

The World's Fair and the Fair World: Rewriting Inuit Stories from Without and Within on Film

Author's Statement

My essay "The World's Fair and the Fair World: Rewriting Inuit Stories from Without and Within on Film" was written for my Dietrich College Grand Challenge Seminar: Native Americas: Facts and Fictions taught by Professor Anne Lambright and Professor Paul Eiss. This essay illustrates differences between colonial and anti-colonial narratives through two films which take vastly different approaches in portraying Indigenous Inuit communities in what is now Canada. I aim to challenge the colonial narrative of the iconic *Nanook of the North* (1922) by contrasting it with the anti-colonial film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001).

Growing up, I was exposed to colonial propaganda that suggested Indigenous people were no longer present. Over time, I became more aware of the colonial history in my region, and understood that not only were Indigenous communities present, but their cultures and histories ran in opposition to the western narratives I had been taught. Yet, the stereotype of the "wildness" and "primitivity" of the "Indian" persists in many circles.

This stereotyping is clearly demonstrated in films like *Nanook* which are still regarded as prime examples of ethnographic documentation. But, on the front line of the artistic movement to write truly Indigenous narratives and cast off the colonial mold stands *Atanarjuat*, one of the loudest in a growing chorus against the ongoing cultural and physical colonization of Indigenous and marginalized peoples. In this essay, I hope to show the distinction between the Indigenous and colonized voices that have more recently been allowed to take center stage and their "extractive" counterparts.

-Ilyas Khan

I grew up in Buffalo, New York, home to the Pan-American Exposition of 1901. The Pan-American exposition, much like the World's Fair (or *Exposition Universelle*), was a convention where entrepreneurs and artisans from around the world came to show off the 'latest and greatest' that they had to offer. Fondly remembered as making Buffalo the first electrified city, there was a dark side to what might otherwise be a point of pride: the "living exhibits." Shown across the United States and the world at such expositions, they would drag Indigenous peoples from hundreds (if not thousands) of miles away to be displayed like animals in a zoo. These peoples were often given little choice, like Chief Geronimo of the Apache, who was captured and displayed in Buffalo in 1901. As time progressed, these "living exhibits" began to fall out of favor ("President McKinley and the Pan-American Exposition of 1901").

But, what would take their place? As the medium of film advanced, a new genre emerged, "The Anthropological Documentary," the forerunner of which, *Nanook of the North*, sought to recapture the audience that would have come to throw peanuts at Geronimo. *Nanook* follows the story of an Inuit hunter named Nanook and his family – his wife and several children – as they go about what is described as "real life in the North." The film was directed by White director Robert J. Flaherty, who would go on to make a career out of "ethnographic films" ("Robert J. Flaherty").

Nanook was created in 1922 as a White person's version of Native life and stories, but since the 1970s there has been a new movement among Native Americans to expand and take ownership of their representation in film and literature, exploring new media and writing stories for Native audiences. The 2001 film *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner* comes out of this movement to rewrite representations of Native Peoples. It follows the mythical brothers Atanarjuat and Amaquiat as they fight with the evil spirit which has overrun their village of Igloodik. *Atanarjuat*

confronts the issue of *Nanook*'s colonial narrative and dioramic nature by creating a truly Native production. While the films *Atanarjuat* and *Nanook of the North* bear some similarities, the differences in the casting, crew, cinematography, storytelling, and even set and prop design cast *Atanarjuat* as a film of Indigenous liberation and *Nanook* as a film of colonialist sensationalization that turns the Inuit of Ungava into "living exhibits" like those at the World's Fairs.

Nanook of the North

Nanook of the North seeks to bring Inuit life into White theaters for spectacle, the same way Indigenous peoples were taken prisoner and exhibited at World's Fairs in the early 20th century. This is done through degrading intertitles, Eurocentric casting, crew and set choices, as well as prop use. As *Nanook* is a silent film, the intertitles take on the role of a third person narrator ("Robert J. Flaherty") who creates a fictitious life for the family. This "Godlike" White narrator transforms each scene into a museum diorama with an explanatory plaque. The sensationalization and stereotyping of Inuit culture is clear and purposeful, deriving its rhetoric from the "Anthropology" and "Ethnology" of the era which prioritized a good story over the actual language, culture, religion and experience of a people, and sought to characterize the "other" as either a violent savage, or an ignorant in need of the White Man's protection.

Casting in Nanook of the North

The film's "veracity" is immediately cast into doubt as in its casting not a single person actually performs their lived experience. Nanook (played by a man *actually* named Allakariallak) and his family (two wives that aren't *actually* his wives and several children that aren't *actually* his children) go about what is described as "a story of life and love in the real arctic" despite the fact that most of these people did not typically actually live together (under the same roof).

Additionally, just as White organizers of “living exhibits” would pick and choose “specimens” to bring to World’s Fairs, (oftentimes prisoners or the destitute (Mathur 498)) Flaherty’s casting of Allakariallak as Nanook was not just by happenstance. In fact all of the casting choices were done to find those Inuit who best fit the Western standards of each character. This is vastly different from the *Atanarjuat* approach which, while placing certain people into certain roles, did not assign them to those roles based on Western archetypes. Both films cast non-professional actors, but only *Nanook* approached casting from the position of: “who will a White audience like best?”

Scenes as Dioramas in Nanook of the North

Much like the construction of *entire villages* at World’s Fairs to demonstrate “real tribal life” Flaherty makes the Inuit into an exhibition through his creation of the sets and scene composition. From cutting igloos in half to make-believe wrestling with a seal, the ways in which those scenes were composed and edited show the clear intent of the filmmakers to present the Inuit in a stereotypical and purely performative way. Though the camerawork makes use of the versatility of the camera, taking some more artistic and immersive shots, the characters in important scenes take center stage in much the same way that they do in museum dioramas. In scenes where the Inuit are hunting, they typically come from the side of the shot, the same way Indigenous and tribal peoples were often depicted as hunting in many classic museum dioramas. (i.e. usually the animal was on one side and the Native Americans would be creeping up from the other, rarely if ever actually seeming to interact with the viewer from behind the glass). In *Nanook*, even though the film presents itself as a depiction of “real life”, almost every crucial scene is staged and set up as if they were mere slides in an exhibit on Inuit culture at the Buffalo

Science Museum in 1922. In this way, the film makes objects of its subjects, and capitalizes on the exoticizing nature of Settler culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Props in Nanook of the North

Further *exhibit-ization* can be seen in the use of props. While harpoons and similar technologies were (by then) greatly outdated, it wasn't as if they were culturally alien to the actors. However, Inuit had by then been using firearms and were acquainted with other Western technologies like the gramophone, the centerpiece of the famous scene in which Nanook bites a record (Rony 111). The film did not portray *contemporary* life, rather a Westernization of Inuit traditions and historical practices. At the beginning of *Atanarjuat*, Qulitalik, a sort of shamanic character and brother to the matriarch Panikpak can be seen first swallowing water from an abalone shell, then spitting it onto a fur cloth and using it to ice the feet of a sled. The absence of tools like the fur cloth used for spreading the water in *Nanook* is notable. Instead of spitting into a cloth, Nanook just spits on and licks objects directly, or uses his hands. This is further demonstrated when he glazes his knife by licking it directly while building the igloo (*Nanook*, 37:53-38:15). As he does so, he repeatedly turns to face the camera and even seems to look at it, putting this action center stage, which might be indicative of Flaherty's desire to capture the knife-licking. In fact, Flaherty focuses on licking knives quite frequently, as it features after almost every hunting scene in the film.

In the scenes in *Atanarjuat* where the people of Igloolik are constructing igloos, this tactic of licking the knife to "cut more easily" is absent, and even when *Atanarjuat* *does* lick his knife it is hardly a significant part of the scene. In fact, the use of water is much more prominent in the segments following both of these scenes (*Atanarjuat*, 31:05-32:10; 2:25:25-2:25:42). It is similarly absent in scenes following hunts. The way in which Flaherty focuses on the Inuit using

their tongues as tools seems to have been purposeful, to further sensationalize them as being backwards and quaintly “primitive” figures.

Relatedly, the use of raw meat as a prop is crucial, because the attitude with which the prop is consumed portrays the Inuit as being savage and ravenous. Much like how the Igorot were forced to eat dogs every day at the 1904 World’s Fair, this constant portrayal of the consumption of raw meat with people eagerly stuffing their faces is extremely reductive of the broader ceremony of the hunt and consumption of the animals (“Living Exhibits’ at 1904 World’s Fair Revisited”). As Shina Novalinga notes, the Inuit use every part of the animals they kill, and oftentimes these hunts have underlying spiritual components which are not represented at all (Novalinga). The use of raw meat as a prop is rooted in a colonialist framing of non-Western cultures as savage and backwards. Much as it fascinated the White audience to force the Igorot to eat dogs, in degrading the Inuit’s cultural practices, Flaherty crafts a narrative that suits the White public’s desire for exotic spectacles, paralleling the concepts of the World’s Fairs.

Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner

Atanarjuat counters the extractivist nature of *Nanook* by crafting a cultural narrative which refuses to be framed in a White Man’s terms. The first thing a viewer will notice is that nothing in the film is in English, nor is it explained. By giving Indigenous language a spotlight, it rejects the silent judgment of *Nanook*. Additionally, unlike *Nanook*, the events of *Atanarjuat* are set far in the past, well before contact and colonization by European powers. Thus, it creates a completely Indigenous setting in which the ethnographic practices of the past have no meaning, so the filmmakers can focus on a message to the future. *Atanarjuat* makes use of every tool in its belt to craft this message, including cinematography, storytelling, and set and prop design, as well as the film’s score.

The scene is set in the mythological past of Igloodik, a city in Nunavut in what is now Canada. It follows the story of two mythical brothers, Atanarjuat and Amaquiat as they navigate the trouble brought on their village and their families when an evil spirit puts a curse on their village, killing the father of the chief in Atanarjuat's time, and replacing him with the chief we know in the film. Over the course of the film, the main antagonists, Oki and Puja (a brother and sister), under the influence of the evil spirit grow increasingly more dastardly, eventually killing their own father (the chief) and Amaquiat. In the end, Atanarjuat defeats them and they are banished from Igloodik.

Cinematography in Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner

Unlike *Nanook*, the cinematography, the camera's movements, the closeup shots of people and action, all give a sense of being in the space, a part of the scene, as opposed to looking in on a diorama. For example, the scene in which Oki first antagonizes Atanarjuat after they're playing tag, when he accuses Atanarjuat of trying to steal Atuat (who is betrothed to Oki) from him, the viewer is brought in between the two men, watching their facial expressions, their movements and manners. It feels as if the viewer is there, on the tundra, rather than looking in or down on the scene as in *Nanook*. The immersion of the viewer can also be attributed to the fact that there is no narrator, nobody to explain what is happening to the viewer, nobody to rationalize the Inuit story to the Non-Inuit audience. This lack of a narrator removes the plaque and breaks the glass on the diorama and instead makes the viewer a passive presence in the story. As such, the viewer becomes more emotionally connected to the story's subjects and can find their own interpretation of the telling of the story. Furthermore, the film's exclusive use of the Inuktitut language, rather than English, deepens the immersion and emotional connection and makes clear who the primary audience of the film is intended to be: other Inuit.

Prop and set use in Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner

Prop and set use in *Atanarjuat* go further to expose much of the objectification and sensationalizing of the Inuit in *Nanook*. Unlike *Nanook*, *Atanarjuat* makes clear that Inuit were not technologically backwards. The Inuit of *Atanarjuat* use fur and abalone shells to ice the feet of their sleds. Their igloos are spacious and warm, not kept “below freezing,” as Flaherty portrays (a decision likely made to cover up for the fact that he had them sawed in half for cinematographic convenience). With its direct challenges to much of the presumed backwardness in *Nanook*, one can see how *Atanarjuat* is deconstructing the Inuit diorama.

A crucial difference in prop use between the films is the use of meat and the idea of “the hunt”. In *Nanook* the hunt is depicted as something wild and frenzied, done to stave off starvation. In stark contrast, the Inuit in *Atanarjuat* are not scrambling to saw off their chunk of raw meat. There is a tradition of respect for hunters, elders, and *hunted*, that is clearly illustrated across the film. This deep connection to tradition as exhibited through the use of props shows that the filmmakers of *Atanarjuat* were looking to build a story that was true to their histories and not to a westernized interpretation of them.

Score in Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner

The score of *Atanarjuat* is composed of music from three disparate Indigenous groups. The first is that of the Inuit, with Inuit throat singing and drumming both present in the film score. These obviously tie the film to the people by which and for which it is made, including cultural musical practices as diegetic sound. In most scenes, singing serves to be either a furthering of character relationships or simply for fun. Two major non-diegetic components of the soundtrack are interesting because they point to a definition of Indigeneity which stretches far beyond Canada or even the Americas. There are a number of pieces which seem to reflect

Australian Aboriginal music with the use of didgeridoos, particularly in more exciting and animated scenes. For example, as Tulimaq is returning to Igloolik from the hunt, we hear a didgeridoo droning as the camera pans between his feet, the sled and his face.

The other major Indigenous group featured in the soundtrack are Tuvans, specifically Huun-Huur-Tu, a famous Tuvan throat singing group. Representing the Turkic and Mongolic Indigenous peoples of Russia, their throat singing can be heard in many of the scenes preceding the suspenseful scenes of the film. For instance, in the leadup to Oki's killing of Amaquuat, their song *Mörgül-Ancestor's Call*, plays over the brothers as they unload the fruits of their hunt and settle down. The part of the song repeated throughout the film is actually a prayer, (the Mörgül) showcasing the Tuvans' ancestor worship and animist beliefs ("Mörgül-Ancestor's Call"). These three, combined with beautiful operatics from a Bulgarian group called The Bulgarian Voices Angelite (who dueted with Huun-Huur-Tu for the album that contains many of these songs) create a truly indigenous soundtrack demonstrating a broader sense of pan-Indigeneity which is at the core of the film's production ideology.

Audience differences between Atanarjuat and Nanook

Many of the contrasts between *Atanarjuat* and *Nanook*, including those outlined above, can be at least partially explained by comparing their objectives and intended audiences. The audience of *Nanook* is evidently the 20th century White settler public. It is a White man's narrative, with no real intention to be shown to the native peoples who participated in its creation, produced to satisfy a curiosity among Whites for the exotic. Conversely, *Atanarjuat* is made primarily for an Inuit audience and reflects this through its use of language, prop and set design, and storytelling. Furthermore, this film has two additional audiences: the global Indigenous population, to whom *Atanarjuat* sends a call to action to embrace the possibilities

inherent in film to preserve language and tradition; and the wider world, to whom the film proudly and with strength declares: We are here. We are not going away. These are our stories, and we write them now.

Conclusion

While the two films have certain aspects in common, and *Atanarjuat* is undeniably influenced by *Nanook*, the similarities are drawn to contrast the two, not to align them. *Atanarjuat* is a call for indigenous liberation, for Indigenous storytelling over some foreign ethnologist coming to judge and construe their culture how they please. Meanwhile *Nanook* seeks to cage the “savage” in film, forcing its participants to pantomime a false version of their lived experience. The vast differences in the casting, crew, cinematography, storytelling, and even set and prop design make it clear that *Nanook* is a colonial vision, a product of the World’s Fair, and *Atanarjuat* is an Indigenous vision of a Fair World.

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