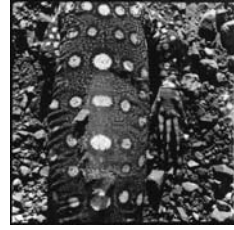


INTERNATIONAL
journal of
CULTURAL studies

Copyright © 2004 SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi
www.sagepublications.com
Volume 7(4): 379–397
DOI: 10.1177/1367877904047860



Nunavut

Inuit television and cultural citizenship

● Avi Santo

University of Texas at Austin, USA

ABSTRACT ● This article expands the discussion of Inuit broadcasting in northern Canada to encompass actual texts, about which little has been written. Specifically, I focus on *Nunavut*, a 13-part television series produced in 1994–5 by Igloodik Isuma Productions. *Nunavut* is considered the first dramatic series to be created entirely by Inuit. While drawing upon Ginsburg's emphasis on the significance of 'embedded aesthetics' to indigenous media producers, I argue that *Nunavut's* visual and narrative forms are essential to its cultural and political goals of sustaining and reviving Inuit culture, and, therefore, that any exploration of the series must not separate form from intention. I also build on John Hartley's arguments for conceptualizing television as a teacher of cultural citizenship. Inuit media productions not only teach Inuit about their culture, but how to practice it. In this sense, Inuit media has been a significant source in mobilizing cultural citizenship. *Nunavut's* aesthetic and narrative choices, which attempt to link past and present Inuit identity and forge a political future that encompasses indigenous identity, exemplify TV's 'love of influence' (Hartley, 1999: 43). ●

KEYWORDS ● broadcast policy ● Canada ● cultural citizenship ● embedded aesthetics ● generative mechanisms ● indigenous media ● Inuit ● mode of production ● oral history ● self-determination ● Television

Introduction

To date, much has been written on the development of northern broadcast policy in Canada and its continuing impact on Inuit access to modes of video production and distribution. The purpose of this article is to expand the discussion of Inuit broadcasting in northern Canada to encompass actual texts, about which little has been written. Specifically, this article will focus on *Nunavut*, a 13-part television series that was produced in 1994–5 by Igloolik Isuma Productions, an Inuit production company located in the north Baffin region of the eastern Arctic. *Nunavut* is considered the first, and only, dramatic series to be created entirely by Inuit (written, directed, produced and starring). Set in 1945, the series has been singled out for its unique visual style and narrative structure (Cousineau, 1999: 1). Isuma has also been widely recognized for its employment of untrained Inuit in almost every aspect of its productions (Evans, 1999a: 177).

While I am concerned with exploring the specific aesthetic, narrative and production choices made in the creation of *Nunavut* and their intersections with the historically-situated position of Canada's Inuit population in the 1990s, I am also interested in situating Inuit media practices within a larger constellation of indigenous media production occurring on a global scale. Faye Ginsburg insists that keeping the larger indigenous 'mediascape' in mind is essential in preventing analysis from simply fetishizing localized 'authentic' cultural practices and reducing indigenous media to mere spectacles of 'difference' or 'curiosities' at the expense of their shared socio-political and educative functions:

Using such a model for indigenous media helps to establish a more generative discursive space for this work which breaks what one might call the fetishizing of the local, without losing a sense of the specific situatedness of any production. (Ginsburg, 2003: 304)

Thus, my goal is to discuss Inuit media practices in general, and *Nunavut* in particular, with the aim of uncovering the specific generative mechanisms that have shaped its aesthetic and narrative form, as well as its social and political purpose, without making claims to the uniqueness and originality of these images or functions, which recur similarly and differently in other indigenous community media.

Given not only the complex history of broadcast policy in Canada but also the ongoing cultural, economic and political struggles faced by Inuit over the loss of their language (Inuktituk) and traditional ways of life, ever-increasing unemployment and the battle to control their own political destiny (Creery, 1993: 6–26; Remie, 1998), it is safe to say that *Nunavut* did not emerge out of thin air. Instead, questions posed concerning the series must be answered in such a way as to consider the generative mechanisms, both media specific and socio-historical, that contributed to the series'

creation. As Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery have stated, ‘the historian first recognizes that the event under study is not a one-dimensional “thing” but the point of convergence for various lines of historical force’ (1985: 17). It is my contention that the impact of these various historical forces can be traced both directly and indirectly within the content and form of the actual series; that aesthetic, narrative and production choices were influenced by the circulation of cultural, economic, political and media discourses existent at that precise historical moment.

I will argue that the series, *Nunavut*, emerges at a moment of profound potential change for Canada’s northern Inuit population, as self-government and the creation of a separate territory of Nunavut in 1999 loom on the horizon. Moreover, government cutbacks, unemployment and decades of forced settlement and education in Canadian schools continue to threaten the economic and cultural stability of Inuit communities. In this context, *Nunavut* can be understood as resulting from a complex and intersecting web of concerns and goals. Most strikingly, I argue that *Nunavut* provides a site where Inuit can both learn and practice their cultural identities, and, by situating the series just prior to Inuit forced settlement by the Canadian government but after initial contact with white southerners, the series poses important questions regarding the type of self-government Inuit will choose to embrace in a newly formed territory in which they will constitute 85 percent of the population.

While drawing upon Ginsburg’s emphasis on the significance of ‘embedded aesthetics’ to indigenous media producers, my purpose is to call attention precisely to the aesthetic and narrative choices made by Isuma Production with *Nunavut*. Ginsburg has argued that Aboriginal producers in Australia are far less concerned with the narrative or visual form their work takes as they are with its ability to ‘embody, sustain, and even revive or create certain social relations’ among and within Aboriginal communities (2003: 306). I argue that *Nunavut*’s visual and narrative forms are essential to its cultural and political goals of sustaining and reviving Inuit culture, and, therefore, that any exploration of the series must not separate form from intention. This is actually in line with Ginsburg’s own definition of ‘embedded aesthetics’, which she elaborates as ‘a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations’ (p. 306).

Moreover, my analysis of the TV series *Nunavut* is also building on Eric Michaels’ arguments about the role media plays in disseminating and developing a ‘cultural future’ for indigenous peoples that ties political survival to the maintenance of traditional modes of cultural production (2000: 712). I contend that *Nunavut* draws heavily on oral storytelling traditions and communal (rather than individual) creative processes that both educate Inuit about their history and culture and allow for the emergence of a political consciousness rooted in traditional cultural practices

intersecting with modern technological and media forms. Accordingly, Ginsburg asserts that 'the social relations built out of indigenous media practices are helping to develop support and sensibilities for indigenous actions for self-determination' (2003: 315).

While neither Ginsburg nor Michaels directly address the educative function of indigenous media production in their own work, it is implied throughout their articles that Aboriginal media in Australia facilitate the preservation of cultural practices both by capturing them on video and requiring the community to actually perform various ceremonies, thus ensuring the continued practice of Aboriginal culture. In this manner their work, as well as my own efforts in this article, shares conceptual linkages to John Hartley's *Uses of Television*, in which he states that 'teaching is what TV does . . . this is the *use* of television' (1999: 41). Hartley argues that TV teaches things that formal schooling does not (p. 42) and is therefore a potentially powerful source of 'continuing education' by and for groups who have historically been underserved by formal schooling (p. 143). Hartley also states that TV's teaching capacity makes it an important site for the development of 'cultural citizenship', which stresses identity politics as a significant site of political and civic engagement (p. 163). While Hartley's work is largely rooted in a Western European paradigm of television production and reception, it is significant that he specifically identifies indigenous communities as those that might benefit most greatly from TV's educational function. Citing Chesterman and Galligan, he states: 'New understandings of citizenship have been informed by, for instance, the recognition of Aboriginal rights, and that these less formal social and cultural aspects of citizenship and community structures, practices and values are crucially important' (p. 164).

Certainly, in the case of Canada's Inuit population, formal schooling has repeatedly failed to address particular cultural and community needs, while often stressing forms of knowledge that distance Inuit youth from their cultural heritage without providing the necessary tools to help them negotiate their identities as Inuit Canadians. Inuit media production has long served as a site of resistance to these hegemonic incorporating tendencies and has offered alternative means of 'schooling' that not only teach Inuit about their culture, but how to practice it. In this sense, Inuit media has been a significant source in mobilizing cultural citizenship. *Nunavut's* aesthetic and narrative choices, which attempt to link past and present Inuit identity and forge a political future that encompasses indigenous identity, exemplify TV's 'love of influence' (Hartley, 1999: 43).

Still, before celebrating television's liberatory potential to provide counter-hegemonic images and narratives that preserve and strengthen indigenous cultural identities, it must be noted that indigenous media production does not occur in a vacuum, but is almost always subject to policies, budgetary constraints and distribution networks that are regulated by the dominant

culture, which constrain and influence production choices as much as they enable them. These legislative, economic and technological aspects are also part of what Ginsburg refers to when discussing the need to explore specificity within a larger indigenous mediascape, as they tend to be recurring concerns for all indigenous media producers but are often negotiated differently in different cultural contexts. Thus, in discussing the generative mechanisms that have played a part in *Nunavut*'s creation, I will also be examining the specific Canadian context in which Inuit media production takes place.

Nunavut

The 13-part series *Nunavut* is set in 1945 and loosely follows the lives of five Inuit families over a period of one year. Characters, while reoccurring, are not truly distinguishable one from another by particular traits or story lines. Instead, they are often recognized in terms of their role within the family unit or their function within the narrative (father, grandmother, hunter etc.). The only notable exception to this rule is the character of Father Forehead (Norman Cohn), who is often singled out in the episodes in which he appears (roughly 1/3) as trying to introduce changes into the Inuit community through religious services. It should be noted, however, that while Father Forehead is 'individualized' (often through compositions that isolate him from the rest of the community) – he is not depicted in any more depth than any of the other characters in the series, who all tend to function as 'types'. Likewise, there are no distinguishable causal-narratives in any of the episodes. Events often transpire in a seemingly haphazard or cumulative manner, with no apparent connection between them. Repetition of events (such as the thrice unraveling of the dog-sled cords in episode 1) or the presentation of 'dead time', in which little of any narrative significance seems to be occurring, is common.

Visually, shaky hand-held camera-work and a proliferation of pans and zooms give the series a documentary-type aesthetic that also seems very immediate. While these images are often striking, they also counteract the stated fictive nature of the series and upset the suspension of disbelief that the events on the screen are transpiring in the past. These compositions are often interwoven with shots that will linger for several minutes at a time on actions such as the skinning of a caribou (episode 1) or the dragging from the water of a dead polar bear (episode 10). These shots often seem more interested in capturing the process depicted (the skinning) than the result (the hide).

Nunavut was cast entirely with non-actors living in the village of Igloolik. Likewise, no professional costume designers, stunt people, make-up artists or technicians were hired from outside the community. All of the shooting

and editing for the series was done in-house by members of Igloodik Isuma productions, giving the series a very localized and communal feel. While scenarios were envisioned, no scripts were actually written for any of the episodes. Instead, actors were told to perform various actions (hunt caribou, build an igloo) or react to various situations (Father Forehead insisting that they pray before eating the polar bear). Mistakes, miscues or moments that break the illusion of reality (staring directly into the camera lens is a common occurrence) are rarely edited out.

In the particular episodes that will be used as references for the remainder of this analysis, the plots may be summarized as follows:

Episode 1: *Qimuksik* (Dog Team)

A computer-generated title tells us that it is spring, 1945. A family travels by dog sled across the wide expanse of the Arctic. The father teaches his son to drive the dogs, while consoling his young daughter that they will set up camp soon. Also along for the ride are the man's wife and older daughter. The man builds an igloo. The sun sets and the camera zooms out to reveal the vastness of land upon which the tiny igloo is situated. The man and his son hunt for seal and, once caught, the family slaughters and eats it. The man and his son go hunting for caribou, and, after several near misses, kill one. The father teaches his son how to skin the animal. The father and son skin the caribou and load the parts onto the sled and head back to the rest of the family. The father remarks that he nearly did not catch any caribou because he was missing them with his rifle. The caribou parts are removed from the sled and the family eats. As the dog sled heads off again, the credits roll. A montage of the events depicted in the episode accompanies the credits.

Episode 10: *Qaisut*

The computer-generated credit informs us that it is spring, 1946. After a walrus hunt, several families are celebrating by the sea. Children run around playing. Several men are trying to fix the motor on a large boat. Father Forehead is amongst them, but is often shown off on his own, observing the Inuit or taking notes in his scrapbook about a marking in the grass that resembles a human being. It is not clear, or indicated, what this marking is. A man captures a seal and it is gutted. The fat is used for cooking. Suddenly, an old woman spots a polar bear eating the walrus meat. The men throw stones at the bear, which turns to leave. One man grabs his rifle and after several mis-loads, shoots the bear. The bear stumbles into the ocean and dies. Several men climb into a small boat to retrieve the dead animal, while others cheer that they will have polar bear meat to eat. The animal is dragged ashore, skinned and gutted. Father Forehead insists that they pray

before eating the polar bear. The people comply and stand in a circle. All the while, children continue to play and the men continue working on the engine. The prayer finished, people pass around portions of the polar bear to eat. The engine begins to turn as the credits roll.

Analysis

Before exploring the generative mechanisms at play in the creation of the series *Nunavut*, I feel it necessary to state the limitations of my approach. By dividing my analysis into separate economic, mediated, political and cultural/educational subcategories, I have been forced to isolate what are often intricately intertwined causal mechanisms. The following analysis is not meant to represent a completed examination of the processes that led to the creation of the series. Further research remains to be done on how these different contexts interact with one another in order to produce complex or contradictory meanings within the text. The following is simply a framework.

Economic context

At first glance, the economic context in which the series *Nunavut* was created seems straightforward. A lack of money, caused by cutbacks to Inuit broadcasting, could easily explain the sparse look of the program or the use of non-professional actors and crew in its production. After all, Lorna Roth is quite explicit in her description of the impact of government funding cuts made in the first half of the 1990s: 'The effects of the cuts have been and continue to be fairly devastating. Native Communications Societies have had to lay off employees; the number of hours of production have been cut; programs have been cancelled; production values have suffered in some cases' (Roth, 1998: 157).

Based on the above assertion, the choice to set the series in the past could be seen as economically ingenious. As opposed to the typical Hollywood budget for period pieces, setting *Nunavut* in the 1940s would actually have reduced the cost of its production. After all, the Inuit had not yet been forced onto settlements during this decade and were still living on the open land. There would therefore be no need to build sets other than those that could be built out of snow, which is free. Also, there would be no need to rent expensive props such as automobiles or snowmobiles, since the Inuit had not yet incorporated these technologies into their culture in the 1940s. As to the question of the aesthetic and narrative choices employed by the series, many could easily be explained as economical compromises by the producers. Zooms are cheaper than renting cranes or dollies. Pans are quicker and less expensive than laying down tracks. Likewise, hand-held

cameras eliminate the cost of tripods. It is also questionable whether any of these expensive pieces of machinery would have been effective in the snow and ice-filled Arctic, providing yet another rationale for the use of less costly and more efficient methods of shooting.

Similarly, from the perspective of the actual production process, the employment of non-actors often means a significant reduction in cost. Most professional actors are unionized and are therefore entitled to a base minimum salary. Non-professionals are usually willing to work for much less. The price paid for this trade-off however can potentially be seen in the many instances throughout the series in which performers will accidentally look directly into the camera or be unable to keep a straight face.

While the affordability of equipment, crew and locations undoubtedly played some part in the conception of the *Nunavut* series, it would be inaccurate to state that only negative economic conditions impacted upon the production. In truth, *Nunavut* was produced on a relatively high budget of CAN\$779,000 (see: www.isuma.ca/objectives.html). Furthermore, Isuma paid out more than half of that amount in salaries to its actors and crew, generating a substantial economic boom for the community of Igloolik, many of whom suffer from unemployment due to lack of industry and professional training. Cousineau states:

Igloolik Isuma Productions managed the tour de force of bringing more than two million dollars into their community by creating, in the last ten years, over 100 part-time jobs in the cultural sector. In a community where unemployment reaches 50 percent, this is not a negligible contribution. (1999: 1)

It should be noted that this economic contribution is not simply an accidental marriage of convenience, in which Isuma gets cheap labor in exchange for a paycheck, but is part of the stated goals of the production company. According to Isuma's website, its 'mission is to create skilled jobs and sustainable economic development for Inuit in Igloolik and Nunavut by producing independent professional media products from an Inuit point of view' (Igloolik Isuma Website, 2004).¹

Media context

Initially, it might appear as though by setting the series in the 1940s, Isuma were merely trying to appease southern decision-makers. After all, the predominant representations of Inuit in the media have often depicted them as primitives, living in a pre-modern era. Inuit producers must seek funding approval from the same organizations that have regularly supported highly inaccurate representations of native cultures by non-native filmmakers, from Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) to Jacques Dorfmann's *Shadow of the Wolf* (1992), which stars the Hispanic actor Lou Diamond Phillips as an Inuit.

Since the earliest days of contact with non-Aboriginal people, the stories of Aboriginal people have been constructed and disseminated by outsiders for outsiders. . . . Aboriginal people are constructed in a historic past in present stereotypes: the noble red man roaming free in the forest, the bloodthirsty savage attacking the colony or the wagon train, the drunken Indian, the Aboriginal environmentalist. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 2004: 5)

One of the fundamental contradictions within Canadian northern broadcast policy is that while it grants the Inuit tremendous freedom to tell their own stories, in their own languages, it also situates the money to tell those stories in the hands of non-Inuit. In the end, southerners are the ones ultimately allowed to dictate what qualifies as an acceptable Inuit production. 'Direct control of the videomaking process lies firmly in local hands at Isuma, but the outfit is still dependent on a southern-based granting system steeped in southern-Canadian values and worldviews' (Evans, 1999a: 190). Consequently, Inuit producers must tailor their ideas to appeal to possible misperceptions of southern decision-makers. By setting *Nunavut* in 1945, Isuma may be able to tap into the stereotype of native people far-removed from modernity that circulates amongst southern financial backers in order to secure funding.

Yet, a close examination of *Nunavut* would easily dispel the notion that it is merely mimicking the ethnographic misrepresentations that preceded it. It is not my intention to claim that the representations of Inuit life in the series *Nunavut* are more authentic than those presented by Flaherty but instead, to point to the distinctions between them. First, *Nunavut* is purposely set at an historical moment that is pre-settlement but post-contact. Whereas Flaherty was concerned to show the primitiveness of Nanook as he hunted with wooden spears and wondered at the marvels of technology (Nanook bites into a phonograph, thinking it might be food), the producers of *Nunavut* are keen to provide a view that promotes how Inuit were able to harmoniously embrace both modernity and tradition. In the two episodes described above, the Inuit hunt with rifles not spears. Moreover, in the episode entitled *Qaisut* they are shown not only with a motor-powered boat, but possessing the knowledge to fix it. In another episode from the series, several men discuss the ongoing war against Hitler, dispelling the myth that the Inuit were secluded and had no conception of the world beyond the Arctic.

Second, the series attempts to dispel the often-romanticized images of the Inuit that are commonplace in the work of Flaherty and other non-Inuit filmmakers. In *Nanook of the North*, Nanook's very existence is presented as the ultimate heroic/tragic struggle against the forces of nature. His hunt for whale is transformed into an almost mythic ordeal and his efforts to survive are always depicted with a sense of urgency. In contrast, the narratives of

Nunavut are filled with depictions of 'ordinariness'. Yes, the Inuit hunt caribou, seal and even polar bear, but these episodes are often filled with mishaps and are devoid of dramatization. The father must shoot at the caribou twice before he kills one. Likewise, the man taking aim at the polar bear must cock his rifle three times before it is properly loaded. Once shot, however, the polar bear does not attack the Inuit, but stumbles into the lake and dies. Its carcass is not ritualistically displayed as the trophy of some great battle, but is quickly skinned and eaten. Michael Robert Evans has also noted this distinction: 'Nanook positions its hero in a mighty struggle against the overwhelming harshness of an impossible land. . . . But *Nunavut* presents the hunt and the meal in much the same manner as a southern videographer might show a trip to the supermarket and work in the kitchen: this is how we get food and this is how we eat it' (1999a: 258–9).

It is important to note that the 'ordinariness' of Inuit cultural practices depicted in the series is different from what Alan McKee has termed the elusive 'banality' of Aboriginal representation on Australian TV. McKee asserts that Aboriginality is rarely associated with middle-class aspirations and that Aboriginal identities that 'partake of these banal elements have been consistently devalued . . . by means of ideas of "authenticity" . . . [that] render Aboriginality and banality incommensurable' (1997: 198). Thus, according to McKee, indigenous cultures are rarely permitted the same mundane mediated existences that whites take for granted, as evidenced by the 'strangeness' the author felt at seeing an Aboriginal contestant on a popular television game show (p. 195).

While *Nunavut*'s producers appear eager to remove the exotic veneer from previous Inuit representation in the media, they are still clearly invested in version of 'Inuitness' that is distinct from, if also capable of selectively incorporating aspects of, southern culture. In the end, *Nunavut*'s images of walrus being hunted and polar bears skinned might look as 'banal' as a home video of a trip to the local supermarket, but the fact remains that they are *not* images of Inuit shopping at the local supermarket. In part, the decision to set the series in the past renders this a moot point (there would have been no supermarket to go to in 1945), but as I will elaborate in the next section, the series' producers purposely construct a selective version of the past that infuses 'ordinariness' into supposedly 'authentic' Inuit cultural practices. In a sense, 'Inuitness' becomes the norm.

Political context

Traditions, according to Raymond Williams, are 'intended to connect with and ratify the present. What [they] offer . . . [are] a predisposed continuity [with the past]' (1977: 116). In this sense, the choice to set *Nunavut* in the year 1945 has less to do with accurately depicting the history of that time period than it does with connecting that historical moment to present-day

concerns. The Canadian government began the process of forcing Inuit into permanent settlements just after the end of World War II (1945). From that period on, the Inuit lost a considerable amount of control over their political destiny, as they were thrust into a new cultural environment without sufficient preparation or training. Many Inuit never recovered from the distortion of their culture brought about by the settlements. High unemployment, lack of industry and a diminution of their traditional means of survival (hunting, fishing) resulted in many Inuit becoming wards of the Canadian government, dependent for their survival on monthly welfare checks.

As Inuit battled back, they gained significant rights as indigenous peoples and finally, in 1993, were promised the creation of a new Territory of Nunavut, which would have an Inuit majority and restore some degree of self-determination over their future. With this in mind, the connection between the television series *Nunavut* being set in 1945 and the territory of Nunavut coming into existence in 1999 could not be clearer. 'Significantly, 1945, the year in which the *Nunavut* series is set, is also the year the government [became] a major force in health and education' (Berger, 1996: 6). In looking back to a time just prior to the Inuit having lost their freedom, the series points ahead to a moment in which that freedom will be restored.

That said, it would be insufficient to claim that the invocation of a particular year would be enough to make this political message salient. The significance of the year 1945 for the series is not rooted in the actual time-frame but in how that period is depicted. Throughout the series, the Inuit characters on the program are represented as self-sufficient. There are no episodes that focus on the failure of the community to find game to hunt or the growing dependency of the Inuit on fur trading posts in order to acquire various commodities, though both of these were very real issues throughout the 1940s, when many Inuit starved to death or grew increasingly reliant upon trade with the Hudson's Bay Company for their survival. Instead, the series focuses on the resourcefulness of the Inuit in adapting to a harsh climate. '[Isuma] see[s] these videos as a chance to show . . . young Inuit . . . how difficult life used to be in the Arctic and how intelligent, resourceful, and creative the Inuit had to be to survive' (Evans, 1999a: 102–3).

This highly selective representation of history in the series *Nunavut* corresponds to Raymond Williams' assertion that traditions are selectively chosen and interpreted in order to meet the needs and values of the current social order. By choosing to 'remember' the past in a particular way, *Nunavut* positions itself ideologically with regards to the present, in which the Inuit have lost much of their freedom, and the near future, when it will hopefully be regained. Eric Michaels has similarly argued regarding the goals of Aboriginal media in Australia, that 'a cultural future can only result from political resistance. It will not be founded on any appeal to nostalgia:

not nostalgia for a past whose existence will always be obscure and unknown, nor a nostalgia we project into a future conceived only in terms of the convoluted temporalities of our own present' (2000: 714). Thus, *Nunavut* does not seek to nostalgically recreate a lost Inuit past nor project it indiscriminately onto an imagined future that resists current Inuit struggles, but instead attempts to draw connections between past and present that might constructively be used in forging a place for Inuit cultural citizenship in a shifting, but still Canadian, political terrain. Similarly, Hartley and McKee argue in the case of Australian Aboriginal media that an 'indigenous public sphere' has emerged that is characterized by an 'intense dialogue between "Aboriginal" and "Australian" components of the overall Australian "semiosphere", the outcome of which is not yet resolved' (2000: 4).

Also significant is the ongoing discourse regarding modernity and tradition present throughout the series, but particularly evident in the *Qaisut* episode. Again, the choice of the year 1945 for the setting of the series is crucial to this rhetoric. In the *Qaisut* episode, scenes of several Inuit fixing a broken engine on a boat accompany scenes of a traditional celebration following the walrus hunt. These two elements are not shown to interfere with one another, but are presented as part of the ongoing life at the campsite. When the polar bear unexpectedly shows up, the men cease their work on the engine and work together to kill and skin the bear. Once done, they resume their work on the engine. (These distinctions are not so evident in the episode. We do not see the men fixing the boat actually put down their tools to kill the polar bear, but some of the men are present in both situations.) 'Kunuk also shows that the Inuit, while appreciative of their heritage and culture, are not stuck illogically in the past. . . . Isuma's Inuit demonstrate real-world practicality' (Evans, 1999a: 260).

The coexistence of modernity and tradition at a point in time before the intervention of the federal government is the key to understanding the significance of the year 1945 for the series. The implications here are twofold. First, that the new territory of Nunavut should embrace both modern and traditional aspects of Inuit culture and second, that the Inuit do not require the assistance of southerners to enter modernity. In order to support this latter claim, one might consider the presence of Father Forehead throughout the *Qaisut* episode. While present, the only non-Inuit character is also the least active, the least participatory and the least helpful. The Inuit fix the motor on the boat without any assistance. Likewise, they kill the polar bear without any help. The priest's only moment of authority comes when he insists that the Inuit pray before eating the polar bear.

Aesthetic choices also support the political discourse present throughout the series. Kunuk often chooses to use intricate panning shots that capture the movement of individuals within a group. Very seldom are individual characters framed in such a way as to emphasize their separation from the

community. The only notable exception is Father Forehead, who on three separate occasions during the *Qaisut* episode is framed in isolation from the rest of the Inuit (twice when he is observing them from the entrance of his tent and again when he wanders off to look at an Inuit monument). Otherwise, Kunuk's mise-en-scene regularly favors the establishment of communal or familial relations through camera movement and framing. These representations of a united Inuit community are often contrasted with extreme long shots that emphasize the isolation of the Inuit from the outside world. In the *Qimuksik* episode, Kunuk chooses to zoom out from a close-up of the completed igloo to reveal the vast emptiness of the land that engulfs it. Again, these images, while not solely motivated by political interests (undoubtedly economic, artistic and cultural influences also contributed to their selection), do support the notion of a united Inuit people inhabiting a land devoid of southern interference (with the exception of the priest, who is present but separate from the rest of the community).²

This emphasis on unity can also be felt at the level of the production process. *Nunavut* must be recognized as a collaborative effort on the parts of many people in the Igloolik community. While Kunuk is listed as the series writer and director, decisions are usually made collaboratively. 'Details regarding performance, dialogue, and authenticity are discussed before each scene is videotaped and decisions are made by consensus' (Berger, 1996: 1). This also fits Marcia Langton's assertions that Aboriginal media are 'community authored' and therefore contributes to Ginsburg's formulation of a transnational indigenous mediascape that encompasses shared practices and intentions (1993: 305).

This participatory approach to the production is also akin to the ways that Inuit decision-making have traditionally transpired. 'The Inuit governed themselves by a flexible system based on consensus . . . proposing a point of view and then modifying it through discussion until general agreement was achieved' (Creery, 1993: 6). In this sense, the *Nunavut* project can be seen, in part, as reasserting this form of collective consensus through the production process.

Cultural/educational context

On a very simple level, *Nunavut* is an historical drama that is meant to teach Inuit about their past. Zacharias Kunuk has noted that the older generation, which still remembers the Inuit way of life prior to 1945, is aging rapidly and passing on (Phillips, 1996: 10). With this in mind, the series represents 'cultural salvage work – efforts to record how igloos were built and how caribou were hunted before that knowledge is lost forever' (Evans, 1999a: 102).

On a more complex level, *Nunavut* must be recognized as adopting a very specific set of visual and narrative codes that are highly reminiscent of an

oral tradition of storytelling that was used for centuries as the model for educating young Inuit in the ways of their culture. 'Like books in southern culture, Inuit oral tradition provides what Marshall McLuhan calls a 'classroom without walls', in which 'the young learned by listening, watching, doing . . . the language and skills of their elders' (Valaskakis, 1998: 6). Both levels emphasize TV's role as teacher of cultural citizenship.

Sally Berger claims that Kunuk is drawn to video-making because he feels the medium bears a strong resemblance to the oral traditions of Inuit culture (1996: 6). What are these resemblances and how are they incorporated into the visual and narrative codes of the series *Nunavut*? According to Michael Robert Evans, traditional Inuit storytellers would often add dramatic flourishes to their tales, 'adding sound effects, varied voices, wild and intense gestures and swelling vocal intonations to make the scene come alive in the midst of the listeners' (1999a: 294). Evans likens the video medium to this process of storytelling, because of the emphasis on visual and aural cues and the ability of video to sweep viewers into the fictional world (p. 295). This answer seems vague and, more precisely, fails to address the educational role that oral stories played in Inuit society. A more detailed account of the formal elements of oral tradition might shed some light on how it has been adapted to fit the series *Nunavut* as well as its significance in educating Inuit about their culture.

First, according to Walter Ong, 'oral thought and expression are additive whereas the written are subordinate' (Lord, 1987: 54). In oral traditions, one event is followed by another and then another without any direct connections between them. Instead, the meaning of the story is meant to emerge from the accumulation of its individual elements. If we look at the episode of *Nunavut* entitled *Qimuksik*, the additive nature of the narrative emerges almost immediately. The family travels across the icy terrain. The father builds an igloo. The father and son hunt for seal. The family eats the seal. The father and son hunt for caribou. The family eats the caribou. The family travels across the icy terrain. End of story. One event does not precipitate the next (with the exception of the family eating the slain animals, but this is weak causation at best, since the slaying of the caribou did not cause the family to eat it). Instead, an overarching impression is formed of the life of the Inuit through the accumulation of all these sequences.

Second, Ong states that in 'oral "life situations" it is necessary to repeat' (Lord, 1987: 57). Again, this finds resonance in the narrative construction of *Nunavut*. In the episode discussed above, repetition abounds. Images of travel by dog sled are repeated on six separate occasions. Not only does the episode begin and end with the family traveling via dog sled across the icy terrain, but the title sequence also features a man traveling by dog sled. There are additional sequences throughout the episode in which the dog sled is present. It is used when the father and son go off to hunt for seal and again for caribou as well as for transporting the caribou meat back to

the camping area. Each of these repeated instances of the dog sled being used adds to the viewer's general understanding of its importance in traditional Inuit life. Not only did the dog sled provide transportation for hunters and their families, but it also could be used to sneak up on an animal that was being stalked or to transport food and other belongings.

Jon C. Stott notes that Inuit oral narratives contain little depth of character or descriptions of specific settings:

Often one has the feeling that specific characters, actions, and settings could be interchanged between stories as they are not that important. The stories seem to be almost ritual celebrations of the general traits which enable the Inuit to survive in a harsh and violent environment. (1986: 218)

It has already been noted that characters in the series *Nunavut* are often indistinguishable one from the other and that they are more easily identified by their role in a particular situation. Certainly, it could be argued that, in both of the episodes described in this article, the most memorable moments are the displays of hunting, skinning and igloo building that allow the Inuit to survive. The actions are on display, not the individuals that display them. When the polar bear is shot, it is of little significance who has done the shooting. Likewise, when the bear is skinned, the camera lingers on the act of skinning rather than the person performing the act.

It is clear from the above analysis that the visual and narrative structures of the series *Nunavut* adhere to some key elements of Inuit oral tradition. This has led the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to conclude: 'although television is primarily a visual medium, it has been adapted to reflect the style and cadences of an oral tradition' (2004: 8). If television could be adapted to reflect the oral style of storytelling, and oral tradition served an educational function in Inuit society, what was *Nunavut* teaching its viewers? Clearly, lingering shots that focus on the process of skinning a polar bear or gutting a seal are meant to showcase the skills involved in such acts. Furthermore, by setting *Nunavut* in the pre-settlement past, a heightened sense of importance is created surrounding the acquisition of such skills for the purposes of survival. As Michael Robert Evans has concluded:

many Inuit today know how to build an igloo, but it is a dwindling art form – and it is done now for reasons of cultural appreciation as much as temporary shelter. By showing the building of the . . . igloo in his video, Kunuk emphasizes both the importance of that skill and the skill itself. (1999a: 93)

This leads to my final point concerning the educational context in which the series *Nunavut* was conceived and produced. Several scholars have emphasized the importance of process as much as product to Isuma's projects (Evans, 1999b: 4; Gale, 1998: 5). Indeed, throughout this article,

the production process has been pointed to as a major source of job creation within the Igloolik community, as an alternative to the hierarchical media practices of the IBC and as a site for traditional Inuit decision-making practices. In this sense, the mode of production has been as significant as (and has contributed to) the content and style of the series and exemplifies the dual concern for text and ‘activities’ Ginsburg seeks to foreground through her application of an ‘embedded aesthetic’ to indigenous media production (2003: 315).

The production process also serves another function. Whereas viewers of the *Nunavut* series might learn about traditional Inuit practices vicariously, those who actively participated in the creation of this series were required to practice their skills even as they were performing them in front of the camera. When the narrative of *Qimuksik* called for the actor to hunt for caribou in the traditional way, this was exactly what he was doing. The same logic applies to the skinning of animals, the building of igloos, the preparation of meals and even the design of costumes and props by those behind the camera:

And the process of making the videos – even beyond the existence of the videos themselves – is intended to reinforce this message [of education]. ‘We had a scene that needed a seal skin tent,’ Kunuk said. ‘Few know how to make them anymore. So we turned to Rachael. She knows how to do it. . . . If Rachael makes a tent and her three daughters learn by watching her, then the knowledge is not archived. It is active and perpetuated. (Evans, 1999a: 103)

In this manner, *Nunavut*’s approach to teaching echoes Umberto Eco’s assertions about proper education. ‘Real education doesn’t mean teaching young people to trust school. On the contrary, it consists of training young people to criticize school books and *write their own school books*’ (Hartley, 1999: 152). It is through this process of re-enactment that traditional skills are not only revitalized, but history and culture are removed from their static manifestations as pictures and words in textbooks. They are given new life.

Conclusion

While I have focused my analysis on the production of a particular text in order to elaborate upon the complex relationship between style and function for indigenous media in general and Inuit media in particular, further research remains necessary in order to make claims for similar aesthetic and narrative forms across indigenous texts. At the moment, I feel most comfortable suggesting that *Nunavut*’s particular form results from the specific generative mechanisms at play within Canadian and Inuit

political, economic and cultural realms, and, since many indigenous communities experience conflicts and concerns in similar areas (though played out differently within different national and indigenous contexts), a transnational model for indigenous aesthetic and narrative practices would need to bear these areas of interconnectivity and specificity in mind.

Finally, I would like to end by re-emphasizing that Inuit media practices are formed in relation to dominant cultural controls over financing, distribution and training that cannot be ignored and which constrain and contain the potential formation of cultural citizenship. I end on this note not to dampen the hopes of Inuit producers, but to stress their role in negotiating between dominant and indigenous cultural practices, localized and nationalized forms of citizenship. *Nunavut* is a complex text precisely because it carves out an Inuit cultural identity that is situated at an interstitial moment after the Inuit have encountered white southerners but before they have been forced onto reservations by the Canadian government. It is not a text that glorifies a mythic past or bemoans the tragic turn of events that follow, but actively negotiates a relationship between past and present that simultaneously emphasizes Inuit self-sufficiency and coexistence. Produced at a crucial liminal moment for the Inuit population, the series proposes a 'cultural future' that keeps both tradition and modernity as active agents in the formation of Inuit cultural citizenship.

Notes

- 1 It is also worth noting that Isuma's method of job creation, while providing valuable skills for those taking part in the productions, is akin to the mixed native economy that actually existed in the 1940s, when *Nunavut* is set. 'What Inuit today call their traditional economy was actually a mixed economy, involving some hunting, some trapping, occasional work for wages' (Creery, 1993: 21). Likewise, an actor or a costume designer working on the series *Nunavut* might be asked to perform traditional Inuit economic activities, such as hunting or sewing, and can also expect to earn a temporary salary for that work.
- 2 A colleague offering feedback on this article asked whether the presence of Father Forehead was meant to criticize 'colonial power'. My response was yes and no. Certainly, Father Forehead's efforts to convert the Inuit are an imposition and his presence within the camp seems to dispel colonialist fictions of white men bringing modernity to the 'savages' as the Inuit seem fully capable of negotiating modern technology and the outside world without him. At the same time, the series never overtly vilifies the priest. His presence is tolerated, often amusedly, by the Inuit. His efforts to have them say grace before eating the polar bear are met neither with resistance nor with willing complicity, but with curiosity and tolerance. As the camera makes its

360-degree spin, it captures numerous smirks and half-hearted attempts to recite the prayer. In this manner, the series seems to acknowledge the minority presence of white and other peoples in Canada's north and posits a complex relationship that emphasizes coexistence.

Bibliography

- Allen, Robert C. and Douglas Gomery (1985) *Film History*. New York: Knopf.
- Berger, Sally (1996) 'Time Travelers', *Inuit Art Quarterly* 11(4): 1–7.
- Cousineau, Marie-Helene (1999) 'Limits or Alternatives: Dead End for First Nations Producers in the Canadian Film and Television Financing System'. Videaz Conference.
- Creery, Ian (1993) *Inuit Eskimo of Canada*. Minority Rights Group International.
- Evans, Michael Robert (1999a) 'Frozen Light and Fluid Time: The Folklore, Politics and Performance of Inuit Video.' Dissertation – Indiana University, September.
- Evans, Michael Robert (1999b) 'Inuit Video: Struggles for Autonomy', *Fuse Magazine* 22(4): 1–7.
- Gale, Peggy (1998) 'A White Light', *Canadian Art* 15(4): 1–8.
- Ginsburg, Faye (2003) 'Embedded Aesthetics: Creating a Discursive Space for Indigenous Media', in Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar (eds) *Planet TV*, pp. 303–19. New York: New York University Press.
- Hartley, John (1999) *Uses of Television*. London: Routledge Press.
- Hartley, John and Alan McKee (2000) *The Indigenous Public Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Igloolik Isuma Website (2004) www.isuma.ca/isuma.html
- Langton, Marcia (1993) 'Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television . . .'. Sydney: Australian Film Commission.
- Lord, Albert B. (1987) 'Characteristics of Orality', *Oral Traditions* 2(1): 54–72.
- McKee, Alan (1997) 'The Aboriginal Version of Ken Done: Banal Aboriginal Identities in Australia', *Cultural Studies* 11(2): 191–206.
- Michaels, Eric (2000) 'For a Cultural Future', in Horace Newcomb (ed.) *Television: The Critical View*, 6th edn, pp. 701–15. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Phillips, Todd (1996) 'Videographer Racing Against Time', *Nunatsiaq News* 15 March: 10.
- Remie, Cornelius H.W. (1998) 'Nunavut: A Challenge for the Inuit', in Leen d'Haenens (ed.) *Images of Canadianness: Visions of Canada's Politics, Culture, Economics*, pp. 129–46. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Roth, Lorna (1998) 'Television Broadcasting North of 60', in Leen d'Haenens (ed.) *Images of Canadianness: Visions of Canada's Politics, Culture, Economics*, pp. 147–66. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (2004) 'Final Draft'. www.indigenous.bc.ca/v3/vol3ch6s2.4to3.1.asp
- Stott, Jon C. (1986) 'Form, Content, and Cultural Values in Three Inuit (Eskimo) Survival Stories', *American Indian Quarterly* 10(3): 213–25.
- Valaskakis, Gail (1988) 'Television and Cultural Integration: Implications for Native Communities in the Canadian North', in Rowland Lorimer and Donald Wilson (eds) *Communication Canada: Issues in Broadcasting and New Technologies*, pp. 124–39. Toronto: Kagen and Woo.
- Valaskakis, Gail (1998) 'Telling Our Own Stories: The Role, Development and Future of Aboriginal Communications.' CCRN Colloquium, June.
- Williams, Raymond (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

● **AVI SANTO** is a graduate student in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include Canadian and Israeli media as well as the American pay cable and comic book industries. He has previously published essays in *The Canadian Journal of Film Studies* and in an anthology edited by David Lavery, *This Thing of Ours: Investigating the Sopranos* (Columbia University Press, 2002). Address: Department of Radio-TV-Film, University of Texas at Austin, 1425 Cloverleaf Drive, Austin, TX 78723, USA. [email: avisanto@mail.utexas.edu] ●