

## Saviors, “Sealfies,” and Seals: Strategies for Self-Representation in Contemporary Inuit Films

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### Abstract



The legibility of the inter-relationships between human and seal is what is at stake when Inuit present themselves within administrative discourses at international assemblies in defense of their ontology and the right to hunt seals. In the language of administration and in the narrative practices of international animal rights, seals can only appear in a predetermined categorical framework for what constitutes human ethical responsibility to nature. The seal in animal rights discourse is one type of object that needs saving in the form of protective measures to keep her safe from the rapacious greed of capitalism. However, in Indigenous cultural practices, the seal is another relative, a relation whose presence makes all certainties about hierarchies, use-value, moral exemptions, and human exceptionalism impossible. Using the trending social media phenomenon of the “sealfie” and three contemporary northern Indigenous films, this essay argues that the Inuit use of these media formats showcases their cultural and economic dependence on seal hunting and restructures debates around authority, self-representation, and one-sided environmental protection activities.

*Keywords:* Animal Rights, Inuit, Inupiat, “sealfie,” self-representation, food security.

### Resumen

El entendimiento de las interrelaciones entre ser humano y foca está en juego cuando los Inuit usan el lenguaje institucional en foros internacionales para defender su realidad y el derecho a cazar focas. En el lenguaje administrativo y en las prácticas discursivas de los derechos internacionales de los animales, las focas únicamente pueden aparecer como un marco categórico predeterminado de lo que constituye la responsabilidad ética del ser humano con la naturaleza. La foca en el lenguaje de los derechos de los animales es un objeto que necesita salvarse mediante medidas protectoras que las salvaguarden de la avaricia agresiva del capitalismo. Sin embargo, en las prácticas culturales indígenas la foca es percibida como un familiar, un pariente cuya presencia hace imposible nuestra certitud sobre jerarquías, el valor de uso, la impunidad moral, y la excepcionalidad humana. Usando la moda de las redes sociales en auge, el “sealfie” y tres películas contemporáneas indígenas del Norte, este ensayo argumenta que los usos inuit de estos formatos mediáticos ponen de manifiesto su dependencia cultural y económica en la caza de focas, y reestructura debates en cuanto a la autoridad, la autorepresentación, y las actividades de protección medioambiental monodireccionales.

*Palabras clave:* derechos de los animales, inuit, inupiat, “sealfie”, autorepresentación, seguridad alimentaria.

What I hope to come out of all this is for people to maybe think about a different kind of animal rights activism. One that's more custom to each environment; one that's thoughtful and respectful of indigenous peoples in whichever country or region you're dealing with, because they tend to be at the forefront of defending the environment and the wildlife.

-Alethea Arnaquq-Baril<sup>1</sup>

Patrick Moore's famous photograph from animal rights activism in the 1970s features Bob Hunter and Paul Watson in front of a sealing ship kneeling next to a baby harp seal. The two men's presence protects the seal pup from the looming threat of the commercial sealing vessel. While an appeal to the environmental consciousness of American and European viewers, the picture also frames a relationship between man and seal that displays the active protective power of the human and the submissive and docile object of that care, the seal. The ship, the reification of a voracious global capitalism, dictates the terms of the interaction between the two species, keeping the practices of care on the part of Hunter and Watson firmly in the realm of subject and object.

Despite the success of animal rights activists with the passing of several bans on selling seal products throughout the 1980s, protectionist efforts are inherently a part, and hence representative, of a late capitalist understanding of the relationship between humans and other animals. Backed by economic and political authority, the commercial sealing industry dictates the terms of the relationship between humans and seals and protectionist and conservationist efforts can only be a reaction to the exploitation of seals by the sealing industry.<sup>2</sup> In their influential study *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out the complex and often contradictory heart of protectionist efforts within economic and cultural systems that separate humans from other species: "Conservation legislation, and/or the treatment of particular species, often depend on public response to representation rather than to the animals themselves or their environments" (139). Furthermore, "it is the *representation* of animals, rather than the animals themselves... along with consumer capitalism [that] continues to determine and sustain the species boundary to the present day" (138, emphasis in original). Similar to animals caught in exploitative markets, animals within conservation rhetoric are not entities in themselves, nor are they relational with a meaningful connection to human beings beyond a market value.

Seal hunting is both promoted and vilified in the dominant political, economic, and cultural systems of Western nations. This binary back and forth, however, excludes additional voices that describe other modes of dependence, relating, and care for nonhuman animals. More than most people in the nations that seek to dictate how

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<sup>1</sup> "Inuit Women Behind 'Sealfies'"

<sup>2</sup> In her study *Animal Capital*, Nicole Shukin argues that different bodies (human and animal) have uneven access to political power and animal bodies, especially, are made materially powerless in the commodity circulation of late capitalism (7).

northern Indigenous people should survive, Inuit and other Indigenous people in the North are intimately aware of the effects of climate change and the extinction of species, yet their voices are heard the least and their deep knowledge of the land and environment remains unexamined by scientists and lay publics.<sup>3</sup> Alaskan ethnographer Ann Fienup-Riordan uncategorically states: "Voice, the right to represent, and the cultural construction of reality are among the most important intellectual issues of our time" (*Freeze Frame* xi). For Inuit in Canada and the linguistically and culturally related Yup'ik and Inupiat in Alaska, the right to represent in animal rights and welfare debates is not only an intellectual issue; it is also an issue about survival for humans and seals in the North.

Alongside other representatives in political and social fora, Inuit artists and cultural workers have been addressing the lack of Inuit voice in these debates. For example, the description of the celebrated filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk's short film, "Tungijjuq: What We Eat," reads: "Inuit jazz throat-singer Tanya Tagaq, and Cannes-winning filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, talk back to Brigitte Bardot and [the] anti-seal hunting lobby on the eternal reality of hunting" ("Tungijjuq"). The film does more than "talk-back" to the discourse of European and North American animal rights activism; it re-envisioned the terms on which the debate rests. In the discourse of the anti-sealing movement, led by organizations such as Greenpeace and celebrities such as Bardot, Paul McCartney, and Ellen DeGeneres, seals only appear as representatives of a wild and helpless nature that is in the process of being destroyed by a violent human interference. The rhetoric of this specific form of animal rights discourse emphasizes human dominion over a helpless animal, a relationship epitomized in the finality of the act of killing.

Most recently, DeGeneres, a popular American talk-show host, found herself in the middle of a controversy around seals, commercial hunting, and Inuit. The conflict was sparked when she raised money from a celebrity self-photograph, or "selfie," taken at the prestigious 2014 Academy Awards (Oscars) show held on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. She then gave the funds to the Humane Society International (HSI) to protect baby harp seals from commercial hunting. Her large donation (1.5 million USD) and the resulting outcry from Inuit prompted the HSI to clarify their stance regarding Inuit and the hunting of seals: "Unlike Inuit sealers, commercial sealers almost exclusively target baby seals who are less than three months old. Inuit hunters kill seals primarily for meat" ("Sealfies"). However, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril rebuffs the Humane Society's overtures given that they have been behind the push for banning the sealskin trade from the beginning: "They failed to mention [in the clarification of their stance vis-à-vis Inuit hunting] this legislation absolutely harms the ability of the Inuit to sell our seal skins, which therefore in turn affects our ability to hunt and feed our families" ("Canadian Inuit").

In "Tools for a Cross-Cultural Feminist Ethics," Greta Gaard draws attention to the "hierarchies" in environmental and animal welfare protests that often focus on the

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<sup>3</sup> Zacharias Kunuk examines the lack of Inuit participation in discussions of climate change in the North and the wealth of Inuit knowledge about this subject in his 2010 film, *Qapirangajuk: To Spear Strangely*.

protection of charismatic fauna in peril from marginalized social and political groups. She writes:

If the ethical question at issue is the hunting, killing, and eating of nonhuman animals, the First World practices of sport hunting, factory farming, large scale cattle ranching and its attendant ecological degradation (deforestation, water loss and degradation, soil erosion, manure disposal) offer enough material to occupy most animal rights activists, environmentalists, and ecofeminists for a few years to come. (9)

Envisioning another type of animal rights discourse that remains attentive to the "contexts and contents" of cross-cultural dietary ethics (Gaard 14), Arnaquq-Baril helped initiate a dialogue between animal welfare advocates and Inuit. Although DeGeneres' action was well intentioned for seals, it could not account for the other lives caught in this nexus of concerns. Acting on her own appeal for a "different kind of animal rights activism," Inuit filmmaker Arnaquq-Baril, poet and artist Laakukuk Williamson Bathory, and musician Nancy Mike launched a counter-social media campaign to DeGeneres' "#selfie" that is at once comedically flippant and completely serious: "#sealfies."

The three women, all residents of Canada's Nunavut Territory, responded to DeGeneres with "sealfies" on social media that are pictures and short films depicting Inuit in sealskin clothing and eating seal meat. According to *Vice* journalist Dave Dean, "Iqaluit resident Laakukuk Williamson Bathory sparked the 'sealfie' hashtag in Canada, a concept that in the past few days [March 28<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2014] has gone viral on Twitter and in the news. It has people posting photos of themselves (often mentioning @theellenshow) with seal meat, seal accessories, and in their sealskin Sunday best" ("Inuit Women Behind 'Sealfies'"). In Dean's interview, Bathory explains why she chose social media for her protest of DeGeneres' donation and choice of charity: "I wanted to it to be a tongue-in-cheek protest to all these very serious animal rights activists... Many of us Inuit use humour to make a strong point instead of anger" ("Inuit Women Behind 'Sealfies'"). Furthermore, Kate Woodsome and Ryan Kohls report that the #sealfie movement is not just a war of "memes;" rather, the "#sealfie campaign, coupled with new findings about food insecurity and a suicide epidemic, has cast a spotlight on a serious issue. Canada's Inuit are in crisis, and they say seal hunting is one of the few traditions keeping their people and culture alive" ("Canadian Inuit").

While the picture of Watson and Hunter is arguably the first #sealfie, the campaign to take control of the image of seals in the North by Inuit is part of a longer process of self-determination and self-representation.<sup>4</sup> Bathory explains that, for her, one of the most important aspects of the #sealfie campaign was "a focus on cultural celebration and positive self-esteem" ("Inuit Women Behind 'Sealfies'"). Pertinently for

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<sup>4</sup> I classify the picture of Watson and Hunter with the baby harp seal as a "sealfie" given that it is a staged portrait of a relationship between humans and seals. As previously stated, however, this staged relationship is in marked contrast to the "sealfies" shared by Inuit in the aftermath of the DeGeneres controversy. The former represents the protectionist stance of Western environmental conservation while the latter is more along the lines of what Greta Gaard terms a "heroic ethics" on the part of a marginalized and systemically disenfranchised people that "distills a range of cultural practices down to a single practice" (14-15).

this discussion of Inuit assertion to the right of self-representation and cultural celebration, Gaard notes: "Tribes and nations struggling to reject colonialism and colonized identities often see the reassertion of nationalism and national or tribal identities as a vital strategy in the struggle for self-determination" (16). #Sealfie photos present vignettes of modern Inuit life to those who have access to the Internet—which is to say just about the whole world—challenging stereotypes of northern Indigenous life while connecting to publics across the globe who have little to no access to remote arctic communities. Along with these brief moments of daily life that nonetheless present culturally important aspects of Inuit identity such as the wearing of sealskins, longer narrative portrayals in the form of films and film shorts have also been mobilized to give voice to the Inuit in their struggle for control of representation.

Accessible through the Internet like #sealfies, the following three contemporary northern Indigenous films creatively engage the seal hunting debate that has thus far been discussed in terms set by those from outside seal-hunting regions. "Tungijuk" and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* are both by Kunuk from Igloolik, Nunavut. All of Kunuk's films can be watched on his Web site Isuma.tv. The third film, *On the Ice*, is the first feature length film by Andrew Okpeaha MacLean from Barrow, Alaska. MacLean turned to the popular crowd-funding Web site Kickstarter to finance the distribution of the film to select theaters around the United States.

These films, while entertaining stories for both Inuit and non-Inuit, also introduce and teach non-Inuit about cultural practices between humans and the animals they eat that are more than exploitative and violent enforcements of species hierarchies. Instead, Inuk director Kunuk and Inupiaq director MacLean offer nuanced portrayals of a northern life that is complex, multifaceted, in transition, modern, and vibrant. The filmmakers make use of modern technologies to showcase this cultural liveliness while also engaging relationships with the environment and other animal species that is non-Western. Fienup-Riordan writes: "Few people on earth have been written about so prodigiously or pictured so often in an exotic light" as the Eskimo (*Freeze Frame* xi). Kunuk and MacLean are each, respectively, offering bodies of work to dislodge the image of Eskimos that others have portrayed in order to give voice to positions that are place, time, and culturally specific and appropriate. Discussing Kunuk's art and media collective, Igloolik Isuma Productions, Katarina Soukup writes: "The films [appropriate] communication tools to transmit an audiovisual form of Inuit oral history and storytelling to a hybrid audience: Isuma's primary goal is to delight other Inuit, and its secondary goal is to connect with a global media audience" (n.p.).

Creatively using the media and new storytelling technologies, Inuit have found the means to reach wider audiences—and potential allies—to reveal their distinct modes of relating to the world. In "Uploading Selves: Inuit Digital Storytelling on YouTube," Nancy Wachowich and Willow Scobie suggest that "through the act of uploading clips and inviting dialogue, Inuit assert their presence in the world and forge new online and offline (transnational and local) social networks. In this capacity, the Internet can be seen as inspiring a new and creative form of technological practice through which Inuit can mobilize themselves and engage different material and

immaterial worlds" (83-84). Similar to how Inuit are using Web sites to distribute short self-made films and #sealfies on social media sites YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook, Inuit filmmakers are also using Web sites and social media to distribute and connect to audiences around the world. Circumventing traditional outlets for film distribution and access that have consistently kept out those on the cultural margins, Indigenous filmmakers have successfully utilized the Internet to build and maintain communities around the world while remaining faithful to projects that promote Inuit cultural and artistic practices. Moreover, the Inuit word for Internet, *Ikiaqqivik*, is an "example of how Inuit are mapping traditional concepts, values, and metaphors to make sense of contemporary realities and technologies" (Soukup n.p.). Soukup explains the genesis of the term chosen by Nunavut's former Official Languages Commissioner, Eva Aariak: "*Ikiaqqivik*, or 'traveling through layers'...comes from the concept describing what a shaman does when asked to find out about living or deceased relatives or where animals have disappeared to: travel across time and space to find answers" (Soukup n.p.).

Kunuk's short film "Tungijuk" is an answer of sorts to a question that needs asking: how can non-Inuit animal welfare advocates begin to understand what seals mean to Inuit in an effort to have productive conversations about the conservation of animal species and Inuit culture? Without any dialogue and only the sounds of the ethereal throat-singing of Tanya Tagaq, the film uses jump cuts and stylized imagery in a manner that is graphically interesting to any audience and thought-provoking for non-Inuit. Moreover, to Inuit audiences, the artistic display of Inuit cosmology and cultural identity usually found in traditional stories is recognizable in the visual format of film. The film opens with a creature that is neither human nor wolf, but rather the representation of the "soul" or "personhood" (in Inuktitut, the *inua*) that has taken wolf form.<sup>5</sup> This person-wolf kills a caribou and through the act of killing, the caribou's *inua* is revealed and released as she sensually fingers her own cut-open abdomen.<sup>6</sup> The transformed caribou-person staggers to the edge of the ice floe and links the margins of the worlds of land and sea as she falls into the water and becomes a ringed seal. The seal-woman is shot and the next scene is of a man (played by Kunuk) cutting open the seal while a woman (played by Tagaq) looks lovingly down at the seal's body. When the seal's abdomen is opened in a manner similar to the caribou's, the woman reaches down and, in a gesture that mirrors the caribou-person fingering her wound, touches the seal and gently pulls a piece of the meat into her mouth. The mirroring of gestures across species and the patterns of linkages that bridge domains (human-animal, land-sea, male-female) suggests a more complex formulation of the interaction and interrelationship of humans and several of their partners in the North that allow human life to exist.

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<sup>5</sup> Jarich Oosten points out that "[T]he concept of *inua* (or *Yua*) [meaning] 'its person' refers to independent spirits as well as to a particular type of soul. The word is derived from the root *inu-* ('human life') and is best translated as 'its human being' or 'its person'" (186-187).

<sup>6</sup> The wound on the caribou and seal abdomens is the shape and texture of female sexual organs, again highlighting the dynamism between concepts of life and death in Inuit stories about hunting and eating seals.

"Tungijuk" does not disavow the killing of animals; rather, it is very aware that "[k]illing sentient animals is killing someone, not something" (Haraway 106). Knowing the subjectivity of the one being killed recognizes what Jacques Derrida calls the "becoming-subject of substance" that destabilizes the category of "killable" (280). Both in the Canadian commercial hunts in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and in the rhetoric of animal rights activists, the baby harp seals are made into objects that are killable. For the hunters, the seals are "killable" despite—or because of—the use of a rhetorical strategy that calls their slaughter a "harvest." For the activist, on the other hand, the seal is still other, but as a killable object in need of saving. The rhetorics of saving and killing stem from a similar meaning-making system that keeps humans and seals ontologically separate. "Tungijuk" suggests a move away from focusing on the finality of death: "knowing [killing an animal is killing someone] is not the end but the beginning of serious accountability inside worldly complexities" (Haraway 106). In the film, the complex circularity of the relationships among wolves, caribou, seals, and humans link different environments and seasons, suggesting that all species and their interrelated lives require constant attention and care; to live *well* in this relational system, makes one accountable to all others.

Relationships among humans and between humans and nonhumans are suffused with death, for death is part of the structure of intersubjective relating. Nancy Mike explains (to *Vice's* Dean) how the seal is more than an object within Inuit cultural practice:

When someone like Ellen, or anybody who's a celebrity or is well known, says something like that [the violent killing of seals needs to be ended], it's attacking us as minority groups because we not only use the seal as a practical thing, we use it to build relationships. We eat the meat, we use the bones or the skin—the bones to make little games for children so they can have fun with it. I don't know if these words can even explain what I want to say about the importance of seal, because it's our life. Not only our culture, but our daily living and how we're taught to be good people and to respect others and respect animals. It's much more than the practical use of it, not only seals, but any animal we have up here in the north. ("Inuit Women Behind 'Sealfies'")

"Tungijuk" explores death and killing not as finalities, but as the means by which Inuit express their cultural identity through an environmentally appropriate dietary practice.<sup>7</sup> Seals are not "killable" as a category of object: rather, every act of killing enacts obligations on the part of the human to ensure that each death is singular and marked with an attention to how the death allows obligations to be performed in the present.

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<sup>7</sup> Woodsome and Kohls report: "Approximately 32,000 people live in Nunavut, a vast, cold territory about the size of Mexico. Getting them food and supplies requires a fleet of ships and planes from southern Canada. Bad weather sometimes thwarts the deliveries, but when they do make it, the shipping costs are exorbitant. The cost is passed on to customers. Despite some government subsidies, shoppers have to pay about \$10 for celery, \$9 for two kilograms of sugar and \$12 for instant coffee. In a community where unemployment is nearly twice the national Canadian average, at 12.5 percent, a lot of families are going without." A complicating factor of relying more on "country food" from subsistence hunting is the high levels of environmental toxins that concentrate in the fatty tissues of animals in the Arctic. The toxins then concentrate further in the mammary glands of Inuit mothers; Inuit, therefore, produce the least environmental pollution while being some of the most effected by environmental pollution. For further reading see Melvin Visser's *Cold, Clear, and Deadly* (2007) and Marla Cone's *Silent Snow* (2005).

Furthermore, in his meditation on animal and human lives in the northeastern arctic, *Sacred Hunt*, David Pelly points out that "Traditionally, the hunt is a pact between Inuit and the seal. The Inuit hunter is not extracting from the environment but creating a bond between his people and their environment. When the seal gives itself to the hunter, it is an act of sharing in which the seal is transformed from animal to human. Being consumed is a form of rebirth or renewal for the seal" (106).

In Pelly's example, for the seal to be transformed into "human" through its death by a human hunter both seems 1) self-serving of the hunter who has now side-stepped the moral implications of the act of killing and eating animals and 2) a good deal for the seal, who now becomes a higher order being. Given that Cary Wolfe suggests in his capacious study, *Animal Rites*, that at least since Descartes, being theorized as "human," if not the "humanist subject," has conferred ontological superiority (5), the metaphysical gymnastics of transforming a seal into a human equivalent and then killing it are truly staggering. Nevertheless, we do not have to claim cultural relativity (the Inuit have a different cultural understanding of human-animal interaction, one that is not accessible to a Western audience) to begin to figure out what is at stake in the encounter between Inuk hunter and seal. By focusing on the interstices of accepted Western relationships between human and animal, Vinciane Despret offers an analysis of interaction that focuses on the "availability" of one to an Other. In her formulation, the animal is "available to some more subtle expectations, the expectations of someone who cares, of someone who trusts, moreover, of someone who was interested, someone it interests (*inter-esse*, to make a link)" (124). To be interested, to be of interest, is to forge a link between two entities.

Tim Agartak explains the "inter-esse" between Inuit and seals: "It is told that even when seals are killed, they do not forget their consciousness. They know the exact manner in which they are handled after they have been caught. For those who handle them carelessly, they know about those people. They would not go to them anymore" (Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries* 51). Although Agartak's example of inter-esse describes a relationship of care that is only active, and recorded by, the seal after death, the relationship between Inuk and seal (as will be explained in the following discussion of *Atanarjuat*) is forged from birth. "Tungijjuq" creatively demonstrates the linkages between Inuit and seals through the masculine practice of hunting at ice floes while Agartak describes the feminine practices of care and cultural work in the form of how the seal is treated once it is brought into the community. Through binary doubling, metaphor, and analogy, "Tungijjuq" visually displays the care that Agartak discusses, offering a mode of relating between human and animal that Wolfe finds lacking in Western philosophy.

Although in Western ontological practice, human and animal are often brought together in moments in which both parties are interested (à la Despret), in management practices, species are kept separated and in a hierarchical ordering. Huggan and Tiffin echo this species hierarchy when they write: "While the Enlightenment trajectory of humanist essentialism demanded the repression of the animal and animalistic in all its latent and recrudescant forms, it is not until our own century, in the urgent contexts of

eco-catastrophe and the extinction of many non-human species, that a radical re-drawing of this foundational relationship has occurred" (134). The "re-drawing" of the relationship is actually a re-valuation of the animal—representative of a wild nature—that places contemporary humanity as degenerate and lacking and nature as what is pure and authentic (and in need of saving). Conversely, in Kunuk's short film and in his feature film discussed next, seals are considered active partners in a reciprocal engagement that focuses not on active and passive adversaries—or wild nature vs. corrupted culture—but on linkages across difference.

Seals are boundary-crossing animals given that they are air-breathing mammals that live in the sea and on land-like floes of ice. Their ambiguous nature makes the hunt of them uncertain (in regards to outcome) and even dangerous (metaphysically). And yet, seals are closely linked to humans from the west coast of Alaska to the east coast of northern Canada. In her body of anthropological work, Fienup-Riordan looks closely at stories from the Yupiit of Western Alaska, such as "The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals," in order to show the "collaborative reciprocity" between humans and seals (*Boundaries* 50). On the other side of the Arctic, Xavier Blaisel analyzes the still popular traditional story, "The One Who Gets a Mother," which features a wandering human fetus that twice becomes a seal before his birth as a human with special knowledge of the respect necessary to be a good hunter. While these stories are ethnographically relevant to anthropologists and didactically useful for Inuit and Yup'ik elders who teach young community members about proper cultural relations, contemporary storytellers have found ways to translate the traditional stories into increasingly multi-cultural and linguistically diverse modes to which Indigenous youths can connect. The traditional stories teach behavioral manners between humans and nonhumans; contemporary retellings through new media formats do similar projects while acknowledging the pain and increasing anomie of Indigenous youths who suffer from consistent misrepresentation and marginalization.

While Kunuk and Norman Cohn are not essentializing Indigenous people as "other" to the white Western subject in *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner*, they know perfectly well the long discursive history of doing just that in art, literature, and film. Arnold Krupat, a postcolonial critic, in his analysis of the *Atanarjuat's* tension between the "epic" and the "ethnographic" states: "I must admit that I got very little out of [*Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner*] when I saw it for the first time in a movie theater in New York" (622).<sup>8</sup> Beyond the "universal" themes of "love, adultery, revenge, murder" (Krupat 617-618), the film consistently refuses to appease, allay, or confirm a suspicious humanist subject like Krupat by explaining what being Inuit means. One scene in particular involving the aftermath of a seal hunt illustrates the nexus of humanist

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<sup>8</sup> Krupat's analysis does move beyond these simplistic categories in order to situate the film in a wider field of relevance as an artistic and political statement. However, I find his insistence on "locating" the film historically and in reference to published material on the myth that subtends the storyline to reproduce the ethnographic standards by which Inuit artistic production is made available for Euro-American consumption. In other words, the critical idiom of his analysis is too heavily indebted to the production of difference he attempts to deconstruct.

subject-Inuit-animal other that brings new questions of interest and availability to the discussion.

Kunuk and Cohn's film explores the potentiality of birth and death in the chapter "The Family Way." In this scene, the eponymous hero, the "fast runner" Atanarjuat, comes close to shore in a kayak with a seal he has caught "way out on the floating ice." As he rows closer to shore, the scene cuts to his wife, Atuat, waiting on shore, and a short pan reveals she is heavily pregnant. While the seal and kayak wait just off screen, a tender moment passes between the two as Atanarjuat kneels down to listen to the fetus kick in Atuat's belly. Atanarjuat's brother and sister-in-law then come down to the beach to help butcher the seal and the next scene is of the ringed seal cut open on the beach and water being put on to boil.

Critics have focused on this film (and the scene between Atanarjuat and Atuat in particular) as "counterethnography" to the staged and "slapstick" nature of Robert Flaherty's "ethnographic" film, *Nanook of the North* (McCall 29-30). Additionally, it has been cast as "practical social power through oral narrative practice," meaning the film's plot originates in stories that are already in circulation in Inuit communities and it is completely in Inuktitut with English subtitles, thereby privileging speakers of Inuktitut who continue to be denied any authority of language or culture (Krupat 607). I read this scene both in the above terms and as having resonances beyond Western postcolonial criticism evident in these analyses. In a sense, Sophie McCall and Krupat are both correct, the kayak scene both re-stages the infamous scene of Flaherty's "documentary" when a whole family of Inuit appears from the inside of a kayak like Russian dolls, and it also "moves the center" by refusing to translate all of the Inuktitut (including cultural norms) into English (Krupat 623). Nevertheless, this scene is not just about "creat[ing] sympathy for the characters [while] further individualiz[ing] them" (McCall 30). I argue that this scene is not about the individual at all. It is not by accident that the successful aftermath of a seal hunt is shown directly before the revelation of Atuat's pregnancy and that the seal is displayed so prominently cut open on the beach with the camp circled around it. The scene is not about making individuals of the characters so that a Western audience will feel more empathy for them. Rather, the scene stages key components to the social make-up and the persistence of cultural continuity for Inuit.

Kunuk stages Inuit and seal relationships in the coinciding events of Atuat's pregnancy and the harpooning of a ringed seal by the edge of the ice. While both events make narrative sense within the world built by the plot, neither of them on their own incites the characters in such a way as to propel the story forward. Instead, the cultural import of this episode goes untranslated given the politics of a "partial translation" that encourages differential viewing experiences between Western and Inuit audiences (McCall 27). Western viewers are given a glimpse of representations of Inuit cultural norms that confirm the individual empathetic nature of the characters even as they are being instructed in how to re-value these norms from an Inuit perspective. Inuit audiences, on the other hand, view a re-valuation of their cultural norms in a context of international and Hollywood artistic standards as they watch the re-translation of familiar cultural norms into film media (McCall 9). How we read the body of the seal

lying between Atanarjuat and Atuat and in the midst of their family unit has repercussions for how Western readers and viewers understand the position of seals and Inuit in the worlds of figural representation and international politics. Privileging only the story of killing and eating seals, even if it is a story meant to empower Inuit, still limits the conceptual framework for how both seals and humans can exist in the world together.

An audience conditioned to view Indigenous people as environmentally naturalized (that is, located in natural, non-built up settings) from films ranging from *Nanook of the North* to *Dances With Wolves* often overlook the technologies at work in *Atanarjuat*. Of course, there are the cameras, lighting, make-up and clothing artists, the writers, editors, translators, and other overt technologies that go into making a film. Alongside these technical aspects, there are also cultural technologies (practices that function as tools for survival) on display that are much harder to recognize and read. In Kunuk's film, these include family structures and displays of kinship (such as the intergenerational relationships between brothers, fathers, sons, and namesakes); seal and caribou hunting (turns in the plot often center around the ambiguous activity of hunting other live souls); cycles of birth and death that connect the human and nonhuman characters; and the storytelling practices evident in the songs (and even in the medium of film itself) that tie these practices together.

Kunuk goes even further to remind his viewers that *Atanarjuat* is a contemporary film about Inuit in the modern world, even though it stages a traditional story and the sets and costumes appear to be pre-contact. During the rolling of the final credits, several of the actors are shown in their modern clothes, some have headphones on, and the modern film equipment is conspicuously present. Kunuk deliberately chooses Inuit artists and historians to make authentic sets and costumes that promote Inuit skin-sewing techniques and animal harvesting in order to bridge traditional skills with a modern means of teaching Inuit and non-Inuit about the specifics of Inuit relationships to their environment, culture, and history. The origin of the film is a retelling of a traditional story from Igloodik that was first written down by Knud Rasmussen when he passed through the community in the 1920s and spent many days discussing oral tales and beliefs with the influential Inuit shaman, Avva (sometimes written as Awa). Kunuk uses Rasmussen's ethnographic collections as source material along with versions of the tale that are still told in the community.<sup>9</sup> He keeps the narrative in a past, almost mythic time, and yet there are still hints to the transitions and upheavals that will preoccupy Inuit in years to come (McCall 20).

MacLean, however, sets *On the Ice* squarely within the contemporary reality of Barrow, an Inupiat town on the most northern tip of Alaska. The music of the film's characters is hip-hop, the art is graffiti, the language is mostly English, and the religion is Christianity. The film is a complex meditation on a social system that persists even as it transforms under pressure; a community and a culture that resists being subsumed and erased by cultural depictions that call them inauthentic or degraded or spiritually and

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<sup>9</sup> His use of Knud Rasmussen's ethnographic collections is more overt in his 2006 film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. For further discussion, see Katarina Soukup's "Travelling Through Layers."

culturally less than they used to be in some imagined past. Beyond popular traditional stories still in circulation in northern and western Alaska, this recent film utilizes the ambiguous parallel between killing your closest relative (the seal) and killing your closest human relative. As previously discussed, Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* showcases a successful seal hunt alongside a welcomed pregnancy, but it also mirrors this event with a failed seal hunt at the *aglu* (or seal breathing hole) that ends in the death of the group's leader by the hand of his son. Similarly, in *On the Ice*, it is the activity of going on a seal hunt that sets the stage for the conflict on and off the ice.

Unlike *Atanarjuat*, who comes to his pregnant wife after having killed a seal, the teenage boys Qalli and Aivaaq, of *On the Ice*, return to their community having failed to catch a seal, but having managed to kill their friend, James. The failure of the hunt out on the ice is more than a stage for the death of James; it reveals an unraveling of environmental and cultural connections for the present generation of Inupiat men. Qalli's father, a renowned hunter, figures out the truth of the events that unfolded on the ice through his knowledge of seal behavior, weather patterns, and ice conditions. The boys live in a post-colonized present filled with alcoholism, drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, and suicide. Although it seems fragile in comparison, to counter this legacy of violence, the community maintains ties to their environment (displayed in the intimate knowledge of Qalli's father and the other older hunters), the animals they depend on for food security (a scene of Qalli's family eating caribou), and each other (every greeting includes an asking after other relatives). The lack of a seal in the film is a profound absence that brings our attention to what is present in its place, a "culture in shock" ("Canadian Inuit").

Inuit cultural activist Aaju Peter points out that "As climate change happens, the culture is changing because of imposed customs... [and the] transition period... has become very stressful. You have to be 100 percent good in Inuit culture, and you have to be 100 percent good in Western-imposed culture, and finding your way as a young person is hard enough to start with" ("Canadian Inuit"). MacLean does not offer an easy solution for navigating the shifting terrain of Inupiaq culture. Instead, he portrays aspects of the loss of cultural identity and pride in Inupiat youths and he seems to indicate that the loss is not just about structures of representation or having a voice to determine one's position within culture and history. Rather, it is also about the separation of a culture from the landscape and animals that make living both possible and meaningful.

The film interrogates the Western myth of the individual, or the myth of the freedom of choice, that is the basis of most Western legal, social, and economic systems. While each character is developed as a fully functioning and desiring human being with personal motivations, the connecting thread of the film is that there is no freedom to choose just for or as oneself. Each character has a history that connects him to the past and the past actions of other people. Each character lives in a world marked by his or her proximity to the other people in the community. Phrases like "it's expected we go," "I left the party to visit aaka [grandmother]," and "he considered you a brother," reference the connectivity of the community through the tissues of relationships. None of the

choices the characters make in the film are made in a vacuum; the tragedy is that the social glue which should aid the functioning of the community through adversity reveals a dark side when violence in the form of drugs and alcohol enters from outside and intervenes in social relations. It is not just the worst of Western material culture that disrupts social functioning, it is also the influence of Western cultural values around the protection of animal bodies that doubly others Indigenous youths—not only are animals no longer a part of social consideration, their lives now hold more value than Inupiat lives.<sup>10</sup>

In the stories of "Tungijjuq," *Atanarjuat*, and *On the Ice*, human and seal ontologies are set up as equivalent, if also dynamically different. Fienup-Riordan explains in the context of the Yupiit of Western Alaska, a people culturally and linguistically related to the Inupiat and Inuit:

[Yupiit] extended personhood beyond the human domain and applied it as an attribute of animals as well. They did not view themselves as dependent on or subordinate to animals. In contrast, they viewed the relationship between humans and animals as collaborative reciprocity by which the animals gave themselves to the hunter in response to the hunter's respectful treatment of them as nonhuman persons. (*Boundaries* 50)

The status of seal and human ontology, a thematic concern of each film, has direct bearing on the current ecological, political, and social controversy that surrounds the ban on the importation of sealskin products into Europe and the United States. The original language of the 1983 European Economic Union Ban on sealskin products places heavy emphasis not on humans and seals as equivalent beings, but on the rather nonspecific "balance of nature" and "traditional" way of life as it is "traditionally" practiced by Inuit.<sup>11</sup> The issue at stake in the original directives becomes clearer the further one reads. It is not the balance of nature or how Inuit conduct their lives; it is the protection of the innocent and vulnerable seal pup, whose endearing gaze was immortalized by Watson and Hunter.

The recent updates to the ban have become more market oriented in the intervening years, regulating which communities can hunt seals for the market, how they can access a sealskin market, and what constitutes a saleable sealskin (it must be partially processed in the community according, again, to "traditional practices"). Like Watson and Hunter's original #sealfie, the seal remains an object within the discourse of protection and relations between human and nonhuman such as found in the Yupiit

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<sup>10</sup> Gaard reflects on this impasse between white environmentalists and Indigenous groups around animal advocacy in the case of the Makah Tribe of the Pacific Northwest and their decision to begin hunting whales again. Advocates for whale hunting view animal welfare activists as attacking legally protected Makah cultural rights while environmentalists see the hunt as an infringement on the rights of the whale, which supersedes the Makah's right to hunt given they have other food sources. She writes: "Yet both of these ethical perspectives take a dualistic approach to framing the ethical question: one must choose either the whale or the Makah in the first narrative; one must choose either the Makah or the white environmentalists in second. But ecofeminism's critique of dualistic thought and 'truncated narratives' suggests that rather than seeing these different perspectives as competing, a more holistic approach would be inclusive of all these layers of relationships, examining the interrelationship between the ethical context and the ethical contents" (9).

<sup>11</sup> "Seal Ban Directives"

worldview, where "The difference between [animals and humans] is...an 'activity rather than a state'," go unseen and unheard (Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries* 49).

Gaard reminds us of the importance of the multilayered contexts of contemporary Indigenous life crosscut with political, social, and environmental insecurity. Instead of promoting animal welfare over Inuit cultural identity or the rights of Inuit self-representation over the well being of seals, both of which are false dichotomies, Gaard suggests something else altogether:

The strategy of distinguishing between the different relationships inherent in the contexts and contents of ethical considerations will also aid antiracist feminists in addressing ethical problems. Without this strategy, it is too easy to set up false dualisms [Inuit vs. seals] and to forget the various layers of ethical relationships, historical and environmental contexts, and the ways that these variables are constantly in flux. (22)

Gaard suggests the need for "border-crossers" who are able to "move freely between the dominant cultural context of the non-native environmentalists/animal rights activists and the marginalized cultural context of the [Inuit], translating the ethical voices and beliefs of each so that they can be heard by the other" (19). The need for such dialogue is apparent given the precarious state of the Arctic in terms of melting ice and environmental toxins harming both humans and animals; environmental justice for Inuit and seals depends on relationships formed inside and outside northern cultures. Using new storytelling forms such as film and social media to reach audiences outside of the Arctic while connecting Indigenous youths with their heritage offers possibilities for cross-cultural interactions around the difficult and complex topic of seal hunting. Arnaquq-Baril knows that Inuit culture is neither static nor isolated, although she "expects the solutions to her community's problems to come from within" ("Canadian Inuit"). Furthermore, Arnaquq-Baril states: "Inuit haven't survived for thousands of years in the Arctic by not being able to adapt" ("Canadian Inuit"). If the mechanisms for storytelling can adapt across genre and media, can we also not change our perspective and see that the boundaries between human and animal are "dynamic and transitional, and passages between worlds are, for better or worse, always a potentiality" (Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries* 49)?

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