

## “Today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow”: Reflections on Inuit Understanding of Time and Place

**Nicole Gombay**

Department of Geography

University of Canterbury (New Zealand)

[nicole.gombay@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:nicole.gombay@canterbury.ac.nz)

The setting is an international conference of Inuit Studies. In one keynote address Peter Irniq, a senior Inuk, a leader and a thinker, is giving a talk about the state of life for Inuit. He has important things to say about the past, the present, and the need for Inuit to ensure that they have a sound future. His talk is stirring, and I am rapt by the power of his oratory and by the real import of his words. He talks on, developing his various themes and pressing the audience to comprehend the urgency of his message; these are matters that need to be said and to which attention must be paid. Slowly, some members of the audience who are keeping track of the up-coming sessions start to squirm as we become aware that the papers we either wish to attend or must give, papers which have been scheduled in the hour and a half after this speaker’s talk and before the break for lunch, are being eaten into by his wide-ranging address. What are we to do? What can we do? Here we are, a gathering largely of non-Inuit, who are assembled to discuss the nature of Inuit society; how are we to get on with the task of doing so if we are held in this web of words while the speaker will not release us? Eventually, having said his piece, we are left scrambling to reassemble our plans.

How we construct our lives and give them order has a great deal to do with how we think about and live in time. But where does this sense of time come from and what, really, are its implications? In this paper I wish to explore these questions focusing particularly on Inuit constructions of time as a reflection of experience of place. Based on a phenomenological approach, I want both to consider how place and time are interlinked and to touch upon what happens to people’s sense of time as places change.

## **Time: the condensed version**

Although we do not often take notice of it, we are always in time. Along with our senses, it is part of the bedrock of our experience. Time has different qualities depending on such things as the places we are in, the activities we are undertaking, our preoccupations, and our state of mind. We often struggle with time, as did some of us in the audience of that keynote address who had to decide how to achieve our various goals. How we live in time has implications –both large and small – for how we shape our lives: it punctuates our days; it determines our movements; it gives order to society; and ultimately, as I will argue here, has existential repercussions. Yet our sense of time is not something we are born knowing; we learn it.

Time can be thought about and understood in many ways (see MAY & THRIFT 2001; MUNN 1992; PARKES & THRIFT 1978). We may think of it in terms of natural phenomena and rhythms (for instance, based on bodily functions such as when we sleep or how we age), or in terms of universal phenomena (for example, sidereal time based on the stars or the seasons or diurnal cycles). Such notions of time are generally cyclical and qualitative. But we have also developed notions of time that are linear and quantitative, and rely on instruments and devices such as clocks and calendars to shape its content. Halpern and Christie call this “technical time” (1990: 151). Such is the time that has set the framework for Western conceptions of history. Technical notions of time are often linked to the desire to establish social discipline (THOMPSON 1967). So for example, the clock was used to determine when the bells were rung to call people to church or to set the hours of work in factories. Such uses of time to establish social control have extended to establish power over the Other in more overtly colonizing ways; thus “[...] we chronologically absorb [the Other] as we spatially absorb them through territorial conquest” (HALPERN & CHRISTIE 1990: 152; see also FABIAN 1983; HARRIS 1991). This division of time between its qualitative and quantitative forms is linked to notions of time as contingent or absolute.

What I wish to argue is that the conception of time developed by and inculcated in Inuit is essentially contingent, that is, it depends on a complex state of affairs which affect how, when, and why people act. In contrast, for the Euro-Canadians with whom Inuit must increasingly interact, time is essentially perceived to be something that is absolute; it is something objective into which people must fit. These contrasting notions of time are, I argue, existential, and are linked to, and reflect, particular understandings of the world we inhabit.

There is literature on Inuit and time calculation rooted in ecological time which discusses how Inuit gauge time based on such things as the stars, seasons, animals, and tides (DORAIS 1975; MACDONALD 1998; MCDONALD, ARRAGUTAINAQ & NOVALINGA 1997; OOSTEN 1983; MENOVSČKOV 1991; SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1990; WILLIAMSON 1974). There is also literature on Inuit understandings of the linear time introduced to them by the arrival of non-Inuit (*e.g.* CHRISTIE & HALPERN 1990; DORAIS 1975; HALPERN & CHRISTIE 1990; MACDONALD 1998;

WILLIAMSON 1974). My interest in this paper is not so much to explore how Inuit calculate time, but more to consider how it is comprehended and experienced by them, and to reflect upon the larger existential assumptions underlying their conceptions of time. Moreover, although time is experienced differently at different moments and by different people, my interest is not in considering these individual experiences of time, but rather, to think about the collective ontological frameworks that shape people's conceptions of time. Of particular interest to me are the ways in which phenomenology can help us to consider not only how place is constructed generally, but more particularly, how this is linked to Inuit notions of time.

### **Phenomenology, Place, and Time**

Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the everyday, lived world of human experience (SCHWANDT 2000). Such analysis is based on the assumption that the meanings that people attach to their experiences influence how they act in the world. Thus, phenomenological research seeks to offer insights into lived experience by exploring how people come to understand and know the world according to their particular conditions. The sights and sounds and smells of a place, the rhythms of life, the comings and goings of people and things, the chance remarks, the sideways glances, the momentous and the inane, are all grist to the phenomenological mill. As a geographer I am interested in exploring experience of place from a phenomenological perspective.

Within geography, space and place are fundamental concepts. Space lends itself to such objective abstractions as cardinal points and ideas of height, breadth, and depth. Yet we actually dwell in place. We do not live surrounded by the intangible coordinates of space, but in the very real, sensorially-shaped places of our existence. Through our experiences, we turn abstract space into lived place. If place becomes meaningful based on lived human experience, and phenomenology is concerned with understanding the everyday lived world of that experience, then it can serve as a useful means of understanding place (see CASEY 1993, 1996; PICKLES 1988; RELPH 1985).

Experience of place is also linked to experience of time; in fact interestingly, in Inuktitut the postbase '-vik' means both 'time' and 'place' (BRIGGS 1998; MACDONALD 1998). Similarly, Nagy (2002) points out in research with Inuvialuit, that time and space are synchronized. Based on the work of Rämö, Crang (2001) contends that at a fundamental level locational and temporal connections may be conceived of in two ways. The first, *chrono-chora*, relates to abstract models of time and space. The second, *kairos-topos*, is linked to particular events in particular places. Such a concept of time focuses more on the experiential, and reflects particular socio-cultural values, attitudes, and norms. It is a conception of time that comes to be understood via the perspective of dwelling that is inherent in phenomenological analysis. My focus is on this second, place-based form of time.

If one considers the links between place and time one might, for example, focus on ecological time. Such an analysis emphasizes how ecological processes, such as rainy and dry seasons, determine the exploitative patterns of humans (EVANS-PRITCHARD 1939). Such time is cyclical derived from qualitative states of the environment and human life and activity. As I discuss hereafter, Inuit keep such ecological time. So in Puvirnituk (Nunavik), for example, people calculate diurnal time by holding out their hands and counting how many hands the sun is above the horizon, or they know that following the first summer rain after their arrival, the Canada geese will moult. The thirteen lunar months and six seasons of the Iglulingmiut (Nunavut) are also examples of ecological time (MACDONALD 1998), as are various environmental indicators (MACDONALD, ARRAGUTAINAQ & NOVALINGA 1997). But, although ecological processes certainly have an impact on human activities, what I wish to reflect upon is how time and place interact and serve to frame human experience at an existential level.

### **Place, Existential Time, and Inuit**

Until recently, daily life for Inuit was fundamentally focused on securing country food. Procurement of these foods depended, amongst other things, on people's knowledge of the animals, the elements, the seasons, and the weather, all of which determine both the availability and the accessibility of food (see ADULT EDUCATION CENTRE 1989; MACDONALD, ARRAGUTAINAQ & NOVALINGA 1997; WENZEL 1991). They must know how the seasons affect the quality and behaviour of the animals. So migratory animals come and go and people's diets change accordingly. Animals are hunted at particular times of their reproductive cycles or are easier to catch in particular seasons. Seals, for instance, may be more easily hunted when they are covered in fat, and so do not sink when they are shot. Canada Geese are easiest to get when they are unable to fly during their summer moult. Similarly, depending on the seasons, animal furs are thicker and healthier, and are therefore more sought-after. Since the seasons also affect the movement of food, people must constantly monitor the state of the environment and its impacts on animal movements and react accordingly.

If the seasons affect the behaviour and availability of animals, they also, along with the weather, influence people's access to those foods. For example, at the end of the autumn and the beginning of the winter it can be difficult to travel in search of food. This is because the ice is not yet stable enough, and there may not be enough snow to travel with ease. This is also a time when the weather can be unsettled. Knowledge of weather was, and continues to be, vitally important for Inuit when they are on the land. Winds can change snow, ice, and water conditions; it can trap people on the land, sea or ice. Storms can cause animals to be scarce and harvesting to be difficult. Heat can cause spoilage of meat before it can be consumed.

Today, although Inuit may seem less vulnerable to the vagaries of the elements, they are still patently at their mercy. Each year people are lost on the land and die of exposure. Each year travel plans must be changed due to weather imposing various hardships. Inuit, despite their move to settlements, cannot but be aware that they are vulnerable to the changing seasons and weather and their interactions with the larger environment.

Talk to Inuit hunters and they will say they have constantly to observe what is going on in their surroundings (see BRODY 1983, 1987, 2000; HENSEL 1996; NIELSEN 1999; TURNER 1990). To get food people must be in the wind and the sun and the rain. They must endure biting insects and bone-jangling lurches over rough ice. They must await the arrival of the animals and know the turning of the tides. In short, they must be in, and develop an extensive understanding of, the environment. Things do not happen in discrete parcels. They are not bounded. Rather, everything is interconnected, and actions can have numerous, often unforeseen, consequences. Given this, people must watch the environment to make sure that they can understand how to react appropriately.

If [a person] doesn't know what's going on in the surroundings, he's just going to concentrate on one thing. But [what] the hunter or trapper does is even though he may only be looking at one thing, he's also trying to observe his surroundings. He might do something, but a couple of months ago he saw something over there too. He might do something and constantly check it again without anybody really noticing. ... It's like that. Because as soon as he makes a move, or does something, he knows right away that something else will happen. That's how you deal with nature. If I did this, if the ice conditions are like this, I know that it's going to be like that on the way. And if I do this, then it might be OK. But when I get to that area, then I'll go on this route. Like leads and things like that, when you're travelling, then there's always one person that's leading. Because you're observing the things going on in surrounding areas (Adamie in GOMBAY 1995: 67).

This awareness of the changeableness and instability in the world is manifest at a variety of levels both physical and metaphysical. It is apparent in the fact that animals and humans can change form from one being to another, so, for example, a young man in Kimmirut told me about caribou in the area that are able to turn into lemmings. It is apparent in the fact that people's sex and gender can be neither fixed nor stable (SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1986). It is apparent in the fact that depending on circumstances, people are able to change their names. It is apparent in the multiple identities that come with the concepts of *atiq* and *sauniq* (see DORAIS 1997; NUTTALL 1992). It is apparent in the predictions of Inuit elders (which I have been told by people in various settlements in the Eastern Canadian Arctic) saying, for instance that: the weather will change in the future; or the animals will go away; or there will be lots of non-Inuit coming in the future. These elders were preparing people for changes they knew would come.

Such an awareness of the unfixed nature of existence requires that people learn how to be flexible (BRIGGS 1991). If things are prone to change and survival demands a vigilant awareness of such transformations, Inuit are encouraged to be conscious of the contingency of life and action. Things can be one way or they can be another.

The physical realities of the natural world – knowledge about its unpredictability – translate, I believe, into deeper existential perceptions about the nature of reality in general, and time in particular. People in the Arctic must necessarily be aware that their environment is unpredictable and constantly changing; everything is in flux, and the future cannot be predicted. Their very survival depends on such awareness. This means that people cannot make firm plans. The future is always contingent on uncontrollable forces, and people must learn to adapt to the unpredictability of life. This is part of what Qitsualik (2003b) sees as intrinsic to the Inuit mindset. In the face of a sometimes hostile and uncertain environment, where conditions can change at any moment, Inuit have, of necessity, learnt to be adaptable, and they have developed a sense of time accordingly<sup>1</sup>.

Environmental conditions require an awareness that the future cannot be predicted. As a result, people must focus on the present. Inuit have often told me, “Today is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow. Don’t bring today into tomorrow, and don’t bring tomorrow into today.” What is important is to take each moment as it comes rather than to assume that one may have control over the future. Such an approach to time affects what gets done and how it gets done.

This is the way my grandfather was raised. Out on the land and back in the past, everyone had to learn to get ready quickly. You were always supposed to be aware of what is going on, never let the others wait. There was always an urgency to get somewhere, whether you were going home, going to a new campsite. It is because we used to have to follow the land’s changes. It might not be good travel conditions later on. Things like climate, ice, and water conditions can change so quickly (Sandra Pikujak Katsak in WACHOWICH 1999: 219).

People do not assume that they have authority over time; rather, they must adjust to the instability and impermanence that they see all around them. This means that people let go of the past – do not bring yesterday’s problems into today’s living – and do not assume that the future is predictable, and therefore, controllable. The world is a place full of hidden forces that must be accepted and to which one must adapt. Time and place are always in flux. Of course this does not mean that people did not, and do not, plan for the future – so, in the past, people cached meat for times when it might be less available<sup>2</sup> – but they did not, and do not, operate under the assumption that the future is something

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<sup>1</sup> On a different, but related front, Romance languages have interesting corollaries with my argument that temporal and climactic conditions are linked. Thus, in French, Italian, and Spanish, the same word is used to mean both ‘weather’ and ‘time’.

<sup>2</sup> Collignon (2006: 86) provides good examples of the emphasis in the oral tradition of the Inuinnait for planning ahead and storing meat in times of plenty to avoid future hardship.



that can be controlled. Instead, they must learn to accept and be prepared for change. Such an attitude reflects time as timing (GOEHRING & STAGER 1991). Things are not fixed in time. The only thing one can truly know is the present. In such a world, time is contingent and therefore, people accept what *is* because it may always change. This, I think, is tied to the Inuit idea of *ajurnarmat*.

The spirit of the Inuit was always that of contentment, even through hardship. It's reflected in the saying "*Ajurnarmat*" (which means "it can't be helped"). Inuit were quick to accept the natural occurrences in life and move on. They had a great respect for their fellow man, the environment, and every living creature used for their survival. One would dare not say "I'm going to catch that game," even if it seemed certain that the chances of catching the game were high. The only comment was "*Angunahuarniaqara*" (... this means "I'll try and catch it"). Successful hunters were not boastful or proud; simply grateful and very fortunate (OTOKIAK, n.d., n.p.).

Things happen when they happen as they happen. Such an attitude entails being in time (LOY 2001). Time is subjective, rather than objective. It is lived moment to moment, rather than according to the clock. If time is contingent, what is important is the quality of time (see GEERTZ 1973). Thus people may disregard to undertake some course of action to which they might have committed themselves in the past, but instead, act based on present circumstances. Things happen when they happen as they happen.

Concepts of time (and its sometimes veiled links to place) are also linguistically discernable. I once had an interesting conversation with an Inuk friend about the concept in English of a 'promise' or a 'contract'. He said that these terms did not exist in Inuktitut because people do not think about a future that is predictable and controlled. Such uncertainty has other interesting linguistic corollaries. Inuit use the word 'maybe' on a far more frequent basis than do Euro-Canadians. Brody (2000) muses that this reflects uncertainty at many levels: at a material level, things may not be what they seem so the division between the material and the immaterial is not so marked as it might appear, and things can potentially transform from one thing to another in unforeseeable ways. At a moral level, in order to avoid telling untruths, people reject the notion of absolutes. And so, at a temporal level, the future can never be known.

The fundamental belief that one cannot assume one has control over the world means, I believe, that Inuit tend to emphasize the importance of process. If one is unable to predict what will get done, *how* things are done becomes important. Thus, the various rules of Inuit about how to treat animals (see, for example, Apphia Agalakti Awa in WACHOWICH 1999: 125-126) are meant as a means of trying to ensure that the animals will present themselves to be hunted successfully in the future. Thus, in order to show respect for the animals, a hunter should not assume that he or she will be successful. The same awareness of lack of control is also evident in how people ought to treat one another. So in childrearing, children are rarely told what to do (BRIGGS 1970, 1998; PAUKTUTII 2006). The

same is true of elders whose thoughts and actions must be allowed to come in their own time. Thus, as Qitsualik (2003a) points out, their messages are not, and should not be, required to fit into the tight schedules of Euro-Canadians. And so we return to the story at the beginning of this paper.

At a fundamental level, Inuit are trained to think in the present. Such knowledge is vitally important to their survival on the land. To assume that one has control over it can be a matter of life and death. Bergson (1950) argues that time should be considered in terms of "*durée*". This is the idea that time can be perceived as durations or moments that flow into one another. Such a conception of time may be understood using the analogy of an old-fashioned flip-book or a celluloid film: each image exists individually, but when put together, they flow into something else. In a sense, what I am proposing is that at a fundamental level, one which is predicated on, and yet also constructs, their understanding of place, Inuit are encouraged to perceive and behave as though each moment were meaningful, and so they inhabit what Momaday (1987: 158) calls "an extended present" or Carpenter (1956: 3) calls an "everlasting now". This is predicated on the mindset that one cannot and should not assume control over the world. Adopting such an attitude means giving over to being in a state of perpetual becoming. Nothing is what it seems and one must simply take each moment as it comes. One simply cannot know the future and to assume that one can control it is foolhardy.

### **Changing Places; Changing Times**

The existential notion of time I have described reflects an experience of place that is associated with, and was developed when, Inuit lived on the land. Starting in the 1950s in the Eastern Canadian Arctic, Inuit moved progressively to settlements. In the process, they have become increasingly enmeshed in the structures and notions that are inherent in both the formal and informal institutions of Euro-Canadians. In contrast to Inuit, Euro-Canadian society is essentially predicated, to an ever-increasing extent, on the belief that one should try to control as many aspects of life as possible. Consider all the technologies of control to which Euro-Canadians are wedded – money (which stores value for the future); the plough; timetables; computers; social insurance numbers; risk assessments; birth certificates – to name but a few. Such a society is predicated on the belief that one can have control over the world and that such control is good and desirable. A telling example of the essential belief in the goodness of control that is held by Euro-Canadians may be found by looking up its antonym – 'lack of control' – in the thesaurus provided Microsoft word. Synonyms for 'lack of control' are: anarchy, chaos, disorder, mayhem, and free-for-all. Yet for Inuit, lack of control is a valued perspective and form of behaviour. "Patience and the ability to accept those realities that are beyond one's control are [...] valued character traits. These attitudes were essential to maintaining subsistence in the Arctic, be it waiting patiently for hours at a time by a seal's breathing hole or being unable



to travel or hunt days and weeks due to violent and lengthy storms” (PAUKTUTIIT 2006: 32).

A society founded on notions of control builds systems in which time does not flow in being, but is rather, compartmentalized and objectified as something outside of the self. And so, like much in the Euro-Canadian world, time is something over which we have control (see ERIKSON 2001). Thus, time is not built into activity; instead, activity is built into time. Where Inuit must wait until an animal appears before it may be harvested, Euro-Canadians have fixed work hours and work days with fixed holidays. This notion of control over time and over the elements that sustain life also means that Euro-Canadians, assume they can have control over the future. Thus they are always looking towards it, trying somehow to predict and be in command of it. Theirs is a world of probabilities which can and should be calculated.

In their move to settlements Inuit are now occupying places that have, in a variety of ways, changed profoundly. Having been taken over by Euro-Canadians and the systems they brought with them, Inuit are living with some basic existential clashes. They must struggle between their eternal now and the perennial future in which they are now embedded by the Euro-Canadian institutions that have been built into settlement life. Certainly people have always lived with a multiplicity of times; however these days Inuit survival is based on alien notions of time which are linked to deeper ideas of control and stability. Today, survival depends on having access to cash, which generally comes with employment, which, in turn, relies on participation in the institutions associated with Euro-Canadians. As a result, Inuit are forced to conform to non-Inuit time in order to survive. The “chronopolitics” (FABIAN 1983) in which they find themselves is sometimes not to their liking. Those with wage employment complain of having to conform to Qallunaat ways. As one friend grumbled, he was caught in Qallunaat time: he used to be given agendas for his work and he would never use them or pay attention to them. But now, he knows the date. He must know it. And so, he uses his agenda. “It’s your stuff”, he said. So MacDonald tellingly quotes a man from Igloolik who, when asked for his definition of time replied, “Time is nine to five” (1998: 208).

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that at an existential level the notion of time amongst Inuit is contingent and fundamentally founded on the belief that one cannot, and ought not, to assume that one has control over the world around one—whether at a physical or a metaphysical level. This is not to deny that Inuit are unaware of time passing, or that they do not see recurring events which get built into how they react to the world; they certainly are and they certainly do. Like everywhere, people age and die. Like everywhere natural phenomena, such as leads or animal feeding grounds, are known normally to reappear in particular places at particular times, and so, are kept in mind from season to season and

generation to generation. Nor do I wish to suggest that Inuit do not have the capacity to react to, and plan for, the future, far from it. All peoples must prepare for the future in order to survive. But at issue, really, is how people conceive of and confront this future. I believe, ultimately such conceptions reflect larger existential assumptions about the nature of reality. And here, I argue, Inuit are encouraged to have regard for the impermanence and changeability of existence. At a fundamental level, concern for future survival requires their being in the present.

In the face of knowledge that ultimately we are at the mercy of forces over which we have no control, how are we to react? We can choose to ignore such awareness – dig in our heels and do all that we can to find a means of establishing supremacy over the essential instability of existence, or, we can give in to it and accept that our experience is ephemeral. Such an approach reflects a recognition that nothing is static, and gives rise to an awareness of flow and change and an understanding of existence in time that emphasizes the here and the now. What I have argued is that Inuit have, at a fundamental level, adopted such an attitude. Their awareness of the inexorable power of the place in which they live does not permit that it be otherwise. So today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow.

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