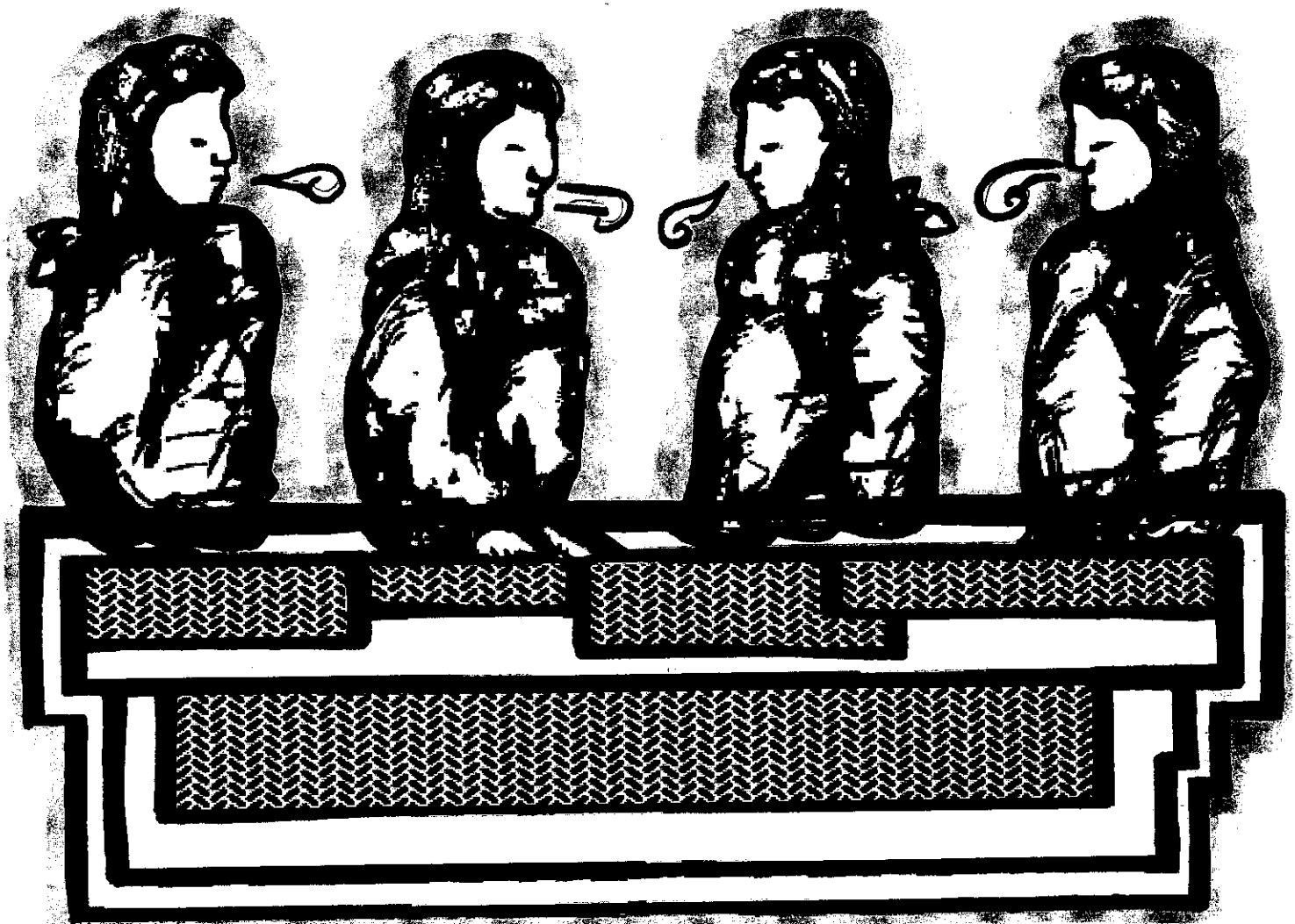


American Anthropologist





REVIEW ESSAYS



FIGURE 1. *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner*. 2001. Director Zacharias Kunuk. 172 min. U.S. distribution—Lot 47 Films, New York. (Photo courtesy of Lot 47 Films)

Introduction

JEFF HIMPELE

Visual Anthropology Section Editor
New York University

Among the remarkable accomplishments of the 2001 film *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* are the prestigious international awards won by its producers, who are from an Inuit community filmmaking collective, as well as the film's wide global circulation in theaters and now on DVD (Lot 47 Films). Considering the dominance of popular and independent films in North America, which are typically filmed in European languages and cultural narrative forms, it is all the more remarkable that this widely appealing feature film is the world's first dramatic screenplay written, produced, and performed in the Inuktitut lan-

guage by native speakers. While subtitles make Inuit storytelling accessible to world audiences for the first time, *Atanarjuat* adapts to film an ancient stream of oral history and legends for present and future generations of Inuit audiences. It therefore seems very appropriate, in this special issue of *American Anthropologist* devoted to questions of the politics of language and culture, particularly in relation to threats to "small" languages, to have three experts in the representation of indigenous culture and media in the Canadian Arctic unpack the significance of the success, production, and politics of *Atanarjuat*.

Shari Huhndorf, who has worked closely with the Inuit film collective Igloodik Isuma that produced *Atanarjuat*, examines the film's cultural narrative in terms of recent claims to territorial sovereignty in Canada; Faye Ginsburg,

who works on indigenous media in Australia and Canada, examines the complex political economic structures and social barriers that the filmmakers negotiated to produce *Atanarjuat* as well as the new opportunities this film affords; and Lucas Bessire, who has studied representations of indigenous peoples, examines reviews of *Atanarjuat* in the dominant North American mass media and the perpetuation of a European Victorian colonial imaginary.

While it may be unusual for a single film, a dramatic feature film, moreover, to be the subject of several film essays in the *American Anthropologist*, this section considers the film anthropologically as the product of multiplex institutions and individuals who have a broader concern with incorporating the practices of filmmaking and storytelling as basic ingredients in contemporary historical projects of indigenous self-determination.



FIGURE 2. Scriptwriter Paul Apak Angilirq with director Zacharias Kunuk on the set of *Atanarjuat* during the first shoot in 1998. © Igloodik Isuma Productions. (Photographer: Marie-Helene Cousineau)

Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner: Culture, History, and Politics in Inuit Media

SHARI HUHNDORF

University of Oregon

The 2001 release of *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* marked a watershed in the history of North American popular cinema. Because it is the first Inuit-produced feature and the only wide-release film in a Native language, *Atanarjuat* quickly drew widespread critical attention. Reviewer's interpretations, however, have for the most part been problematical. Citing the narrative elements of love, jealousy, revenge, and struggles for power, many critics have described the mythic nature and appeal of *Atanarjuat* as universal, likening it to such fictional literary and film classics as *Macbeth*, the *Odyssey*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. Other commentators, by contrast, have focused on *Atanarjuat's* careful attention to cultural details and practices, remarking

on its documentary objectivity and frequently comparing it to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. Despite their different emphases, these interpretations render *Atanarjuat* meaningful solely in relation to European narrative conventions or by explaining its purpose as translating Inuit culture for outsiders. These reviews raise the question of the extent to which mainstream audiences' interpretations of *Atanarjuat* are circumscribed by familiar Western forms and, in particular, by the long history of representations of Native peoples in popular and ethnographic films. However, when placed in the context of Inuit culture, history, and contemporary politics in the Canadian Arctic, *Atanarjuat* takes on an entirely different set of meanings. While the release of the film marks a departure from the content and conventions of Western cinema, *Atanarjuat* is part of a growing body of work by Inuit mediamakers that, since

the 1970s, has self-consciously engaged in the interrelated projects of political activism (especially campaigns for sovereignty), nation building, and the reconceptualization of cultural identities in response to dramatic social changes. Read in this context, the film illuminates the integral relationship between Inuit media and politics and, more broadly, the complex role of culture in the processes of colonization and resistance in the Canadian Arctic.

Inuit media emerged out of two related histories: the social changes precipitated by colonialism and the consequent development of activism focused on land claims settlements, the revival of traditions, and the return of political control to indigenous communities. Because of the remoteness of the eastern and central Arctic, the Inuit, unlike other Native peoples, remained relatively independent from the colonizing society through the close of the 19th century. By the early decades of the 20th century, however, the fur trade had transformed Inuit life; because traders rewarded those who met their demands, many Inuit altered their hunting practices and became reliant on European goods. But the most profound changes followed the collapse of the fur markets after World War II, when the Inuit resettled in central villages and grew increasingly dependent economically on the Canadian government, which afforded them no means of influencing the policies that shaped their lives. Moreover, during this period, the government intensified its efforts to sever Native peoples from their traditions and to undermine further their social autonomy through missionization, boarding schools, and extensive bureaucratic regulation of subsistence practices (Hicks and White 2000:45–50; Jull 2000:121–122). The 1970s, however, became a turning point in this history because a series of legal and political events redefined the place of indigenous peoples in Canadian society. In 1973, the Calder Supreme Court decision set the stage for Native campaigns for land and political sovereignty by establishing the “long-time occupation, possession, and use” of traditional lands as a legal basis for aboriginal title.¹ In the Arctic regions, Inuit land claims resulted in the 1999 founding of *Nunavut* (the Inuktitut term for *our land*), the largest settlement in Canadian history. Signed in 1991, the agreement to establish Nunavut transformed 350,000 square kilometers of the eastern and central Arctic into a new territory controlled by the Inuit, who comprise the overwhelming majority of its population.

Since the 1970s, Inuit campaigns for self-determination extended to culture, and the revitalization and perpetuation of traditional languages and practices ultimately became an explicit goal of the Nunavut settlement.² Not only did the revival of traditions provide a critical part of the anticolonial project, Inuit people contended that they should have the authority to interpret their society and its history on their own terms. Media has played a crucial role in this project, in part by constituting what Faye Ginsburg (1995) has described in another context as a “rhetoric of self-determination.” In the 1970s, Native groups in Canada began producing their own cultural programming,

and in the North, these efforts culminated in the 1982 founding of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), the first Native-controlled television network to be distributed by satellite in North America. IBC produces programming in Inuktitut, and its goals include perpetuating Inuit language and culture, integrating geographically distant communities, and providing employment to increase economic self-sufficiency.³ Shortly after the founding of IBC, Zacharias Kunuk, director of *Atanarjuat*, began his own work as an independent mediamaker, producing his first video, *From Inuk Point of View*, in 1985. Five years later, along with screenwriter Paul Apak Angilirq, actor Paul Qulitalik, and cinematographer Norman Cohn, he co-founded Igloolik Isuma Productions, the first Inuit independent production company (Kaufman 2001).

Like IBC's programming, the work of Igloolik Isuma Productions is concerned with cultural and language preservation, and it also represents the history of the Arctic regions in a way that reflects on the contemporary political relationships between Natives and Euro-Canadians. Since its inception, Igloolik Isuma has produced 20 films, assembled as the 13-part television series *Nunavut* (Our Land), and a three-volume collection, *Unikaatuatiit* (Storytelling). These titles suggest the integral relationship between politics and culture in the group's work. Filmed in Inuktitut and written, produced, directed, and acted by Inuit peoples, the works depict traditional lifestyles with an emphasis on subsistence practices, render a critique of European colonialism in the region, and represent the perspectives of elders on issues including education, missionization, and the Nunavut settlement. Straddling the boundary between fiction and documentary, some of the works also dramatize traditional social relations, marriage practices, and ceremonial rituals. A primary concern of both collections is to convey a sense of continuity between past and present Inuit life. In this context, the past serves not as a marker of irremediable loss incompatible with changes in Native societies. Rather, through the dialogue, narratives, and the layering of historical and contemporary images, the films convey the persistence of traditional values and practices and their continued usefulness; at the same time, they help to create this continuity between past and present by imparting traditional knowledge. The critique of colonialism offered by *Nunavut* and *Unikaatuatiit* shows the necessity of perpetuating such traditions. In *Ajainaal!* (Almost!), for example, elders describe the cultural losses, the erosion of autonomy, and the collective sense of shame that resulted from European control. This message easily translates into an argument for contemporary self-determination that becomes explicit in *Nipi* (Voice) when elders and political leaders insist on the necessity of their own forms of leadership and government. Finally, both series show the history of the Arctic regions as specifically Native, and, in this way, too, they support contemporary Inuit control of the region. Yet this focus on the past is not without contradictions. Because they rely on a Western medium, the films themselves are potentially at odds with

the project of cultural recovery and a notion of identity premised on tradition. Moreover, this is an issue that extends to other facets of Inuit social life, including the establishment of a centralized, representational (i.e., Western-style) government in Nunavut.⁴ In another sense, however, the films challenge the idea that tradition is incompatible with contemporary life, and they thus contest static conceptions of Native identity and cultural authenticity rooted in an unchanging past.

Atanarjuat is the first feature film by Igloolik Isuma Productions, and because of its focus on Inuit traditions and its political implications, its story complements and extends the work of *Nunavut* and *Unikaatuaitit*. In an essay published shortly after the release of *Atanarjuat*, Kunuk describes finding inspiration for the film in a legend told by his mother, and he connects the legend to traditional Inuit life in a way that sheds light on the cultural and political work of the film. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Kunuk's family spent winters in a sod house at Kapuvik, storytelling provided one of many ties to ancestors who had inhabited the Canadian Arctic for countless generations. "We were still living on the land," he recalls, "traveling from place to place just like our ancestors did in this region for four thousand years . . . our mother would put us to sleep at night with all these stories about [them], how they lived, and what would happen to us if we were like this one or that one when we grew up" (Kunuk 2002:17). In the mid-1960s, Kunuk's life changed dramatically when he and his brother were sent to a government school in Igloolik. Combined with the longstanding presence of priests and the assimilationist influence of Western media, the imposition of formal education contributed to what Kunuk labels the "death of [Inuit] history" and oral culture in Inuit communities (Kunuk 2002:18). As a filmmaker, Kunuk aims primarily to counter this process of cultural dispossession and erasure, in the case of *Atanarjuat* by retelling a traditional legend with important implications for contemporary Inuit life. Media, in Kunuk's words, provides a means of bringing storytelling into the new millennium, and *Atanarjuat* in particular asserts the continued relevance of traditions and engages in the process of retaining them. The film also depicts the changing nature of Inuit identities and the history and contemporary effects of colonialism in the Arctic. If storytelling in Kunuk's childhood was inextricably bound to the social fabric of Inuit life, so too is this cinematic reproduction part of the broader project of Native Canadian activism aimed at achieving self-determination including the realm of representation.

As a dramatization of a traditional legend, *Atanarjuat* is set in an atemporal realm unaffected by the historical events that have transformed Inuit life over the last century. Yet its project is in some ways profoundly historical because it reflects on these events and carries critical lessons for a society forever changed by European colonialism. The film opens when, in the words of the narrator, "evil came to us like death" and an unknown shaman en-

ters the community of Igloolik, casting a curse that shatters relationships between its residents for two generations. In the beginning scene, Sauri murders his father, the camp leader, in order to take his position and displace his chosen successor, Tulimaq. As the narrative unfolds, the conflict between them carries over to the next generation as Oki, Sauri's son, vies with Amaqjuaq and Atanarjuat, the sons of Tulimaq, over the loyalty of women as well as their relative status in the community. Their rivalry culminates in the murder of Amaqjuaq and the assassins' subsequent pursuit of Atanarjuat (the fast runner), who flees naked over miles of treacherous ice floes to avoid his own death. In the end, his miraculous escape precipitates a series of events that lead to the expulsion of Oki and his supporters from the community. The film, in Kunuk's words, centers on the "lessons we kids were supposed to learn about [the consequences] if you break . . . taboos" (Kunuk 2002:17). In the story, the shaman's curse precipitates the near collapse of a community that had long depended on respect for elders, strict attention to proper family relations, and sharing resources in times of scarcity. By showing the disastrous consequences of departing from these traditions, *Atanarjuat* insists on their contemporary value and relevance. Because shamanism provides both the source of evil and a means of expelling it, the film also emphasizes the power and efficacy of Inuit spirituality. Finally, *Atanarjuat*'s careful attention to cultural details valorizes the practices that constituted Inuit life in the past. In this way, the film helps to counter the cultural loss that resulted from the government's assimilationist policies, and it provides a means of recovering and reimagining a past distorted or obscured by colonialist practices, including mainstream media. Setting the film before the advent of European incursions thus provides, in the terms of Kenyan writer and activist Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993), a means of "moving the center," of representing Native society and culture independently, rather than solely in terms of its relationship to the West.

If *Atanarjuat* reconstitutes an Inuit world unmarred by the dislocations and losses of colonialism, it also reflects in important but indirect ways on the processes and consequences of European domination. As a story about a community ravaged by outside influences, the film functions as a colonial allegory as well as a narrative about identity reconstruction in the wake of this catastrophe. The evil that descends on the community in the opening scenes and results in a change in leadership provides a stark parallel with colonial policies that similarly disrupted social relations and traditional practices. This historical parallel constitutes a critique of the origins of colonialism as well as of the social discord and disruption it caused, a critique that consequently supports a return to traditions and political autonomy. Yet taken together, Kunuk's films do not suggest an uncomplicated return to a way of life that preceded colonialism; indeed, the events that have transformed Inuit society over the last century render such a return impossible. Instead, by engaging social issues, the

film conceptualizes Inuit identity in a manner that both provides a sense of continuity with the past and responds to changing circumstances. Since the 1960s, the transition from nomadic, family-based communities to village life and a shared history of colonialism have tied Inuit people together across geographical, linguistic, and cultural divides and have helped to create an emerging regional ethnic identity, an Inuit nationalism defined in contradistinction to other groups comprising Canadian society (Hicks and White 2000:51). Along with the long history of Inuit occupation of the land, this notion of a common, distinctive Inuit culture provided an important rationale for the land claims settlement (Gombay 2000:134). Media has been highly instrumental in facilitating this emergent nationalism, in part by providing a tool to define a common culture as well as by offering a means to disperse cultural knowledge and political information amongst geographically dispersed communities.

Through its focus on tradition and the political implications of its narrative, *Atanarjuat* contributes to campaigns for Native sovereignty and the reconceptualization of Inuit culture and identity. While some critics, as I have noted, contend that the film's documentary-like effect renders it similar to ethnography, this effect serves another purpose in the context I have been tracing. While atemporality is an ethnographic convention, here it conveys that Inuit people have occupied the land since time immemorial, and it thus sets a precedent for their continued control of Nunavut. In addition, *Atanarjuat's* close attention to cultural details highlights the differences between Inuit and Euro-Canadians in a way that supports Inuit nationalism by creating an affiliation among "nationals" who understand the cultural practices. This is apparent in viewers' responses to the film, many of which suggest that its narrative is confusing and that (unlike conventional ethnography) it leaves cultural practices unexplained. The subtitles produce a similar alienating effect because they do not fully account for the action that unfolds on the screen and they frequently fade into the visual imagery. Intentionally or not, this absence of complete translation serves to distinguish cultural insiders from outsiders. In fact, the story itself suggests this distinction in the opening scenes when the narrator says that her song can only be sung to someone who understands it.

In its final scenes, *Atanarjuat* underscores this distinction between insiders and outsiders in its resolution to the problems that have fractured the community. At the story's beginning, when "evil came to us like death," the narrator explains that "we had to live with it." But at its conclusion, the presence and consequences of evil no longer seem inevitable: community members expel the invaders, regain social control, and return to their way of life before these incursions. Following these events, *Atanarjuat's* concluding images, which are interspersed with the credits, complement this narrative turn by showing scenes from the making of the film; not only do these images highlight its fictional nature and, thus, further distinguish

it from ethnography, they also show Inuit mastery of Western technologies used to accomplish their own goal of self-representation, another aspect of self-determination. These events and images find a parallel in recent Canadian history in Inuit efforts to establish political autonomy and to revive the practices that have defined life in the region for centuries, at times using Western tools to accomplish these purposes. *Atanarjuat* rewrites the Inuit past as well as the history and consequences of colonialism in a way that imagines, and consequently helps to realize, a different kind of future. In recent decades, if media has been complicit in the processes of colonization and assimilation, in the contemporary Arctic it thus also constitutes a means of refiguring Inuit histories, culture, and identity in ways that support Native campaigns for self-determination.

NOTES

1. The Calder decision pertained specifically to Nisga'a land claims in the Prince Rupert area, and it was the result of decades of Native activism in British Columbia, begun in the 1880s when Nisga'a and Tsimshian chiefs publicly demanded recognition of land title and rights to self-government. These efforts continued into the 20th century and resulted in the formation of a number of political organizations, including the Interior Tribes of British Columbia, the Indian Rights Association, the Nisga'a Land Committee, and the Allied Tribes of British Columbia. In 1955, the newly formed Nisga'a Tribal Council directed its efforts towards land claims settlements, ultimately bringing its claim to court in 1969. Courts in British Columbia ruled against the Nisga'a, and the case was sent to the Supreme Court. While the Court ruled against the Nisga'a on a technicality, its ruling paved the way for other Native settlements. The other landmark event of the period was the report of the Berger Inquiry, which analyzed indigenous-white relations in ways that supported significant changes in public policy (see Jull 2000:122).
2. The Nunavut Implementation Commission explicitly mandated that "The Government of Nunavut will undertake to protect and preserve the distinct society which has existed in Nunavut for thousands of years." See Légaré 1997:411.
3. See Ginsburg (this issue) and Sorenson (2000) for brief histories of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation that include a discussion of the complicated relationship between IBC and the emergence of Nunavut; on IBC, see also Poisey and Hansen's documentary, *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* (1991).
4. See Gombay (2000) for one discussion of this issue and an analysis of the contradictory uses of tradition in the debate surrounding gender parity in the Nunavut legislature.

REFERENCES CITED

- Ginsburg, Faye
1995 Production Values: Indigenous Media and the Rhetoric of Self-Determination. In *Rhetorics of Self-Making*. Debora Battaglia, ed. Pp. 121-138. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gombay, Nicole
2000 The Politics of Culture: Gender Parity in the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. *Etudes/Inuit/Studies* 24 (1):125-148.
- Hicks, Jack, and Graham White
2000 Nunavut: Inuit Self-Determination through a Land Claim and Public Government? In *Nunavut: Inuit Regain Control of Their Lands and Their Lives*. Jens Dahl, Jack Hicks, and Peter Jull, eds. Pp. 30-117. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.
- Jull, Peter
2000 Inuit and Nunavut: Renewing the New World. In *Nunavut: Inuit Regain Control of Their Lands and Their Lives*. Jens Dahl, Jack Hicks, and Peter Jull, eds. Pp. 118-137. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.

Kaufman, Debra

2001 A Collective Effort: Inuit Legends Inspire *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. *American Cinematographer* 82(12):80–87.

Kunuk, Zacharias

2002 I First Heard the Story of Atanarjuat from My Mother. *Brick* 70 (winter):17–20.

Légaré, André

1997 The Government of Nunavut (1999): A Prospective Analysis. In *First Nations in Canada: Perspectives on Opportunity, Empowerment, and Self-Determination*. J. Rick Ponting, ed. Pp. 404–431. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

1993 *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey/Heinemann.

Poisey, David and William Hansen

1991 *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*. Tamarack Productions. New York: First Run Icarus Films.

Sørensen, Laila

2000 The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation and Nunavut. In *Nunavut: Inuit Regain Control of Their Lands and Their Lives*. Jens Dahl, Jack Hicks, and Peter Jull, eds. Pp. 170–179. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.



FIGURE 3. Atanarjuat (played by Natar Ungalaaq) and his brother Amaqjuat (played by Pakkak Inukshuk) share a joke. © Igloolik Isuma Productions. (Photographer: Norman Cohn)



FIGURE 4. The executive committee of Igloodik Isuma Productions on location for the filming of *Nunaqpa (Going Inland)* in 1991. From left: Norman Cohn, Paulossie Qulitalik, cast members, Zacharias Kunuk. © Igloodik Isuma Productions.

Atanarjuat Off-Screen: From “Media Reservations” to the World Stage

FAYE GINSBURG
New York University

The phenomenal success of the first-ever Inuit feature film *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (2001) has many dramatic stories behind it since it was first imagined in 1995. There is, of course, the Inuit legend on which the film’s narrative is based. Beyond that, and of particular significance to anthropologists, are the stories of the off-screen “media worlds” (Ginsburg et al. 2002) that enabled this film to be made, starting with the community-based Inuit production company, Igloodik Isuma,¹ founded in 1991 by Igloodik residents Zacharias Kunuk (*Atanarjuat*’s director), with the late Paul Apak Angilirq, Pauloosie Qulitalik, and Norman Cohn (see Huhndorf this issue). But the story of Isuma is not only about creating media that involve and address Inuit subjects and deploy their creative talents, it is also about indigenous advocacy. Aboriginal cultural activists, and members of Igloodik Isuma in particular, have

been important players in transforming the political economy and cultural policies that shape indigenous media in Canada, as the circulation of this work oscillates between local communities, the nation, and the world stage. Productions such as *Atanarjuat* are key sites for contemporary Aboriginal “culture-making” in a number of arenas (Myers 1994), reimagining the space of indigeneity by creating what some have called “visual sovereignty” (Rickard 1995).

The following excerpts from Kunuk’s two-page 1998 application to the Guggenheim Foundation give a succinct glimpse into his prescient understanding of the potential “multiplier effects” imagined for this film three years into its conceptual life.

How can we bring our ancient art of storytelling into the new millennium? How can we unlock the silence of our elders before they all pass away? How can we save our youth from reacting to the death of history by killing themselves? . . .

My project is *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. With my artist partners—Paul Apak, Paulossie Qulitalik and Norman Cohn, and with sixty Inuit from our community as cast and crew, we bring one of our most ancient legends from our oral history into the next millennium through video art and TV. We will show Inuit and non-Inuit how we lived, how our ancestors survived through the healing power of community and how Inuit art can endure for another 1000 years.

Atanarjuat will reach Inuit youth and give them hope. Young Inuit have the highest suicide rate in Canada, seven times the national average. At our rate, in Montreal or Toronto, they would wake up to fifteen youth suicides every day. It seems that when our elders stopped talking, our children began killing themselves. *Atanarjuat* will pioneer the use of video and TV to give new life to our past and to show youth that a living past means a living future.

This artwork will employ sixty local people as writers, actors, crew, seamstresses, prop-makers and set builders to recreate, act, and film our authentic life of the past. Our movie will train ten crew members in technical skills like makeup, continuity, sound recording and set design towards building a future Nunavut2 film industry. We hope *Atanarjuat* will be the first of many future productions so Inuit artists can tap into the economic benefits of local media production. Finally, *Atanarjuat* demonstrates that Igloolik artists at the millennium have something to contribute to national and international discourses in media, art, culture, and communication. [Kunuk 1998:1–2]

In a few spare paragraphs of his proposal, Kunuk links the support of the film—and the value of Inuit storytelling—to an array of benefits resulting from indigenously controlled cultural preservation and creativity. And, remarkably, *Atanarjuat* has enabled the accomplishment of many of these claims. Most visibly, the achievements of *Atanarjuat* have established, at last, recognition of Inuit (and indigenous) produced media as part of the national cinema of Canada, and as a potentially productive sector of its arts economy. That recognition was catalyzed, in part, by the acclaim the film won internationally, beginning in 2001 with one of the most coveted prizes given to first directors, the *Camera D'Or* of the Cannes Film Festival, and subsequent box office success in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world (see Bessire this issue). These are irreversible signs of the creative and economic possibilities that First Peoples' filmmaking brings to world cinema, though success has not been without cost.

Such cultural boundary breaking actually began earlier in the project. It is evident from *Atanarjuat* that in its decade of work leading up to that film, Igloolik Isuma had established a confident and culturally distinctive aesthetic approach to storytelling in its media practice. Central to that approach are the *social practices* of media making that are as crucial to the group's work as is the use of Inuktitut scripts with English subtitles. These involve a nonhierarchical consensus-based decision-making style, the participation of much of the community as actors, script and language advisers, costume makers, and food suppliers. Kunuk explained the method they developed in an interview at the National Museum of the American Indian:

Well, we don't work like [they do] in film, like how they do down here [in the U.S.] where you have a director, an assistant to the director, and then another assistant to that director. We don't work like that. All the heads come together, we talk about what it's going to be like and understand each other at length; if we're going to do a scene where tents are—we ask each other "Are they right?" It's everybody's job to get it right, and so we all talk about it . . . And of course, all the actors come from our own little community, and you just tell them when they have to get into their characters and they do. I have very little directing to do. Because the script is already written and people know what to do, I just tell them "start" and "stop" and "wrap" and that's about it. [Kunuk 2002a]

Clearly, the materiality of making a feature film in an Inuit world demands forms of imagination that extend far beyond the film text. As Igloolik Isuma moved into feature filmmaking—a more expensive and commercial form of media production than their previous video work, and one that requires considerable labor—all this has become an important form of economic development for Igloolik. In the end, more than 100 Igloolik Inuit, from the young to the elderly, were employed as actors, hairdressers, and technicians as well as costume makers, language experts, and hunters who provided food, bringing more than \$1.5 million into a local economy that suffers from a 60 percent unemployment rate.³

When they began to seek the financing required for shooting a feature film, *Atanarjuat's* producers realized that they would have to challenge the cultural categories through which Canadian funds were allocated to Aboriginal productions. By April 1998, the film was three years into development, with Paul Apak having written the original story of the Inuktitut script, based on interviews with Igloolik elders. Norman Cohn wrote the English version. The film was already in its second week of location shooting, with \$500,000 in financing from 17 different sources. They hoped to have it finished in time to coincide with the inaugural festivities celebrating the creation of Nunavut on April 1, 1999. Igloolik Isuma put in proposals (and anticipated support for) much of the remaining \$2 million budget, modest for a feature film. These proposals were submitted to Telefilm Canada, the government's main source of support for Canadian independent filmmakers. They did not want to be confined to Telefilm's Aboriginal Production Fund because that category capped all requests at \$200,000. Instead, they asked to be considered as part of the general pool of funding. Disregarding their request, Telefilm officers told them that all their Aboriginal funds had already been allocated and failed to place the proposal in the broader competition as the group had requested.⁴ Never imagining that Aboriginal funds might be needed for a feature film that would exceed all expectations, these well-intended policies supportive of indigenous "culture-making" thus smuggled in limitations that also threaten to confine Aboriginal producers to under-resourced "media reservations" (Ginsburg and Roth 2002:130).⁵

When Igloolik Isuma producers hit a cultural glass ceiling, they protested, wrote letters, and appealed to the press. Exemplary of their campaign is an unequivocally partisan story in the Montreal newspaper the *Gazette* entitled "Inuit Film Frozen Out: Arts Bureaucrats Fudge on Funding of Nunavut Project," in which writer Matt Radz brought Igloolik Isuma's cause to the Canadian public in 1998.

The traditionalism of Canada's arts mandarins and patrons is outdated and insulting. It has blinded the bureaucracy to the sophistication of Isuma's work. As a result the company's funding needs have been chronically underestimated. [1998, D3]

What emerged out of the social drama that erupted between Telefilm and Isuma was the question of Inuit (and, by extension, indigenous) cultural citizenship. Whose cultural practices could legitimately be considered part of the Canadian nation in the fundamental arena of film? Given an ideology of inclusion that has increasingly shaped Canadian media policy, particularly with the increasing vocalicity of so many constituencies in that nation, one might ask how exclusion continues to take place (Gittings 2002). Certainly, location, language, and culture make it difficult for an Inuit Arctic-based community to participate in the everyday social practices through which networks of support, trust, and knowledge—so crucial to funding—are informally constituted. Igloolik Isuma's directors offered convincing ethnographic insights into the barriers that disadvantaged their proposal in terms of the bureaucratic social practices.

From Igloolik, we cannot easily have lunch with Telefilm, or make the personal contacts that smooth funding systems along. Our key Inuit producers and creative personnel express themselves much better in Inuktitut, a language none of your staff speaks. A fully discounted restricted return airfare to meet with you in Toronto costs \$1,900. . . . In the last ten years of professional film-making with our programs shown in 16 countries . . . no executive from Telefilm, . . . or any other participant in the national broadcasting system has ever visited Igloolik to see where, how, and why we work as we do, to see for themselves our daily reality, our different way of working, of storytelling, of Inuit corporate culture.

This is our disadvantage: southern ignorance, not northern inability. [Radz 1998:D3]

A year after their initial rejection, Isuma's objections to Telefilm's actions bore fruit. Telefilm agreed to invest \$537,000 and the Canadian Television Fund (CTF) contributed \$390,000 toward production, but only after the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) signed on as a coproducer, investing 23 percent of the budget. Isuma quickly mobilized for six months of shooting from April to September 1999, and edited throughout 2000; the December premiere in Igloolik, was delayed for several days because of heavy weather. As a result, no outside press or Inuit dignitaries made it, but for the filmmakers, the significant audience was made up of the 1,200 residents of Igloolik, many of whom had worked on the film. Kunuk describes the scene as the film's acid test:

The first screening in Igloolik in December 2000 was my scariest moment because we finally put it on the table to the people what we are making. We have no theatres in Igloolik. We found the biggest room we could find which was a gymnasium. We bought a video projector, a wide screen. We put out four hundred chairs, and when we opened the gym, kids were running, pouring in. They were sitting on the floor. Elders were sitting and people were standing in the back for almost three hours. Sometimes there was silence, sometimes there was laughter, and then silence again. And when the credits rolled, people were clapping and crying and shaking our hands. That day I knew that we did our job right. For three screenings each night, about five hundred people came out of twelve hundred people. Inuit loved it. Kids loved it. Kids were even playing *Atanarjuat* on the street. Every household in Igloolik had a copy of the video. [Kunuk 2002b]

Despite the extraordinary critical and box-office success of the film worldwide, Igloolik Isuma has continued to face new challenges, much like the stream of unforeseen obstacles encountered by *Atanarjuat*, the protagonist in the film. Surprisingly, they have seen very little income returned to their company; in the past year, claiming that they have been deprived of \$600,000–700,000 of their international revenue, Igloolik Isuma has been embroiled in a lawsuit with their international sales agent. The suit has eaten up \$200,000 of *Atanarjuat*'s existing revenue. In a recent interview, Cohn described this situation as endemic to the film industry.

Being ripped off in the film industry is equal opportunity exploitation. All we are is another diamond mine in an industry where people are not any more culturally sensitive than in the diamond industry. These are the same forces that have operated for centuries, and are not aimed at us exclusively. We're just shrimps. Cultural capital is all you get if you're a shrimp, and not a shark. [personal communication, July 15, 2003]

Their lawsuit notwithstanding, the cultural capital they have gained is considerable, not to mention the inspiration the work has provided for indigenous media makers worldwide. Along with its international recognition, *Atanarjuat* has provided important (if intermittent) opportunities for economic development to Igloolik. The producers see their work as part of a long overdue effort to turn the tables on the historical trajectory of the power relations embedded in the incessant documentation of Inuit life over the last century in research monographs, photography, and ethnographic practice. *Atanarjuat*, and their other works, are deeply felt responses to the impact of such representational practices on Inuit society and culture. Thus it is not only that the *activity* of media making has helped resuscitate the local economy, reviving relations between generations and skills that had nearly been abandoned. The *fact* of their appearance in a prize-winning film circulating throughout the world on *Inuit* terms, inverts the usual hierarchy of values attached to dominant technologies, conferring new prestige to Inuit culture activity, perhaps most significantly for younger members of the community, who have rarely seen a movie with a heroic

Inuit protagonist, let alone an all-Inuit cast and in Inuktitut dialogue.

Recognizing the incredible impact the film has had in Igloolik, and for Inuit everywhere, Cohn nonetheless cautioned against undue optimism.

We were probably as large—on the level of magnitude—a positive transformative experience as anything you can imagine. Everyone has a copy, kids love it. But the difficulties that are on the ground in a community like this for almost everybody are so overwhelming. Any positive experience can only have a very small impact. Those positive experiences, if they are not consistent, tend to disappear like a stone in the lake. We're a positive stone in the lake. But in terms of global forces . . . as long as we're just an event, these come and go. Sometimes there's money, sometimes not. At this rate we're in full production every three years. Kids with potential would see us as a crazy job. [personal communication]

Nevertheless, the situation that made filmmaking a "crazy job" is becoming a bit more stable. In an ironic twist, Telefilm, the agency that rejected Isuma's 1998 proposal, is now providing the group with steady funding of over \$1 million, at least for a few years. Igloolik Isuma is one of five "English" nationally based production companies with films that made over \$1 million at the Canadian box office in the last year to be given substantial funding advances to encourage quick development of new projects. Because they only have two language categories—French and English—they had to place *Atanarjuat* in the latter category, once again underscoring the limited expectations for films from indigenous, and other cultural, communities. Igloolik Isuma is applying its award to develop a number of scripts, in particular their next feature with the working title, *The Journals of Knut Rasmussen*, a film that will focus on the period just before missionaries arrived (personal communication, July 15, 2003).

The "off-screen" stories of *Atanarjuat* are instructive, underscoring the need for rethinking the problematic dimensions of multicultural arts policies, and the impact of culturally bounded categories of support for this form of indigenous cultural production. Igloolik Isuma's activities demonstrate how indigenous cultural activists can mobilize the political and cultural capacity to reframe such policies. Furthermore, the kinds of benefits that *Atanarjuat* brought to Inuit living in Igloolik and elsewhere—economic, imaginative, cultural, and psychological—are exemplary of what steady funding might help produce beyond the film itself. The fact that *Atanarjuat* is one of Canada's most successful cultural exports has made a definitive intervention into the place of self-determined representations of Inuit lives as part of the Canadian national imaginary. More broadly, their efforts have called into

question certain assumptions about first and second-class cultural citizenship. Two years before the film was completed, Kunuk wrote that "*Atanarjuat* can show the global community it might be worth listening to an Inuit voice" (Kunuk and Cohn 1998). The prescience of his words has been dramatized vividly as *Atanarjuat* continues to represent Inuit lives on the world stage of cinema.

NOTES

1. Igloolik is the name of the settlement in the Baffin region of the Eastern Arctic. Isuma is Inuktitut for "idea," implying a sense of responsibility toward the community.
2. Nunavut became Canada's newest territory on April 1, 1999, the result of the world's largest aboriginal land claims agreement, bringing self-government to the people of the eastern Arctic regions who have occupied this land for thousands of years. See <http://www.arctictravel.com/press/whatis.html>. See also <http://www.gov.nu.ca/Nunavut/English/about/index.html>.
3. http://www.atanarjuat.com/production_diary/index.html.
4. Officers from Telefilm Canada denied that racial or linguistic concerns played a role in their decision and that the failure of A. to get completion money was due more to CBC's refusal to grant Isuma a licensing commitment for broadcast if that licensing money was to be used to trigger Telefilm money (Gittings 2002).
5. This term is used by communications scholar Lorna Roth to index the arguments, made by some, that isolating indigenous media work into specially designated funding or programming slots constructs "a televisual space parallel to the kind of segregation that characterizes First Peoples' socio-political experience" (Ginsburg and Roth 2002:130).

REFERENCES CITED

- Ginsburg, Faye, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin
2002 Introduction: The Social Practice of Media. In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. F. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod, and B. Larkin, eds. Pp. 2–38. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ginsburg, Faye, and Lorna Roth
2002 First Peoples Television. In *Television Studies* Toby Miller, ed. Pp. 130–132. London: The British Film Institute.
- Gittings, Christopher
2002 Canadian National Cinema. New York: Routledge.
- Kunuk, Zacharias
1998 Letter of application to the Guggenheim Foundation.
2002a Zacharias Kunuk Interview with Michelle Svenson. Electronic document, http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/Eng/features/zk_interview.html, accessed April 1.
2002b The Public Art of Inuit Storytelling. Spry Memorial Lecture, University of Montreal, November 28 (<http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/COM/spry/>).
- Kunuk, Zacharias, and Norman Cohn.
1998 Unpublished draft of letter to the editor. *The Gazette*, October 21.
- Myers, Fred
1994 Culture-Making: Performing Aboriginality at the Asia Society. *American Ethnologist* 21:679.
- Radz, Matt
1998 Inuit Film Frozen Out: Arts Bureaucrats Fudge on Funding for Nunavut Project. *The Gazette*, Arts and Entertainment Section, October 17: D3.
- Rickard, Jolene
1995 Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand. In *Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices*, Aperture, 139(summer):51–61.



FIGURE 5. Director of photography Norman Cohn on the set of *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (1998). © Igloolik Isuma Productions. (Photographer: Viviane Delisle)



FIGURE 6. *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* Director: Zacharias Kunuk. Anatanarjuat (played by Natar Ungalaaq) © Igloolik Productions. (Photographer: Marie-Helene Cousineau)

Talking Back to Primitivism: Divided Audiences, Collective Desires

LUCAS BESSIRE
New York University

We're just tryin' to talk back. Talk back to the new technology. . . . I just want us to be understood. We know what we're doing. We want a piece of the pie.

—Zacharias Kunuk, videotaped Artist's Statement

An Inuit produced, directed, written, and acted fiction film in the Inuktitut language with English subtitles winning the coveted Camera d'Or at Cannes in 2001? A handful of years ago, it would have been unbelievable. Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn's epic drama *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* did just that, however, in addition to sweeping the Canadian Genie Awards. A string of other prizes followed: Best Film at the 2001 ImagineNATIVE International Media Art Festival, Best of Fest Award at the 2001 Next Fest Digital Motion Picture Festival, Best Film at the 2001 Flanders International Film Festival, Prix du Public at the Festival International du nouveau Cinema in

Montreal. Kunuk was the recipient of the Claude Jutra Award, as well as a cowinner of the Best New Director prize at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. *Atanarjuat* became the highest grossing film in Canada for 2001, earning \$3.7 million in North America, and nearly \$3 million internationally. The June 2002 opening of the film in two New York City theaters earned more than \$37,000 in its first three days—making it the highest grossing film “per-screen average” in the country, even with its three-hour length (Scott 2002b:11). The film spent 23 weeks in the top 60 North American films. Since then, Kunuk and Cohn have started on the international lecture circuit: Yale, Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto.

What was it that made *Atanarjuat* so exceptionally successful, not only among Native but also international audiences? This unprecedented success raises questions about the multiplex impact that Native appropriation of film, video, and television technologies exert on indigenous resistance and accommodation of foreign elements in their quest for self-determination (see Ginsburg 1991).

Atanarjuat highlights Native agency in strategies of self-determination—while calling into question conceptualizations of indigenous media initiatives as destructive to indigenous cultural norms or as sui generis developments aimed at internal communication (see Ginsburg 1994, 2002; Prins 1989; Weiner 1997). Instead, such films are revealed as open bicultural systems in which indigenous agendas can actively be expressed. This multicultural fluency (which in some cases may be traced to the involvement of non-Native individuals such as Vincent Carelli, Terence Turner, Eric Michaels, and Norman Cohn) enables the success of films such as *Atanarjuat* by accommodating dominant society's signifying practices, yet at the same time seeking to undermine and change the very nature of the primitivism that motivates and informs them. Part of the success of *Atanarjuat* can be explained by Harald Prins's concept of the "primitivist perplex" (2002). Primitivism, he writes, is inherently paradoxical: "[It] works in two ways: while it reduces indigenous peoples to the 'noble savage' stereotype, it also provides them with a model of self-representation which they can (and do) exploit for their own political ends" (1997:244):

Exotic imagery . . . has no intrinsic meaning of its own. Because different audiences engage in alternative signifying practices, their respective interpretations may have contrasting consequences . . . exotic imagery in cultural survival films . . . promotes a people's general public appeal. Reflecting the romantic trope of primitivism, such films can become popular when they allow the audience to recognize indigenous imagery and to place it in a familiar cultural niche. [1997:250, 262]

The categories and vocabularies by which dominant society audiences render *Atanarjuat* culturally comprehensible also emphasize the importance of audience agency in the circulation and interpretation of indigenous imagery. This essay analyzes mainstream reactions to the film in widely circulated popular press reviews. These reviews reveal the existence of multiple, subjective, and often antagonistic audiences loaded down with metaphors and categories directly emerging from historical imaginations of the Inuit

Imagining the Primitive

Mainstream Western reactions to *Atanarjuat* are rooted in the history of colonial interactions with the Inuit—a history of expansion, domination, and marginalization.¹ The Inuit apparently captured Western imaginations from the beginning—the first instance of taking Inuit captives as "curiosities" began with the 1497 Cabot expedition and nearly every subsequent Arctic expedition repeated the horrific example of kidnapping and colonial terrorism (see Huhndorf 2000; Oswalt 1999). European conceptualizations of Inuit stressed their status as "curiosities," emphasizing their practice of sun worship, resourcefulness, "Man-eating," and consumption of raw meat (Oswalt 1999:48, 52). English accounts of the three Inuit kidnapped on Frobisher's 16th-century expedition express amazement at the respect

and gentleness of the Inuit—the birth of the "happy-go-lucky Eskimo" (Oswalt 1999:27–32).

The Western public's fascination with Inuit continued, with Inuit often referred to as "whiter" than other colonized native peoples being exterminated at the time (see Jenness 1921; Oswalt 1999:196–197). Inuit were captured and put in zoos and on display at curiosity cabinet events like the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, the American Museum of Natural History in 1897, the 1904 St. Louis–Louisiana Purchase Exposition, and Seattle's 1909 Alaska–Pacific–Yukon Exposition (see Huhndorf 2000:124; Rony 1996:105–106). Filmed images of Inuit date to Edison's 1901 *Esquimaux Village* shot at the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo, New York, with Inuit as "happy gamesters amid papier-mache igloos" (Rony 1996:108). Numerous other films, including William Van Valins 1912–18 works were made in the first two decades of the 20th century (Rony 1996). The success of Robert Flaherty's 1922 *Nanook of the North* was derived from this collective public fascination with Inuit lifeways:

Nanook of the North became a kind of watershed, the point after which no imagining of the Far North was without the full panoply of stereotypes born in the later nineteenth century, developed in the 1900s and 1910s, and brought to fruition in Flaherty's work. The film spawned "Nanookmania." [Huhndorf 2000:124]

At least two other films with Arctic subject matter were released in the following decade by major Hollywood studios Universal and MGM (Huhndorf 2000:125). According to Huhndorf, public perceptions of Inuit around the turn of the 20th century formed part of the "antimodernism" movement: "For many moderns, non-Westerners and the worlds they seemed to inhabit increasingly provided an escape from and sometimes even a means of regenerating a fallen, 'overcivilized' Western world" (2000: 125). In the complex and often contradictory sphere of determining social value, Inuit were seen as inhabitants of a vanished frontier holding potential to revitalize North American masculinity, embodying Western ideals of rugged independence, surviving in a harsh environment, yet peaceful and happy (Huhndorf 2000:127, 134). David Spurr writes that proponents of such primitivism seek not to engage in an alternative lifestyle, but to generate a version of the Other "that is readily incorporated into the fabric of Western values" (Huhndorf 2000:135). As such, the Inuit were seen as possessors of desirable traits, but dependent on White Men to fully realize them (Rony 1996: 107). Rony's biting critique of *Nanook of the North* argues that film replaced museums and expositions as sites for the exotization of the Inuit and that such primitivist tendencies are analogous to taxidermic practices, seeking to make "the dead look alive and the living look dead" (1996: 108, 126). Such imaginations coincided with a colonial agenda of domination and economic exploitation (see Oswalt 1999; Wenzel 1991). This agenda was contested by a dynamic and multifaceted Inuit movement for self-determination dating from the early 1970s; including education reform

and self-governance in Nunavut, as well as Inuit media organizations such as the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation and Igloodik Isuma Productions (see Huhndorf and Ginsburg this issue; see also Duffy 1988; Fleming 1996; IW-GIA 2001; Marks 1994; Rigby et al. 2000; Vick-Westgate 2002; www.isuma.ca).

PASSING PRIMITIVISM

The enormous amount of press associated with *Atanarjuat* suggests such latent primitivist tendencies played a substantial role in many of the unprecedented and overwhelmingly positive reactions that non-Native reviewers had to the film (see Gillespie 2002; Howe 2002).² Primitivist themes are played out repeatedly in popular press reviews of *Atanarjuat*, as in the following July 26, 2002, example from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:

A universal story indeed—its echo reverberates through Greek tragedy, Shakespeare and such recent pieces of popular culture as "The Lion King." My initial reaction was that of a cultural romantic or, at least, someone sick to death of bloodshed in the Middle East, threats of unspeakable destruction by terrorists, children being abducted and killed, one group of people vowing to destroy another in the name of religion, people doing unto others before other do unto you. I wanted to believe there was one place left on Earth where people get along and help each other survive. What better place than the Arctic tundra, where life seems reduced to its basics and there is so little material wealth to fight over? [Weiskind 2002:18]

Even the well-intentioned, enthusiastic review of Robert Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* reveals that somehow the Inuit message isn't getting across for many mainstream critics when he emphasizes the paradox of the film's apparent universal exoticism:

At the end of the film, over the closing titles, there are credit cookies showing the production of the film, and we realize with a little shock that the film was made now, by living people, with new technology. . . . I am not surprised that *The Fast Runner* has been a box-office hit in its opening engagements. It is unlike anything most audiences will ever have seen, and yet it tells a universal story. [Ebert 2002:35]

The recurrent theme of universalism suggests two audience reactions to the film. On the one hand, an appeal to the common humanity of us all must serve as the foundation for any cross-cultural narrative. On the other hand, the homogeneity of reviewer reaction on this point suggests that this idea may play into dominant society's desire to appropriate indigenous identity, a complex, well-documented phenomenon deeply rooted in American frontier worldviews, a "fantasy of the master race" (see Churchill 1998; DeLoria 1969; Prins 1986).

At its center is a gripping yet universal tale about love, commitment, revenge and community as the audience is plunged into the fight for survival of rival groups of hunter-gatherers. . . . What is most remarkable, however, is that such a transfixing saga has been constructed from a simple folk tale. The actors are largely amateurs from whom Kunuk has managed to elicit accomplished per-

formances. It is utterly exhilarating to come into contact with a culture and a part of the planet that are so utterly unfamiliar, through an archaic tale that manages to bring to psychological life characters who are so deeply touching. It is much more potent than any ethnographic film, even one as studiously lyrical as *Nanook of the North*. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* is a powerfully resonant experience that transports you to a different physical and emotional realm. [Crayford 2002:68]

Such primitivist escapism figured prominently in many of the enthusiastic reviews of the film (see Arnold 2002; Houlihan 2002). In other reviews, the story of *Atanarjuat* was described as "timeless," inverting the cross-cultural communication threshold into a linear timeline (see Curiel 2002). The film, and its subjects become situated inextricably in the past, an example of "the living made to look dead" of Rony. The ideological justification for much of the colonial enterprise and current ideas about "development" stems from conceptualizations of Native peoples as being "contemporary ancestors" in language strikingly reminiscent of Turgot's pre-Social Evolutionary comparativism. Indeed, indigenous heritage becomes a product of social evolution, reinscribing the tired trope of Progressivist philosophies. As Loren King wrote in the *Boston Globe* on June 21, 2002:

The characters' motivation centers almost entirely on custom and ritual; these are not so much real men and women as they are symbols of ancient myth and lore. In this sense, *The Fast Runner* might have been just as effective as a pure documentary, rather than as a narrative bolstered by its documentary style. The characters are often indistinguishable from one another, psychologically and physically. . . . A pivotal scene of a naked Atanarjuat running for his life across the vast frozen terrain is simply breathtaking. From sweeping images like that one to small moments of intimate beauty, *The Fast Runner* magically transports the viewer across time and space. As it does so, it becomes a humbling reminder of the universality of the human experience. [King 2002: C5]

One disturbing "primitivist" theme is the refusal by some members of dominant society to accept the changing nature of Native peoples' struggle for cultural identity.



FIGURE 7. Krista Uttak applies a facial tattoo to an actor on the set of *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner*. Photo from www.atanarjuat.com photo gallery.

Revealing the power of social desires for an "other," some reviewers did the ultimate primitivist contortion by believing in the face of all evidence (including closing scenes with actors in Western clothing and ignoring the fact that a camera had to be there) that the film is an accurate depiction of contemporary Inuit life, as in the following excerpt from the June 21, 2002 *Boston Herald* (see also King 2002):

More interesting than the plot or the characters are the documentarylike scenes depicting Inuit life. In one of the most fascinating, we watch as several Inuit men carve an igloo, shaving blocks of ice and using snow as mortar with the skill of Gothic stoneworkers. Among the other engrossing details are Inuit hunting practices and the Inuit diet. Of course, you'd also learn much of this from Robert Flaherty's landmark 1922 documentary *Nanook of the North*. As a richly detailed, indigenous artifact, *The Fast Runner* is also a landmark. [Verniere 2002: S20]

In one feature article from *The Boston Globe*, the reporter asks Inuit art dealer James Houston's son about the relationship between his European father's exportation of Inuit carvings during the first half of the 1900s and the success of *Atanarjuat*:

Is there a path leading from his father's landfall at Cape Dorset to *Runner*, the first Inuit-made feature film? "I think there is a continuity. . . . It's stuff that my father got going and that I kept going, the interpretation of the world of the Inuit. Eventually they would have access to technology to explain their world of thought to the outside. . . . It's like lightning striking twice." [Beam 2002: D1]

Inuit are once again presented as tenacious primitives relying on the White Man to fully realize their individual potential.

The emphasis on themes of universality, exoticism, antiquity and fantasy form the heart of the romantic primitivist impulse. Interestingly enough, reviews of Academy Award-winning blockbuster *Dances with Wolves* (1990) relied on many of the same appeals to audience emotions and desires, while Native reviewers lambasted the film as "an elaboration of movieland's Great White Hunter theme" (see Churchhill 1998:240-242; also Berardinelli 1999; Ebert 1990; Johanson 1999). On the contrary, the Native written, directed, produced, and acted feature *Smoke Signals* (1998) was hailed by native audiences as "realistic" and "a breakthrough," but fell flat among mediocre box-office earnings and lukewarm, patronizing dominant reviews (see Bissley 2000; Ebert 1998).

This should be no surprise in light of the prevalence of Native American imagery used as mascots for sports teams and marketing devices for products ranging from potato chips to \$1,200 "Eskimo boots" from Christian Dior.³ As Miranda Purves, writing for the Canada-based *Saturday Post* reported, "Curiously, tribal authenticity is one of the few things that feels new in fashion this season" (2002: SP7).

The value of "tribal authenticity" as a commodity is determined by dominant society. Hence, the stereotypical

Dances with Wolves and the painstakingly accurate *Atanarjuat* are rewarded at the box-office and in reviews, the contemporary *Smoke Signals* and *Skins* (2002) are given the cold shoulder (see Hunter 2002). One can only surmise that if Chris Eyre adapted the script of *Skins* to 1850s Cheyenne life, reviewer reactions would similarly reward him.

Atanarjuat, however, cannot be dismissed as a primitivist film. Kunuk's vision of *Atanarjuat* is generally consistent from interview to interview (see Kunuk 2002). His primary motivation was to document the old ways for the young kids, to provide a positive role model based on Inuit values and worldviews. Kunuk states that he wanted to capture an Inuit version of history: "We want to talk from an Inuk point of view" (Gopnik 2000: B1). On several occasions, however, Norman Cohn has explicitly framed the film with primitivist terminology: "This is a timeless story, but set far in the past. It could be happening anywhere between 500 to 2,000 years ago" (King 2002: SPOT). In fact, the publicity material sent with the film states, "*Atanarjuat* is a universal story with emotions people all over the world can understand. It is also totally Inuit" (Smith 2002: D8). Cohn, in an NPR interview, reveals a political agenda behind the usage of such primitivist terminology: "It's told entirely from the point of view of people that we've all believed never even had a point of view, in a wilderness that we've all believed was this kind of howling, terrifying wilderness, and here these people are like masters of the universe and it looks like a paradise. So everything is inverted" (Cohn 2002).

The consequent dual layers of communication are perhaps best summarized in the film's oblique opening sequence: "I can only sing this song to one who understands it . . . When you sing, you laugh at the same time. It must be because you're winning, too. It's fun to sing and play a game at the same time."

CONCLUSION

Atanarjuat's success suggests that it may be helpful to think of indigenous media as one of Paul Rabinow's "event/forms," a newly emerged bricolage that "catalyzes previously existing actors, things, temporalities, or spatialities into a new mode of existence, a new assemblage, one that makes things work in a different manner and produces and instantiates new capacities" (Rabinow 1999:180). Such new forms, he argues, necessitate a larger series of limited concepts to encompass and render them comprehensible (Rabinow 1999:181). Crossover dramatic blockbusters like *Atanarjuat* could be such new assemblages representing the need for a shift in the parameters of academic discourse on indigenous media. Instead of being seen as tainting the "traditional" (see Weiner 1997), such dramas reveal the coconstructed nature of imagery, the power of social metaphors and the native struggle to resignify such exclusionary categories from within as part of their quest for domestic independence. Indigenous actors/

producers with certain worldviews come into novel arrangements with Western political-economic structures and audiences representing distinct worldviews; the direct result of Native and non-Native agency seeking to transform the traditionally oppressive framework in which they have been forcibly situated. Films such as *Atanarjuat* should force many viewers to confront the depth of their own ethnocentrism. The question raised, then, is not one of the effect that dominant media may have on indigenous peoples, but, rather, the impact indigenous media may have on dominant audiences and socially constructed categories of "otherness." This entails a new conceptualization of the role of audiences and indigenous drama as seeking to unite two historically antagonistic audiences.

As Prins notes, it is precisely the primitivist double-bind that enables such familiar cultural niches of the public imagination to be modified or influenced from within. *Atanarjuat* (and other indigenous dramas) can be seen as a deliberate political engagement with social categories of primitivism in order to open a space within dominant signifying practices for indigenous voices, as well as tap into financial and material resources—thereby undermining the perpetuation of primitivism through simultaneously activating it. By triggering and contradicting myths of "The Noble Savage," the "Vanishing Redman," and the "happy-go-lucky Eskimo" by juxtaposing indigenous imagery with humanizing, valorizing actions and emotions—all while providing an Inuit story to Inuit people—*Atanarjuat* can be viewed as an activist film *par excellence*, and a gamble in optimism.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. Special thanks to Dr. Jeff Himpele (NYU) for the feedback and editorial advice on the ideas in this article, Dr. Harald Prins (KSU) for the continuing dialogue and example, and Dr. Faye Ginsburg (NYU) for the input and opportunity.

1. The term *Inuit* refers to indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic: approximately one hundred thousand people living in parts of Canada, the United States, Greenland, and Russia (Freeman 2000:xii).
2. This is not to say, however, that all dominant reviewers relied on primitivist terminology or categories in their praise for the film. Indeed, many reviews, such as Scott's, focused instead on the astonishing cinematography and moving story: "a work of narrative sweep and visual beauty that honors the history of the art form even as it extends its perspective" (Scott 2002a: E18).
3. Popular images of Inuit also include the infamous Eskimo-pie dating from *Nanook*. On Mojo: "Mojo, a six-inch gingerbread Eskimo, will begin his U.S. Peace in Your Heart Tour to promote peace." Replete with his own website for posting stories of how Mojo changed lives and "Eskimo proverbs," Mojo will travel with a sled and five gingerbread dogs. At only \$16.95, Mojo wishes his buyers "may you have warmth in your igloo, oil in your lamp and peace in your heart" (PR Newswire Association 2002). In an odd historical parallel with "Nanookmania," *Atanarjuat* has influenced haute fashion. Pricey Inuit rip-offs popped up in the fall 2002 collections of Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton. At only \$1,240/pair, Dior's fox-lined "Eskimo boots" were sold-out before they arrived in Paris and the United States, while Vuitton's hand-embroidered wool and cashmere parka/vest set were intended to invoke "the Eskimo spirit" (Purves 2002).

REFERENCES CITED

- Arnold, Gary
2002 Runner a Wilderness Escape. *Washington Times*, June 22: D05.
- Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner
2001 Zacharias Kunuk, dir. 172 min. Igloolik: Isuma Distributing International.
- Beam, Alex
2002 For Inuit, Modernity's Cost. *Boston Globe*, July 18: D1.
- Berardinelli, James
1999 Dances with Wolves Review. Electronic document, <http://www.rottentomatoes.com>, accessed December 10, 2002.
- Bissley, Jackie
2000 Native Cinema Emerges with a New Force. Electronic document, <http://www.indiancountrytoday.com/?2565>, accessed June 4, 2003.
- Churchill, Ward
1998 *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*. San Francisco: City Lights Press.
- Cohn, Norman
2002 Interview by Bob Edwards. *The Morning Edition*. NPR, July 4.
- Crayford, Peter
2002 Immersion in Another World. *Australian Financial Review*, August 31: 68.
- Curiel, Jonathan
2002 Inuit Film Is a Cultural Trailblazer. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 6: 36.
- Dances with Wolves
1990 Kevin Costner, dir. 181 min. Hollywood: Image Entertainment.
- DeLoria, Vine
1969 *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. New York: MacMillan.
- Duffy, R. Quinn
1988 *The Road to Nunavut: The Progress of the Eastern Arctic Inuit since the Second World War*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Ebert, Robert
1990 Review of *Dances with Wolves*. Electronic document, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1990/11/576465.html, accessed on December 10, 2002.
- 1998 Review of *Smoke Signals*. Electronic document, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1998/07/070302.html, accessed on June 4, 2003.
- 2002 Review of *The Fast Runner*. *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 28: 35.
- Esquimaux Village
1901 Thomas Edison, dir. 40 sec. Edison Manufacturing Company. New York.
- Fleming, Kathleen
1996 Igloolik Video: An Organic Response from a Culturally Sound Community. *Inuit Art* 11(2):30–38.
- Freeman, Milton
2000 *Endangered Peoples of the Arctic: Struggles to Survive and Thrive*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Gillespie, Eleanor
2002 Mythic *Runner* Exerts Primal Pull. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 19: 7P.
- Ginsburg, Faye
1991 Indigenous Media: Faustian Contract or Global Village? *Cultural Anthropology* 6(1):92–112.
- 1994 Culture and Media: A (Mild) Polemic. *Anthropology Today*. 10(2):5–15.
- 2002 Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media. In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds. Pp. 39–57. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gopnik, Blake
2000 From an Inuit Point of View. *Globe and Mail*, September 13: B1, B2.
- Houlihan, Mary
2002 Fast Runner Captures Intrigue of Inuit legend. *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 27: 40.

- Huhndorf, Shari
2000 Nanook and His Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimos in American Culture, 1897–1922. *Critical Inquiry* 27(1):122–148.
- Howe, Desson
2002 *Fast Runner* a Stunner. *Washington Post*, June 21: T44.
- Hunter, Stephen
2002 *Skins*: Rage of the Broken Warriors. *Washington Post*, September 27: C05.
- International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs
2001 The Indigenous World 2000–2001. Copenhagen: Eks-Skolens Trykkeri.
- Jenness, Diamond
1921 The Blond Eskimos. *American Anthropologist* 23(3):257–267.
- Johanson, MaryAnn
1999 *Review of Dances with Wolves*. Electronic document, <http://www.rottentomatoes.com>, accessed March 14, 2003.
- King, Dennis
2002 Way up North: How Did a World-Class Movie Come to Be Made in a Yiny Arctic Inuit village? *Tulsa World*, July 19: SPOT.
- King, Loren
2002 *Runner* Captures Epic Sweep of Inuit Life. *Boston Globe*, June 21: C5.
- Kunuk, Zacharias
2002 The Public Art of Inuit Storytelling. Graham Spry Memorial Lecture presented at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, November 25.
- Marks, Laura
1994 Reconfigured Nationhood: A Partisan History of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. *Afterimage* (March):4–8.
- Nanook of the North
1922 Robert Flaherty, dir. 79 min. Kino International. New York.
- Oswalt, Wendell
1999 *Eskimos and Explorers*. 2nd edition. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- PR Newswire Association
2002 *Mojo the Eskimo Begins US Peace Tour*; Collects Personal Acts of Peace Making. October 22.
- Prins, Harald
1986 Mohock the Tories: Political Symbolism at the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Paper presented at the First Interdisciplinary Conference on New England Culture and History. University of Massachusetts.
- 1989 American Indians and the Ethnokinematic Complex: From Native Participation to Production Control. In *Eyes across the Water*. Boonzaier Flaes, ed. Pp. 80–90. Amsterdam: Het Spinhof.
- 1997 The Paradox of Primitivism: Native Rights and the Problem of Imagery in Cultural Survival. *Visual Anthropology* 9(3–4):243–266.
- 2002 Visual Media and the Primitivist Perplex: Colonial Fantasies, Indigenous Imagination and Advocacy in North America. In *Media Worlds*. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds. Pp. 58–74. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Purves, Miranda
2002 Inuit Style: Nanook Goes South as Designers Pair Fur Boots with Cocktail Dresses. *Saturday Post*, November 11: SP7.
- Rabinow, Paul
1999 *French DNA*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rigby, Bruce, John MacDonald, and Leah Otak
2000 The Inuit of Nunavut, Canada. In *Endangered Peoples of the Arctic: Struggles to Survive and Thrive*. Milton Freeman, ed. Pp. 92–112. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Rony, Fatima
1996 *The Third Eye*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Scott, A. O.
2002a An Inuit Epic in Shades of White. *New York Times*, June 7: E18.
2002b The Way We Live Now. *New York Times*, July 14: 11.
- Skins*
2002 Chris Eyre, dir. 90 min. Hollywood: First Look Pictures.
- Smith, Randall
2002 *Shaman's Return*: Award-winning Native Film from Canada to Set to Debut in Anchorage. *Anchorage Daily News*, August 18: D8.
- Smoke Signals*
1998 Chris Eyre, dir. 89 min. Hollywood: Miramax Films.
- Veniere, James
2002 *Fast Runner* Not Fleet Enough to Dodge Apathy. *Boston Herald*, June 21: S20.
- Vick-Westgate, Ann
2002 *Nunavik: Inuit-Controlled Education in Arctic Quebec*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Weiner, James
1997 *Televisualist Anthropology: Representation, Aesthetics and Politics*. *Current Anthropology* 38(2):197–236.
- Weiskind, Ron
2002 Drama on the Tundra: *Atanarjuat* Tells Inuit Tale That Resonates as Story for All People. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 26: 18.
- Wenzel, George
1991 *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, Environment and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- www.isuma.ca
Homepage of Igloodik Isuma Productions.



FIGURE 8. *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* Director: Zacharias Kunuk. Puja (played by Luci Tulugarjuk) and Panikpak (played by Madeline Ivalu) © Igloolik Isuma Productions. (Photographer: Marie-Helene Cousineau)