

### The Sovereign Obscurity of Inuit Literature

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The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature

Edited by James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice

Print Publication Date: Sep 2014 Subject: Literature, American Literature

Online Publication Date: Feb 2014 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199914036.013.001

### Abstract and Keywords

Based on his travel to the territory of the Inuinnait with the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1914, ethnographer Diamond Jenness wrote an account in which he depicts the Inuinnait singers as either bashful primitives or frivolous pranksters. Jenness clearly could not make sense of the Inuinnait's "unintelligible" songs. This chapter argues that Inuit "literature" has, since Jenness's first attempt to access it, remained somewhat unintelligible to outsiders and thus continues to be underrepresented in Indigenous literary scholarship in Canada. Unlike Jenness, it insists that one of the great strengths of Inuit literary tradition is its opacity. The chapter explores three examples—Nunavut Arctic College's *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, Salomé Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk's work of fiction entitled *Sanaaq*, and Igloodik Isuma Productions' film *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*--to illustrate how Inuit literature challenges scholars to re-evaluate their attempts at decolonizing literary critical practice.

Keywords: Diamond Jenness, Inuit literature, Canada, Nunaat, colonization, Salome Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk, Sanaaq, Noah Richler, Zacharias Kunuk, Atanarjuat

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IN 1914, ethnographer Diamond Jenness travelled to the territory of the Inuinnait—then known as "Copper Eskimos"—with the Canadian Arctic Expedition. Working in the vicinity of Bernard Harbour, near the present-day community of Kugluktuk, Jenness was determined to record "the great wealth of dance-songs" that existed in the region (9). Because cold temperatures would cause the phonograph's wax cylinders to harden, Jenness persuaded local people to perform their songs inside the station house rather than recording them in the field. As he tells it:

The Copper Eskimos were not acquainted with a phonograph prior to this time; there were still a few natives, in fact, who had never seen a white man. They thought a spirit was reproducing their words, and were quite nervous at first about singing into the machine; later, when more familiar with it, one or two of them were inclined to play pranks, ejaculating, laughing or talking in the middle

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of a song to create more amusement when the record was played over. The texts of the songs are full of this extraneous matter. (7)

Although readings of Jenness's account may be colored by his later misguided policy recommendations for Inuit relocation,<sup>1</sup> his representation of the Inuinnait singers as either bashful primitives or frivolous pranksters seems to be consistent with his general attitude toward Inuit intellectual traditions in performance.

On the page, Jenness evidences a slight disdain, or perhaps even frustration—particularly when faced with the task of translating the material. “Eskimo songs, as a rule,” he says,

are comprehensible to their composers only.... It is only to be expected that a large proportion of the dance-songs are virtually *unintelligible*. All the individual words—except, of course, the burden syllables—may be capable of translation, yet taken together they will yield no meaning.... (7, 13; emphasis added)

**(p. 16)** This assessment may contain a shred of accuracy: because Jenness cannot make sense of the songs, they are indeed “unintelligible” to him. This failure in meaning-making, however, is one that he is only willing to take a fraction of responsibility for. “There are cases probably,” he says, “where the obscurity lies in the translation rather than in the original, owing to my imperfect knowledge of the language and the inadequacy of my interpreters; but in the majority of instances *the songs themselves are at fault*.... ” (13; emphasis added). In this regard, Jenness also seems to be invoking the older, now-obsolete connotation of the term “unintelligible”: the idea of being unintelligent.<sup>2</sup> It appears, then, that Jenness was assessing the local tradition on the basis of its transparency or its receptiveness to strangers. Yet the songs, like the singers, seemed to have had a different set of priorities.

My thesis is that Inuit “literature” has, since the time that Jenness first tried to access it, remained somewhat unintelligible to outsiders and that, for this reason, it has remained underrepresented in the field of Indigenous literary study in Canada. Unlike Jenness, however, I want to posit the opacity of Inuit literature not as a flaw, but rather as one of the great strengths of the tradition. “Unintelligibility,” after all, can also be read as a marker of sovereignty—a commitment of the tradition to being understood on its own terms. In withholding from Jenness the desired (and illusory) raw song data that could be easily rendered into a form appropriate for export, the Inuinnait singers ensured that their work remained community-oriented. As a tradition, Inuit literature continues to prioritize an audience of insiders as it develops into forms that decline to mimic the dominant genres—and the dominant languages—preferred by literary scholars. Due to its lack of concern for mainstream accessibility, I argue, Inuit literature has the potential to challenge the academy by forcing it to question the extent of its tolerance for indigenization.

Although the Inuit literature of Siberia, Alaska, and Greenland invites both individual and comparative discussions, the focus of this chapter is on the Canadian Inuit context. It begins by outlining some of the historical factors that influence the production and reception of Inuit texts, and it points out that, just as the Canadian government has struggled with the legal definition of “Inuit,” so has the academy fumbled with Inuit texts. Like Jenness's station house, the university encompasses a space that seems to welcome Inuit traditions but that is inevitably challenged by their nonconformity. With reference to

three brief examples, I argue that Inuit literature challenges scholars of Indigenous literatures to reassess the tolerance and broad applicability of their methods.

### Introduction to *Inuit Nunaat*

Most broadly defined, the Inuit homeland reaches from the coast of the Chukchi peninsula in Siberia, through the Yup'ik and Iñupiat territories of coastal Alaska, into the Inuvialuit settlement region (coastal Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Arctic Quebec), Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador), and Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). Varying (p. 17) dialects of Inuit language (known most commonly as Inuktitut, although regionally also as Inuinnaqtun, Inuvialuktun, and Iñupiaq) are closely connected, whereas the Yup'ik languages of Alaska and Siberia form a separate branch of the Eskimo-Aleut (or Inuit-Unangan) family. The extent to which Inuit may be thought of as a singular “nation,” however, is subject to some debate. Although the rise of Inuit political activism in the 1970s—particularly, through the development of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC)—has emphasized Inuit circumpolar unity, significant regional differences persist. The segmenting of Inuit lands by the borders of four different nation-states (Russia, the United States, Canada, and Denmark), along with the pursuit of separate land claims within these borders, has created a range of political contexts within which Inuit literature can be understood. To provide some background to the Canadian context, I summarize a few key elements of Inuit political history here.

Although early anthropologists classified Inuit according to large regional groupings like the Baffin, Netsilik, Iglulik, Caribou, Copper, and Mackenzie River “Eskimos,” Indigenous names are far more specific. *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut* specifies the existence in the mid-nineteenth-century of forty-eight *-miut* groups in what is now the Nunavut territory (339). The suffix *-miut* means “people of,” as in the case of the Nattilingmiut, the “people of the place where there are seals.” These identifications spell out a belonging to and movement within a particular region that differs quite drastically from southern impressions of Inuit nomadism. Although *-miut* territories are quite firmly established, some Inuit oral histories also include stories of migration to these territories, including the displacement of the Tuniit (or Dorset) people who were living there already.<sup>3</sup> Traditional Inuit yearly rounds involved the harvesting of different resources such as seals, char, and caribou—and eventually also included trade with *qallunaat* (white people). Inuit names for other Indigenous peoples, including *allait* (“strangers”) or *iqqiliit* (“louse eggs”) speak to a history of political conflict, but the oral history also includes stories of trade and intermarriage (Bennett and Rowley, 126–142). Many versions of the story of Nuliajuk or Sedna—the mother of the sea creatures—also assign Indians (and Europeans) Inuit origin, as Nuliajuk is said to have given birth to puppies who traveled south to become the *iqqiliit*.<sup>4</sup> Despite this legendary connection, Inuit have remained for the most part both geographically and legally separate from other Indigenous peoples in Canada.

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The history of colonization is somewhat distinct for Inuit, whose territory was not viewed as desirable for European settlement because of its inability to support agriculture. For this reason, the interaction of Inuit with the burgeoning Canadian state occurred largely through contact with the Hudson's Bay Company and through missionary activity, although previous encounters with explorers and whalers had also shaped their early relationship with Europeans. In the 1930s, however, the decline of the fox fur trade (on which many Inuit had become economically reliant) created administrative challenges that required various levels of government to settle the ambiguity regarding Inuit legal status—or, in other words, to determine who was responsible for providing “relief” to Inuit families (Kulchyski and Tester, 24–28). The disagreement between the federal government and the province of Quebec over (p. 18) the responsibility for Inuit welfare in Nunavik (Northern Quebec) eventually led to the 1939 Supreme Court case *Re: Eskimos*, wherein it was decided that Inuit should be considered an Indian “tribe” (and therefore a federal responsibility), largely based on a history of these kinds of descriptions in the colonial literature (Bonesteel, 6; Kulchyski and Tester, 28–35). Although the federal government thus retained responsibility for Inuit administration, it persisted in distinguishing Inuit from Indians; as Sarah Bonesteel notes, “A 1951 amendment to the *Indian Act* states that, ‘a reference in this Act to an Indian does not include any person of the race of aborigines commonly referred to as *Eskimos*’” (7).

During this sudden, mid-century increase in government intervention into Northern Canada, Inuit were subjected to a range of policies aimed at transforming them into citizens of the state. In the 1940s, the government introduced a disc identification system that would allow administrators to manage Inuit by number rather than by name. Although the numbers were phased out after the 1969 implementation of Project Naming—a plan to assign standardized surnames to Inuit across the North—some older Inuit still make use of the numbers in identifying themselves in formal settings.<sup>5</sup> The 1950s and 1960s were eras of relocation; Inuit were moved—often forcibly—to permanent communities; the records of this difficult time often mention the destruction of outpost camps and the slaughter of the sled dogs who enabled Inuit to travel and hunt. In an attempt to bolster Canadian sovereignty via proof of occupancy in the High Arctic, some Inuit families from Inukjuak and Pond Inlet were relocated in the mid-1950s to the new communities of Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord.<sup>6</sup> In 2010, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs apologized to these “High Arctic exiles” for ostensibly using them as “human flagpoles” (Campion-Smith). On top of this history of relocation, the impacts of the tuberculosis epidemics and the residential school system continue to be felt in Inuit communities today.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1970s, however, the rise of Indigenous activism in Canada was augmented by the development of Inuit organizations like the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (the “Eskimo Brotherhood,” now known as Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami or ITK) and the international Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC). In the early 1970s, the ITC commissioned a land use and occupancy study to gather information that would provide a legal basis for the pursuit of land claims (Freeman). In 1977, the ICC made a declaration of Inuit unity in order to establish a strong stance from which to negotiate with the nation-states whose borders segment the Inuit homeland. The 1999 creation of the territory of Nunavut—an area comprising one-

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fifth of Canada's land mass—is perhaps the best-known of the resulting Inuit land claim settlements, but it was preceded by the 1984 Inuvialuit Final Agreement and the hastily negotiated James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement of 1985. In 2005, the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement officially created the self-governing region of Nunatsiavut.

In the fifty-two communities that exist across the Inuit regions in Canada, Inuit languages and traditions continue to maintain a strong presence. In most households in Nunavut and Nunavik, Inuktitut is the language of daily life. The diversity of local dialects persists; for instance, Inuinnaqtun (the dialect that Jenness was struggling with) is (p. 19) spoken in the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut and written in roman letters, but Inuktitut generally uses syllabics, which became widely popular after the arrival of Anglican missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century. However, intermittent discussions of the need for a standardized writing system continue to arise, particularly as Northern communities work to enhance the role of Inuit language and culture in education and governance. Thousands of Inuit also live in southern urban centers like Ottawa, Montreal, Winnipeg, and Edmonton.

Although the lives of contemporary Inuit have changed drastically in the past century—the motto of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is “First Canadians, Canadian First”<sup>8</sup>—Inuit communities continue to retain their political, cultural, and linguistic distinctiveness. In the territory of Nunavut, for instance, Inuit traditions—now often codified under the rubric of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (“traditional knowledge” or “what Inuit have known for a very long time”)—increasingly help to shape the workings of governance, legal practices, and the education system.<sup>9</sup> And although terms like “literature” and “literary studies” are not prominent within the policy discussions of northern governments, we might mimic their attempts at indigenization by asking the following questions: what does the Inuit literary tradition look like, and how can the study of this literature remain consistent with Inuit principles?

## Inuit “Literature”?

In 2006, when Justice Thomas Berger submitted a Final Report on the implementation of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, he identified one of the territory's most crucial tasks as the creation of a bilingual education system that would produce graduates fully literate in both English and Inuktitut. “The Inuit are a bright tile in the Canadian mosaic,” he says, “Why not an Inuit literature?” (xii). Berger, who is well respected for his work as the Commissioner of the 1974–77 Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, was undoubtedly aware of the existence of an Inuit oral tradition; we might assume, then, that he was using the term “literature” in its literal sense: referring to letters or to written language. Although this rather narrow definition is no longer in widespread use in academic circles, the association of the term “literature” with genres like the novel, the short story, and the lyric poem certainly continue to shape university-level curricula—and to exclude texts that do not fall under these categories.

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The Inuk writer and politician Zebedee Nungak reiterates this sense of Inuit exclusion from the literary realm:

Since Inuit traditions are oral and not literary, Inuit have had to process through a transition to find a suitable “zone of comfort” in the field of written literature. In past times, writing seemed to be something for “others” to do, and was not at all a pre-occupation of Inuit. For a long time, it seemed that Inuit were neither meant, nor expected to be, writers. That is, in the way that Qallunaat [white people] have been authors, poets, and producers of written works for centuries. (64)<sup>10</sup>

(p. 20) Here, Nungak alludes to the larger cultural biases that have prevented Inuit from being thought of—and from thinking of themselves—as writers. Some scholars, though, have questioned the idea that Indigenous traditions are “oral and not literary”—or rather, that a firm distinction exists between these categories.<sup>11</sup> Although oral traditions may not be composed of letters, they may have other features of “literary” texts: they involve “complex or finely crafted” stories and songs “of the kind valued for quality of form.”<sup>12</sup>

A wide range of critics, then, have opted to use the term “literature” to describe oral traditions and the various texts that they engender. As J. Edward Chamberlin (2009) writes,

I know of no other word that catches the way in which language—the medium of literature, after all—figures largely in these traditions... and no other word (than literature) that respects the “writing without words” in woven and beaded fabric, in carved wood and stone, and in the intricate choreographies of dancing and drama, which are a central part of many performances. (72)

“Literature,” in other words, is a term that asks readers, listeners, and viewers to pay particular attention to the way in which information is conveyed—whether it be written, spoken, carved, or sung. It draws attention to the artistry of texts, and, used strategically, it can foster appreciation within the academy for nonwritten forms of expression that do many of the same things that the most cherished written texts do. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm writes that “[b]efore it was named ‘poetry,’ our ancestors composed poetry in the form of songs and prayers. Before it was called ‘creative non-fiction,’ our ancestors told tales of personal and historical events in a style that was poetic and complex in its beauty” (170). This use of Euro-Western literary terms in describing Indigenous texts thus promotes the recognition and study of Indigenous literary traditions and so acts as a useful tactic within larger projects of decolonization within the university.

In the Inuit context, one of the early proponents of the existence of an Inuit “literature” was the Greenlandic Inuit amateur ethnographer Knud Rasmussen, who, in the early 1920s, led the Fifth Thule Expedition through the Canadian Arctic to gather samples of Inuit intellectual and material culture. Because Rasmussen spoke Kalaallisut, the Inuit language of Greenland, he moved through the Canadian Arctic with a level of ease that was unavailable to Diamond Jenness, and he was able to collect several volumes’ worth of stories and song lyrics. Rasmussen also had the privilege of watching songs performed in context, and he kept careful record of the details of performance: the identity of the singer, the situation, and the effect on the audience. “The great song festivals at which I have been present during the dark season,” he writes,

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are the most original and the prettiest kind of pastime I have ever witnessed. Every man and woman, sometimes also the children, will have his or her own songs, with appropriate melodies, which are sung in the *qag·e*, the great snow hut which is set up in every village where life and good spirits abound. Those taking part in a song festival are called *qag·ifut*; the poem recited is called *pisEq*, the melody of a song *ivᖃErut*.... (227)<sup>13</sup>

(p. 21) Although Rasmussen is careful to note the Inuktitut terminology that describes this tradition, his own choice of words is notable; like Franz Boas before him, Rasmussen refers to the song as a “poem” (*digt*, in the Danish) and often refers to the singers as poets.<sup>14</sup> In other words, he frames Inuit performance as a literary tradition. The published volumes of his findings now form a cornerstone of the printed Inuit canon, and his translations have been reprinted in a wide range of collections and literary anthologies.

The problem remains, however, that terms like “literature” and “poetry” are not Inuit terms. But rather than saying wistfully that “there is no word for poetry/literature in Inuktitut,” it might be preferable to say that English, like other European languages, struggles to adequately convey the specific nature of the *pisiit* (personal songs) and the *ikiaqtagait* (adapted or “split” songs), the *iviutiit* (embarrassing songs), and the *sakausiit* (shaman songs).<sup>15</sup> Although terms like “literature” can be strategically useful in gaining external recognition of traditions that have too often been dismissed, they also retain the possibility of skewing outsiders’ understandings of the material. Euro-Western perspectives on the nature, purpose, and proper handling of “literature,” after all, vary quite considerably from Inuit approaches to stories and songs. The song traditions do celebrate the creativity, innovation, and skill of individual singers—and so (as Sophie McCall points out) might make them easily comparable to European lyric traditions,<sup>16</sup> but whether this indicates that it is appropriate to read them as lyric poems is open to debate. Inuit narrative protocols, meanwhile, tend to emphasize the importance of speaking truthfully—from experience. Even in the case of the *unikkaaqtuat*, the stories that go on for a long time, many elders vouch for the truthfulness of the subject matter and thereby complicate the usual English translation: “myths.” Most notably, because storytellers are either speaking from their own experience or carefully passing on ancient stories that they have inherited, there seems to be little value placed on the invention of “original” stories of the kind that tend to draw praise in Euro-Western genres like the novel.

The practice of close reading, furthermore, is rendered problematic by the reality that most academics will have to read the stories in translation—and also by the possibility that close analysis or interpretation might itself be a foreign way of interacting with an Inuit “text.” In the same way that cross-examining an elder would be inappropriate, the rigorous dissection of an *unikkaaqtuaq* might also come across as disrespectful. And what are the ethics of submitting a “traditional” story to analysis by a class of undergraduate students in the South? Given Inuit protocols about respecting the autonomy of another person’s opinion and about speaking from experience, is it appropriate to ask students to argue about their respective interpretations—particularly with regards to a tradition that they often have only minimal experience with? Although I have no wish to erect insurmountable walls between different intellectual traditions, these strike me as important—

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and useful—methodological challenges that arise during the process of “opening up” the canon. Although movements toward more inclusive curricula are urgently needed, their decolonizing potential remains contingent on the commitment of scholars to scrutinize their assumptions about the reading and teaching of Indigenous “literatures.” Like other scholars, I continue to use the term strategic term “literature” when referring to the wide range of “texts” that make up the Inuit tradition. But the (p. 22) persistence of the Inuktitut language and the diversity and difference of Inuit texts also act as a reminder that scholars must continue to interrogate their terms.

### Three Inuit “Texts”

Contrary to popular opinion, there is no shortage of written Inuit literature. Zebedee Nungak writes that “[f]rom the late 1950s onward, Inuit have proven themselves more than capable as writers ever since magazines, newsletters, and other publications have been available to them across the Arctic” (64). Along with recorded and translated collections of oral literatures, Inuit writers have themselves published in a range of genres, including autobiography (Anthony Apakark Thrasher’s *Thrasher: Skid Row Eskimo* [1976]; Minnie Aodla Freeman’s *Life Among the Qallunaat* [1978]; Alice French’s *My Name Is Masak* [1977] and *The Restless Nomad* [1991]), long works of fiction (Markoosie’s *Harpoon of the Hunter* [1970]; Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk’s *Sanaaq* [1984, 2002], Michael Kusugak’s *Curse of the Shaman* [2006]), and short fiction (including Alooook Ipellie’s *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* [1993] and Rachel Qitsualik’s “Skraeling” [2005]). Other short writings and poems have been anthologized in Penny Petrone’s *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English* (1988) and Robin Gedalof [McGrath]’s *Paper Stays Put* (1979). More recently, Inhabit Media, an Inuit-owned publisher based in Iqaluit, has been producing many volumes of beautifully illustrated traditional stories aimed at younger audiences. However, Nungak also points out that “for the most part, Inuit writing has yet to make its presence memorable in the world of mainstream literature.... Inuit writers have yet to attain such ‘firsts’ as making the bestseller lists, or winning mainline literary prizes for written works” (66).

Although this lack of commercial success and critical attention can certainly be cast as a problem, I would again argue that it might also be framed as one of the strengths of the Inuit literary tradition. Rather than positing Inuit literature as not having yet “arrived” or come into its own—as aimed teleologically toward an end point that is the publication of an Inuk *Three Day Road*—we might celebrate the fact that Inuit authors have, for the most part, *not* adopted the genres and languages that would make them accessible in the South. Instead, Inuit authors have tended to write for Inuit audiences, and their work therefore exists in forms that challenge the southern academy’s practices of inclusivity. Although I lack the space to discuss them in any great depth, I offer three brief examples here to illustrate the useful methodological challenges that they provide to scholars of Indigenous literatures.

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### *Interviewing Inuit Elders: Seeking an Inuit Critical Theory*

The Anishinaabe critic Kimberly Blaeser wrote in 1993 that “[t]he insistence on reading Native literature by way of Western literary theory clearly violates its integrity (p. 23) and performs a new act of colonization and conquest” (55). Recent developments in Indigenous literary theory, known under the general heading of Indigenous literary nationalism, have thus encouraged scholars to read Indigenous literatures within the framework of the specific intellectual traditions that produced them. In the Inuit context, consulting ethnographic sources is one way of accessing “tradition,” but contemporary Inuit elders and community members also offer valuable perspectives on their own past and present; indeed, their expertise would best be prioritized above that of non-Inuit academics (myself included). This would be consistent with the principles of *Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit*, which often derives from consultation with elders. All students of Inuit literature would benefit from spending time in Inuit territory—particularly out on the land with elders. However, the commitment of time and resources that this requires makes it impossible for many. For the southern academy to consider the voices of Inuit elders in the development of critical theory, then, it tends to require texts or other kinds of resources that can travel the long distance to the South. Fortunately, Nunavut Arctic College has published a series of books (available both in Inuktitut and in English translation) featuring the perspectives of Inuit elders on a wide range of topics, including stories and songs. These texts—in particular, the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series—provide invaluable context for the study of Inuit literature.

The challenge of reading Inuit oral histories as critical theory, however, lies in the difficulty of deriving from them a set of firm, widely applicable literary critical principles—ones that would be useful in framing a variety of situations and texts. Indeed, the architects of Nunavut policy have faced the same problem in attempting to incorporate *Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit*—the “Inuit way of doing things”—into all aspects of the territory’s operations. Jaypetee Arnakak—formerly of Nunavut’s Department of Sustainable Development—admits that he “deliberately tried to keep IQ from becoming an official policy, knowing that separating IQ from the contemporary realities renders something that is profound, enriching and alive into something that is meaningless, sterile, and awkwardly exclusionary” (“Commentary”). Alexina Kublu, Frédéric Laugrand, and Jarich Oosten, in their introduction to the first volume in the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series, also state that

[m]ost ethnographic texts tend to reconstruct Inuit knowledge as an objective body of knowledge. The idea that knowledge should be objective and true has a long history in the West.... In Inuit society, we are dealing with a completely different tradition of knowledge. All knowledge is social by nature and the idea of objectified true knowledge holds little attraction or fascination.

(Angmaalik et al., 8–9)

In attempting to use the particular and context-specific reflections of Inuit elders as foundational for a critical theory, then, scholars risk removing Inuit knowledge from the context and net-

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work of relationships that makes it both meaningful and authoritative. Although elders do comment and provide teachings on stories and songs, finding ways to honor the specificity of their knowledge and experience remains challenging when working within a southern intellectual framework that yearns toward generalization and hardly ever requires anyone to speak from personal, lived experience. How, then, (p. 24) can the education system effectively and appropriately integrate the expertise of elders? Can *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* find a home within an academic framework? If so, which kind of behavioral and methodological shifts would this entail?

### **Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel?**

Inuit literary traditions, lacking the South's enthusiasm for all things fictional, seldom produce novels. It might seem surprising, then—given the excitement around the rise of the Indigenous novel, which was theorized by Kenneth Lincoln in the US context as an American Indian literary Renaissance—that so few scholars are aware of the existence of *Sanaaq*. The author of this long work of fiction, Salomé Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk of Kangiqsujuaq, Northern Quebec, began working on the story in the 1950s after a local priest asked her to write down some phrases to assist him with his study of the Inuktitut language. Mitiarjuk's book was eventually published in 1984, one year after Beatrice Culleton Moisonier's *In Search of April Raintree* and one year before Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*. However, because it was published in the Inuktitut language for use in the Nunavik school system, *Sanaaq* was in no way accessible to the vast majority of Canadian readers. Although a 2002 French translation by the anthropologist Bernard Saladin d'Anglure made the novel available to a Francophone readership in Canada and Europe, it remains almost entirely unknown in English-speaking North America.

*Sanaaq* finds company in another Inuit novel written (and serialized) in Inuktitut: Markoosie Patsauq's *Harpoon of the Hunter* (1970). Both of these works have been largely discounted by their few critical assessors. In the words of Noah Richler, "Neither of these books are novels in any sophisticated sense. They are generally expository stories explaining a heritage through picaresque scenes" (82). Reviewer Paul-André Proulx writes, "One does not read *Sanaaq* for the beauty of the writing. The author simply recounts her life, a story shaped by the relentless struggle for food" ("*Vivre en pays inuit*"; my translation). Such an assessment seems to be influenced by popular southern ideas about life in the "harsh" Arctic environment; theorists of autobiography, meanwhile, may contest the "simplicity" of the process of recounting one's life. Although *Sanaaq* is undoubtedly based on Mitiarjuk's life experiences, it is also fictionalized, and there is nothing simplistic about it. Rather, the story is a complex, humorous, and profound rendering of life in a Northern Quebec community during a time of transition, and although Saladin d'Anglure credits Mitiarjuk with having "re-invented the art of the novel whilst being unaware of its existence," one has to wonder whether the framing and assessment of this work *as a novel* is fair, or appropriate (7).<sup>17</sup> After all, the novel, as a genre, maintains deep ties to European ideologies, whereas Mitiarjuk, as a writer, arguably draws more heavily on Inuit storytelling protocols.<sup>18</sup> An indigenized Inuit literary criticism, I would argue, might view *Sanaaq* not as a convenient occasion for novelistic analysis (which, in-

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evitably, finds the book to be lacking), but as a unique product of an Inuit literary tradition, with its own set of aesthetic priorities.

Although an English translation is now available, we should be skeptical of this as a solution to the challenge of reading *Sanaaq*. Based on contemporary literacy initiatives (p. 25) in the North, which focus on the creation of Inuktitut-language texts, the happy likelihood is that Inuit writing will persist in appearing in Inuktitut and in drawing on aesthetic conventions that do not conform to Euro-Western expectations; therefore, it will continue to challenge the academy and its attempts at inclusivity.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, we may study works in translation, but the fact that serious scholars of French or Spanish or Russian literature are expected to work in those languages acts as a stern reminder to scholars of Indigenous literatures. *Sanaaq* is not a French- or English-language novel, and to evaluate it as such is to miss an opportunity to begin the hard work of indigenizing literary criticism.

### ***Atanarjuat*—A Literary Film?**

In the process of writing *This Is My Country, What's Yours?*, author Noah Richler traveled to Igloolik to interview Zacharias Kunuk, one of the co-founders of Igloolik Isuma Productions and the director of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*. Instead of discussing Kunuk's filmmaking, however, Richler spends most of his interview trying to make sense of the lack of popularity of novels among Inuit. He concludes that the individualism that characterizes the novel as a genre does not make sense within societies that emphasize the well-being of the group over the individual; by contrast, he believes, epic stories and creation myths "impede a kind of questioning that might have led to a more rebellious outcome" (80). In other words, he views the novel as a genre of critical thinking and as a vehicle for political change and human rights activism—thereby suggesting that these things are alien to the novel-less North. Although Richler may be correct about the foreign origins of individualism, his suggestion that its absence results in a society of sheeplike individuals who blindly follow instruction bears little resemblance to Inuit society, with its consistent emphasis on *isuma*—the mature intelligence that endows a person with the right and responsibility to act independently and in a self-reliant manner.<sup>20</sup>

The poet Robert Bringhurst—also interviewed by Richler—likewise notes the shortage of Inuit novels, speculating that "[w]ere [an Inuit] novel of an incontrovertibly sophisticated kind to have been written, it may well have been done by Paul Apak Angilirq, the screenwriter of *Atanarjuat* who died in 1998" (quoted in Richler, 82). Notable here is the language of deficiency and even of regret that continues to characterize critical responses to Inuit texts; rather than celebrating and/or attempting to understand the aesthetic choices of Inuit storytellers, many critics have tended to languish in hypothetical spaces of possibility, speculating about the ways that Inuit texts "might have been" or the things that their creators "could have done." Despite being a film, though, *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* is one of the "texts" that has brought the Inuit literary tradition to international attention. Described by its producers as "part of this continuous stream of oral history [that is] carried forward into the new millennium through a marriage of Inuit storytelling skills and new technology," this entirely Inuktitut-language film has won the Camera d'Or at

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Cannes, as well as the attention of several literary scholars (“Atanarjuat [The Fast Runner]”).<sup>21</sup> Igloolik Isuma Productions (p. 26) explains that its style of filmmaking is community-based in all aspects. Paul Apak Angilirq’s screenplay was actually a collaborative adaptation of multiple elders’ versions of the local legend of Atanarjuat, and its production employed many community members and fostered the practicing and teaching of traditional skills like igloo-building and the sewing of caribou and sealskin clothes. Its collaborative nature shirks critics’ desire for a singular creative genius (although Kunuk is often cast into this role).

What do literary critics do, then, when literary traditions produce films rather than novels? How might we problematize ideas about the “development” of Inuit literature into forms deemed by outsiders to be politically and aesthetically appropriate?<sup>22</sup> Arguably, *Atanarjuat* does this work on its own, as it continues to provide a series of challenges, many of which relate to the fact that the primary target audience of the film is “a local and quite specific contemporary Indigenous community” (Krupat, 608). Although subtitles are provided, the film supplies no other means of familiarizing a southern viewer with its complex aesthetic and cultural features. For this reason, students often find it excruciatingly long and somewhat baffling, whereas the film’s academic critics have been known to mix up characters and misinterpret events. An Inuktitut-speaking Igloolik audience familiar with the local story of Atanarjuat—and knowledgeable about Inuit oral history, song traditions, shamanism, the signifiers of traditional clothing, and the like—will obviously have a far richer and perhaps more enjoyable experience of the film. Southern viewers, meanwhile, tend to get caught up in ethnography rather than in aesthetic appreciation, and the acquisition of the background knowledge needed to access a deeper understanding of the film is, again, a time commitment that many scholars cannot afford. As director Zacharias Kunuk says, “Life is too short to do too many things. I only want to do films about my people” (“Zacharias Kunuk Speaks”). Those southerners wishing to study these films, however, will need to rearrange their schedules—and their expectations. Although the appearance of Inuit texts that would compete for Governor General’s awards would not be unwelcome, the literary establishment must also consider the possibility that it might, in fact, make more sense for the most celebrated product of the Inuit literary tradition to be an Inuktitut-language community-grown film based on an Igloolik legend.

What unites these three examples is their commitment to prioritizing a local, Inuktitut-speaking audience. To be sure, there are some Inuit texts written in English that adapt outside genres very effectively—Rachel Qitsualik’s short story “Skraeling” comes to mind, as does Taqralik Partridge’s spoken-word poetry—and thereby position themselves to carry out the important work of intervening in southern understandings of Inuit history and contemporary reality. My question, however, is about the majority of Inuit literary texts that continue to resist predictions about the eventual maturation of the literature into forms—and languages—that are more familiar to a southern readership. After all, if the opening up of the curriculum means studying English (or French)-language novels, plays, and lyric poetry in the same way that scholars study other literatures, perhaps the canon has not been that thoroughly indigenized after all.

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I recognize, of course, that this argument is contentious. In no way do I mean to suggest that novels written in English by Indigenous authors are “inauthentic.” Rather, (p. 27) I take Cherokee critic Sean Teuton’s view in his book *Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel* that “[t]o express their political and cultural hopes, Indigenous writers opened the European novel, breathed into it an Indian voice, and created not a literary form caught between two cultures, but the Red Power novel” (34). In the same way, Indigenous writers have adopted and adapted the English language (along with other European languages) and set it to work in both artistic and political arenas. As Teuton suggests, the resulting texts are hugely valuable in their ability not only to reach wider audiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers but also to redefine the meaning of Indigeneity beyond stereotypical and static ideas of “tradition.”

The question remains, however, as to what the academy should do with “texts” that do not have this same set of priorities—which do not strategically adopt European genres and languages, and which therefore provide serious interpretive challenges to southern audiences. What form should an ethical, rigorous, and pragmatic literary criticism of Inuit literature take? Like any literary nationalist reading, this asks a lot of its practitioners. It requires a familiarity with the political and historical contexts out of which Inuit texts are produced. It requires an understanding of the traditional genres of Inuit narrative and performance. It requires a knowledge of the Inuktitut language—a language with dialects that vary widely across the Arctic homeland. More than anything, perhaps, it requires a willingness to consider the possibility that academic protocols about the reading of “literature” may—like a compass—not work reliably above the treeline.

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### Notes:

(1) . Jenness's role in (a) promoting Inuit relocation to the High Arctic communities in an attempt to bolster Canadian sovereignty and (b) recommending the removal of all Inuit to southern Canada is discussed in Kulchyski and Tester's *Tammarniit*, 111-112, 317.

(2) . "Unintelligible," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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- (3) . See Hugh Brody's contribution to the 1976 *Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Study*, edited by Milton M. R. Freeman. For a contemporary telling of a Tuniit story, see Rachel A. Qitsualik's short story "Skraeling."
- (4) . See, for instance, Alexina Kublu's telling of the story of Uinigumasuittuq ("she never wants to get a husband") in the first volume of *Interviewing Inuit Elders*. Angmaalik et al., 153-161. *Iqqiliit*, meaning "they have louse eggs," is one colloquial term still occasionally used (along with the less-derogatory term *allait*, or "strangers") to denote "Indians."
- (5) . For a more thorough description of the disc system, see Alia, *Names and Nunavut*, 49-57.
- (6) . For more information on the High Arctic relocations, see Kulchyski and Tester's *Tamarniit (Mistakes): Inuit Relocation in the Eastern Arctic (1939-63)*, and Igloodik Isuma Productions' documentary *Exile*.
- (7) . Many of the Inuit tuberculosis patients who were shipped to hospitals in the south never returned home; their story is told in Grygier's *A Long Way From Home*. In 2008, an exhibit documenting the Inuit experience of residential schools foundation ("We Were So Far Away...") was created by the Legacy of Hope Foundation. For first-person accounts of Inuit/Inuvialuit residential school experience, see Minnie Aodla Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat*, Alice Masak French's *My Name Is Masak*, and Anthony Apakark Thrasher's *Thrasher: Skid Row Eskimo*.
- (8) . This motto—based on a quote by the late Inuit leader Jose Kusugak—suggests a strategic alliance with (or loyalty to) the Canadian state, which in some ways distinguishes Inuit political strategy from that of other Indigenous nations (some of which reject the label "Canadian").
- (9) . For an overview of the implementation of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (also known as *Inuit Qaujimanituqangit*), see Jaypeetee Arnakak's article "Incorporation of Inuit Qaujimanituqangit, or Inuit Traditional Knowledge, into the Government of Nunavut."
- (10) . This article was originally published in *Windspeaker* 22.1 (2004): 21, 26.
- (11) . See Chamberlin, "Hunting, Tracking, and Reading," 70-72.
- (12) . "Literary," *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- (13) . According to Lucien Schneider, *qag-ifut* (or *qaggijut*) means "they are assembled," or "the ones who are assembled." *Ulirnaigutiit: An Inuktitut-English Dictionary*, 277. Imaruittuq gives *qimik* as another term for "melody"; the one given here, *ivᖅErut* (or *inn-girutit*), means literally "a tool for singing." Imaruittuq, "Pisiit, Songs," 219.
- (14) . Franz Boas, who visited Cumberland Sound in 1883-1884, writes that "[a]mong the arts of the Eskimo poetry and music are by far the most prominent." *The Central Eskimo*, 240.

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(15) . These are the song categories described by Igloolik elder Emile Imarittuq. "Pisiit, Songs," 202–203.

(16) . McCall, *First Person Plural*, 184.

(17) . This quote is drawn from Saladin d'Anglure's introduction to the novel.

(18) . In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt chronicles the ways in which the growth of the middle class and the entrenchment of European individualism spurred on the popularity of the genre (9–92). See also Benedict Anderson's discussion of the novel as a nationalist genre in *Imagined Communities* (25–36).

(19) . See, for instance, the Titiraliritti! Inuktitut literacy project sponsored by the Government of Nunavut's Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth. <http://www.cley.gov.nu.ca/en/LiteraryPrize.aspx>

(20) . For more on *isuma* (or *ihuma*), see Jean Briggs, *Never in Anger*, 358–366, or Pamela Stern's "Learning to Be Smart," 506.

(21) . This critical success, one might note, could act as an antidote to Zebedee Nungak's fears about the dearth of Inuit literary prize winners.

(22) . Robin McGrath, one of the early academic scholars of Inuit literature, wrote a book entitled *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition*, whereas Penny Petrone, editor of *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English* traces a similar developmental arc in her portrayal of the tradition, which she views as progressing from oral traditions and early writings through the "transitional" genre of life writing (105).

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