

BOOK REVIEW

Silent Snow: The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic

Marla Cone

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For Arctic Aboriginal people, the colonialism that often accompanied the arrival of outsiders into their traditional territories came in many forms beyond an extensive struggle for economic hegemony, including non-Native attempts at political, religious and ideological, linguistic, and cultural domination. However, centuries of contact have not fundamentally altered the fact that the capital, technology, and political authority that continue to fuel economic development in the Fourth World Arctic resides squarely in the First World. Following the near extinction of fur stocks and whale pods due to non-Aboriginal avarice in the decades following initial contact, the Arctic has more recently become an industrial wilderness where the pursuit of non-renewable resources has loomed an ever larger prize for energy-hungry southern markets. The search for diamonds in the Central Arctic, hydrocarbon extraction in Alaska, a generation of heavy metal mining at Nanisivik (Baffin Island), oil and gas exploration in the Beaufort Sea, and pipeline schemes slated for the Mackenzie River valley, are examples of the persistence of colonial resolve and an overall lack of respect for the Arctic and the Aboriginal people who live there. As with the collapse of earlier renewable

resource-based economic booms, one can only assume that when the current non-renewable resource gold rush ends, the rapacity of the First World will once again retreat, abandoning a diminished and exploited Arctic to its original, alienated inhabitants.

In *Silent Snow*, environmental journalist Marla Cone describes the most chilling First World legacy yet to affect the Aboriginal Arctic. Taking readers on a personal journey across the one-fifth of the global landscape that is the circumpolar region, she illuminates how the Arctic has become a toxic sink for a witch's brew of chemical toxins that have been carried to the region on wind and waves, finally and forever deposited in the air, water, and in the flesh of living animals. In the far northern latitudes, industrial contaminants invade the region as hitchhikers from the south on ocean currents and prevailing winds — climatic patterns that are changing at ten times the current global rate. North of 60, contamination takes the form of surging concentrations of the most pernicious industrial cocktails imaginable appearing throughout the natural world. Mercury, insecticides, pesticides (DDT and others), perfluorinated acids (used in the manufacture of Scotchgard and Tef-

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lon), mirex, dieldrin, and Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) are but a few of 200 toxins currently present in Arctic air, water, soil (permafrost), and finally, animals. As airborne and oceanic stowaways, contaminants traveling from Europe, Russia, and North America often terminate and persist in staggering concentrations through a process known as bioaccumulation, a contamination pyramid that can multiply concentrations by double digit magnitudes as they pass upwards through the regional food chain from microbial phytoplankton, to fish, to marine mammals, and finally to circumpolar Aboriginal people. Spanning a total of three continents and eight countries, nobody is immune: pan-Arctic Inuit, the Yupik and Aleuts in Alaska, and the Chukchi, Nenets and others in eastern Siberia, Dene and Métis in Canada, and the Saami of Northern Europe are all affected. As a result Cone explains, High Arctic polar bears are increasingly showing signs of chemical contamination, skewed sex hormones, and the outward appearance of both male and female sex organs that combine to imperil reproduction and depress populations. Fish stocks have become thoroughly contaminated with a combination of pesticides in dizzying concentrations, and seals currently carry appalling amounts of PCBs in their blubber. The results of persistent and escalating contamination in circumpolar human populations include lowered birth weights, human breast milk dangerously tainted with mercury, suppressed immune systems, elevated rates of genetic mutation, scrambled hormone balances, depressed brain development, and neurological impairment.

As Cone describes it, Arctic contaminant loading is a new and perverse variety (not to mention consequence) of globalization; contaminants know no boundaries, need no passports. Yet like epidemics of the past — perhaps as the infested blankets of the 21st century? — they are vandalizing Aboriginal economies and lifeways. They are gravely imperiling customary Arctic economies by undercutting the renewable resource base, squashing some species and making almost all others too poisonous to consume in traditional — in some case, minimal — quantities. In a region where between one-third and one-half of daily human nutritive energy is derived from the harvest of fish, birds, marine and terrestrial mammals, the very country food

(Peqqinnartoq, or *healthy food*, in Greenlandic) that has sustained millennia of Aboriginal peoples is now being recognized as so loaded with the so-called Dirty Dozen of foreign contaminants as to be avoided, only to be replaced with imported, less nutritious, painfully expensive, and culturally sterile foodstuffs. Neither quaint, nor culturally static, Arctic economies are singularly hunting endeavors, where harvesting is at once a materially productive venture, a cultural birthright, part of a spiritual conversation with the supernatural, a marker of ethnic identity, and a moral test of the hunter's skill and generosity. As one Greenlandic elder put it, "contaminants do not affect our souls, avoiding our foods from fear does" (p. 113).

As a result, the economic consequences have been staggering, as throughout the region, subsistence hunting has been curtailed as family economic self-sufficiency is further destabilized. As former Inuit Circumpolar Conference president Sheila Watt-Cloutier remarks, hunting is, "not just food on our plates. It's a way of life" (p. 52). Nursing mothers are challenged (most loudly by non-Aboriginal outsiders who claim to understand the problem) to reduce or discontinue breast feeding infants, while hunting and fishing — the traditional remit of men and boys — has been rendered unnecessary, if not outrightly lethal, further compromising the traditional gendered Aboriginal economy. Indeed, the Arctic without polar bears is "like the plains without buffalo" (p. 79). The corruption of what amounts to the shortest and most fragile food chain on the planet has fed a greater reliance on the cash economy, declining quality of life standards, and community out-migration by those who have been literally starved off their land. Traditional feasting economies that have celebrated the harvesting of marine mammals of all sizes for millennia have been demoralized — after all, who wants to share, let alone consume, contaminated meat, even if such avoidance risks offending the generosity inherent in the enduring and powerful spirits of the very creatures who have sacrificed themselves to feed hungry humans? In the Arctic, hunting, and the concomitant sharing and consumption of meat is much more than economic: imperiling hunting imperils the cosmos.

Even the cash-intensive new-era renewable resource economies, including sport fishing and

trophy hunt guiding have been undercut by Northern contamination, while Arctic eco-tourism (now a contradiction of terms?) has surely suffered. Clearly, romantic non-Aboriginal perceptions of the presumed idyllic Arctic are being challenged and cognitively, albeit reluctantly, replaced by the messy spectre of a less-than-pristine wilderness, a Love Canal of the North. That being said, what tourist wants to visit a place where they believe the staple is *sukkunartuq* — an Inuktitut term for something that damages, destroys, or results in an undesirable outcome?

The future, Cone advises is discouraging. As regional contamination increases, the symptomatic and cultural effects magnify in successive generations of fauna and humans, and the wider situation can only continue to deteriorate. *Silent Snow* paints a depressing picture as it raises issues of grave importance to circumpolar Aboriginal people and the rest of us. Thankfully, Cone is wise enough to avoid proffering simple or glib solutions to what will undoubtedly escalate as an economic and cultural catastrophe. Another issue that she avoids is one of escalating First World stigma associated with a part of the world that Cone identifies as many more times polluted (according to some indicators) than the industrial south. How do Aboriginal people feel about being perceived by those who

live in the myopic, safely urban, and self-righteous southern latitudes as mere toxic victims, struggling to survive in a poisoned part of the world? While Cone counts among her informants many Aboriginal community leaders, hunters, fishers, and Elders, some readers may be left unsure as to just how people feel about deteriorating (and perhaps incomplete or incorrect) southern views of their homeland.

Despite the obvious strengths of *Silent Snow*, Cone is prone to taking geographical, historical, and ethnographic liberties throughout. She confuses Nunavut and Nunavik, conflates culture and latitude by assuming that the farther north one travels, the more traditional Aboriginal economic systems (and culture in general) are to be found, and she seems to forget that the majority of circumpolar people now reside in communities best defined as urban. Moreover, throughout the book she often presents her informants as passive, if not fatalistic, bystanders to their fate, ignoring that Aboriginal people of the circumpolar region have long assumed and asserted more control of their lives, their communities, and their homelands than Cone admits. All things considered, however, *Silent Snow* is for Arctic Aboriginal people — not to mention the rest of us — what Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was 45 years ago: a passionate and enlightened call to seek effective solutions before it is too late.