



Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

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Kevin O'Connor, Duskin Drum & Paulette Metuq

To cite this article: Kevin O'Connor, Duskin Drum & Paulette Metuq (2017) Wear Qisi-Become Seal, Performance Research, 22:2, 20-26, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2017.1315935](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1315935)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1315935>



Published online: 15 Jun 2017.



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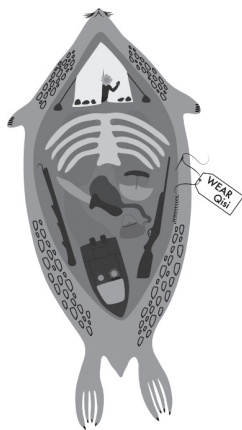


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■ Figure 1. Wear qisi image. Final design by Paulette Metuq. Photo courtesy of Paulette Metuq and Kevin O'Connor



Wear Qisi-Become Seal

KEVIN O'CONNOR, DUSKIN DRUM
& PAULETTE METUQ

¹ The bush school was started by Native Studies Professor Peter Kulchyski and ran from 1997 to 2015. It was a summer land-based school accredited through the Native Studies programme at the University of Manitoba. Kulchyski uses the word 'bush' to highlight how First Nations cultures are 'bush cultures', historically living in relationship to the land through specific cultural practices, traditions and self-governance. He writes, 'a bush culture is a culture that is of the bush, and bush, unlike wilderness, allows us to think a lived relation to and in this landscape' (Kulchyski 2013). Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2X_nVEG8GQ for video on Pangnirtung Bush School.

² Inuk is the singular form of Inuit.

³ At the Pangnirtung Hunters and Trappers Association, Kevin and duskin were shown a map. Almost every section of the map was covered with place names, outposts, family hunting camps, important landmarks, hunting routes and features such as cracks and crevasses that appear only in certain seasons – for example, Millurialik, which means 'throwing place'. It was at Millurialik that the Inuit devised a method for hunting beluga whale by hurling boulders down to block their escape. The spot became known as Millurialik, or Throwing Rock Place. Thousands of names and associated stories are being mapped by Nunavut's Inuit Heritage Trust (IHT) to preserve, enrich and protect the Inuit heritage and identity embodied in Nunavut's archeological sites, ethnographic resources and traditional place name (Inuit Heritage Trust 2015).

Wear qisi-become seal is a T-shirt design depicting a cut-open ringed seal (*natsiq*). An entire Inuit way of life emerges out of the corpse. The design highlights the dynamic relationships between Inuit people, seals and the land. The design also points to a relational ecology that grounds Inuit ways of knowing, particularly as found in the community of Pangnirtung (or Panniqtuuq, 'the place of Bull Caribou'), or Pang for short. Pang rests on the southeastern side of a fjord cutting northward into Baffin Island from Cumberland Sound, within the Inuit territory of Nunavut in the Eastern Canadian Arctic. Seals become Inuit and Inuit become seals through hunting, eating, storytelling and art making. Together they co-constitute what cultural ecologist George Wenzel calls 'co-residents of the Arctic environment' (1991:62). The shirt highlights how human and animals are entwined as active agents in both political and colonial processes in Nunavut. In this essay, we speculatively assert that Inuit are always seal. Inuit bodies and worlds are seal, in seal, of seal, through and for seal. Furthermore, by tracing both the effects of global organic pollutants through seals into Inuit bodies, and based on Inuit responses to climate change, we assert that we are all potentially seal, in seal, of seal, through and for seal.

'WEAR QISI' SHIRT PROJECT

The T-shirt design process began as a student doodling session in Pang. The authors were participating in a University of Manitoba summer programme, a five-week Arctic-based 'Bush School' run by Native Studies Professor Peter Kulchyski.¹ The 'wear qisi' image design

and the writing of this autoethnographic essay are based on experiential research and storytelling, which the authors conducted over the course of two summer-programme seasons in the Arctic. The creative process evolved into a collaboration between the three co-authors of this essay. We are Kevin O'Connor, a dance artist from Southern Ontario; duskin drum, a performer from the Salish Sea; and Paulette Metuq, an Inuk graphic designer based in Pang.² The University of Manitoba hired Kevin and duskin to help with the Pang summer school logistics and teaching twenty college students from Southern Canada and the United States. Paulette was hired as one of the local guides and teachers. The college students spent the summer learning about contemporary Inuit life and community. They were given the opportunity to spend time both in the local town and on the land with Inuit hunting families, including different guest elders.

Going out 'on the land' is a vital part of the programme. 'On the land' is an English phrase that refers to the activity of spending time at any of the numerous seasonal fishing and hunting camps throughout the region. In Inuktitut, there is no equivalent phrase. Each place is named.³ Living in these traditional and family camps predates the relocation and population consolidation in Pang Township. The camps and their surrounding hunting and fishing grounds are domestic spaces. The land is a powerful site of social exchange, transmission and transformation. The students lived in white canvas tents on the tundra and partook in the activities that constitute Inuit camp life, including hunting, fishing, gathering clams, cooking, playing Inuit games under the



midnight sun, tanning sealskins and preparing them and sewing them into clothing. Even a brief stay can expose (sub)urban students to the profound effects of land-based pedagogy with Inuit Elders. Many students returned home with more complex understandings of Northern life-ways.

Our collaboration focused more specifically on the design of a T-shirt image depicting the political and cultural significance of seal hunting among the local community of Pang. It has grown into this essay, where the three of us provide an ethnographic account of how the creative process involved in the creation of a T-shirt design became also an exploration into a set of complex questions concerning Inuit ways of life, especially with respect to human/animal co-relation. Paulette and Kevin co-designed the final image, which depicts a grey speckled seal (*natsiq*) with cute whiskers and flippers, and an elegant tail (fig. 1). A child waves from inside a tent (*tupiq*), which is standing on the green tundra or *Nuna* (also a term for the land), all of which is depicted inside the splayed open seal. The sealskin, or *qisi(k)*, is cut open to reveal a number of Inuit practices linking humans to animals, and to the land.

Our time on the land included much time at sea. One image on the T-shirt evokes Inuit hunters driving their motorboats out on the open water of Cumberland Sound in search of seal. Time stretches as the boat slows down and those in it rest in a kind of open attention, often for hours on end. Human movement is kept to a minimum so as to not frighten the seals. While out on the land, Paulette had taught us to pay attention to how the seal head moves along the

surface of the water. When catching a glimpse of a round head poking out at a constant level just above the surface of the water, we would yell '*natsiq*' while pointing in the direction of the seal. We quickly learned to ignore the head of a harp seal (*qairulik*), a head bobbing up and down. The Inuit families we hunted with rarely hunted the harp seals for food or skins. Once a *natsiq* was spotted the hunter would shoot close to the seal so that it would dive without catching its breath. It would then have to surface very quickly, allowing the boat with the hunters in it to approach. This happens several times until the hunter is confident that they are close enough to the seal to shoot it, and then they will shoot to kill it.

Other aspects of the final image evoke a range of hunting activities. While hunting, meltwater from a passing iceberg is collected and placed in a kettle for tea (fig. 2). Paulette designed the organs so that the liver pours out from a kettle of ice-melt tea and the wake of the boat morphs into the lungs. Like the warm tea, fresh liver warms the body when eaten. Between the boat and the tent are the other tools of hunting and preparing *natsiq* for food and the skin for use and sale. These include a rifle and two knives for cutting up the seal. The curved ulu knife is an essential tool for preparing the skin for its numerous uses. The knives are stylistically shown to be cutting up the delicious organs of the seal. Just below the head of the seal, a child is drawn looking out from inside the tent and the Inuit world on the land opens up before them (fig. 3). The world of tools, food and organs is bound in the skin and body of a seal.

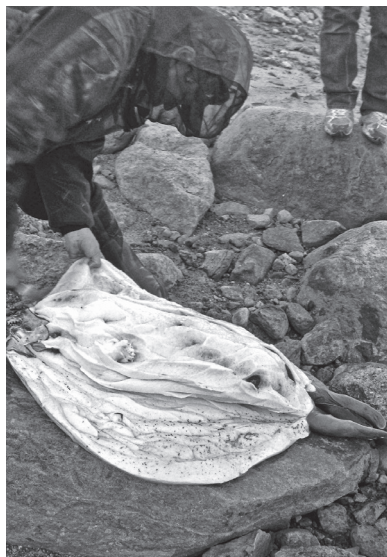


■ (left) Figure 2. Our teacher Jaco Ishulutaq and his grandson collecting water for tea from an iceberg on Pangnirtung Fjord. Photo courtesy of Kevin O'Connor

■ Figure 3. A canvas tent set up on the land at Ingurlik. Photo courtesy of Kevin O'Connor



■ (left) Figure 4. A seal brought into the boat after being shot on Pangnirtung Fjord. Photo courtesy of Kevin O'Connor



■ (right) Figure 5. Sealskins laying out to dry after being skinned, scraped and washed. Photo courtesy of Kevin O'Connor

⁴ *Ningiqtuq* is the sharing that occurs between animals and humans and from person to person. It is done differently in different communities and family groups across Nunavut. The elaborate system of *Ningiqtuq* reproduces social and material relations that sustain the Inuit subsistence system and includes the sharing of technology and money (Wenzel 2000: 61–5).

When we had finished the initial T-shirt design, Paulette took it to some of her family members and elders in the community in order to get their opinion. What else could be drawn coming from within the seal's body? Paulette's aunt noted that the gaff was missing. The gaff is a stick with a metal hook on its end used to haul the seal into the boat after it has been shot. In the warm summer months, ringed seal undergo moulting, which involves a reduction in the proportion of their live weight by shedding blubber. The seal also loses buoyancy at this time of the year, which is why the hunter only has a few seconds to get to it after shooting it, or else it will sink. Since the gaff is necessary to retrieve the seal, the boats have to get sufficiently close to the seal before they can kill it. Once the seal is in the boat it is brought back to camp and shared (*ningiqtuq*)⁴. After being butchered, the skin is washed, laid out to dry and prepared. It is then either sewn into clothing using a needle and thread or used as whole skin for family use or to be gifted or sold for money.

SEALS-INUIT WORDING

Our T-shirt design promotes the wearing and eating of seal, and it is intended to highlight, not least for political reasons, the dynamic relationship between people, seals and the land in Pang. As far as the politics of seal hunting is concerned, the Government of Nunavut drafted a report in 2012 defending the Inuit seal hunt, which has been contested by both the United States and the European Union (EU). The report states:

Seal hunting has been a cornerstone of Inuit culture, nutrition and survival in the Arctic for millennia. Since the introduction of cash economy in the Canadian Arctic, seal hunting has also been an important factor in the socio-economic well-being of Inuit. Seal hunting in Nunavut occurs year-round and is an important part of daily life in every coastal community. During the winter and spring months, hunting occurs from the sea ice platform, and during the summer and fall hunting occurs from boats in the open water. Ringed seals are the preferred food species for Inuit and therefore comprise the majority of the seal harvest in Nunavut. (Nunavut Government 2012)

From the political perspective, the T-shirt design project acquires a more complex and multi-layered dimension, as the political message behind the image resists the decades-long ban on seal fur. When the final design for the T-shirt was posted on the world wide web so that people could order the T-shirts online, the political repercussions of the project became apparent. The tag on the design initially said 'Wear Seal'. This provoked a number of online tags and conversational trails, including the following provocative exchange between feminist technoscience scholar Donna Haraway and anthropologist Marisol De la Cadena:

Donna Haraway: 'I love the design and the indigenous support politics, but I think the t-shirt needs a marker that this is Inuit seal hunting, marketing, and sovereignty over land that we are talking about, not any other seal "harvesting" and commodification practices. Could the tag in the design read "wear Inuit seal"? I could wear a shirt like that in animal advocacy gatherings and provoke the right conversations. Without it, I could not wear the shirt because all the wrong conversations would ensue.'

Marisa De la Cadena: 'Definitely. I would think that Inuit seal is not just seal – like Inuit is not just human. "Inuit" may translate "person", and this may include seal. Wear Inuit Seal – definitely. Seal as Inuit life.'

(De la Cadena and Haraway 2016)

After a longer online conversation among multiple commentators about how the words 'wear seal' would be read differently by Inuit and non-Inuit audiences, Haraway added the following:

Donna Haraway: “Some mis-interpretations are generative; others are not – and it depends on for whom is what easy. Should interpretation be made easier for southerners, especially animal advocacy worlds I am thinking about? That’s a real question. I was imagining wearing the t-shirt at a conference in Mexico City next year to provoke conversations. I think it is good that southerners have to work to understand design elements that are entirely legible to Inuit and other circumpolar people & peoples. But the tag is already a sign toward markets, hardly a new element of Inuit living. What is lost by adding an invitation to stay with an initially hard message for outsiders?” (De la Cadena and Haraway 2016)

In reading the responses, Paulette suggested the label ‘wear qisi’ instead. Not all hunting of seal outside the circumpolar region is irresponsible, or falls within commodity-driven commercial practices. But *qisi*, which means ‘sealskin’ in Inuktitut, is fundamental to the culture and refers to many things. In the book *Indigenous Pathways Into Social Research: Voices of a new generation* (Mertens *et al.* 2013), Inuk Bernadette Uttak asserted that all that was needed for survival in the Arctic was a *pana* (snow knife), a *qisik* (sealskin) and a *kukissaq* (flintstone for fire). The *qisik* or sealskin is used for clothing as a parka, pants, *kamiik* (sealskin boots), mittens, hat or headband; for a shelter or tent; as a bucket to hold water (container); and because it is essential for the body’s health (Mertens *et al.* 2013). Paulette adds satchels to pack knives, other tools for hunting and computer cases for students taking part in the Pang bush school.

LAND IN THE SEAL

The final element we had to decide upon before submitting the image for print was the colour that surrounded the various images within the seal. Kevin suggested the colour red. Red would, of course, evoke the colour of warm blood spilling out of the seal. Paulette pointed out that for *Qallunaat* (that is, non-Inuit people) the colour red may well be linked to blood, which in turn points to the killing of helpless animals by humans, resulting in what some see as the finality of death. This is precisely the

kind of thinking that was nurtured by animal rights activists opposing commercial sealing practices. In his book *Animal Rights, Human Rights*, anthropologist George Wenzel describes how sensational, bloody images of Labrador commercial seal hunting led to the ban on seal furs that has impacted the Inuit community since the 1980s (1991: 145). These commercial seal hunts are why it matters to distinguish *qisi* from commercial sealskins.

Green is the colour of the land that surrounds Pang and was the colour that Paulette chose to fill in the seal image. Camping out on the land and walking on the soft, bouncy, green tundra takes some time for Southern students to get used to. The springy and aromatic vegetative ground is a mix of Arctic heather (*qijuktaat*), Labrador tea (*qijuktaaqpait*), dwarf fireweed (*paunnat*), Arctic cotton (*kangoyak*), cloudberry flowers (*aqqiit*), Arctic poppy and other plants. It is on the land where relations and obligations among seal, human and the other aspects of land are enacted. Green is a gesture that allowed Paulette to ‘talk back’ to the discourse of European and North American animal rights activists, re-envisioning the terms on which the debate rests. By choosing green, she is emphasizing how the land, as a kind of connective tissue, binds the humans, land and seal together in Inuit–seal relations. This differentiates *qisi* from sensational blood-stained images of commercial sealing.

INUIT WORLD IN THE SEAL

For the Inuit, meat (*niqitunnaq*) is associated with good health⁵ and with the land itself, which may explain why it is referred to as ‘country food’. Inuit, both young and old, often spoke to us of country food or *niqitunnaq* as ‘food from which they cannot be separated’. Out on the land Inuit parents would feed their children by placing morsels of seal, fish and walrus flesh in their young children’s mouths. Any extra seal, walrus, beluga whale or fish we caught was shared with elders and other families back in Pang or at other camps nearby. Such exchanges create and sustain Inuit society beyond individual families.

⁵ Performance Studies scholar Lynette Hunter (2006) highlights how traditional foods of the Inuit offer a balanced diet, resulting in one of the lowest incidents of heart disease among meat-eating cultures.

Filmmaker and anthropologist Hugh Brody explains that it is *niqituinnaq*, real Inuit food, that conceptually and concretely integrates the human community through harvesting on the land (1975:125). A person is referred to as *inummariit* when they eat the meat of animals. Our Inuktitut teacher, Kelly Karpik, taught us that Inuit conceptions of *niqituinnaq* are entangled within the understanding of *Inummariit* or *Inummarititut*: to eat, work, talk as a Inuit. A department of community health sciences study on food in Northern Canada highlights how *Inummariit* is a cumulative body of localized knowledge that is handed down from generation to generation and that is derived through direct contact with the land (O'Neil *et al.* 1996). *Inummarititut* reveals the inter-connective relationships of living beings with one another and their ecology.

Seal meat was a staple food during our time on the land, providing nourishment. Even the fat, blood and eyes of the animal were eaten. When we ate the raw meat, it would warm us up from the inside for hours. The elders on the land told us that the water-resistant nature of the skin made it good for making water-tight boots and mittens, tents, and harpoon lines. Seal bladders were used to make floats to attach to harpoon lines. After being boiled and scraped the bones provided material for tools, utensils and children's games. After having undergone rapid and often forced lifestyle changes that include the forced re-localization off the land and into Pangnirtung, subsistence activities for the Inuit not only operate to maintain social relations via the sharing of resources including seal meat, but they also function to preserve relationships including those of human-seal.

SEALSKIN AS A KIND OF CONTAINER

The term for sealskin (*qisi*) can be used to denote physical containers, including tents, clothes, floats and bags. Going back to Marisol De la Cadena's comment above, it is important to point out that the design highlights the seal as both a material container and an ontological process for being Inuit. In the design, a person

is emerging from the cut open skin of the seal. The seal skin conveys some of the essentials of a contemporary Inuit worldview, much as we experienced it in Pang. *Qisi* is a container and conveyer of Inuit beingness. Inuit are entangled and held inside visceral seal-Inuit relations. As a process of material agency, the design gestures to the circulation of social worlds created, covered, bagged, contained and shared through *Qisi*. The regular and repeated circulations of sealskins, meat and the tools and methods of hunting seal, enact, carry, sew together and distribute Inuit worlding. We, along with Marisol de la Cadena, are also reminded of diplomatic statements by other Indigenous peoples who equate their distinctive human identity to those other-than-human entities with whom they co-exist and in regards to which they subsist. 'We are Caribou people,' 'we are the whale,' 'we are salmon people' (Banerjee 2012). The T-shirt shows the idea of a shared seal-human life world, and highlights the idea that someone, not something, continually dies for the continuation of life (and ways of living).

INUIT WORLD IS GLOBAL

Arguably, the Inuit and the Arctic North are the people and place most heavily impacted by global warming. Decades of toxic persistent organic pollutants like polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs) have accumulated in the meat of Arctic sea-mammals and the breast milk of Inuit women. In an interview describing an Inuit view of the world, Sheila Watts Cloutier, Inuit diplomat and former International Chair for Inuit Circumpolar Council, connects the global to the Inuit way life:

(The) whole of this planet is connected, not just people ...

The lichen, the flora, the animals, the ice are necessary for the well-being of the planet.

It's naive for people to think that oh, it does not matter if the polar bear becomes extinct or it does not matter if the Inuit can no longer hunt.

Let them assimilate and eat and buy their food in supermarkets like we do

none of it matters ... The entire well-being is connected.

There is a purpose and need for all of us to be here ... It's like saying: it's really not necessary for you to have your two lungs.

Why can't you just have one?

We can function without that, or other parts of the body

We can do without these parts ... This planet is one for a reason ... The ecosystems are there for a reason ... It's important that the Inuit remain a hunting people.

Keeping the Inuit hunter on the land is the first line of defence for all changes to this planet.

The world has a vested interest in keeping the Inuit hunter on the land ...

(Watt-Cloutier 2015)

Watt-Cloutier highlights that the lives of living beings are necessarily tangled with one another and with the wider systems that enable life to flourish. She points out that, for generations, Inuit have observed the environment and have accurately predicted the weather, enabling them to travel safely on the sea-ice and hunt seal, and other Arctic animals. She emphasizes that Inuit do not hunt for sport or recreation. Hunters put food on the table. People further south on the globe go to the supermarket; Inuit go on the sea-ice. Eating what Inuit hunt is at the very core of what it means to be Inuit. When they can no longer hunt what is on the sea-ice then their entire existence as a people will be threatened. Pointing to the link between a bodily and global world perspective, Watt-Cloutier connects hunting, eating and sharing country food to lungs, breath and shared air, to being Inuit, to climate change and protection of the whole planet.

This particular relationship to the land ties Inuit cosmology to the weather, land, ice and other Arctic inhabitants. Cultural anthropologists Jarich Oosten and Frederic Laugrand write that 'social norms and cosmic norms are difficult to separate in Inuit culture', and, they add: 'Relations between the communities and the world around them are interdependent' (Oosten *et al.* 2002: 5). For instance, the word '*sila*' can be translated not only as 'weather', 'the elements' or 'winds', but also as 'mind' or 'consciousness'/ 'intelligence'. '*Sila* connects a person with the rhythms of the

universe, integrating the self with the natural world' (Watt-Cloutier and Inuit Circumpolar Council 2005: 18).

Before becoming involved in climate justice, Watt-Cloutier worked on creating what became the Stockholm Convention, an international agreement that banned Persistent Organic Pollutants (POP) such as dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). Environmental scientists have shown that the Arctic has become a kind of sinkhole for toxic organic compounds: acids, metal and radionuclides transported to the Arctic by air and water currents from agricultural, industrial and military sources (Wormworth 1995).⁶ These pollutants bioaccumulate in dangerous levels in the marine mammals that sustain Inuit life. Inuit women's milk has become toxic for their babies. POPs travel thousands of miles through food chains from their application sites into the Arctic ecosystems, into the land and ice and into the bodies of people. The distance between the worlds of the north and the industrial south collapse, as the bodies of seals and Inuit women are poisoned. The global industrial world is in the seal.

BACK ON THE LAND

In July 2015, we (Paulette, duskin and Kevin) were out on the land in Cumberland Sound and hunting seal from a place called Ingurlik. The Sound was blocked with unseasonable sea-ice. We learned that the ice was probably multi-year ice broken up and blown into the Sound. Ocean warming causes sea-ice in Davis Straits between Baffin Island and Greenland to break up and drift south. One of our hunter guides and teachers, Andrew Nakashuk, remarked, 'This is not our ice.' The ice altered and impeded the season's normal seal hunting. As a result of the general warming conditions, hunting was not as successful as the previous year that we were on the land.

Since the ban on seal-fur imports in Europe and United States, climate-change data and discourses are the major intellectual export from the Inuit Arctic to the south. The projection of more extensive climate change

⁶ Inuit have pushed back against totalizing scientific discourse on contaminants in country food. In doing so, they include their own knowledge of risks and benefits of eating this kind of food (O'Neil *et al.* 1996).

effects in Earth's polar regions has led to a flood of research in the north. This scientific knowledge sometimes rests in tension with the ecological and adaptive knowledge of Inuit, called Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ).

In Pang, global warming is a lived-in and felt reality. Technoscience scholar Candis Callison has persuasively argued in her book *How Climate Change Comes to Matter: The communal life of facts*, that climate change has been shaped by scientific vernaculars and media discourse (2014). Callison highlights that the way in which one is likely to talk about the environment is based on how one comes to know it. For many Inuit people across the Arctic, however, this learning process involves communal and familial interactions with elder family members and time spent living and hunting on the land. This situated mode of knowing places the Inuit at the front line of climate-change research, which is why Watt-Cloutier states: 'The world has a vested interest in keeping the Inuit hunter on the land' (2015).

By placing the 'wear qisi' design alongside global-warming discourse and Watt-Cloutier's international diplomacy, we can say that Inuit seal worlding is the result of many strings tying and retying the seal body and its contents. The global world is always already threaded through the seal skin. Watt-Cloutier's fight is against the ways in which these colonial threads have suffocated Inuit world-binding. We argue that the Inuit worldview counters these colonial threads by entangling the global world into Inuit-seal relations. In doing so, we think with Watt-Cloutier, who demands that we turn towards and actively foster Inuit practices on the land, sea and ice, including Inuit hunting of seal. Finally, she is asking us: what worlds or modes of becoming must die in order for Inuit-seal relations to continue to flourish?

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