

Project Description

Due to global climate change, the circumpolar north, especially the Arctic, is experiencing rapid rates of environmental change. Ice and permafrost melting resulting in unpredictable sea ice conditions and sea-level rise are among the most dramatic changes in local climate conditions (Ford and Furgal 2009, 1; Rathwell and Armitage 2016, 1; Rathwell 2020, 67–68; Harrison 2020, 31). Like most indigenous¹ cultures, Inuit² who have inhabited the Canadian arctic region for centuries, have profound interrelationships with the natural world and their non-human environment. Through the performance of the expressive cultural forms of throat singing, digital storytelling, and the embodiment of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) passed on for generations, Inuit engage with animals, plants, and places while accessing, performing and developing Inuit ontologies and epistemologies, therefore demonstrating how humans and non-humans should ideally interact (Harrison 2020, 31; Sakakibara 2021, 119–122). The interrelationship with their arctic environment is an important factor in the ongoing struggle of identity-making and decolonizing efforts. Therefore, global climate change threatens not only the physical and mental well-being of Inuit but rather the sustainability of Inuit culture adding further to the already imposed negative effects of colonialism (Igloliorte 2017, 105; Harrison 2020, 28, 31; Sakakibara 2021, 119; Lebel et al. 2022, 312; Ford and Furgal 2009, 1).

Despite the wide recognition that indigenous peoples are among the most affected by global warming due to climate change, the global climate change discourse is still dominated by western scientific research concepts and needs (Harrison 2020, 31; Lebel et al. 2022, 312; Igloliorte 2017, 105; Ford and Furgal 2009, 5; S. 2021, 106). By highlighting the cultural implications of climate change in the Arctic we can gain an indigenous perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness between humans and their natural surroundings. As recent research has shown – especially in the Environmental Humanities – bridging indigenous and western knowledge systems enhances global understanding of climate and environmental change. Furthermore, it helps to humanize the scientific-dominated climate change discourse.

¹ While in many ways heterogenous in experiences and cultural features, Indigenous peoples share: a self-identification as Indigenous, a continuation of historical pre-colonial or pre-settler societies, strong links to territories and natural resources, a distinctness of social, economic or political systems as well as language, culture and beliefs, a non- dominant position in broader society, and a resolve to sustain their ancestral environments and social systems (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. n.d. Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Voices. Factsheet. (https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1))

² Inuit — Inuktitut for “the people” — are an Indigenous people, the majority of whom inhabit the northern regions of Canada. An Inuit person is known as an Inuk. The Inuit homeland is known as Inuit Nunangat, which refers to the land, water and ice contained in the Arctic region. (<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/inuit>).

Because as Rory Turner explains, we live in a “time of impending environmental and social crisis“. Therefore, “ways of being and living in the world flowing from alternate realizations of nature, culture, and spirituality can provide substance and inspiration for sustainable adaptive and meaningful ecological and human communities“ (Rory 2021, 71). Finally, the engagement with Inuit points of view, needs and imaginations helps to increase the presence of indigenous narratives and perspectives, therefore contributing to the international movement of Indigenism which aims to promote and protect the rights of the worlds’ first people, their rights to cultural expression and their rights of freedom in an academic context (Harrison 2020, 28; Henry et al. 2008, 1–3).

The dissertation will examine the interrelationship between climate change, cultural resilience, sustainability and identity-making of Canadian Inuit as demonstrated by Inuit artists and activists through the performance of the expressive cultural forms of throat singing, digital storytelling and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Therefore, shedding light on how members of marginalized populations confront environmental crisis by reaffirming their cultural identities. The dissertation aims to point out that the local implications of global climate change – namely sea and ice melting – threatens the sustainability of Inuit culture and therefore efforts to articulate and express a modern cultural Inuit identity, which is understood as interconnected with their arctic environment.

The concepts of Performing Diverse Environmentalism and Indigenous Music Sustainability will function as the theoretical framework for the dissertation. John Holmes McDowell, Katherine Borland, Rebecca Dirksen and Sue Tuohy understand diverse environmentalisms as “environmental knowledge, consciousness, experience, and practice of groups that speak to senses of place, environmental consciousness, and social-political action“. In that context expressive culture³ often becomes a resource and/or a catalyst for action in settings of environmental crisis, as individuals and communities try to resist the destructive effects of ecological and climatic change. Furthermore, the performance of expressive culture allows people to interpret their changing environment, expressing their perceptions and insights, therefore generating new forms of knowledge which can lead to action and the formation of new social relations. Through highlighting indigenous voices that address ecological dilemmas

³ McDowell, Borland and Tuohy consider stories told and songs sung, objects crafted, ceremonies and rituals as expressive culture. They explain that expressive culture as it features in cultural performances such as religious practices, ceremony, ritual and theater are social events in which people “share their experiences, knowledge and convictions, thereby creating the affective bonds and personal connections upon which environmental activism depends” (Borland, McDowell, and Tuohy 2021, 4).

and respond to environmental degradation, ecological collapse, and global climate change, the concept of Performing Diverse Environmentalisms functions as a critical perspective on global responses to ecological change and cultural trauma as global warming advances. In that way, it challenges the perception that environmental studies and climate change discourse are singular, western scientific constructs (Borland, McDowell, and Tuohy 2021, 1–7).

However, the concept of Performing Diverse Environmentalisms depends on the ongoing existence and therefore sustainability of expressive culture. The concept of Indigenous Music Sustainability focuses on sustaining indigenous music cultures, which are faced with severe social and physical challenges associated with colonialism and climate change (Harrison 2020, 28–29). The Inuit in Canada have experienced colonial assimilationist government and church policies, including residential schools that took children away from their families and forbade song, dance and language. These policies resulted in the almost total erasure of cultural forms. However, in recent years, Inuit among other indigenous peoples of Canada and the Nordic countries have reflected, articulated and interpellated sociocultural interrelations and politics through expressive culture. These performances address the aftermaths of colonialism and current threads to the sustainability of their culture like global climate change, often in ways that emphasize and enact contemporary resilience (Harrison 2019, 17–18).

The dissertation will be structured in two main parts to answer the proposed research questions. The first part will examine how Canadian Inuit perceived and interacted with their arctic environment before and after colonial encounters. In that context, the long-term effects of settler colonialism on the interrelationship of Inuit with their natural surroundings will also be analyzed. Considering current trends in environmental history, the agency of the arctic environment in form of spiritualized and sonic landscapes will be considered too. Data will be collected from semi-structured interviews, traditional songs and stories, archives, and early ethnographic studies. The results thus obtained will serve as basis in order to identify the present relationship of Inuit with their natural surroundings, which lie at the core of their current ecological concerns, environmental activism and identity-making. At present, there can be identified a “New Wave” of Inuit throat singers and Inuit filmmakers in Canada, who engage with traditional cultural forms and practices in new contexts (<https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2020/06/19/new-wave-of-inuit-throat-singers-reach-the-canadian-mainstream-music-scene/> and <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-film-panel-jackson-arnaquq-baril-wente-mccue-1.4704637>). Following research strategies applied in

ethnomusicology, anthropology, and the newly emerging field of virtual ethnography, the second part will focus on selected Inuit artists and activists in form of case studies. Data for this part will be gathered through semi-structured interviews, fieldwork, and the analysis of digital material available on the Internet.

Bibliography

- Allen, Aaron. 2021. "Diverse Ecomusicologies: Making a Difference with the Environmental Liberal Arts." In *Performing Environmentalisms : Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*, edited by McDowell, John Holmes, Borland, Katherine, Dirksen, Rebecca, Tuohy, and Sue, 89–118. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Borland, Katherine, John Holmes McDowell, and Sue Tuohy. 2021. "Introduction." In *Performing Environmentalisms : Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*, edited by McDowell, John Holmes, Borland, Katherine, Dirksen, Rebecca, Tuohy, and Sue, 1–20. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ford, James D., and Chris Furgal. 2009. "Foreword to the Special Issue: Climate Change Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability in the Arctic." *Polar Research* 28 (1): 1–9.
- Harrison, Klisala. 2019. "Sustainability and Indigenous Aesthetics: Musical Resilience in Sámi and Indigenous Canadian Theatre." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 51: 17–48.
- Harrison, Klisala. 2020. "Indigenous Music Sustainability during Climate Change." *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 43: 28–34.
- Henry, Minde, Gaski Harald, Jentoft Svein, and Midre Georges. 2008. "Introduction." In *Indigenous Peoples: Self-Determination, Knowledge, Indigeneity*, 1–28. Delft: Eburon Delft.
- Igloliorte, Heather. 2017. "Curating Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Inuit Knowledge in the Qallunaat Art Museum." *Art Journal* 76 (2): 101–113.
- Lebel, Laurence, Vincent Paquin, Tiff-Annie Kenny, Christopher Fletcher, Lucie Nadeau, Eduardo Chachamovich, and Mélanie Lemire. 2022. "Climate Change and Indigenous Mental Health in the Circumpolar North: A Systematic Review to Inform Clinical Practice." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 59 (3): 312–336.
- Rathwell, Kaitlyn. 2020. "She Is Transforming" *Arctic* 73 (1): 67–80.
- Rathwell, Kaitlyn, and Derek Armitage. 2016. "Art and Artistic Processes Bridge Knowledge Systems about Social-Ecological Change: An Empirical Examination with Inuit Artists from Nunavut, Canada." *Ecology and Society* 21 (2).
- Rory, Turner. 2021. "The Critique of Being: Educating for Diverse Environmentalisms and Sustainable Lives in the Anthropocene." In *Performing Environmentalisms : Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*, edited by McDowell, John Holmes, Borland, Katherine, Dirksen, Rebecca, Tuohy, and Sue, 71–88. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sakakibara, Chie. 2021. "Singing for the Whales: Whaling Peoples and Shared Heritage in Arctic Alaska and the Azores." In *Performing Environmentalisms : Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*, edited by McDowell, John Holmes, Borland, Katherine, Dirksen, Rebecca, Tuohy, and Sue, 119–135. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.