-I makutangutet elluatut" (John 38).

[16] For a fuller account of the recycling of matter and spirit through the name in Inuit cosmology, see Laugrand and Oosten; Trott; Briggs; Brody; and Saladin d'Anglure. Laugrand and Oosten write, "A child only became a complete person when it received an *atiq*, a name, usually from a deceased relative . . . [*Atiq*] refers to a relation, not to an essence" (126).

[17] See Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries*, and Cruikshank for more details about the structure of didactic storytelling.

[18] Although unnamed in the anthology, the "poet-maker" is Orpingalik, a leader of a Netsilik tribe from around Pelly Bay. Knud Rasmussen first recorded his songs and stories during his fifth Thule expedition, which crossed the Arctic between 1921 and 1924 (*Across Arctic America* 164).

[19] All quotations from Blaisel are my translations from the French.

[20] The story emphasizes the degree to which Inuit have concrete and studied knowledge about seals and the other animals they interact with regularly in their specificity

and otherness: learning how to eat like a dog at a trash heap, wandering across the land in a wolf pack, being easily spooked like a caribou, or staying in a rather smelly bunch as walrus generally do.

[21] In Blaisel, which includes Rasmussen's original Inuktitut and his translation into English, this line reads, "*qitumgiurunnarani. Unaanganuuqalluni angirrausaalirluni* /who never had any children/. /First it went to the harpoon/ /it went home quickly/" (24).

[22] Fienup-Riordan writes of her Yup'ik informants: "[Yupiit] are engaged in a complex process of appropriation, innovation, and encounter. Contrary to the view that would see them as either traditional or modern, the Yupiit are . . . striving to be both" ("Invocation of Tradition" 81, 86).

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