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Reflections: Indigenous Artists on Socio-Ecological Issues

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Abstract

Ecological devastation such as droughts, melting glaciers, and more, caused by climate change threaten the sustainability of our socio-ecological systems at a global scale. Our relationship with nature is embedded, and our interactions with it form the basis of our development and sustainability. Currently, our relationship with it is threatened by the increase of catastrophic climate-related events. Although it is a global phenomenon that impacts people in all regions, climate change has been shown to disproportionately impact communities of color, low-income, and other socio-economic minorities directly. As a result, Indigenous communities are being impacted more directly due to their traditional livelihood lifestyle, which depends on the land and its natural resources. In the Arctic, melting sea ice has been statistically shown to contribute to the rising sea levels that directly impact local and global ecosystems. Inuit communities within the Arctic regions of Northern Canada, Greenland, and Alaska, are foremost among these groups affected by exogenous changes. For the Inuit communities, climate-based devastation threatens their personal communal rights alongside their very existence as an Indigenous group. Inuit contemporary artists Jessie Kleemann and Jaco Ishulutaq utilize art as a platform to bring forward visibility to Indigenous perspectives, relationships, and issues with the current Anthropocene. This paper will examine their work and argue that both artists, through their art depict the continuation of colonial oppression among Indigenous people caused by modern-day globalization. This paper will also highlight the importance of protecting the existence of Indigenous communities, as their loss can mean the loss of cultures, traditions, languages, and sophisticated traditional knowledge of the natural world, which can be used to fight climate change and build resilience.

Increasing global temperatures related to climate change has resulted in rapidly melting glaciers, causing rising sea levels. Rising sea levels contribute to potentially devastating coastal storms, floodings, and biodiversity loss, among other ecological devastation. Such devastation has been shown to disproportionately impact the most marginalized communities directly. As a result, Indigenous communities are being significantly impacted because they depend on the land and its natural resources. Within the Arctic regions of Northern Canada, Greenland, and Alaska, Inuit Indigenous communities have particularly suffered severe local impacts to their daily activities, including hunting, fishing, and travel. Grappling with ecological devastation within their communities, Inuit contemporary artists Jessie Kleemann and Jaco Ishulutaq use art to reflect on Indigenous socio-ecological issues by depicting their personal Indigenous relationships with the current Anthropocene. Their work brings forward visibility to Indigenous perspectives, relationships, and issues that highlight the continuation of colonial oppression experienced through modern-day globalization. It is important to highlight Indigenous issues because their very existence, traditions, and cultures as Indigenous communities are threatened by current climate-based devastation.

Located in Sermeq Kujalleq Glaciers, Greenland, Inuit artist Jessie Kleemann performed her work, *Arkhticós Doloros / The Arctic in Pain*. In her performance art, she embodies direct emotion from her memories and mythology, "I explore through layers of different movements, substances, poetry, or themes, such as the *Sassuma Arnaa*, seal blubber, or sea weeds. I can then appear in the work through several repetitions until it shows something new or loses its inherent meaning. I let my body take over and I ask what it should do to me and to the space. What relevance do the myths have, and are we able to let them speak?"¹ Relying on her Inuit heritage myths, shamanism, and rituals, she reflects on man's centuries-long relationship with the harsh

¹ *Exposure Native Art and Political Ecology*. Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2021

nature of the Arctic. Kleemann describes the wind, the ice, and the running melted ice as an element of their own. She questions the reality of the melting of the Arctic as the ice sheet melts and the planet faces human migration to flee wars and famine from subarctic regions.² *Arkhticós Doloros* means to be in pain. To Kleemann, *Arkhticós Doloros* states the pain of the Arctic, the pain of the polar bears, and the pain of within herself. Her body movement appears planned yet improvised, conveying her interpretation of a frightening sensation of being, functioning, and embodying herself as the ground zero of the climate crisis.

Although Indigenous communities are a widely diverse group based on their perspective regions, traditions, and cultures, they all share common commonalities among the communities, such as generation abuse, oppression, political and economic marginalization, land dispossessions, and subjugation caused by the continuation of colonization.³ Kleemann is from the Greenlandic region of the Inuit people. In her art performance, Kleemann shows some of these common commonalities while expressing her pain in a personal reflection between her relationships as an Inuit member with the Arctic.

As Kleemann walks the ice, the ice is melting. For Inuit people, the ice is a crucial element to their style of living. They depend on the cold, the ice, and the snow. Climate change has caused hunting, fishing, and travel in the Arctic to become more difficult. Floods caused by melting ice have caused members to relocate. Reindeer herders report declining populations because the animals find it increasingly difficult to access food and are more likely to fall through melting ice; about twenty-some Arctic species, such as caribou, have migrated away

² *Exposure Native Art and Political Ecology*. Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2021.

³ Randall S. Abate and Elizabeth Ann Kronk, "Commonality Among Unique Indigenous Communities: An Introduction to Climate Change and Its Impacts on Indigenous Peoples." *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 26, no. 2 (2013): 179–95.

from their traditional habitats and ranges due to shifts in weather patterns.⁴ Kleemann feels pain for her people, for herself, and for the environment that she is connected to, all while reflecting on the escalating threatening changes caused by the co-occurring effects of colonial oppression and globalization on Indigenous people. In most cases, these groups have legal connections to the land and therefore make it nearly impossible for communities to leave the land that has been set aside for them.⁵ As a group they constitute for only 5% of the Global population and represent 15% of the world's poorest.⁶ They contribute remarkably very limited quantities of greenhouse gasses to the global atmosphere and are the first that must learn to adapt to unpredictable changes. Kleemann artworks serve as visual elements that bring forward discussions about climate change into contexts to explore Indigenous understandings of the Arctic and the relationship between Art and Artistic process and resilience to the surrounding changes and uncertainty.⁷

Native Indigenous to the Inuit people in Cape Dorset, Canada, artist Jaco Ishulutaq's art piece "*Global Warming*," (2010), is a call for action regarding climate change. He utilizes a skull bone walrus head and positions it on top of a gray and green soapstone. Underneath the head, the soapstone has carvings of hands. There are also small soapstone-carved depictions of diverse animals: a fish, a bear, a bird, and a seal. The animals are placed on the skull bone head. His

⁴ Randall S. Abate and Elizabeth Ann Kronk, "Commonality Among Unique Indigenous Communities: An Introduction to Climate Change and Its Impacts on Indigenous Peoples." *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 26, no. 2 (2013): 179–95.

⁵ Randall S. Abate and Elizabeth Ann Kronk, "Commonality Among Unique Indigenous Communities: An Introduction to Climate Change and Its Impacts on Indigenous Peoples." *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 26, no. 2 (2013): 179–95.

⁶ J. Andrew Hubbell and John Charles Ryan, *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2022).

⁷ Kaitlyn J. Rathwell and Derek Armitage, "Art and Artistic Processes Bridge Knowledge Systems about Social-Ecological Change: An Empirical Examination with Inuit Artists from Nunavut, Canada," *Ecology and Society* 21, no. 2 (2016).

work highlights his growing concerns about human agency's contribution to climate change. Ishulutaq, like most Inuit individuals, is well knowledgeable of their natural environment and its changes. As a hunter, he worries about growing environmental changes in the Arctic Sea ice. Ishulutaq explains how there are changes in the wind and the temperatures in the water. He explains how the ice has gotten softer and changes through the season. "I've carved climate change. Global warming. One is holding on to the Arctic, holding on to the south, holding on to the whole world. It's a carving of hands holding the world. It's carved out of a walrus skull with the tusks, it has animals on it and hands holding it all. The hands represent that the world is delicate, that we must take care of it. Since we are ruining it with the atmosphere with the pollution of smokes. It's in our hands. If we take care of our planet, our animals and the plant life won't be ruined."⁸ The hand represents Ishulutaq believes that humans are the cause and the solution to global warming, and therefore, the hand holds on to the Arctic ecosystem as a symbol of responsibility and human relationships' role in these changes.⁹

Ishulutaq is an example of an artist using art as a platform for interpretation, engagement, and communication towards concerning existing socio-ecological issues among Indigenous communities such as the Inuit. He shares his relationship and Knowledge of the Arctic seas, land, and biodiversity. He calls for change and action and works with Indigenous leaders to achieve a political space, a voice, and a change that aims to reverse centuries of global inequities and redistributive justice. To achieve redistributive justice, indigenous leaders speak less about their ecological Knowledge when invited to conferences, environmental talk meetings, and related meetings. Instead Indigenous leaders speak of the inequalities they have experienced as

⁸ Kaitlyn J. Rathwell, "'She Is Transforming: ' Inuit Artworks Reflect a Cultural Response to Arctic Sea Ice and Climate Change.'" *Arctic Journal* 73, no. 1 (March 2020): 67–80.

⁹ Kaitlyn J. Rathwell and Derek Armitage, "Art and Artistic Processes Bridge Knowledge Systems about Social-Ecological Change: An Empirical Examination with Inuit Artists from Nunavut, Canada," *Ecology and Society* 21, no. 2 (2016).

marginalized peoples exploited by colonialism and globalization; the same forces responsible for the over-exploitation of natural resources that have contributed to current climate change concerns.¹⁰ Indigenous people and their leaders still continue to be politically marginalized. However, over the past few years, they have participated in the UN General Assembly and International Union Conversations of Nature to provide themselves with political leverage in their struggles for rights and self-determination.¹¹ Ishulutaq through his art displays resilience and a voice against climate change. As an individual, he seeks change for the better of his people and the world as a whole.

Climate change is a global phenomenon that affects all people in all regions. It is caused by greenhouse gas emissions, which trap solar radiation within the Earth's atmosphere causing Earth's surface to heat up. Humans create greenhouse gas, and over the past decade, our levels of greenhouse gas emissions have increased causing high temperatures globally. As a society, we are moving faster than nature. Our levels of consumption have increased with the help of globalization and technology. In this new and complex geological age, it is clear that we have turned global systems as technology conquers our space. However, natural systems such as coral reefs, forests, and animals struggle to keep up and adapt to the current changes. Globalization has driven the increase in economic and social change. For Indigenous communities, external social drives of colonization and globalization impact their social-ecological systems, livelihood, activities, as well as their art and traditions which are interrelated with nature and its changes.¹²

¹⁰ AmityA Doolittle, "The Politics of Indigeneity: Indigenous Strategies for Inclusion in Climate Change Negotiations," *Conservation and Society* 8, no. 4 (2010): 286–91.

¹¹ AmityA Doolittle, "The Politics," 286–91.

¹² Kaitlyn J. Rathwell and Derek Armitage, "Art and Artistic Processes Bridge Knowledge Systems about Social-Ecological Change: An Empirical Examination with Inuit Artists from Nunavut, Canada," *Ecology and Society* 21, no. 2 (2016).

For example, the Inuit face the challenges of maintaining traditional Knowledge and resilience against the ecological and social drivers of change. Traditional Knowledge is a crucial essential to indigenous communities and their survival. Traditional Knowledge is passed down from generation-to-generation leading to adaptation to any forthcoming changes. Inuit traditional Knowledge consists of multi dispensaries using natural resources. Their interactions with the land are key for the modeling development of sustainable practices.¹³ As an approach to environmental justice and sustainability, ethical and moral questions regarding the use and misuse of Indigenous Knowledge for environmental research often seek to engage directly with Indigenous communities as partners in projects designed to address ecological problems, enhance human well-being, and protect more-than-human species.

Our ecological devastation such as droughts, melting glaciers, and more, caused by climate change threaten the sustainability of our socio-ecological systems at a global scale. Our relationship with nature is embedded, and our interactions with it form the basis of our development and sustainability. Currently, our relationship with it is threatened by the increase of catastrophic climate-related events, and although it is a global phenomenon that impacts people in all regions, climate change has been shown to impact marginalized communities disproportionately such as low-income, and other socio-economic minorities directly. Native Indigenous communities are among the upfront groups affected by exogenous changes. As part of their livelihoods, their culture, traditions, and values are intimate and dependent on the ecosystem. Indigenous groups have phase and continue to phase crucial experiences in both emotional and physical well-being. To this day, they phase different forms of climate change, according to their respective region, exploitation of resources, high levels of poverty, poor access

¹³ J. Andrew Hubbell and John Charles Ryan, Introduction to the Environmental Humanities (London: Routledge, 2022).

to education, health, and broad human rights violations. Now more than ever, it is important to hear the voices of contemporary Indigenous people. Inuit artists such as Kleemann and Ishulutaq both share their reflections on Indigenous socio-ecological issues by depicting their Indigenous personal relationships with the current Anthropocene within their art. Through contemporary art, their work functions as a vital and crucial practice that transmits visibility to Indigenous Socio-ecological issues and highlights the continuation of colonial oppression experienced through modern-day globalization. Indigenous artists and groups are grappling with ecological devastation and art serves as a platform for engagement for a better understanding of Indigenous communities and our relationship with the Earth in the current Anthropocene.

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Figure 1. Jessie Kleemann, *Arkticós Doloros / The Arctic in Pain*, 2019 (detail), single-channel video, 12 minutes. Courtesy of the artist. © Jessie Kleemann



Figure 2. Jaco Ishulutaq: "Global warming," 2010. Soapstone and walrus bone carving. Photo credit: Susana Reisman.