Thought in a Cold Climate: the Nordicity of Arne Naess and Sheila Watt-Cloutier

In the novel *Love in a Cold Climate*, one of Nancy Mitford’s characters says that she is relieved to be moving back to England (from India) since people in a cold climate pay less attention to love affairs.[[1]](#footnote-1) Those of us who live in cold climates wonder if that is true: do we really pay less attention to love affairs? And if we do, is that because of our climate? There has been likewise a wide-spread belief that people in a cold climate have little time and no use for intellectual pursuits. However, I think that intellectual pursuits are no less pervasive and valued in northern societies. In fact, northern societies have generated their own distinctive patterns of thinking. In the first part of this paper, I shall briefly explain the concept of nordicity and argue that it can be fruitfully applied to patterns of thought characteristic of different communities. In the second part of the paper, I shall explore some of these distinctive patterns of nordicity by comparing the thought of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess with the thought of the Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier. In the final part, I shall focus on the specifically Canadian nordicity to explain the differences between Arne Naess and Sheila Watt-Cloutier.

**Nordicity in Thought**

The Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin developed the concept of *nordicity*—the degree of northernness—in the 1960's as a response to a growing consensus among geographers and other scientists that there is no single criterion to measure the “northernness” of particular places; rather, the degree of northernness is most accurately understood by assessing both natural factors (such as temperature) and human factors (such as cultural self-perception) to measure the “northernness” of a place. Although many philosophers would deny that climate, or any aspect of physical location, have a significant effect on thought, other scholars, such as Hamelin, argue that such an effect is inevitable. In order to measure both natural and human factors, Hamelin developed an index he called *Valeurs polaires* (VAPO) that includes the following ten factors: (1) latitude; (2) summer heat; (3) annual cold; (4) types of ice; (5) total precipitation; (6) natural vegetation cover; (7) accessibility other than by air; (8) air services; (9) resident or wintering population and density; (10) degree of economic activity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Based on VAPO there are four regions in Canada: Extréme Nord (Extreme North), Grand Nord (Far North), Moyen Nord (Middle North), and Pré-Nord (Near North).[[3]](#footnote-3) Although *prima facie* it may appear that nordicity has little to do with thought, Hamelin insists that we can only understand the nordicity of a place by looking at the non-human and human factors together, including how inhabitants think about their environment and themselves. For example, he says that he developed VAPO because

another development that may help to define the cold region is our own perception, since a nation is far from being solely the production of ecological factors. It is more or less the child of our thought, expressed or silent, exact or not, whether translated into actions or not. Mental structures may constitute the most powerful determinants of a region. By this process, images may be created whose weight may come to surpass that of the most easily identifiable physical realities such as freezing. Thus ‘reality’ is, in part, the product of the interpretation put on things. The Canadian North is not exempt from this mental evolution. Mixed in with the tangible, sensible North is a North that is the product of invention or imagination.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In other words, the reality of a cold climate and a northern latitude is constituted in part by our thought: our “own perception”, our “interpretation,” our “imagination.”

What is interesting here is that while one might suppose that a scientist such as Hamelin would have little use for non-physical factors in an index of measurement, it is his inclusion of mental elements that have contributed to the widespread acceptance of VAPO as a measurement. It is because of the inclusion of human factors that VAPO is considered an improvement over previous, purely physical, measurements of northernness; it is widely used by the Canadian government to determine things like environmental regulations, funding formulae, etc.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is not simply that the “North” is affected by what we think of it; as Sherrill Grace argues, what we think is affected by our nordicity. She says “not only are our ‘nordicity’ (as Hamelin calls it) and sub-Arctic and Arctic geography inescapable physical realities, but the North is deeply embedded in all that we do . . .. North, I will argue, is fundamental to who we are, to that ‘imagined community’ . . . of Canada, with all its contradictions, failures, compromises, and successes” (2007, 23). Similarly, Daniel Chartier argues “the opening created by geography onto the pluridisciplinarity [of the concept of nordicity] provides an opportunity to grasp the links between literature, discourse, and culture on the one hand and territoriality or reality on the other hand” (35-6). In other words, thought does not take place in a vacuum but in a *habitus* and as such, thought is influenced by the milieu of the thinker.

**Arne Naess and Sheila Watt-Cloutier**

Arne Naess was a prolific philosopher and his writings span some seventy years. He is internationally famous as one of the founders of Deep Ecology. In the introduction to the English version of *Life’s Philosophy,* Harold Glasser says that “the deep ecology movement stresses the importance of addressing the fundamental roots and coevolving causes of the ecological crisis. It posits that along with humans’ special capacities of reason and moral consciousness comes special responsibilities, particularly in relation to the flourishing of nonhuman life and ecocultural sustainability of the planet.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Naess was also a renowned mountaineer and climber and a peace activist. By the time he died in January 2009, he was recipient of countless awards and honours.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier is an Inuit activist. She is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and in 2015 she published *The Right to Be Cold.* She represented the Inuit both nationally and internationally in her work on social and environmental issues as they affect the Inuit, particularly on persistent organic pollutants in the circumpolar Arctic and global warming. She served as International Chair for the Inuit Circumpolar Council from 2002 to 2006. She has received numerous awards and honours for her work; she was nominated for the Nobel peace prize and is a recipient of the Sophie prize and an Officer of the Order of Canada.

What is intriguing about the thought of Naess on the one hand and Watt-Cloutier on the other is how despite the difference between them—one a professional philosopher, the other a political activist; different nationalities; despite different generations—they share a similar imagery underlying their thought: they both talk about life as a journey on the land or with the land. Before I turn to specific examples of this imagery, I wish to point out that the one thing Naess and Watt-Cloutier do have in common is their nordicity. The thought of both is steeped in their northern locations; hence, their respective writings are characterized by a focus—broadly speaking—on environmental issues. To frame it more accurately, their thought arises from and is dependent on their specific geography and climate.

Let us turn to Naess first. In a chapter entitled “Life Seen as an Open Landscape,” Naess is explicit about his imagery underlying his philosophy:

To live is like traveling through a landscape with both easy and broken terrain, light and dark places, all concealing the unexpected. We travel though this landscape on expeditions big and small, continually interacting with others. We cannot move entirely by ourselves, any more than we can always bask in the sun. A vital aspect of the journey is to take time to tarry in the halts along the way, to pull up and absorb life’s inherent values: a beautiful sunrise, a loving smile, a touching piece of music, a cloudless sky. (2002:1)

Naess is not making an argument here, but this imagery of a journey, of an expedition, is bound up with two of his key ideas: *possibilism* is the “assumption that the future is in principle completely open, offering unimaginable surprises” (2002:4) and *pluralism* by which he means that “an indefinite plurality of equally valid but mutually inconsistent or incompatible theories, approaches, or interpretations exists to address any problem or issue” (Glasser 2002:xviii). Since we are talking here about the imagery underlying rational thought, it is significant that imagination has no problem with inconsistency or contradiction, nor does imagination have a problem with the possibility that there are surprises in the future that we cannot yet imagine.

Although Naess often refers to possibilism and pluralism as ideas or concepts, he says they are also attitudes and they are adapted to helping us out of seemingly unalterable circumstances (2002:5). He tells the following story to illustrate the richness of possibilism and pluralism as both concepts and attitudes:

Once I was climbing alone down a very long, steep, and rugged ridge in the Pyrenees. I had a thirty-meter rope, so that I could rappel down a fifteen-meter overhang and then pull down the rope after me. Then I arrived at an overhang with a vertical drop of about fifteen meters, which I was quite certain was the longest on the route. The ledge on which I landed under the overhang was quite big. I was convinced that there would not be any greater overhangs further down, so I pulled the rope down to the ledge. But then I suddenly saw that the ledge jutted out over a considerably deeper overhang. I was trapped completely trapped. Above me there was an overhand impossible to climb, and my rope was not long enough to reach down. My reaction to the situation? I said to myself, “Idiot, idiot, idiot!” After about an hour, I agreed with myself that I would not remain sitting passively on the ledge while I slowly starved and thirsted to death. I decided to try climbing up a tiny shallow crack that ran to the right. It petered out, but at that point I saw a crack running upward to the left. I thought it probable that if I started moving along it, I would fall and be killed, but on the other hand, I would far rather die that way than remain stuck on the ledge. To cut a long story short, I saved myself! A drastic reminder that there are always possibilities of survival, even if the circumstances seem quite hopeless.. . . Possibilism and pluralism are expressions of the fundamental way in which some of us feel life and the world around us. (2002:5-6)

In other words, possibilism means that the future is unpredictable in a meaningful way (even though it is not always so) and pluralism means that there is more than one way to respond to a problem. It the unpredictability or contingency of the future coupled with the plurality of valid ways to engage with the future that resonates so well with the image of life as a journey, or to use another of his common phrases, life as an expedition. And in Naess’s case, both the literal and the metaphorical journey includes climbing and hiking in the mountains.

Watt-Cloutier expresses the imagery of life as a journey on the land in somewhat different terms. She refers to her culture, the Inuit culture, as a hunting culture, which is cyclically nomadic, involving both long and short journeys following animals throughout the year. She says that non-Inuit often misunderstand hunting culture. She says it is not just about the killing of animals but explains that: [[7]](#footnote-7)

We remain a hunting people of the land, ice, and snow. The land and the process [journey] of the hunt are for our youth much like a university education.. . . Not only do they teach the technical hunting skills, they just as importantly teach our children character skills, life skills such a patience, courage, determination, persistence, and how to be reflective. They learn to be focused and strategic and to take the right survival risks under the right conditions at the right time. They learn to control their impulses, to withstand and cope with stressful situations, to develop sound judgment and ultimately wisdom. They learn just who they are in terms of their sense of identity and self-worth, and their self-esteem and confidence are built as they become proficient as providers and natural conservationists. Our hunting culture is not only relevant for survival on the land it teaches crucial life skills and wisdom that are transferable to the modern world. (2009)

In other words, a hunting culture is about so much more than harvesting animals to assuage hunger or to provide raw materials for clothing and shelter. For Watt-Cloutier, a hunting people are hunting for identity, for wisdom, for character through their hunt for animals. Their hunting is motivated by physical needs, but also by cultural and spiritual needs. If the Inuit can no longer hunt, they cannot be fully Inuit. Because hunting is so foundational to Inuit being, environmental degradation and changes that threaten their ability to hunt threaten their very survival as a people.

According to Watt-Cloutier, a hunting culture is in symbiosis with the land that originates and enables both the hunting and the culture that develops with it. She says:

The land not only teaches technical skills of aiming the gun or harpoon or skinning a seal, it teaches what is required to survive, giving confidence to our people and it builds the character, skills of judgment, courage, patience, boldness under pressure and withstanding stress. A sense of peace. It is wisdom, ultimately that we are trying to teach our children so that they can choose life over self-destruction. (2005 sophie prize)

Living on the land, with the animals and the vegetation, becoming natural conservationists brings peace and ultimately wisdom. What we see in Watt-Cloutier’s words is not the work of a professional philosopher although I think Naess would agree with her; her words do not easily lend themselves to concepts and ideas that can be systematized but rather are meant to be evocative, to engage our imagination.

In her numerous speeches, Watt-Cloutier invariably emphasizes how Inuit thought and culture is rooted in a very specific—northern—region:

Inuit have a deep understanding of the cycles, rhythms, seasons, and natural changes in life. Living on the land requires a high level of independence, self-confidence, good judgment, initiative, and skill. In my hunting culture, challenges are very real and immediate, and this remains so today. But the skills and attitudes needed to survive on the land are transferable and highly relevant in the rapidly changing world in which we all now live. (2005)

In this instance, she explicitly connects this understanding of life as a journey, a hunting trip, to the land that sustains it. It is because she understands life as a journey on the land that she says that the skills and attitudes needed to survive on the land are just as useful and necessary to life anywhere on our planet. In other places, she talks of the connections not just between the Inuit and the Arctic, but between all people. For example, she asserts that “everything is connected through our common atmosphere, not to mention our common spirit and humanity. What affects one affects us all. The Arctic, after all, is the cooling system . . . for the entire planet” (RTBC 13). For Watt-Cloutier, we all live on the land, on the planet Earth and that makes us all one. This is not to say that the land is the same everywhere on the Earth, but she says that the fate of the Inuit is ultimately the fate of all of us.

Naess too sees what he calls the unity of all living things (2002:100). He says that "I feel . . . like a little tree in a huge forest" (2002:101). (Given how much of Norway is forested, it may seem obvious to point out that this image shows how his imagination is shaped by his *place* in the world). He goes on to say "if I feel that something is alive, I feel that it has a basic resemblance to myself. For some years this feeling persuaded me to declare that fundamentally, all life is one" (2002:101). And Naess has a very expansive understanding of Life. He writes that "For my part, I feel that in a certain sense Hallingskarvet Mountain is living and friendly. Some people will call this a myth. . . . The truth is that we sorely need to nurture our mythlike imagination" (2002:111). He goes on to describe an experience of standing in solidarity with the Samis in a protest movement against a hydroelectric scheme on the Alta River in northern Norway in the early 1980's where some of the Sami protesters said that the river was part of themselves: here we see the mythlike imagination at work. Watt-Cloutier does not often use such metaphorical language, although she does say that ice is the lifeblood of the Inuit (TED 2016). For Watt-Cloutier, many of her protests and environmental activism are resolutely couched in the language of science (although she often says that science is beginning to show what the Inuit have been saying for generations).[[8]](#footnote-8) I think, unfortunately, the reason for this difference between Naess and Watt-Cloutier here is that Naess, as a scholar with impeccable academic credentials, does not need to take on the trappings and authority of the paradigm of Western thought that is, Science whereas Watt-Cloutier, as an indigenous woman, needs to make ritualistic gestures of acknowledging the authority of Western science.

**Canadian Nordicity**

I have shown that both Naess and Watt-Cloutier invoke an imagery of life as a journey on the land. Are these patterns of thought and imagination part of nordicity? The easy answer would be to say that living in a northern land influences the thought and practice of its inhabitants and thus, their similar imagery is a result of nordicity. I think both Naess and Watt-Cloutier would only partly agree. They would agree that living in a northern land shapes the thought and practices of its people as it shapes the evolution of its plants and (other) animals. But if we take seriously the claim both Naess and Watt-Cloutier make that we are all one people, that the Earth is one ecosystem, then we have to also take seriously that the land with which *any* people live shapes their thought and practices. In other words, Northern people are not unique because they are formed by their environment. At most times in human history, we have been enormously influenced by our environment. It is only relatively recently that we humans have enough control that we can ignore enormous aspects of our environment. And as we ignore our land, generation by generation, we lose touch with our surroundings, with our deepest selves, and the land slowly ceases to play a role in our imaginative life. It loses its forces in our psyches. I think Naess and Watt-Cloutier would agree with me here, since Naess talks about how the language of science *can* devalue the particular (which includes our particular location in this world) and Watt-Cloutier warns that modern science and technology let us live on the land without recognizing that we are still part of the land (even if we use snowmobiles). She talks of how even her own people are cast adrift when they are uprooted; what interesting metaphors from their traditional homeland.

If it is true that all humans (and their thought) are significantly influenced by their environment, is nordicity a useful concept for examining the thought developed in northern environments? I contend that it is useful: although it may be true that all thought develops in its own particularity shaped in part by the milieu of the thinker, the particular milieus are distinctive and contribute to those distinctive patterns of thought. What might possibly be unique to northern lands is this: that the land, with its climate, its seasons of long bright summer days with short nights and short winter days with long dark nights, is extreme enough to make it harder for its inhabitants to ignore. This inexorable nearness of northernness in our everyday lives might also explain why it is sometimes commonly thought that northern people have little time or use for intellectual pursuits; just living in the north takes energy and attention. I am not suggesting that northern people are consciously more in touch with their environment than people elsewhere although there is a sense in which we are more in touch with it since we have to do so much to allow us to ignore it (e.g. central heating, block heaters, etc.) In fact, Canadians at least might be said to complain more about their land and its climate so being in touch with the natural world does not necessarily generate warm fuzzy feelings. But I am suggesting that living in a northern land makes it easier to stay in touch. The land will not let us ignore it. And strangely this possibility of staying in touch has persisted despite the incredible growth of technologies that increasingly buffer us from the outside.

Even if I am right about some of what might be unique to northern location, not all nordicities are the same. The concept of nordicity is not only a geographical concept; it is also a social concept. While nordicity includes physical geography, it also includes the social-cultural-historical milieu. So, Naess’ imagery of life as a journey grows out of not only the geography of Norway, but also the history and culture of Norwegian society. For example, Nina Witoszek argues that “Naess’ vision is not a rootless abstraction, self-begotten and self-sustaining, severed from culture and history” but is very much part of a Norwegian Nature Tradition.[[9]](#footnote-9) In fact, she says “it is difficult to imagine deep ecology being born in a latitude further south than Copenhagen: its discourse and its world view is, on the whole, rather wintery” (63). Although the concept of nordicity is a Canadianism, it seems uncontroversial to accept that Naess’ thought is shaped by the nordicity of his Norwegian society (including geography, culture, and history).

Likewise, the thought of Watt-Cloutier grows out of her milieu. It is easy to see how her thought grows out of her physical geography since her entire work has been devoted to conserving the Arctic and the Inuit culture. It may be harder to see the extent to which she has been influenced by the thought of other Canadians since she does not necessarily cite the work of others who have influenced her (the way a professional philosopher would do). So, (like Witoszek) I am of necessity making a circumstantial case: given that Watt-Cloutier was educated and has worked exclusively in Canada (although often with international partners), she, like any Canadian, has been influenced by the cultural-historical-political milieu of Canadian society. In fact, although Watt-Cloutier shares the imagery of life as a journey on the land, her view of nature resembles the view of nature found in a significant strand of Canadian philosophy, and scholarship more generally, more closely than it resembles the view of Naess and the Norwegian Nature Tradition.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, Leslie Armour argues that “Canadian philosophers perceived nature not as hostile but as fragile and to be treated with respect. Nature was neither that plastic creature of American sunshine to be done with as one pleases nor the virginal beauty of the European Romantics. It was there. It responded. It demanded respect. It could never be conquered, but neither could it conquer.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Watt-Cloutier also says that nature is not hostile and must be treated with respect: “we [Inuit] came from a highly disciplined culture, where we had to have self-control and respect for one another, as well as for nature, in order to survive” (2015, 102). She too sees the fragility of nature and as such, her Inuit society has long recognized that “our hunters, our people, were *sentinels*, positioned at the top of the world . . . sounding the alarm . . .. Our homeland—the Arctic—is the health barometer for the planet, and as such, we Inuit have a significant role to play globally” (2015, 383, emphasis mine). In other words, the Inuit are sentinels or guardians watching out for the well-being of nature. Watt-Cloutier has devoted her life to pointing out that of course nature responds: climate change is nature’s response to certain human activities and the Inuit are “the best positioned to defend it [nature] . . . as the sentinels of global environmental change” (2105, 588). She says that “we Indigenous people of the North were [are] part of the environment—we had survived in harsh conditions for thousands of years by listening to the land’s cadences and adjusting to its rhythms” (2015, 380); in other words, the Inuit are in a reciprocal relationship with nature (neither conquering nor being conquered).

Another Canadian philosopher who has such a view of nature is George Blewett. In their study of Blewett’s thought, Armour and Eliabeth Trott argue that Blewett “grasped that we must, if we are to understand nature, come to regard it as a significant system” where every part “works together” (FR 335). Similarly, Watt-Cloutier sees nature as a significant system; she says “the changing Arctic weather shows just how interconnected nature is and how humans, plants, and wildlife are all dependent on a stable climate to survive and thrive” (2015, 357). Moreover, Armour and Trott point out that Blewett “wants to maintain the unity of man [sic] and nature, he wants to restore our failing respect for nature, and he wants to develop a position within which it can be seen that nature is meaningful” (FR 336); in fact, for Blewett “one finds out about oneself by doing things in the world—that one finds out about oneself not by immediate introspection but by noticing what goes on in nature” (FR 339). Once again, there are parallels in the thought of Watt-Cloutier: in all her writings and speeches she repeatedly shows how humans are part of nature, how humans need to respect nature, how nature is meaningful in its own right is; she describes how hunting—being close to the land—teaches the Inuit about themselves.

I want to end with reading from a book recently published about the Group of Seven; interestingly, this book also examines the life-changing effect Scandinavian art had on their art in 1 913. Ross King writes:

North is, of course, a relative term.. . . But the Canadian north is a concept concerned less with degrees of latitude than perceptions of remoteness, underpopulation, lack of cultivation and, above all, harsh winter weather. (2010: 41).

Perhaps Nordicity is a state of mind as much as finding oneself in a particular location. I suggest to you that nordicity involves having a certain kind of imagination. When I started thinking about this paper, having been familiar with Naess's work, I fully expected to find distinctive patterns of thought; I did find that. What I didn’t expect was how those patterns of thought are so intimately tied to a northern imagination.

It may be objected or proposed at this point that what is the same here—life as a journey on the land—is not necessarily evidence of nordicity and its effect on thought but rather a kind of environmentalism having little to do with where it developed. I do not think that is the case, however, because, while Naess’ concern for the environment and his metaphor of life as a journey is tied to his possibilism and pluralism,

1. Nancy Mitford, *Love in a Cold Climate* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*, trans. William Barr (Montreal: Harvest House, 1978), 19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*, 24-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*, 16-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Daniel Chartier. "Representations of North and Winter: The Methodological Point of View of 'Nordicity' and 'Winterity'."  In *La circumpolaridad como fenómeno sociocultural: Pasado, presente, futuro*, edited by Enrique del Acebo Ibáñez and Helgi  Gunnlaugsson, 27-39. Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2010. <https://archipel.uqam.ca/6479/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Harold Glasser, introduction to *Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World,* by Arne Naess with Per Ingvar Haukeland, translated by Roland Huntford (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia’s Press, 2002), xxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. At her acceptance speech of an honourary doctorate at the University of Alberta, she said: [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Right to be cold pp. 300-01. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nature tradition, 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Although this chapter is too short to explore the differences between Naess and Watt-Cloutier, it should be noted that while Naess is the founder of Deep Ecology environmentalism, Watt-Cloutier explicitly says she is not an environmentalist (2015, 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community*. Ottawa: Steel Rail Publications, 1981, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)