

## 5 Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat* (*The Fast Runner*)

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In an early scene from Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Allakariallak, the Inuit actor who portrays the titular hunter in the film, is introduced to a gramophone by a white trader who, according to the intertitles, "attempts to explain the principle of the gramophone" to him.<sup>1</sup> Having never before seen such a device, the putatively naïve Nanook inspects all sides of the machine, touches it, laughs at it, seems to ask the trader about its operation, and subsequently bites the record in a haptic effort to understand this new technology. In this well-known scene, the viewer takes these on-screen actions as a cue that Nanook is both unfamiliar with Western technology (and therefore oblivious to the camera's gaze in recording his actions) and primitive (only a culturally simple person would respond to advances in sound technology—especially in the silent era—with levity). Yet while a non-Inuit audience might register Nanook's smile as a marker of his alterity and childlike nature, Fatimah Tobing Rony asserts, "Recent research has shown that the Inuit found Flaherty and

the filmmaking a source of great amusement . . . from the Inuit point of view he may be seen as laughing at the camera."<sup>2</sup>

Not only is he laughing at the camera, his laughter performs public pedagogy for a viewing practice that reads cinematic Indigeneity as primitivism and innocence. The film invites the spectator to laugh at Nanook's expense in this scene, as the spectator is assumed to already understand the pretense of the gramophone, but William Rothman suggests an alternative orientation to the smile: "If we laugh at Nanook at this moment, as Flaherty's titles invite us to do, if we assume that this gesture reveals Nanook to be more of a child, or more of an animal than we are, that is a mark of our naïveté, not his. . . . When Nanook first hears the 'canned' voice, he breaks into a grin, amused that the 'canned' voice is not a profound mystery but only a special effect, as it were."<sup>3</sup> The trader purports, according to the intertitles, to teach Nanook "how the white man 'cans' his voice," suggesting the artifice of European American culture. The scene aligns the gramophone with the inexpensive trinkets of the trading post, the "beads and bright colored candy," that the trader will barter for the animal pelts, essential for survival in the Arctic, which he procured through "hand-to-hand combat," suggesting that while Native American cultural goods are objects of practical survival, European American culture offers artifacts of entertainment and frivolity.

It is tempting to read resistance into films like *Nanook*, which was created by an amateur white filmmaker formally trained as a mining specialist, that do not seem to permit much, if any, Indigenous agency, especially if the critical apparatuses necessary to "read" humor as a playful and powerful way of deconstructing audience expectations and the vast matrix of Native American (mis)representations have yet to be fully articulated or understood within their unique cultural contexts. And, since resistance as a



26. Nanook (Allakariallak) (left) at the trading post in *Nanook of the North* (1922). Courtesy of the Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center, Claremont CA.

category deployed by various colonized peoples is not created equal in all situations but is located along a spectrum of political and social efficacy, Nanook's response might register one thing to his non-Inuit audience and quite another to members of an Inuit community who recognize the cultural code of his smile. While Nanook is portrayed as heroic and master of his physical environment in scenes that situate him outside Western notions of time and history, when he is compared with the world of the trader he is depicted as awkward and as lacking intelligence—an anachronistic and

irrelevant, if quaint, figure in the early twentieth-century context of his non-Inuit audience.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I explore what it means for Indigenous people “to laugh at the camera” as a tactic of visual sovereignty on the virtual reservation. Laughing at the camera confronts the spectator with the often-absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype. I examine *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* (2000), the first full-length feature film directed by an Inuit (Zacharias Kunuk) and produced by Igloolik Isuma Productions Inc., a collaborative, majority Inuit production company, as my primary context for analysis to examine the ways this film is embedded within discourses about Arctic peoples that cannot be severed from the larger web of hegemonic discourses of ethnography. I do this first by discussing the pervasive images of Native Americans in ethnographic films and then by theorizing the ways that *Atanarjuat* intervenes into visual sovereignty as a film that successfully addresses a dual Inuit and non-Inuit audience for two different aims. I consider how the *Atanarjuat* filmmakers strategically adjust and reframe the registers on which Inuit epistemes are considered with the twin, but not necessarily conflicting, aims of operating in the service of their home communities and forcing viewers to reconsider mass-mediated images of the Arctic.

I suggest a reading practice for thinking about the space between resistance and compliance wherein Indigenous filmmakers and actors revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, while at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions. Terming this approach visual “sovereignty,” I demonstrate how this strategy offers up not only the possibility of engaging and deconstructing white-generated representations

of Indigenous people, but more broadly and importantly how it intervenes in larger discussions of Native American sovereignty by locating and advocating for Indigenous cultural and political power both within and outside of Western legal jurisprudence. My understanding of visual sovereignty is rooted in and expands upon three important discussions of sovereignty that think outside the perimeters of legal discourse: Jolene Rickard's call for expanding the boundaries of discourse around sovereignty to the arts, Beverly R. Singer's notion of "cultural sovereignty" as "trusting in the older ways and adapting them to our lives in the present," and Robert Allen Warrior's term "intellectual sovereignty," which in turn draws from Vine Deloria Jr.'s understanding of sovereignty "as an open-ended process" that involves critical and kinetic contemplations of what sovereignty means at different historical and paradigmatic junctures.<sup>5</sup>

The visual—particularly film, video, and new media—is a germinal and exciting site for exploring how sovereignty can be a creative act of self-representation that has the potential to both undermine stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and to strengthen what Robert Allen Warrior terms the "intellectual health" of communities in the wake of genocide and colonialism.<sup>6</sup> Visual sovereignty is a strategy that Indigenous filmmakers have engaged in since at least the 1960s—when North American Indigenous filmmakers began producing televisual, film, and video projects—and that has continued to the present with the explosion of hundreds of exciting films by Indigenous filmmakers whose work runs the gamut from short experimental videos to activist documentaries to full-length feature films.<sup>7</sup> Visual sovereignty is a practice that takes a holistic approach to the process of creating moving images and that locates Indigenous cinema in a particular historical and social context while privileging tribal specificity.

In the case of the Inuit of Canada, visual sovereignty has an earlier history as a result of their involvement in filmmaking proj-

ects such as the one that produced *Nanook*. While I find Rony's incisive critique of *Nanook* as "cinematic taxidermy" instructive, I am hesitant to disregard the complicated collaborative nature of the film's production. While Flaherty suffered from the ethnocentric biases and racism of his contemporaries, it is important to foreground the ways in which the Inuit instructed him on how to work collaboratively, according to their views of social and cultural interaction, as a form of aesthetic and technical diplomacy. This tradition would be carried forward to the present as the collaborative filmmaking projects of artists such as Eyre and Niro suggest. Faye Ginsburg has determined that Allakariallak and other Inuit community members worked with Flaherty "as technicians, camera operators, film developers, and production consultants."<sup>8</sup> Jay Ruby has argued that not only did the Inuit serve as production staff but that they also challenged Flaherty to work collaboratively on the project. "The Inuit performed for the camera, reviewed and criticized their performance, and were able to offer suggestions for additional scenes in the film—a way of making films that, when tried today," Ruby argues, "is thought to be 'innovative and original.'"<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the film and its off-screen stories have had a lasting positive impact on Inuit communities, most likely because of the depth of their participation in its creation. Peter Pitseolak, an Inuit photographer from Cape Dorset and a contemporary of Allakariallak, met Flaherty in 1912 and was inspired to learn photography as a result. His stunning, intimate photographs of community members in the 1930s and 1940s militate against images of Arctic people that framed them as archaic, primitive, and doomed peoples.<sup>10</sup>

Even into the 1970s *Nanook* was employed to empower Inuit communities. At a training workshop in 1979, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada—a language preservation, land rights, and cultural advocacy organization that later formed the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC)—screened the film for an Inuit community.<sup>11</sup> According to Lyndsay Green, operations manager of

Inuit Tapirisat, "The film excited great pride in the strength and dignity of their ancestors, and they want to share this with their elders and children."<sup>12</sup> Inuit audiences, like those in other communities, have utilized film as a mode of cultural continuity and preservation. This focus on the aspects of the film that reflect their relatives' contributions to the creation of *Nanook* demonstrates how visual sovereignty can involve a revision of older films featuring Native American plots in order to reframe a narrative that privileges Indigenous participation and perhaps points to sites of Indigenous knowledge production in films otherwise understood as purely Western products, as *Nanook* and Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914) have been.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, by recognizing the imprint of Indigenous people working in various capacities as intellectual and cultural advisors and technical assistants, contemporary Indigenous filmmakers draw from this early motion picture material to frame their own projects that engage with notions of the traditional in order to think about how the past informs the present. Visual sovereignty, then, promotes intellectual health on at least two critical registers. By appealing to a mass, intergenerational, and transnational Indigenous audience, visual sovereignty permits the flow of Indigenous knowledge about such key issues as land rights, language acquisition, and preservation, which narrativizes local and international struggles. Visual sovereignty, as expressed by Indigenous filmmakers, also involves the employment of editing technologies that permit filmmakers to stage performances of oral narrative and Indigenous notions of time and space that are not possible through print alone.

#### Visualizing Sovereignty in Indigenous Films

Sovereignty in its manifold manifestations sets Native American studies apart from other critical race discourses. Native Americans have no single shared culture, event, or series of events necessary

to imagine a collective group experience. Even the Wounded Knee Massacre, which resulted in the murders of more than three hundred Lakota tribal members, is not an event to which all Native Americans can cathect communal memories, although the fact remains that it is a significant visual register because the bodies of the victims were photographed and because these images were widely disseminated as commercial postcards.<sup>14</sup> Sovereignty is an ontological and philosophical concept with very real practical, political, and cultural ramifications that unites the experiences of Native Americans, but it is a difficult idea to define because it is always in motion and is inherently contradictory. As David E. Wilkins and K. Tsianina Lomawaima note, "The political realities of relations with the federal government, relations with state and local governments, competing jurisdictions, complicated local histories, circumscribed land bases, and overlapping citizenships all constrain" contemporary notions of sovereignty.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, sovereignty is perhaps the most important, overused, and often-misunderstood term employed in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Native American circles.<sup>16</sup> While legal and social science discourses have used the term to describe a peculiar, problematic, and particular relationship between the Anglophone colonies of the United States and Canada and the Indigenous nations of North America, I would like to suggest a discussion of visual sovereignty as a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media but do not rely solely on the texts and contexts of Western jurisprudence.

Sovereignty is a key term in the lexicon of Native American Studies because it demonstrates how Indigenous peoples are different from immigrant communities in the Americas (as well as other Indigenous nations) in terms of political structure, epistemology, and relationships to specific geographical spaces. In Scott Richard Lyon's formulation, sovereignty is "nothing less than

our attempt to survive and flourish as a people.”<sup>17</sup> Yet while he locates sovereignty within the history of the colonization of the Americas, considerations of the concept of sovereignty should also take into account expressions of sovereignty within traditional Native American aesthetic production prior to European incursion.

Prior to European contact, Native nations theorized about the concept of sovereignty in order to discursively distinguish themselves from the other human, spirit, animal, and inanimate communities surrounding them through performance, songs, stories, dreams, and visual texts such as wampum, pictographs, and tipi drawings. In a Native American context, the term predates European notions of nation-to-nation political sovereignty even as the Indigenous conceptions have now incorporated these non-Native articulations of the term into their definition. The English word “sovereignty,” then, becomes a placeholder for a multitude of Indigenous designations employed to describe the concept that also takes into account the European origins of the idea. The contradictions of sovereignty are numerous. Its applications vary from Indigenous nation to nation, and it often maintains ties to older, Indigenous concepts of self-governance, which are remembered and constructed through oral narrative and a given community’s consensus on what constitutes precontact forms and theories of government and social structure. It incorporates as well European notions of recognizing political autonomy and jurisprudence. In other words, sovereignty in a Native American context incorporates the paradox of multiple definitions into its genealogy. And the fact that sovereignty is paradoxical—located within and without Indigenous discourse—does not make it any less powerful or valid a statement of political, individual, or cultural autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

Visual sovereignty can be likened to the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Two Row Wampum Belt Treaty. This treaty, both a

material artifact composed of strung quahog shells and a symbol of Indigenous diplomacy on tribally specific terms, is a visual representation of a pact based on mutual respect made between the Haudenosaunee and Europeans, stipulating that the communities would be allowed to coexist and recognize each other’s sovereignty, nation to nation. It was first created in the seventeenth century as a pact between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch. Haudenosaunee individuals interpret it as a visual manifestation of their inherent right to retain their geographic, cultural, political, linguistic, and economic sovereignty.

According to G. Peter Jemison, Seneca Faithkeeper, “The purple lines represent the Haudenosaunee traveling in their canoe. Parallel to them, but not touching, is the path of the boat of the Europeans that came here. In our canoe is our way of life, our language, our law, and our customs and traditions.”<sup>19</sup> He continues, “And in the boat, likewise, are the European language, customs, traditions, and law. We have said, ‘Please don’t get out of your boat and try to steer our canoe. And we won’t get out of our canoe and try to steer your boat.’ We’re going to accept each other as sovereign—we’re going to travel down the river of life together, side by side.” While European powers, Canada, and the United States have yet to fully honor this covenant, the Iroquois Confederacy continues to abide by the philosophy behind the belt—recognizing European forms of sovereignty, the continuing importance of oral narrative in maintaining a collective identity (the belt depends on “readers” who can decipher and interpret its meaning), and visual artifact as a mnemonic device. It is significant that one of the first treaties made between Indians and whites was recorded using an Indigenous form.

Visual sovereignty opens up a practice for reading Native American visual culture that incorporates both Indigenous traditions of community representation and non-Indigenous filmmaking practices. As the Two Row Wampum Belt Treaty demonstrates,

visual sovereignty recognizes the complexities of creating media for multiple audiences, critiquing filmic representations of Native Americans, at the same time that it participates in some of the conventions that have produced these representations.

Sovereignty, because of this diversity of Indigenous relationships to it, has become a kind of collective placeholder term similar to "strategic essentialism."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, sovereignty indicates a powerful way to mobilize social and political action through situational—sometimes temporary—solidarity with the understanding that this solidarity is predicated on consensus that recognizes individual dissent. Likewise, visual sovereignty intervenes in larger discourses on Indigenous sovereignty but employs a slightly different set of tactics. Because visual sovereignty arbitrates in the broader world of Indigenous sovereignty and is not always directly involved in political debates that determine Native American survival and livelihood—as legal sovereignty in the U.S. and Canadian justice systems is—there is more room for narrative play. Under visual sovereignty, filmmakers can deploy individual and community assertions of what sovereignty and self-representation mean and, through new media technologies, frame more imaginative renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms, such as the presentation of the spiritual and dream world, than are often possible in official political contexts. Visual sovereignty is not outside of or disinterested in political activism and debate. While the film *Atanarjuat* makes no overt reference to local environmental concerns in the Arctic, it "peoples" this particular endangered space. Recent news reports detail how this global catastrophe is adversely affecting all forms of plant and animal life in the Arctic, and *Atanarjuat* intimates how human populations on the front line of global warming will also be devastated.

Igloodik Isuma is based in Nunavut, Canada's newest territory, established in 1999. With a population of roughly thirteen hun-

dred, 93 percent of whom are Inuit, and a consensual government system that blends Inuit principles (*qaujimajatuqangit* in Inuktitut) with Canadian parliamentary democracy, Nunavut is the site of a unique and exciting Indigenous political economy and a practicing form of political and cultural sovereignty that provides an ideal site to host a production company that works in the service of visual sovereignty.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Igloodik Isuma Productions Inc. employs ethnographic film conventions to serve didactic purposes within the Inuit communities of Canada: forging much-needed economic opportunities in depressed markets; educating younger generations alienated from community elders and tribal epistemologies through diasporic conditions; and addressing the lingering effects of colonization, natural environments in immediate peril, and high mortality, substance abuse, and incarceration rates.

Ginsburg notes that as a result of Igloodik Isuma's economic presence in Igloodik, "More than 100 Igloodik Inuit, from the young to the elderly, were employed as actors, hairdressers, and technicians, as well as costume makers, language experts, and hunters who provided food, bringing more than \$1.5 million into a local economy that suffers from a 60 percent unemployment rate."<sup>22</sup> According to Zacharias Kunuk, one of Igloodik Isuma's four founding members, "We create traditional artifacts, digital media, and desperately needed jobs in the same activity."<sup>23</sup> His statement, coupled with Ginsburg's statistics, points to the important political work of visual sovereignty: making a commercially successful film that foregrounds Inuit epistemes and simultaneously accomplishes collective social justice off-screen by providing job training and a livelihood for Inuit communities. Most recently, Isuma engaged in its latest form of visual sovereignty by creating Isuma TV, "an independent interactive network of Inuit and Indigenous multimedia" broadcast free on the Internet.<sup>24</sup> In its mission statement, Isuma TV notes, "Our tools

enable Indigenous people to express reality in their own voices: views of the past, anxieties about the present, and hopes for a more decent and honorable future. Our sincere goal is to assist people to listen to one another, to recognize and respect diverse ways of experiencing our world, and honor those differences as a human strength."<sup>25</sup> To this end, Isuma TV broadcasts in over four languages, most importantly, Inuktitut; offers testimony by residential school survivors of sexual, cultural, physical, linguistic, and psychological abuse; premieres new work by Indigenous video artists; covers arts festivals; features interviews by scientists and community members about climate change and the impact of mining on the Arctic; and links to over thirty channels that include blogs, news reports, and language lessons from all over the Indigenous world.

Isuma means "to think" in Inuktitut, and the members of both Igloolik and its sister company, Arnait Video Productions (Women's Video Collective of Igloolik), which focuses on issues of relevance to Inuit women, are dedicated to a production style that revolves around Inuit worldviews, such as collaborative conceptualizing of the film's diegesis and its incorporation of a subplot based on Inuit spiritual traditions rather than those borrowed from the West (or, in the Inuit's case, the South).<sup>26</sup> The filmmaking process, as a result, is much slower than that of Hollywood because members attempt to reach consensus on the details of the film (the director, for example, serves more as a contact person than as the director in the conventional sense of the term), and the film is screened before an audience of elders and community members and is edited accordingly prior to release.

The work of Igloolik Isuma and Arnait Video Productions aligns with and has, in some cases, inspired the kinds of work that have been produced recently by Indigenous filmmakers in sites such as Latin America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Oceania.<sup>27</sup> This international project is part of a broader historical move from

cinema produced by European settler and colonial nations to what Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino term "Third Cinema" to a variety of Indigenous cinemas that incorporate local epistemes and cultural critiques with new visual technologies.<sup>28</sup> While Third Cinema is a postcolonial movement that grew out of cultural and political changes in the 1960s in formerly colonized parts of the world to denounce Hollywood-style entertainment in favor of a national, popular, and activist vernacular, Indigenous Cinema has its roots in specific Indigenous aesthetics with their attendant focus on a particular geographical space, discrete cultural practices, social activist texts, spiritual traditions, and notions of temporality that do not delink the past from the present or future.

Igloolik Isuma's oeuvre similarly is not solely a vehicle aimed at either an internal or an external audience. *Atanarjuat* compels non-Inuit spectators to think differently about what constitutes Indigenous content in films and more conventional representations of Native Americans in cinematic history and also about Indigenous visual aesthetics. As Michael Leigh argues, Indigenous communities "are ensuring the continuity of their languages and cultures and representations of their views. By making their own films and videos, they speak for themselves, no longer aliens in an industry which for a century has used them for its own ends."<sup>29</sup> Inuit filmmakers do not only employ what have come to be envisioned as Western visual culture technologies to create activist-resistance texts that retell oral narratives in local languages for future generations, however. Rather, they also engage in dialogue with media communities outside the far North, reconsidering and transforming filmic genres and audience expectations.<sup>30</sup> Arnait's *Anaana (Mother)* (2001), directed by Zacharias's sister, Mary Kunuk, and Marie-Hélène Cousineau, for example, is an hour-long documentary about Vivi Kunuk, Zacharias and Mary's mother. Through lyrical, humorous, and poignant vignettes about Vivi and other members of her family, the spectator is presented with a

portrait of an Inuit community that retains traditional elements of culture and embraces modernity, but on its own terms. The matriarch, Vivi, for example, hunts seal with a modified hockey stick, a scene that might make some audiences uncomfortable as the entire hunt is filmed. This scene has a dual purpose. On the one hand it provides a kind of visual how-to manual through which acculturated community members can learn how to hunt seal and other Arctic mammals. On the other hand it reminds spectators in the "South" that being carnivorous requires sacrifice and recognition of the mode of production of harvesting animals for meat. For the Inuit in the film, there is a respectful and intimate relationship between the hunters and the hunted.

Cultural difference, particularly as it relates to a shamanistic plotline, is deployed in *Atanarjuat* to trouble a history of discursive representations of Arctic peoples as simultaneously commensurable and alien. The film re-inscribes these scenes of cultural difference as regenerative sites of cultural preservation within a community that understands culture as a locus of fluidity, historical change, and adaptation. Igloolik Isuma filmmakers invert what non-Inuit might consider "aberrant" cultural practices—interacting with supernatural powers, eating raw meat, and engaging in a polygamous and sometimes violent trade in women—through humor and the strategic use of ethnographic film conventions.<sup>31</sup> By doing so they open up a more subtle, nuanced reading of these practices as a means of entering the debate on sovereignty and rupturing mainstream notions of feminism and aboriginal representation by mocking universalism and its untenable utopianism.

The film employs cinematic technology to retell the ancient oral story of *Atanarjuat*, a folk hero who rids his community of negative forces by violating cultural taboos. Born into a family of low social class due to the machinations of a malevolent visiting shaman, *Atanarjuat* (Natar Ungalaaq) defeats a rival, Oki (Peter-

Henry Arnatsiaq), for the attentions of Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu), who has already been promised by her family to Oki. This upsets the delicate balance of this close-knit community, and Oki quietly plots his revenge against *Atanarjuat*. When *Atanarjuat* takes Oki's sister, Puja (Lucy Tulugarjuk), as his second wife, Oki attempts to kill *Atanarjuat* for a perceived slight to his sister, murdering instead *Atanarjuat's* brother. *Atanarjuat* escapes by running naked for miles over ice and frozen land until he is harbored by an exiled community member, Qulitalik (Pauloosie Qulitalik), who lives out on the tundra alone with his wife and daughter. *Atanarjuat* apprentices under Qulitalik until he is ready to return to his camp, reunite with Atuat (who has been raped by Oki and his friends in the interim and lives an abject life with her son and Qulitalik's sister, Panikpak, played by Madeline Ivalu, on the fringes of camp), and reverse the damage initiated by the visiting shaman. The film ends with *Atanarjuat* acting nonviolently and Oki and his family being driven out of the community to purge it of negativity. Igloolik Isuma thus situates the traditional oral narrative of *Atanarjuat* on a virtual reservation opening up the narrative for dialogue within and outside the community on a site that is less invested in the traffic in authenticity than in reconsidering the relationship between the visual image, technologies, and larger cultural and political contexts.

#### "Here Come the Anthros": Sa(l)vages and Ethnographic Representation

In his biting musical indictment of cultural anthropology's intrusion into Indian country, Floyd Red Crow Westerman sings, "Here come the anthros, better hide your past away."<sup>32</sup> Inspired by Vine Deloria Jr.'s groundbreaking work, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Westerman's song punctures the notion that amateur and professional anthropologists engaging in research projects in Native American communities are universally benevolent and objective.

Both Westerman's and Deloria's work responds to statements that assert the primacy for Native Americans of the putatively "lower order" functions such as attention to the body, to action over thought, and to doing rather than feeling. For example, Flaherty asserted in a BBC interview that "I don't think you can make a good film of the love affair of the Eskimo . . . because they never show much feeling in their faces, but you can make a very good film of Eskimos spearing a walrus."<sup>33</sup>

Deloria questioned the motives of anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in Native American communities in the late 1960s and produced "essentially self-confirming, self-referential, and self-reproducing closed systems of arcane 'pure knowledge'—systems with little, if any, empirical relationship to, or practical value for, real Indian people."<sup>34</sup> Although both anthropologists and ethnographers have adopted more self-reflective and sensitive research methodologies in response to critiques launched by Indigenous peoples, Native Americans are still positioned between complicity with and resistance to anthropological standards, definitions, and representations of Indigenous peoples.<sup>35</sup> An enduring oral tradition continues within many Indigenous communities, at the same time it is impossible to ignore the important cultural, linguistic, genealogical, and philosophical material in the ethnographic and historical record, especially as this material constructs a mass-mediated view of the Indigenous world and in some cases represents the full cultural patrimony of Native American nations.

The commercial motion picture industry in North America has been fascinated with the image of the American Indian, and hundreds of actualities featuring Indians engaging in "traditional" and quotidian practices were shown in nickelodeons from 1894 through 1908. These actualities and early documentary and ethnographic films simultaneously contributed to the myth of the vanishing Indian—the actors were clothed in anachronistic dress

performing prereservation-era tasks—and helped to create a form of American spectatorship that coheres around the dichotomous relationship between Indian and white figures. The idea of the American spectator emerged at the turn of the twentieth century according to Miriam Hansen with the perhaps unintended effect of incorporating "outside" social groups, such as European American women and recent immigrants from Europe, into the national body politic as consumers of forms of knowledge, culture, and history through an alternative public sphere "not necessarily anticipated in the context of production."<sup>36</sup> While Native Americans and their relationship to specific geographical spaces provided the backdrop for a national origin myth around which immigrant identities could coalesce, Indigenous people represented in the films were erased through both the reenactment of the physical violence of the frontier and the discursive violence that notions of salvage anthropology propagated.<sup>37</sup>

Salvage anthropology inflicted a particularly damaging form of violence on Native American communities as these communities faced pressure from the government to assimilate while simultaneously receiving the message from anthropologists and ethnographers that their cultures were becoming increasingly inauthentic, impure, and irrelevant. Salvage anthropology would draw upon older forms of stereotyping found in early colonial texts, captivity narratives, and turn-of-the-century dime novels as well as scientific discourses on race to create the "sa(l)vage"—a doomed, "leftover" figure who, like Flaherty's description of "the Eskimo" exists only as a static, flat, proto-human type.

The stagings of "traditional" cultures in actualities and early films provided the kinds of artifacts that salvage anthropology hoped to rescue from oblivion. The actualities of the turn of the century are the cinematic source from which both representations of Native Americans in the western and in amateur and professional ethnographic films would take shape. Despite the

sense of ethnography as a kind of inescapable frame through which Indigenous lives are screened, Indigenous filmmakers have deployed ethnographic film conventions to assert and revise a sense of visual sovereignty. Critically engaging this seeming paradox—questioning ethnography’s tendencies by using the tools and conventions available to the filmmaker—is not entirely new. Jerry White states, “Ethnographic filmmaking has undergone a complete transformation in the last two decades. Once the safe vocation of earnest scientists seeking imagery for exotic cultures, ethnographic filmmaking has become fertile ground for revision by Third World and avant-garde filmmakers.”<sup>38</sup> However, articulations of this paradox and how it complicates notions of sovereignty on the virtual reservation are unique to Indigenous filmmaking practices in a number of different settler colonialism contexts throughout the world.

With few exceptions, contemporary work by Indigenous filmmakers in the United States and Canada is set in the present as a response to films—particularly westerns and ethnographic films—that situate Native Americans in the nineteenth-century past with no viable future. While images of Hollywood Indians have saturated the market since the inception of films, the work of Native American filmmakers and issues of relevance to tribal peoples have been markedly absent from mass-market films, cinema scholarship, and the historical archive.<sup>39</sup> Native Americans in mass media have occupied a twilight-zone existence in which they are both hypervisible in ways overdetermined by popular and nostalgic representations and completely invisible because Native American actors are often uncredited; underpaid; and cast in ancillary, sometimes demeaning roles in support of a white protagonist who provides the point of entry for the spectator.<sup>40</sup> As a result, work by Indigenous filmmakers often creates narrative films that strive to overturn stereotypes of Indigenous people by featuring characters experiencing seemingly universal events. For

example the title of Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie’s landmark film, *Smoke Signals* (1998), conjures up images from the western film imaginary, but the action is set on a present-day reservation in the Northwest and centers on a narrative about the complex range of emotions between father and son.

“I can only sing this song to someone who understands it”:  
Multiple Modes of Address in *Atanarjuat* (*The Fast Runner*)

In the wake of the success generated by *Smoke Signals*, *Atanarjuat* (*The Fast Runner*) subverts the conventional paradigm by refusing a white point of entry for the spectator. Shot entirely on location in and around Igloodik, *Atanarjuat* is the first Inuit feature-length film. According to an article published in the Nunavut-based *Nunatsiaq News*, the film is drawn from a didactic “legend of power, intrigue, love, jealousy, murder, and revenge” more than a thousand years old.<sup>41</sup> It is a visual recreation of an oral narrative important to the Inuit community and centers on the taboo-breaking romantic relationship between the main protagonist, Atanarjuat (played by one of a handful of professional actors employed by the production company), and Atuat, who has been promised in marriage by her family to Oki. As in most Native American oral stories, there are no absolute binaries in the story or the film. Neither the main protagonist Atanarjuat nor his antagonist, Oki, are wholly good or evil, a narrative decision that undermines the expectations of spectators familiar with Hollywood film formulas. Both break cultural taboos whose stakes are very high (Oki kills Atanarjuat’s brother as well as his own father, and as a result is banished by his grandmother, Panikpak, at the film’s conclusion), but despite the fact that Atanarjuat performs an act that is socially unacceptable, his actions permit the community to heal from the devastation wrought years ago by the mysterious and ambivalent shaman figure, Tuurngarjuaq (Abraham Ulayuruluk). Yet unlike *Smoke Signals*, which features

English dialogue and familiar, contemporary references, *Atanarjuat* includes an all-Inuit cast speaking Inuktitut (with English subtitles), wearing costumes made of animal skins, performing ostensibly traditional acts such as hunting walrus and seal with harpoons, and eating raw meat. Additionally, *Atanarjuat* is situated within a shamanistic narrative framework and it captures pre-European invasion time.<sup>42</sup>

At first glance the film appears to be an ethnographic spectacle that seems, like its predecessor *Nanook*, to reinforce Flaherty's contention that Arctic people produce a cinema of the Indigenous body and its interaction with the land, but little else. *Atanarjuat*, with its good-natured main protagonist, amateur actors, teams of sled dogs, and long, slow shots of the frozen land and seascape (which lyrically operate as uncredited protagonists in the film because of the intense attention paid to them by the often handheld camerawork), appears to share much in common with Flaherty's classic ethnographic documentary. Innupiat writer Joseph E. Senungetuk suggests Arctic communities in North America are depicted as "a people without technology, without a culture, lacking intelligence, living in igloos, and at best, a sort of simplistic 'native boy' type of subhuman arctic being."<sup>43</sup> Ann Fienup-Riordan terms these representations "Eskimo orientalism." She argues that "like the representations of the Orient, the representation of the Eskimo is about origins—in this case the origin of society in the 'pure primitive': peaceful, happy, childlike, noble, independent, and free. The Eskimo of the movies is 'essential man,' stripped of social constraint and High Culture. . . . Their position at the geographic and historical fringe of Western Civilization made them the perfect foils for an 'Eskimo orientalism' as potent as its namesake."<sup>44</sup> The filmmakers tap into this "Eskimo orientalist" representational history in the supplementary materials produced alongside the film. The companion book to the film opens with a quote by Claude Lévi-Strauss who writes, "I was . . . captivated by

many ethnographic details."<sup>45</sup> Even *Isuma: Inuit Studies Reader* (2004), which was produced by Isuma Publishing, a division of Igloolik Isuma Productions, features ethnographic texts by writers such as Knud Rasmussen and Franz Boas, and the companion book demonstrates that the ethnographic verisimilitude of the film, particularly in terms of costuming, is based on drawings by Captain G. F. Lyon, who accompanied explorer William Edward Parry to the Arctic from 1821–23.

An examination of the bookends of the film—its opening scene and non-diegetic production shots shown while the credits roll—demonstrate that the filmmakers self-consciously deploy hallmarks of ethnographic cinematography without interpretive interventions such as the expert talking head. This is done in the service of drawing attention to the film as a film, as opposed to an "authentic" visual record of a vanished past, as part of a larger project of visual sovereignty. Igloolik Isuma Productions Inc., whose team of filmmakers created *Atanarjuat*, declines to narrate the legendary story of *Atanarjuat* in a contemporary Inuit context, focusing instead on an earlier period that permits the film to forgo representing the white-Inuit colonial equation and the types of nostalgia that often arise out of attempts to portray an unadulterated Indigenous past. Kunuk, the film's primary director, presents his audience with an intact Inuit world, one that does not rely on a binary opposition between Inuit and "southern" communities.<sup>46</sup>

The opening scene and cultural references of the film can be confusing and opaque to a non-Inuit spectator, so perhaps the filmmakers used the marketing materials—the companion book and *Inuit Studies Reader*—to provide the interpretive lens lacking in the film.<sup>47</sup> The film opens with a lone man standing on the snow-packed tundra with his howling dogs. This image is one of isolation and loneliness that hearkens back to what Rony calls Flaherty's "Primitive Everyman," a snapshot of the self-made

man in conflict with a desolate and harsh landscape.<sup>48</sup> This image, evocative of *Nanook*, is undercut by the next scene, a tactic that the filmmakers repeatedly employ to challenge audience expectations. The following scene takes place inside a spacious *qaggiq* (large igloo), where a dozen or so adults and children are contemplating a visitor, referred to as an “up North stranger,” who has arrived alone in the small community wearing a shaman’s necklace made of polar bear claws (which designates him as a powerful person), a white fur coat, and white polar bear pants similar to the ones worn by Allakariallak in *Nanook of the North*.<sup>49</sup> We learn later that the events in the opening scene take place approximately twenty years before most of the film’s action. The visiting shaman, Tuurngarjuaq, greets the local community leader and shaman, Kumaglak (Apayata Kotierk), who wears a shaman’s walrus teeth necklace and coat decorated with raven feathers to designate his individuality and personal powers. Tuurngarjuaq sings a song in the *qaggiq*, which he prefaces by claiming, “I can only sing this song to someone who understands it. When you sing, you laugh at the same time. It must be because you’re winning too! It’s fun to sing and play a game at the same time.”

The opening subtitled lines of the film are a cue to the non-Inuit spectator (including non-Inuit Native Americans) that the film’s narrative and details may remain incommensurable since a non-Inuktitut speaking person wouldn’t understand his song. Tuurngarjuaq’s statement makes evident the multiple audiences the film is addressing: Inuits who understand scenes such as the opening one because they are already familiar with the narrative, non-Inuit Native Americans who may read some of the cues from the film and place them in dialogue with their own tribally specific oral narratives and discursive contexts, and non-Inuits who do not understand Inuktitut or the cultural practices represented in the film but who may be aware of the economy of stereotypes

surrounding the Inuit in literature and film. Tuurngarjuaq’s lines underscoring the link between humor and play are telling here as they point to how the filmmakers and characters “laugh at the audience,” to return to Rony’s phrase. Not only does the non-Inuit audience not fully understand the film, but the audience is also, unwittingly perhaps, engaged in a game with the filmmakers, one in which the filmmakers obviously have the upper hand.

This idea of narrative play is at work when Tuurngarjuaq and Kumaglak engage in a practice termed *illuriik* (opponents/partners) in the opening scene of the film, a public custom, according to the *Atanarjuat* companion book, that tests visiting strangers, particularly shamans, “physically and psychologically” by tying them together and letting their helping spirits (*tuurngait*), often associated with powerful animals such as the walrus and polar bear, encounter each other in the spirit world.<sup>50</sup> Often, if the stranger passes the test, he and the host shaman become friends and exchange their possessions; however, in this case Tuurngarjuaq’s helping spirit, which takes the form of a polar bear, kills Kumaglak’s spirit, which manifests itself as a walrus, and Kumaglak dies as a result. The two men are tied together, and one slumps over, apparently and inexplicably dead.

Although this *illuriik* has a disastrous ending, the scene is not devoid of humor. When Tuurngarjuaq first stands up to display his shaman’s parka, he teases Kumaglak, “Since your clothes are different, take a look at mine. If you show me yours . . .” and the joke trails off here. Kumaglak retorts, “No, I don’t want any lessons from some up North stranger.” Throughout the film, a more theoretical understanding of *illuriik* is offered as social and political negotiations and confrontations vacillate between violence and humor. As an expression of a tribally specific episteme, *illuriik* in the film is a form of visual sovereignty that both places this practice within a local context in the services of linguistic and cultural revitalization and simultaneously makes a broader argument

for self-representation and self-determination by involving the spectator in the process of decolonization. This is accomplished by presenting Inuit cultural practices and sensibilities on Inuit terms, without the kinds of explanatory apparatuses that typically accompany ethnographic films. To decipher exactly what is happening in this scene in its cultural context, the non-Inuit audience has to turn to the texts of ethnography, including Igloolik Isuma's own companion book. Because the *illuriik* is not a cultural practice that is universally familiar, even among Native North Americans, its decoding points to how Indigenous filmmaking is poised on a grid of representational practices: ethnography, aboriginal narrative, and the lexicon and technology of film.

Upon his death, Kumaglak's wife, Panikpak, provides voice-over narration in the opening of the film: "We never knew what he was or why it happened. Evil came to us like Death. It just happened, and we had to live with it." It becomes clear that Tuurngarjuaq occupies an ambivalent position as metaphorical tester of the audience in a kind of extranarrative *illuriik*, but he also serves as a precursor to the incursion of Europeans on Inuit land, leaving death and destruction in his wake. Read metaphorically as a seductive, enduring, foreign presence, the visiting shaman can be seen to represent both an individualized, spiritual, destructive power and the destructive power of European Canadian colonialism. Settler colonialism is read here through the lens of an ongoing, Inuit process of coping with and sometimes purging detrimental outside elements. The community struggles over the course of the next two-and-a-half hours to purge itself of the damage caused by the introduction of malevolent forces and begins to heal using community-based elements and strategies. This is instructive for the contemporary community at Igloolik and its environs who can take these lessons about negotiating the potentially dangerous terrain of the "Other" to apply to the present colonial and environmental context in their homelands.



27. Panikpak (Madeline Ivalu) and Qulitalik (Paulosie Qulitalik) drive evil away from the community at the close of *Atanarjuat* (2001).

In the end, an elderly Panikpak is reunited with her brother, Qulitalik (played by one of the founding members of Igloolik Isuma who also cowrote the screenplay), who had been banished from the community immediately after Kumaglak's death. When Tuurngarjuaq returns years after his initial arrival, this time as a more ghostly presence marked by smoke and his eerie laughter, brother and sister work in tandem as complementary forces to force the shaman away permanently. Thereafter, Panikpak banishes her grandchildren (Oki and his followers) from the village:

We are not finished here! Before we can go on we have to forgive some of our family who have done things no one should ever do. For many winters now we have been ruled and frightened just like that evil Tuurngarjuaq was

still with us! My own son Sauri's children have led an evil life to others day after day! This has to stop so our future generations can have better lives. Mistreating others, committing murders, telling lies. This has to stop now!

Panikpak's chastisement and call to collective healing reinforces the strength of Inuit women in the community, who hold positions of power that are equal to those of men.<sup>51</sup> This representation of the power of women within Inuit communities is an example of visual sovereignty, a subtle way of demonstrating gender complementarity.

Another means through which visual sovereignty is exhibited is the film's pacing and attention to landscape. The film has a running time of approximately 160 minutes, much of which is taken up with slow pans of the landscape, the quotidian actions of the characters as they find and prepare food, and shots of things such as feet crunching through the snow that would have been edited out of a conventional Hollywood film. In other words, the film is full of what Jennifer Doyle has called "boring parts," that if skipped over would mean missing the way in which the film constructs a specifically Inuit epistemology.<sup>52</sup> More careful attention to the film, however, demonstrates that what the filmmakers do is take the non-Inuit audience hostage, successfully forcing us to alter our consumption of visual images to an Inuit pace, one that is slower and more attentive to the play of light on a grouping of rocks or the place where the snow meets the ocean. The slowness of the sequencing matches the patience one must have to hunt on the ice, wait for hours at a seal hole, traverse long distances on foot or in a dog sled—or contend with over five hundred years of colonialism.

The filmmakers' refusal to edit the film to a more conventional length and willingness to "subject" the audience to seemingly interminable, long shots of people walking or running on the

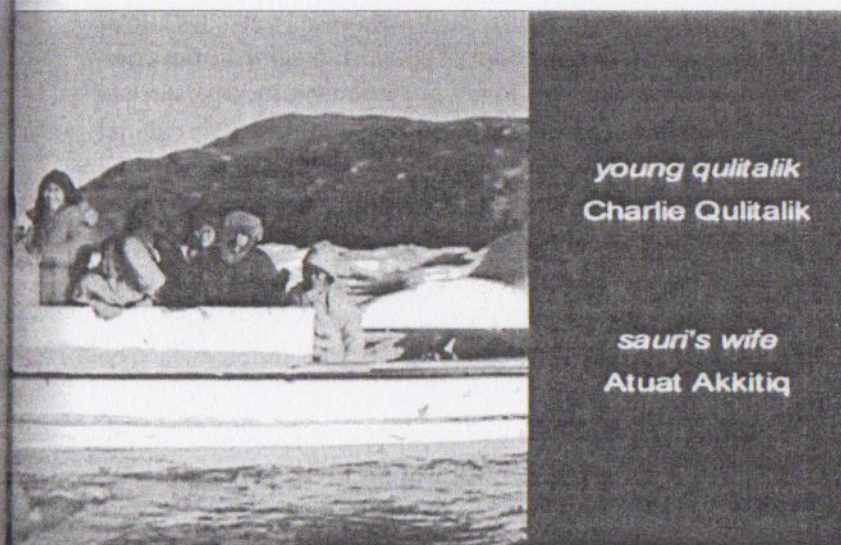
snow and ice marks a visually sovereign practice. Working against Hollywood film conventions, Isuma creates an Inuit aesthetic in *Atanarjuat* that requires a spectator to enter the virtual reservation of the film on Inuit terms and, in the case of a non-Inuit spectator, as an outsider. In a geographical site represented as *terra nullius*, the filmmakers' insistence upon peopling the land and demonstrating the Inuit's dependence on it is a means of asserting political and representational sovereignty at a time of crisis in terms of the United States and Canada's history of resource extraction and environmental degradation in the Arctic. As Steven Leuthold attests, "Group identities, especially before the advent of electronic media, were linked, as they still are, to shared but special access to physical locations, a main reason for the continued emphasis on place in Native American documentaries."<sup>53</sup> The land is not something that the characters of the film are in conflict with and attempt to overcome, but rather is a varied and essential backdrop against which the particularities of the narrative are played out. This is especially key to understanding the film since communities in the Arctic continue to rely on the land and its plant and animal population for survival.

The film closes with the expulsion of negative forces and healing in the form of the community singing Kumaglak's *ajaja* (personal) song in the presence of *Atanarjuat* and Atuat's son Kumaglak (Bernice Ivalu), a reincarnation of the original Kumaglak, making the narrative frame one that is circular rather than linear. The narrative follows the traditional story's plot by expelling the influence of a shaman who caused the community harm, but makes a larger, contemporary claim for repudiating the negative influences of the Western world brought on by colonialism. The cultural and political work of the film within the Igloodik community is to instill a sense of pride in young people through the success of award-winning projects such as *Atanarjuat* and to provide jobs and experience to its members who live in poverty, face substance

abuse, and suffer from high suicide rates. Kathleen Fleming notes that both Igloolik Isuma and Arnait Video Productions continue to operate as community-based production companies, helping to stem the tide of violence that began with the advent of colonialism in Arctic villages.<sup>54</sup> She writes that the companies have provided “direct professional experience shooting and editing video, preparing story lines and scripts, and fundraising.”<sup>55</sup>

The representation of the film’s shamanistic storyline, coupled with the cultural and political work it has accomplished off-screen, are examples of visual sovereignty, as are the film’s production shots included at the end of the film. In these scenes, the audience gets a glimpse into the filmmaking process and the context of the making of the film. As the credits roll and Kumaglak’s *ajaja* song is still heard, camera sleds pulled by actors and the crew film a naked *Atanarjuat* running on the ice, the actor who plays Oki walks along the beach in hip waders and a motorcycle jacket listening to headphones, and actors out of costume wave to the camera from a modern boat. These shots, like Nanook’s smile, poke fun at the spectator, forcing the viewer (who has the patience to sit through to the film’s end) to imagine *Atanarjuat* as a narrative film produced by a vibrant contemporary Inuit community rather than a documentary on the mythic past or footage from a bygone era.

These final images lay bare and interrogate the project of ethnographic film. As Alison Griffiths asserts, “As a discursive category, ethnographic film refers less to a set of unified signifiatory practices or to the anthropological method of intensive fieldwork than to the looking relations between the initiator of the gaze and the recipient.”<sup>56</sup> As a camera person sitting on the prow of a boat turns to film another crew member holding a camera, the audience realizes that while the film offers a glimpse into Inuit community life, it also reminds the audience that ethnographic



28. Cast and crew wave from boat while credits roll in *Atanarjuat* (2001).

film is often merely a mirror reflecting the gaze of the Western viewer. While Kunuk claims that “the goal of *Atanarjuat* is to make the viewer feel *inside* the action, looking out rather than outside looking in,” the production shots bring the audience back to the present and situate the viewer outside the community, back in the space of the darkened cinema.<sup>57</sup>

Kunuk and the Igloolik Isuma team operate as technological brokers and autoethnographers of sorts, moving between the community from which they hail and the Western world and its overdetermined images of Indigenous people. James C. Faris has argued that Indigenous filmmakers “do not join the global village as equal participants, as just more folks with video cameras. They enter it already situated by the West, which gives them little room to be anything more

than what the West will allow" because of the hegemonic effects of capitalism and consumerism.<sup>58</sup> Igloolik Isuma Productions contradicts Faris's statement by creating a film that incorporates and reworks ethnographic elements to offer up a corrective cultural narrative to combat a century of anthropological monographs and documentaries. The filmmakers present an Inuit oral narrative through a visual register in the service of their community, while at the same time stretching the boundaries of Indigenous representation through the deployment of visual sovereignty. Igloolik Isuma enters the "global village" of media production on its own terms, engaging in a new, metaphorical form of *illuriik* that retains a sense of humor—laughing, perhaps, like Allakariallak, about the paradoxical nature of the project.

## 6 Epilogue

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### Redfacing Redux

One week after I submitted the revisions of this manuscript to the press editor, I became intimately aware of the persistent, sometimes violent afterlife of redfacing and the importance of drawing attention to and critically engaging racist imagery. In November 2008 I learned that the public elementary school my daughter attended engages in a noncontinuous, forty-year tradition of dressing kindergarteners up in "Pilgrim" and "Indian" costumes with another school in the district as a way to teach American history and the significance of the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday.<sup>1</sup> Given that so many schools and elementary school systems have relinquished this racist practice, it was dismaying to learn that it still persists in some schools. In response I consulted with other parents whose children were in the same school district, with local Tongva tribal members, with colleagues who teach Native American Studies, with the Title 7 Indian Education Organization in the Los Angeles Unified School District, with members of a national association dedicated to Native American