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# Atanarjuat and the Ideological Work of Contemporary Indigenous Filmmaking

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*Atanarjuat* and the Ideological Work of Contemporary Indigenous Film-Making.

Going Inuit

Canada's ongoing attempts to go native have recently culminated in the *ilanaaq*,<sup>i</sup> the official logo of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games to take place in Vancouver, British Columbia. A contemporary rendition of *inukshuk*, a traditional Inuit stone marker, *ilanaaq* is meant to represent: "hope, friendship and [...] the hospitality of a nation that warmly welcomes the people of the world with open arms."<sup>ii</sup> Nothing to argue with, really, and yet the logo has already proven controversial. Disagreement concerns two issues: *ilanaaq*'s ability to represent all of Canada—the facility with which it replaces the maple leaf proved irksome to some constituencies—and its relationship to other First Nations—the Squamish<sup>iii</sup> have charged that *ilanaaq* exemplifies a particularly egregious instance of symbolic favoritism as it replaces abundantly available representations of the West Coast indigeneity with an emblem imported from the Arctic North. The Vancouver Organizing Committee has come to eloquent defense of *ilanaaq* by invoking its symbolic integrationist potential: "Ilanaaq's strength comes from the teamwork and collaboration of many. Each stone relies on the others to support the whole, but the unified balance is strong and unwavering." The Inuit have become Canada's favorite indigenes because their political history and their cultural symbols lend themselves so well to Canada's ongoing federalist project.

*Ilanaaq* is the latest North American example of "playing Indian" (Deloria 1998), a practice with vast historical precedent. With *ilanaaq*, Canada joins a host of nations who have turned to symbols of local indigeneity to assert their national distinctiveness. Such

appropriation presents indigenous artists with a dilemma. The current flowering of indigenous letters, art and cinema in North America is generally taken as evidence that Canada and the United States, as thriving multiculturalist democracies, have broken with an earlier history of the expropriation and displacement of the Americas' indigenous peoples. The art bears witness to a new historical period, in which respect for difference becomes the dominant logic of social and cultural relations. But this new historical period comes with a price of its own. Multiculturalism effectively demands that American Indians put their indigeneity on display. It prohibits Euroamericans from playing Indian—all such attempts are quickly denounced as cultural appropriation; ethnic frauds are regularly and ritually exposed these days. Instead, it requires that the Indians themselves play Indian to help legitimate the multiculturalist democracies they cannot help but inhabit.

But how does an Indian play Indian? *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner*, Zacharias Kunuk's feature debut provides an intriguing opportunity to investigate this question. Despite the wide-spread critical acclaim it has garnered since its showing at Cannes in 2000, where it won Camera d'Or, Kunuk's film continues to pose somewhat of a puzzle. Unique among contemporary North American indigenous cinema, both in terms of its subject matter and its formal solutions, Kunuk's film raises important questions about the possibilities of indigenous self-representation in contemporary multicultural democracies without offering easy answers. In fact, the ideological valence of the film appears outright contradictory and that contradiction is embodied most vividly in the juxtaposition of *The Fast Runner's* main narrative depicting a pre-contact nomadic band of the Inuit and the film's outtakes chronicling the making of the feature itself.

*Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner*, as the title already hints, participates in two separate traditions of representing the indigenous. It flees modernity into mythic indigenous past and then runs towards contemporary Canada as it unabashedly claims modernity in the outtakes concluding the film. Kunuk's film urgently poses the question of representing indigeneity under the conditions of multiculturalist democracies which enlist recognition on behalf of national cohesion rather than on behalf of cultural and political autonomy of indigenous nations.

A creation of Isuma Productions Inc., Canada's first independent Inuit production company,<sup>iv</sup> *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* has been marketed as the first feature film written, directed, acted, and produced by the Inuit. A cinematographic reprise of a traditional Inuit morality tale passed down orally through many generations, the film has been billed as "part of this continuous stream of oral history carried forward into the new millennium through a marriage of Inuit storytelling skills and new technology." "An exciting action-thriller (!) set in ancient Igloolik," it has promised "international audiences a more authentic view of Inuit culture and oral tradition than ever before, from the inside and through Inuit eyes."<sup>v</sup>

The film fascinates with its attempt to sustain an illusion of a pre-contact world in what is today's Canada's Eastern Arctic for its entire 2 hours and 41 minutes. It accomplishes this goal by throwing non-Inuit and non-Inuktitut<sup>vi</sup> speaking viewers into a world that does not offer them recognizable parameters of orientation: no native informant here. The promise of understanding held out by the English subtitles shatters with the first translated message: a declaration by an elder storyteller that she can tell this story only to those who already understand it, but to no others. The disjointed editing of

the opening sections augments the impression of being at a loss in an unknown world, as the Southern<sup>vii</sup> viewer struggles to reconstruct the plots from the offered fragments.<sup>viii</sup> The film unfolds as a story about an interfamily feud precipitated by an evil curse and a dispute over a woman. But above all, it works as a representation of the ancient material world recreated with meticulous attention to the accuracy effect of ethnographic detail by contemporary Igloolik's craftsmen and celebrated by the camera's loving lingering over the details of everyday objects. Reconstructions of traditional seal and polar bear skin clothing adorned by intricate embroidery; caribou bone, skin and ligament sleds and kayaks; snow-block igloos built in the traditional manner as well as attention to details large and small, from the landscapes of women's tattooed faces to the physiognomy of the eastern Arctic, uninterrupted by any signs of alternate economies—these all build the film's credibility as a recreation of a specific past. The storyline itself matters to the extent that it evokes the classical epics and their preoccupation with governable communities, which allows the reviewers to juxtapose claims of exotic authenticity with assurances about the universal qualities of the tale. But it is this very ability to create and sustain a believable pre-contact Inuit world that is typically singled out as the film's greatest achievement.

#### The Formal Puzzle of *Atanarjuat*.

With its plot unfolding in pre-modern past, *Atanarjuat* is unique among contemporary indigenous films in North America. Other works directed by indigenous filmmakers or based on texts by American Indian writers<sup>ix</sup> situate their plots in the present and depict indigenous individuals and communities negotiating material and cultural legacies of American imperialism. Their ideological work is plain to see. On the

heels of a long history of representing indigenous peoples as vanishing emblems of a pre-modern past (think of such historical dramas as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) or *Black Robe* (1991), the entire US Western tradition, or the early ethnographic film), these films insist that Native peoples are here still. In their uncompromising portrayals of reservation or urban realities, of communities and individuals suffering from unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, and alienation, alongside stories of material survival and cultural resistance, Native film has aimed to reinsert indigenous people into the material realities and historical time of North America. And yet, because of the unvarnished treatment of these subjects, these films often meet with sharp critique by Native intellectuals for serving up negative stereotypes of American Indians or for their inability to narrate the Native present from an uncompromisingly Native point of view.

In this context, Kunuk's choice to shed the trappings of modernity with its settler presence and invoke instead a pre-contact Inuit world could be read as an effort to articulate a categorically indigenist point of view. By locating the narrative far enough in the past, *Atanarjuat* refuses to narrate the obliteration of the traditional way of life. Instead, it indulges in a fantasy of a world as yet not destroyed by colonization. And yet one wonders about the contemporary uses of such representations. However attractive such a vision might be, considering the long tradition of allochronic representation of indigenous peoples in Western visual media, most flagrantly and famously evidenced in photographs by Edward S. Curtis, an insistence on the mythic indigenous past must appear as a vexed choice. In Curtis' photographs and his 1914 film about the Northwest's Kwakwaka'wakw, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), as in a host of other ethnographies of the early twentieth century, the indigenous "real" is firmly associated

with the period before the arrival of the colonizing armies and settler communities, as if the very fact of conquest annulled any possibility of continuous authentic indigeneity. This is why Native commentators have worried that insistence on the narratives of the past diverts one's attention from the present and invites a continued ignorance of the ongoing struggles of the Native peoples to reclaim their land (Lyons 2002).

Why would an Inuit filmmaker and his 90% Inuit crew<sup>x</sup>—dedicated to building independent Inuit media, dedicated, more broadly, to Inuit cultural and economic empowerment—commit themselves fully to a representational strategy compromised by mainstream ethnographic and popular film and criticized by Native intellectuals clamoring for representations of unblighted indigenous life in the present? What useful ideological work does a sustained image of an indigenous pre-conquest past make possible beyond the current truism about the need of native communities to reclaim mainstream representational modes in order to record their history?

The puzzle posed by *Atanarjuat* does not end here, though, because whatever useful ideological work an ancient tale told by the Inuit themselves performs, the film seems to undermine that work in its final moments. *Atanarjuat* concludes with outtakes showing Inuit actors and filmmakers in contemporary garb availing themselves expertly of the most modern means of representation, and the effect of these several clips is to shatter whatever illusions of utopian access to the real the film's main narrative might have inspired in the viewers. The outtakes insist on the *re*-creation of traditional practices, on the Inuit past as a carefully staged performance. They display Inuit technological expertise, which immediately showcases thorough embeddedness in contemporary settler life, black leather jackets, portable CD players, digital cameras and

all. The outtakes take for granted a special cultural dexterity of the actors and filmmakers, who move in and out of Inuktitut and English, in and out of representations of contemporary and ancient Eastern Arctic. They also pose the question of “the real” or “the authentic” of indigeneity: then *or* now, then *and* now, or perhaps, precisely, in the gap between these two temporal realms. The puzzle, then: Why offer an almost three hour long narrative of the Inuit mythical past, an artistic choice already weighted with ideological consequences, only to undermine it in the film’s concluding minutes by sixty seconds of explosive self-reflexivity?

What is unprecedented in Kunuk’s formal decision is the juxtaposition of these two representational strategies. The self-reflexive mode is rather common to indigenous film-making, which distinguishes itself from more author-oriented settler culture cinema by insisting on its community-authored nature and its function as a form of social action, what Faye Ginsburg has called embedded aesthetics (Ginsburg 2003). Kunuk’s video work appears fully invested in that aesthetic. His 1989 *Qaggiq* and 1991 *Nunagpa*, both productions for the local Inuit TV channel, combine historical reconstruction narratives with representations of how settler culture changed Inuit communities. *Atanarjuat* represents a departure from this cinematographic practice: the historical reconstruction becomes formally separated from the narrative of Inuit modernity. The outtakes do work to interrupt the illusion of the autonomous pre-contact world, but this unmasking of authentic indigeneity as performance is maximally delayed; in fact, it risks being missed altogether by impatient viewers who leave the screening rooms as soon as the final credits begin to roll. Why, then, painstakingly reconstruct a pre-colonial past characterized by Inuit economic and social self-sufficiency, only to complement, or

contradict, it by a brief concluding narrative of the Inuit's inextricable and even joyous participation in the Canadian present? And if that final correction of perspective is ultimately crucial, why is it so fleeting, merely a cinematic footnote rather than a defining feature of the film? What kind of ideological investments, what contradictions embedded in the effort to represent contemporary indigeneity, does this unique formal strategy attempt to solve?

#### Rhetorical sovereignty

One way of answering these questions would be to suggest that *Atanarjuat* is engaged in a deliberate exercise of what Scott Lyons has called rhetorical sovereignty: a people's right to determine "their own communicative needs and desires, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles and languages of public discourse;" a right that presumes an Indian voice employing Native language, "speaking in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of the debate"(Lyons 2000:462). The outtakes, we might argue, function precisely as one such effort to set the terms of discourse on indigeneity: they show the Inuit representing their usable past within the context of the contemporary multicultural Canada—and doing so with the financial support of its governmental institutions.<sup>xi</sup>

Once we read the outtakes as a gesture of rhetorical sovereignty, *Atanarjuat* will appear as a succession of narrative strategies, each deployed to contest dominant settler modes of representing the Inuit. The outtakes bring the body of the film into their project of autoethnography; they command viewers to reevaluate what they have just seen, to recognize it as something other than a quixotic pursuit of an uncontaminated Inuit past condemned to mimic the conventional representations of the indigenous familiar from the

settler popular culture and early ethnography. Because it emerges in response to the dominant culture's representations of the indigenous and consequently incorporates the colonizer's idiom, autoethnography is not an "authentic" form of self-representation; rather, it constitutes the group's point of entry into metropolitan literate culture (Pratt 1992). As such it presents minority artists with advantages and limitations. It offers them an opportunity to speak back to the dominant culture in an idiom that culture already understands. But runs the risk of reinforcing the reigning ideology, not to mention the economic and social systems this ideology sustains, the very systems that have historically been inimical to the survival of indigenous societies. By making its very categories of thought legitimate through use, this strategy makes it harder to imagine, let alone put to use, a radically different worldview, a viable alternative to the dominant social and cultural arrangements. Thus indigenous artists have confronted a particularly vicious trap, a defining dilemma of all autoethnographic texts: assertions of traditionally indigenous forms of expression, such as orality, as defining Indian authenticity effectively cast the literate Indians as cultural half-breeds; and yet a turn to the majoritarian conventions of expression seems inevitable as the claims to political and cultural sovereignty have to be addressed to the colonizer and in their very formulation depend on the colonizer's political discourse.

*Atanarjuat's* autoethnographic investment is evident and it begins with the employment of Inuktitut and digital video technology. While Inuktitut privileges the putative subaltern subject by shifting the discourse onto indigenous linguistic terrain and places the non-Inuktitut speaking viewers as outsiders without easy entry into the film's fictional world, in Kunuk's own estimation, the digital camera technology resolves the

contradiction between orality and literacy. It allows for an entry of traditional Inuit story-telling into modernity bypassing altogether the question of textuality as a supposed marker of civilization. Digital video makes it possible to replace traditional story-telling, not with a written text, but with a visual representation of traditional story-telling.

Kunuk's film speaks to the metropolitan subjects and gets to define the context and mode of this dialogue. This is what it means to speak of autoethnography, then: in an openly metafictional mode, the concluding outtakes break away from the historical narrative to represent its very production. These concluding shots of actors and filmmakers at work force us to re-envision the entire film as a project in representing not only an authentic indigenous past but also, and more importantly, contemporary indigenous people making collective decisions about representing their past and present.

The recreated tale of *Atanarjuat* itself, too, testifies to a conscious auto-ethnographic strategy deployed in at least two ways: it attempts to tell a universal tale recognizable to the "South" and to offer an alternative to Southern ethnographic conventions. To mark themselves as subjects within the dominant discourse rather than just victims subject to it (Powell 2002), the filmmakers take up the middle ground between their tribal culture and the settler society. *Atanarjuat's* outtakes stake such an in-between positioning and foreground indigenous agency: no longer objects of a white ethnographic discourse, the Inuit tell of their own past. The tale of *Atanarjuat* works more as a shrewd deployment of recognizably Southern narrative conventions, both filmic and literary, rather than as an effort to elide the South. The South, which disappeared from the diegesis, reappears at the level of form.

The most obvious among these conventions is the ethnographic one, dating back to well before the invention of the kinoscope, and coming to some culmination in Flaherty's 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*, the first feature-length documentary about the indigenous people of the American Far North and an overt exercise in salvage ethnography, a concerted effort to document the everyday life of a vanishing indigenous people. *Atanarjuat* explicitly takes up specific narrative segments of *Nanook*. The visual allusions pile up: dogs get kicked, raw meat gets eaten, knives and sled runners get licked, igloos go up, the camera lingers over the ethnographic detail of tattooed faces and hand-crafted tools. And yet, while reproducing these documentary conventions, the film, by replaying some scenes with a difference and omitting others completely, offers a subtle critique of same. For example, in the "getting ready for bed" scene in *Nanook*, the ethnographic verges on the pornographic, as early 20th century viewers can be safely titillated by a display of a woman's bare breasts because the indigenous woman is figured as an ethnographic specimen rather than a person. *Atanarjuat* stages an identical scene very differently: what in *Nanook* was one more testimony to the supposedly timeless routine of a not-quite people, in *Atanarjuat* becomes an opportunity to play out a specific plot of planned revenge, and later, a pretext to illustrate the capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation; human unpredictability, in other words, rather than animal-like embeddedness in natural cycles.

*Atanarjuat's* filmmakers also omit all of the scenes of contact: the trading-post scenes and, most conspicuously, the indigenous encounter with Southern technology. In Flaherty's film the trading-post scene, in which an Inuit child gets sick after gorging on biscuits and lard offered by the trader, only then to be cured by the medicine administered

by that same trader,<sup>xii</sup> works almost at cross purposes. On one hand it offers an early version of what has later become the dominant Canadian official discourse on the Inuit: an illustration of the Inuit as hapless victims of modernization that put an end to the self-sustaining nomadic life, a people in need of governmental care to manage successive waves of starvation and disease decimating them. But it illustrates as well the dynamic that gave rise to that discourse and exposes it as self-serving. After all, the trader functions as a solution to a problem that he has precipitated in the first place, just as the Canadian state's move into the Eastern Arctic in the 1950s and 1960s, nominally to deal with the mounting epidemics, was only the latest stage in the ongoing process of drawing these not-yet-colonized lands and their populations into the settler administrative networks (Brody 1977).

The notorious gramophone scene in *Nanook of the North*, in which Nanook pretends to see the gramophone for the first time by biting the record not once but three times, establishes another staple of ethnographic thinking about the indigenous: their fundamental state of authentic separateness—the naiveté of the freshly discovered—combined with a natural curiosity about the wonders of Western technology. Kunuk's decision to construct a pre-contact narrative makes it possible to believably omit such scenes and break away, even if only for an imaginative moment, from the political discourses they sustain. The point of these omissions, again, is not so much to arrive at a story of uncontaminated indigenous culture—the final outtakes decisively shut down that possibility—not, that is, to indulge in what rightly can be named a fantasy of disentanglement with the South, but rather to assert rhetorical sovereignty, to tell a story

of the indigenous past without appropriating all of the structural elements of the North-South narrative.

The second convention at work in the film is the epic deployed in a universalizing gesture that collapses the presupposed difference between us and them and indulges the white viewer with the cherished fantasy of adoption into the tribe. Judging by the reviewers,<sup>xiii</sup> it seems that the mainstream public would like to have it both ways, a film that plays up the exotic otherness of the Inuit and reveals a reassuring universality at the core of their particular experience, a universality that becomes a passport required for the Inuit entry to the rest of Canada and the world. The conventions of the epic deployed in *Atanarjuat* play to this desire on the part of the mainstream viewer, but at the same time illustrate the rhetorical dilemma of the indigenous artist's engagement with the settler culture's representational conventions. Historically, the epic has been bound up with the cultural work of nation building. The epics have been used to underwrite a people's claims to nationhood and sovereignty. Because it was released in 1999, when Canada's Northern Territory was divided to give Nunavut administrative independence, *Atanarjuat* registers as a claim to cultural distinctiveness meant to bolster the emergence of the first self-governing province with an Inuit voting majority in Canada. It thus functions as an expression of both a universalist and a nationalist impulse; it is the Inuit claim to global visibility and status of a distinct culture and society, in a move that turns what I identified earlier as the white viewers' contradictory expectation of simultaneous exoticity and universality into the filmmakers' conscious strategy; a kind of pact even made with the Southern viewer, which allows each to have it both ways. What the film stages for us,

then, is the inseparability of the claims on behalf of universalism and particularity within the specific rhetorical conditions of multiculturalist capitalist democracies.

### Cunning of Recognition

Multiculturalism requires a narrative of cultural distinctiveness for the very belonging in a nation. This requirement found its apt expression in the 1982 Constitution, which proclaimed Canada a multicultural nation of distinct societies. The Inuit produce an epic in order to establish their prior distinctiveness, but this epic also evidences a kind of generic integration, roughly analogous to the political incorporation everywhere demanded of North America's indigenous peoples. *Atanarjuat* is intelligible as "authentically Inuit" only via its recourse to the dominant epic and ethnographic conventions. The three-hour narrative of the pre-modern past functions to underwrite the claim of participation in Canadian modernity staked out by the closing sequences of the film. Thus the film and the outtakes are fundamentally of a piece, two separate parts of the same rhetorical strategy. *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* exemplifies the insight that there is no eluding "Europe," "The West," "The South" or whatever we choose to call political and cultural formations brought to the Americas by the settler communities. Rhetorical sovereignty functions only within the horizon of multiculturalism and its politics of recognition. And perhaps this is precisely why some of the contemporary Native intellectuals want nothing less than to "to delete sovereignty from [their] vocabulary once and for all."<sup>xiv</sup>

To say as much, though, is already to insist on a different perspective. The rhetorical sovereignty argument does not tell the entire story of the film's ideological functions. If rhetorical sovereignty hinges on an emphatic engagement with the present to

clear space for discursive, social, political and economic autonomy for indigenous people, serious investment in the narratives of the past that rely on representational strategies borrowed from settler culture, even as they work to contest settler fantasies, must seem like useful energy displaced. Why not make films such as Shelley Neri's *Honey Moccasins*, which takes upon itself to thematize up front the issues that are dealt in *The Fast Runner* in brief 60 seconds of the outtakes? Why edit out altogether the narrative of the colonization and gradual disappearance of the traditional lifeways and the serious critique of Canada's ongoing exploitation of the First Nations' land such a narrative would imply? Why not follow the lead of Alanis Obomsavin's documentary about the Mohawk standoff at Oki, *270 Years of Resistance*, which puts the political questions concerning First Nations first and foremost? Perhaps these omissions are precisely the key to *The Fast Runner's* acclaim among the Canadian film establishment, an acclaim testified to by numerous awards. If the film's primary ideological investment is Inuit sovereignty, rhetorical, cultural, political, and economic, why has the film been so eagerly embraced by the official critical establishment, especially through its connection to Canada's National Film Board, a government-funded institution interested in nation-building, that is, in integrative rather than liberatory projects? After all, the story the main film tells is emphatically anti-multiculturalist; it is an account of a community re-constituting itself through a forced expulsion of its insubordinate members, an account in which difference is literally demonized, i.e., made into a demon. Embodied by an evil shaman from the North stumbling into the Inuit band and precipitating patricide, difference is clearly inimical to the survival of the group; it takes several years and heroic effort on the part of the protagonist to restore the social balance within his community.

The main story hardly functions as a manual about transformation of social arrangements to accommodate difference. If the film embodies an instance of rhetorical sovereignty for the Inuit, what kind of ideological functions does it perform for Canada's establishment multiculturalism, unequivocally invested in creating at least the impression of a nation of distinct yet equal societies bound in a single federation?

The very autoethnographic conventions deployed by the filmmakers to assert rhetorical sovereignty bespeak an entanglement with the Canadian politics of recognition and the varied modes of political co-optation such politics necessitates. This link, while seemingly inevitable, is also troubling: several scholars, indigenous and non-native alike, have pointed out that this multiculturalist project is inimical to the political and cultural goals associated with indigenous sovereignty.<sup>xv</sup> This is so because in practice it has led to further dependence of the contemporary indigenous economies on the economy and political culture of a capitalist democracy that is Canada, effectively undermining any potential for alternate modes of economic, political and social organization.

Multiculturalism has elided any forms of difference that would matter in spheres other than symbolic.

*The Fast Runner*, then, has to be considered in the context of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) has called *the cunning of recognition*. Povinelli, who studied the Australian brand of this cultural predicament, explains that the concept of the indigenous plays a crucial role in debates over multiculturalism by “purifying the ideal image of the nation [rather] than offering a counter-national form”(26). This process of national redemption confronts indigenous people with an impossible task: identification with a putatively authentic past that can only be performatively resurrected, and in the context in

which some of the customary practices are either prohibited by laws or found unacceptable by the public sense of decency, or both (Povinelli 2002).

In his tellingly titled recent book, *A Way of Life That Does Not Exist. Canada and the Extinguishment of the Innu* (2003), Colin Samson identifies a similar dynamic in the Canadian government's treatment of an unrecognized<sup>xvi</sup> indigenous group in Labrador, the Innu. In Canada the politics of recognition renders the indigenous visible within the nation's political and legal discourses "only long enough to redeem their colonizers and give conscience and meaning to what is in effect a bargain involving the disappearance of real difference and Native sovereignty in exchange for a place in the mosaic of Canadian multiculturalism"(Samson 2003:328). A good example of this dynamic is gathering of the Innu, former hunter-gatherers onto permanent settlements where they are separated from the lands which constituted the basis for their culture's cosmology as well as everyday practices and compressed into villages without access to sustainable employment and education. As in the case of Australia, the multiculturalist discourse of recognition in Canada is really no more than another attempt at extinguishment<sup>xvii</sup> of the radical claims to native sovereignty so that the "historical work of Canadian Federation can continue on what effectively are the purloined ancestral homelands of the indigenous peoples" (Samson 2003:9). Multiculturalist policies and rhetoric function as a cover-up for a continuing usurpation of the land, no longer protected, in theory, if never in practice, by the native title. The nation cedes a space for the indigenous in the national imaginary so that it continues to have unobstructed access to the land; symbolic recognition ends up at the service of continuing material exploitation.

The very language of indigenous political and cultural empowerment, endorsed by the Canadian public media, obscures the history of forced policies of cultural assimilation and potentially eases the white liberal conscience, plagued by worries about intruding on indigenous turf (Samson 2003). This intertwining of discourses of self-determination with integrative impulses seems to be a matter of tradition. Robert Flaherty's comments on *Nanook* are an early example, at least for the Arctic, of such colonization through political emancipation. When he suggested that he wanted to show the Inuit "not from the civilized point of view, but as they saw themselves, as "we, the people"" (qtd. in Rony 1996:18), Flaherty projected a kind of Jeffersonian ideal of self-determination while also falling back on the most hackneyed distinction between the civilized and the barbarians. The Inuit on this logic are radically other and potentially the same, amenable to the same social and political modes of organization, while retaining their fundamentally non-modern "nature." Contemporary celebration of Native agency by Canadian media shifts the responsibility for what in effect are changes desired by and benefiting the Canadian state<sup>xviii</sup> onto the indigenous themselves so that the state cannot be blamed for the adverse effects these transformations often have on Native communities. The very notion of indigenous sovereignty—political, cultural, rhetorical—ends up completing the historic work of the Canadian federation (Samson 2003). The indigenous thus fully frame the settler culture. First, they provide it with a past to match the European national genealogies: in that sense, the historical narrative of *The Fast Runner* in addition to underwriting Canadian claims to an enlightened relationship to its indigenous peoples also provides Canada itself with a genealogy, its own indigenous ancestors, so to speak. But the indigenous also furnish Canada with a future, a means of

marking the new world's difference from the old: as a multiculturalist democracy fully delivering on its claims of being a nation of distinct yet equal societies, Canada emerges as a viable alternative to the majority of European nations which continue to insist on the republican integrationist rather than pluralist models of national belonging, despite their rapidly changing populations. What the indigenous get in turn is the access to Canadian administrative structures, which allow them to participate, now out of political maturity, in the ongoing work of the state's political and economic self-consolidation, all the while, newly without any official obstruction, performing their cultural difference.

In this context, the image projected in *The Fast Runner's* outtakes—the image, that is, of self-empowered indigenous communities believably performing their past—hardly functions as a critique of the multiculturalist brands of cultural and political colonization. It is, rather, a necessary corollary to those projects. *The Fast Runner* cannot help but become complicit in Canada's nation-building and global self-promotion. This is not an unwitting complicity, of course. Most of the Inuit-authored political documents dating back to early 1970s testify to a deliberate deployment of this strategy. The Inuit have typically cast their aspirations for autonomy in the context of political and economic participation in Canadian nation. Canadian historians have dubbed this approach the “genius of Inuit politics” and see it as crucial to the emergence of Nunavut as a self-governing territory (Miller 2000). It has also been favorably contrasted with more explicitly oppositional tactics of the First Nations in Southern Canada. Yet this approach has been sharply criticized by indigenous governance scholars. Taiaiake Alfred (1999), for example, insists on the wrongheadedness of any political strategy that accommodates the state's founding political framework. For Alfred, adoption of Western notions of

sovereignty simply works too retrench Western forms of political authority, moving the indigenous still farther away from their own traditions of governance.

*The Fast Runner* plays into the hands of the Canadian multiculturalist project not only through the, by this historical juncture, requisite version of the contemporary ethnography asserted in the outtakes, but also through the mythical epic narrative of the Inuit past, despite the tale's overtly anti-multiculturalist tenor. The cunning of recognition requires authentic indigeneity that is rendered emblematic through a paradoxical identification with a putatively vanished cultural formation (Povinelli 2000). This task is paradoxical because the entry to modernity is premised for the indigenous on incontrovertible identification with a past that has been both exoticized and suppressed. The indigenous are called upon to establish cultural distinctiveness and, by this act of particularly dexterous cultural performance, they earn the right to political representation within a multicultural democracy, in other words, a right to equivalence, at least in theory (of democratic politics).

The marker of authenticity established by ethnographers and the settler public is an impossible ideal, an idea of the indigenous that reaches out for its referent not to contemporary surviving indigenous communities but to the time before conquest.<sup>xix</sup> It thus establishes indigeneity as simultaneously visible and irrelevant, necessary but anachronistic, or better, necessarily anachronistic. To paraphrase Bill Reading, we could say: to live in Nunavut means to have been Inuit once (1997:42). Main mythical narrative thus cannot help but also register as a response to this requirement. The cunning of recognition is such that if in the past the indigenous were overtly compelled to serve these functions, now they appear to choose to do so. Their willing participation is deemed

an act of self-determination, self-empowerment and political maturity. In a political context so wrought with the dangers of cooptation, *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* cannot unambiguously serve as an instance of successfully deployed contemporary indigenous agency. Rather, it provides a map of the contradictory forces characterizing the terrain on which exercise of such sovereignty is necessarily undertaken as it raises the question of indigenous resistance to cultural and political domination within multiculturalist democracies.

#### Resistance or Cooptation?

This dynamic of resistance and cooptation is played out clearly even when we simply consider the question of the representational medium. According to Kunuk, digital video technology opened new possibilities of self-representation for the indigenous by allowing them to move directly from the oral to visual. But it has also inserted indigenous filmmakers into the history of Canadian national cinema and its political economy.

Kunuk's film takes on added meaning on the background of a concerted effort in Canada, unfolding over the last thirty years, to establish a national cinema through creation of festivals, compilation of "Ten Best" lists (in 1984 and 1993) as well as financial support through a variety of governmental organizations. At stake in that effort has been a "publicly recognizable body of Canadian [feature] film" (Gittings 2002:3), especially so in the context of the strong commitment of early Canadian film to documentary projects and a relatively late governmental investment in feature-film industry. This nationalist project of articulation has unfolded in the context of a threefold dynamic of emergence: 1) the emergence of Canadian cinema against the United States' cultural colonialism; 2) the emergence of the Quebec cinema against the cultural colonialism emanating from

Anglo-Canada; and 3) the emergence of First Nations cinema against Canadian settler political and cultural dominance after 1965 regionalization of the film industry.<sup>xx</sup> The administrative history of the Canadian cinema, and the post-1965 decentralization of funding and production in particular, reflect a larger effort underway in Canada to “reconfigure 'national' as a category by focusing on the local and specific in Canada's diverse regions” (Gittings 2002:89). They are one testimony to a more general movement from an universalist to multiculturalist perspective on the nation within Canadian public discourse and its constitutional documents. The focus has shifted from the whole to the parts, from the nation to the federation. But integration remains the ultimate goal, only the strategy has changed to de-emphasize the universal and the national in favor of the particular, the regional, the diverse.

*Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* is well positioned to serve the needs of the Canadian national cinema developing in the age of multiculturalism. Inuit video and film productions, along with other work by minority filmmakers, contribute to an ongoing Canadian effort to shape a national cinema by locating Canada's diverse communities within the imagined national community. Kunuk's video and cinematographic project testify to a changing politics of national community, of insider- and outsidership. The early video work in all its aspects of production, distribution and exhibition was addressed to the Inuktitut speaking Inuit audience. But *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* targets Southern and global viewers even as it taunts them with the opening line of demarcation between those who already know the tale and those who do not, the banishing of English or French to the subtitles as well as the openly anti-integrationist tenor of the tale. In a way similar to the early films in Quebec which were produced by

Anglophones and then translated into French, *The Fast Runner* also moved between Inuktitut and English at different stages of its production, only to ultimately employ a minority language rather than a national one. The point here is to overcome the cultural and linguistic split not by institution of a common language, not in a patently integrationist mode in other words, but by an enactment of a national cinematic project that embodies the nation as a federation of linguistically and culturally distinct societies. Kunuk's film delivers multicultural Canada to Canadians, precisely when it offers the Inuit the story of their origins and their modernity told in Inuktitut rather than English (or French).

But it still delivers more. That the political economy of Canadian film production has to be considered in the context of British and American hegemony further informs the success of *The Fast Runner*. Canada's film industry has embraced the film because it could be presented as Canada's indigenous film, solidifying the national canon by offering a film that in its subject matter, production and exhibition is unlike standard Hollywood fare. Ironically, the film marks Canadian authenticity, even though it emphatically intended, if we give the film's producers automatic authority here, to mark an alternative cultural sensibility: the Inuit world shown through the Inuit eyes. As much as it is an Inuit claim to simultaneous cultural distinctiveness and embeddedness in Canada's modernity, it is also Canada's claim to the former. One kind of difference, that is Inuit specific, is appropriated as another kind of difference, now marking Canada's cultural specificity against American hegemony.<sup>xxi</sup>

Ideological functions of what I singled out as the film's fundamental formal gesture, then? Ultimately, the juxtaposition of the outtakes and the main narrative

embodies the predicament of indigenous art in contemporary multicultural democracies, such as Canada and Australia where multiculturalism has been constitutionalized, but also the United States where it governs much of the nation's public imaginary as well as a good share of its institutions. This juxtaposition enacts the Jamesonian moment of the ideological and utopian, where the hegemonic and subversive coexist in their contradiction (Jameson 1981 and 1990). It embodies the contradictions inherent in indigenous art's efforts to engage the politics of recognition; it also functions as a formal solution to these otherwise insurpassable contradictions. This solution is counterintuitive, because *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* foregrounds rather than covers up the contradiction between resistance and cooptation. To read the outtakes as a straightforward assertion of rhetorical sovereignty would paper over the very contradictions embedded in the exercise of such indigenous agency under the conditions of contemporary multicultural democracies, which, in the context of indigenous history, continue to be colonial states. Therefore the awareness of "the cunning of recognition" has to complement any sovereignty-oriented reading, if the entire extent of *The Fast Runner's* ideological investment and entanglement is to be apprehended.

More than a straightforward claim of the Inuit right to represent their usable past in a gesture of asserting cultural autonomy, the outtakes underscore the mythical status of the main narrative and by doing so insist on the recreation/reproduction of cultural practices rather than their unproblematic accessibility to those appropriately located. They expose the idea of indigeneity as a performance necessitated by the politics of recognition and intended to secure concrete political and material gains, such as a voting majority in Nunavut and asserted title to a portion of original Inuit land, for example. The

point, of course, is not to suggest a simple cause-effect relationship, but rather to indicate the entire ideological field within whose constraints the film must operate. So here's an illustration of a terribly vicious circle: a need to perform cultural difference in order to gain recognition, which in turns precipitates official incorporation into the state and its capitalist economy, which, in yet another turn, results in an erasure of any meaningful difference (that is difference in social and economic arrangements) behind the screen of difference performed. The contest over difference is reduced to the field of culture only, bearing out Slavoj Žižek's (1997) point about multiculturalism and its compulsion to represent cultural differences as a smoke screen for the ongoing process of global homogenization characteristic of the age of multinational capital.

The point is not, let me insist, that *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* fails as a gesture of rhetorical sovereignty, and that this is a bad thing. Rather, the point is that by intimating the entire extent of its contradictory ideological investments, Kunuk's film specifies the possibilities and constraints of indigenous self-representation in the present. It actively invites fantasies of the return to uncontaminated indigenous past and the possibility of what Achin Vanaik (1997) has described as primary resistance—only to dispel them. Instead, Kunuk's film posits indigeneity as a cultural performance in the name of specific cultural projects, which in turn fulfill multiple ideological functions for the indigenous nations, as well as for the nation-states which these nations inhabit. It also makes clear, though, that simple acknowledgement of this implication is only the beginning of our critical work. Resistance and cooptation: how do we tell the difference between the two? Do we need to? *Sitting Bull* spent a season riding in Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

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<sup>i</sup> Inuit word for “friend.”

<sup>ii</sup> All the quotations in this paragraph are from the Olympic Emblem’s official website: <http://www.vancouver2010.com/emblem/emblem.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Squamish are the original owners of the land on which the 2010 Olympic Games will take place.

<sup>iv</sup> Incorporated in 1990 and based in Igloolik, a community of 1200 people on a small island in the north Baffin region of the Canadian Arctic.

<sup>v</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from Isuma Productions Inc. website: <http://www.isuma.ca>.

<sup>vi</sup> Inuktitut is the mother tongue of the Canada’s Eastern Arctic Inuit.

<sup>vii</sup> “Southern” is typically used by the Inuit to refer to Canadian, or more broadly American peoples living South of the Canadian Eastern Arctic. But it also can be taken to refer to a specific though broad cultural formation, we call, in other contexts, “The West” or “Europe.”

<sup>viii</sup> This reading presumes a Southern, non-Inuit, non-Inuktitut speaking viewer. Anecdotal evidence I was able to gather about Inuit reception of the film emphasized recognition rather than disorientation.

<sup>ix</sup> Such as Greg Sarris and Dan Sakheim’s *Grand Avenue* (1996), Sherman Alexie’s *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), Adrian Louis’s and Chris Eyre’s *Skins* (2002), Alexie and Eyre’s *Smoke Signals* (1996), Valerie Red-Horse and Jennifer Farmer’s *Naturally Native* (1997), Shelley Niro’s *Honey Moccasins* (1998), Randy Readroad’s *The Doe Boy* (2001) or Blackhorse Lowe’s *The 5<sup>th</sup> World* (2004).

<sup>x</sup> Norman Cohen, the Isuma Productions cinematographer and the company’s shareholder, is the exception to the all-Inuit cast.

<sup>xi</sup> As is the case with almost all Canadian productions Kunuk’s film was partially funded by the Canada’s National Film Board. See Gittings and White on the somewhat complicated history of this funding.

<sup>xii</sup> In yet another ironic twist, the medicine is seal oil, only now packaged in the Southern pharmacy bottle.

<sup>xiii</sup> A good example would be Kenneth Turan writing for the *Los Angeles Times* that “what’s special about *The Fast Runner* is that by its epic close, the select group [of he understanding listeners to an ancient tale] includes us.”

<sup>xiv</sup> Deborah Miranda on the ASAIL listserve, March 4, 2004. Also see Alfred.

<sup>xv</sup> See San Juan, Alfred, Povinelli and Samson.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Canadian government's term for this is "non-status," referring to a nation that never signed historic treaties with Britain or Canada.

<sup>xvii</sup> An official term used in Canada "for the cancellation of the sovereignty over territories or 'Aboriginal title' of Native people" (Samson 2003:9).

<sup>xviii</sup> Such as shifting the control over the lands protected by native title to the Canadian government, or, the shift from state administration of the indigenous communities to their self-administration via the concept of self-government.

<sup>xix</sup> This dynamic operates in a particularly categorical way in Australia. In the United States and Canada, land claims have to be underwritten by indigenous identity as testified to by federally recognized tribal enrollment lists. There's no legal requirement to demonstrate a continuing adherence to traditional lifeways. However, the logic of cultural distinctiveness and authenticity established with reference to earlier forms of tribal/national organizations operates unimpeded within the public discourse on indigeneity in North America.

<sup>xx</sup> For a comprehensive history of Canadian cinema see Gittings.

<sup>xxi</sup> That a screening of Kunuk's film in Washington, DC, at First Nations/First Features showcase in May 2005, was funded by and took place in the Canadian Embassy, is only one of the latest examples of this dynamic.

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