Community of the North: Postnationality in Contemporary Arctic Video Art

Nicole Ashley Dial-Kay

University of Colorado at Boulder, nicoledialkay@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/arth_gradetds

Part of the Contemporary Art Commons, and the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.colorado.edu/arth_gradetds/14

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Art and Art History at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art History Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
COMMUNITY OF THE NORTH: POSTNATIONALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ARCTIC VIDEO ART

By

NICOLE DIAL-KAY

B.A. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 2009
M.A. University of Missouri Saint Louis, 2011

A thesis submitted to the Faculty
of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the
Master’s of Arts Degree

Department of Art and Art History

2013
This thesis entitled:
Community of the North: Postnationality in Contemporary Arctic Video Art
written by Nicole Dial-Kay
has been approved for the Department of Art & Art History

____________________________
Claire Farago

____________________________
James Córdova

____________________________
Robert Nauman

Date____________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Community of the North: Postnationality in Contemporary Arctic Video Art

This thesis aims to analyze the use of new media by contemporary Arctic artists as a means of redefining their region against the popularly accepted separation of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, Canada, and Alaska as individual nation-states, and toward the community of the Arctic region, using themes of language, land, cosmology, folklore, embedded aesthetics, values, symbols, and stories. It is my belief that these artists are creating important works that constitute contemporary self-production of a post-national Arctic cultural future. My discussion focuses on three artists, Ólöf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq, who demonstrate the use of nativism and spotlight everyday repetitive life experiences (de Certeau) to define their individual and collective identities as part of a postnational Arctic community. Each of these artists utilizes video art as a unique medium that offers subaltern communities a counter-discursive voice and an ability to control their identity representation from an “interstitial space” (Bhabha).

Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq utilize the concepts of community, postnationality, and the appropriation of film works to express their individual and collective identity as part of the Arctic in accordance with their own models of interpretation. Nordal self-represents with the utilization of folklore, Ryöppy relies on manipulations of time and space to highlight her identity in relation to nation-state boundaries, and Tagaq fully immerses herself in the techniques and arenas of mass media to spread a new narrative of Arctic community that defies previous colonial representation.
Contents

Chapters

Introduction..................................................................................................................................................................................1
  I. My Journey to the Arctic ...............................................................................................................................................................1
  II. Methodology: Translation in the Everyday .................................................................................................................................3
  III. Foundation Within the Discipline ...........................................................................................................................................7
  IV. The Arctic: A Brief History and Today ..................................................................................................................................14
  V. Video Art and Subaltern Communities ...................................................................................................................................18
  VI. Conclusion....................................................................................................................................................................................21

1. Ólöf Nordal: Folklore and National Narrative.................................................................................................................................22
  I. Seal Maiden: Folklore and Community Groups ..........................................................................................................................22
  II. Iceland Specimen Collection: Construction of a National Narrative .........................................................................................27
  III. Theory and Ólöf Nordal ...............................................................................................................................................................30
  IV. Video Art and the Oral Narrative Tradition ................................................................................................................................31

2. Catarina Ryöppy..................................................................................................................................................................................35
  I. being misplaced: Movement through Boundaries .........................................................................................................................35
  II. Disappearances: Connected Motions ...........................................................................................................................................39
  III. Time-Borders: Manipulated Freedom .........................................................................................................................................42
  IV. Time and Space ............................................................................................................................................................................45

3. Tanya Tagaq: The Ice, the Ocean, the Seal, and the Caribou..............................................................................................................49
  I. Tungijuq: Breath of the Arctic ..........................................................................................................................................................49
  II. Anirniq: “We ARE animals” .........................................................................................................................................................55
  III. This Land and the National Parks Project: Sirmilik: The Appropriation of “Nation” .....................................................................60
  IV. Film and Popular Culture ...............................................................................................................................................................68

Conclusion..................................................................................................................................................................................................73

Figures..................................................................................................................................................................................................80

Bibliography................................................................................................................................................................................................93
Introduction

I. My Journey to the Arctic

In the spring of 2010, I was in the midst of my Master’s of Arts in Museum Studies at the University of Missouri Saint Louis. Dr. Jay Rounds, chair of the program, suggested that I apply for a summer museum position in Alaska paid for by the federal government and regulated through Alaska State Museums. The applicant chosen for the position would spend four months assisting different museums in Alaska, some small, some large, some Native-run, some maintained by families of the first Alaskan homesteaders, and some well-endowed museums. These museums required help ranging from curatorial work, collections management, database overhauls, conservation needs, to exhibition design.

I had previous experience in all of these fields from prior work and my museum studies courses so I followed Dr. Round’s advice and applied for the position. While I knew very little about Alaska at the time and only had brief knowledge of Native American arts, I felt that my skill set was adequate and the prospect of adventure in the “last frontier “ was undeniable. I was chosen for the position and arrived in Alaska in May. I worked in Anchorage, Homer, Seward, Seldovia, Nanwalek, and on Kodiak Island over the following four months.

What I experienced during my assistantship has changed the course of my academic intentions and professional plans. I worked closely with the Rasmuson Foundation at the Pratt Museum in Homer, Alaska. The Rasmuson Foundation is a family foundation that is dedicated to “improving the quality of life for Alaskans.” The foundation provides a significant amount of funding to contemporary Alaskan artists, Native and non-Native, in

an attempt to foster Alaskan artistic culture as a means of improving life for all. I was taken with many of the artists featured in the Rasmuson Foundation files at the Pratt Museum who were involved in Alaskan community building efforts. The investment of artists such as Alvin Amason and Rebecca Lyon in exhibiting within their own community (as well as at outside galleries and museums), promoting Native languages, and spreading oral histories of their tribal nation and of Alaska had an incredible impact on me.

I traveled to Kodiak Island near the end of my trip to spend a quick two days with MacArthur Award recipient Sven Haakanson at the Alutiiq Museum in the town of Kodiak. On Kodiak Island, in a few different towns and villages, the Alutiiq Renaissance was underway. Traditional celebrations were being held, rarely seen practices of canoe building and shelter construction were revived and completed, and funding was supplied for the creation of artwork that expressed the “Renaissance” of the Alutiiq, Russian, and American history of the Emerald Isle, Kodiak Island’s local title.

It is now three years later and I am returning to the Arctic and to the idea of community in my thesis. I traveled back to Alaska last summer (2012), and spent time in the archives of the Anchorage Museum and of the Pratt Museum in Homer. While examining the most recent funding ventures of the Rasmuson Foundation, I discovered a prolific amount of video art from all areas of the Arctic—Siberian Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. Many of these film works center on the idea of community, a transcendent transnational community that pervades throughout the Arctic Circle.

In this thesis, I will analyze the use of new media by contemporary Arctic artists, Native and non-Native, as a means of redefining their region against the legally defined and
popularly accepted separation of Arctic countries as individual nation-states, and toward the connection of these lands, using themes of folklore and oral tradition, the Arctic land, time and space, language, cosmology, community, values, symbols, and embedded aesthetics. It is my belief that these artists are creating important works that constitute contemporary self-production of a postnational Arctic cultural future which operates as one of many potential identifications for the heterogenous populations of the Arctic. I will frame and test this hypothesis against the existing scholarship of subaltern communities, new media, and postnationalism.

II. Methodology: Nativism and Translation in the Everyday

I am not from the Arctic. I did not grow up there and, other than the five collective months that I have spent there, I do not hold any claims to residency. Therefore, I will be constructing this essay from the perspective of an outsider. As an outsider, it is vital that I provide a framework for my thesis that acknowledges my perspective on authorship concerning boundary cultures.

In 1988 Gayatri Spivak published the cornerstone essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” which investigates the problems with examining boundary cultures based on accepted “universal” concepts and frameworks created by a dominant European colonial culture.² Spivak argues that knowledge is never innocent and is acquired and created with the goal of personal gain by whoever collects and disperses the information. Further, she claims that research of non-dominant cultures is always colonial, as information is extracted and brought back to the dominant culture. The language that the information is dispersed in

exists autonomously as a system of signs and symbols that only speak within the powerful system.

While many scholars have since proposed models of scholarship with acknowledgement of the question posed by Gayatri Spivak’s question of culture and cultural property, I will utilize a model in this thesis that gives power to the peoples of focus, the nativist model as explored by archaeologist Nicholas Thomas in Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Anthropology. Those who have adapted the nativist position recognize that what may be popularly understood as essentialist notions of Native cultures can play a progressive role in the formation of self-orchestrated identity. Art historians Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi explain the nativist position as “a theoretical interest of self-representation that lies precisely in its reproduction of anthropological systems.” Perpetrators of the nativist model work within existing colonial models to achieve their own ends. The nativist model puts particular emphasis on social unity and the performance and determination of identity, individual and collective.

The three artists that I will be considering, Ólöf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq, are all participants in the nativist approach. Each artist appropriates and utilizes the notion “nation” according to their individual goals of self-expression, identity, and community definition. They utilize their connection to the land, their history, and traditions as they see fit for their personal definition. While they make use of the concept of “nation,” they are also not restricted by singular definitions that others may perceive

---

when looking upon them or their artworks. Also, community is a central focus to each artist in their self-representation. The community of the Arctic, the designated nationality that they hold, and/or the global community are persistent themes in all three of the artists’ works. In addition, Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq all participate in the deliberate performance of their identity in their lives and through their artwork. Their performance is the agency and intentionality of their desired self-representation as members of the Arctic community.

I will also utilize in this thesis a model of understanding other cultures put forth by Michel de Certeau in his 1984 work *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Michel de Certeau argues that the most effective approach for academics working with other cultures is the study of everyday life, particularly those actions which require repetitiveness. De Certeau writes, “Considering culture as it is practiced, not in what is most valued by official representation or economic politics, but in what upholds it and organizes it, three priorities stand out: orality, operations, and the ordinary.”

De Certeau claims that examining the everyday is the most powerful translation of a culture because our repetitive actions are in a constant process of producing meaning of our social experience.

Ólóf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq each elicit the repetitive behaviors that constitute meaning for their lives. Living in an Arctic region provides a realm of existence that fosters similar repetitive daily actions from Norway to Canada as demanded by the landscape and shared cultural aspects fostered by a history and present of connectivity. The orality that de Certeau refers to is present in their use of language and signs in the Arctic. All three artists evoke these symbols and, at times, question their

---

meaning or otherwise embrace the community that shares an understanding around the
signifiers. Each artist utilizes shared operations that span the Arctic with the
representation of the collective occupations, hunting or weather prediction methods,
sHELTER building, and forms of entertainment that have come out of a shared physical
environment. The ordinary element of meaningful repetitive behavior in the lives of the
three Arctic artists is present in common landscapes, childhood stories, belief systems, and
family structures. It is with Michel de Certeau’s theory of focus on the everyday that I
argue for the importance of the expression of community identity by Nordal, Ryöppy, and
Tagaq.

I will utilize the nativist position and Michel de Certeau’s theory of translation in
conjunction with one another as instruments with which to examine the artists from the
Arctic. I have chosen three artists who demonstrate nativism and de Certeau’s theory of the
eyeDay to demonstrate the community of the Arctic region. Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq
have expressed the relationship of their work to notions of connectivity of the Arctic region
in published interviews. Each of these artists demonstrates themes of community in their
work (language, land, cosmology, folklore, embedded aesthetics, values, symbols, and
stories) that are built on the foundation of everyday experience. While all inhabitants of the
Arctic experience life uniquely in an ever-changing environment, the artists that I have
chosen center on elements of Arctic life that connect peoples across nation-state

---

6 Ólafur Gislason, “Forms of History: Transferred Mythological Meaning in the Works of
Ólóf Nordal,” in *Corpus Dulcis* (Reykjavik: Gallery i8, 1998). Marja-Terttu Stone Chest, *Time-
Donna Lyall - Love Song,” *BBC*, accessed March 20, 2013,
http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00dkvy9.
boundaries with the appropriation and manipulation of the notion of nationality that has been imposed upon them.

Ólóf Nordal works with folklore that extends throughout the nations of the Arctic. Folklore is a foundational aspect of Arctic life for many; it can range from creation narratives to life lessons to narratives of hunting and weather patterns. Folklore pervades daily life. She uses the narrative ability of the video medium to unfold the folklore stories in real time similar to the experience of sharing oral stories.

Catarina Ryöppy juxtaposes the values and lifestyle of those living in the Arctic against nation-state boundaries. She shows locations and household activities in different Arctic nations without time manipulation so that the similarities of daily life in separate nations are meticulously evident to the viewer. The medium of video allows Ryöppy to highlight life, as we experience it, at the pace that we know it, in contrast to the artificiality of national identity constructs.

Finally, Tanya Tagaq uses an overwhelming cacophony of sound and visuals to mimic the inundation of popular mass media and exhibits her work on a feature film stage. Tagaq’s films feature the land as the cradle of food, shelter, entertainment, and life in a way that dramatically impresses the importance of the environment for people across the Arctic. Tagaq’s work brings to the viewer the encompassing presence of the Arctic landscape as it affects most actions of inhabitants’ daily lives.

III. Foundation Within the Discipline

This thesis will examine the work of these Arctic artists and the construction of collective and individual identity. I desire to express only information about identity construction that the artists have expressed rather than apply an “Arctic identity” to all
residents of the Arctic. I comment upon the work of these artists and their words with the view that identity is a never fixed process of expression of one’s life experiences.

In “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity” (1995), Joan Scott defines identity:

“... identities are historically conferred, that this conferral is ambiguous (though it works precisely and necessarily by imposing a false clarity), that subjects are produced through multiple identifications, some of which become politically salient for a time in certain contexts, and that the project of history is not to reify identity but to understand its production as an ongoing process of differentiation, relentless in its repetition, but also ... subject to redefinition, resistance, and change.”

Each of the three artists’ experiences are filtered through her individual interpretive framework. Rather than inappropriately assume that their shared latitude on the globe designates a shared identity, I choose to respect their unique expression of individual and collective identity as they have articulated it.

In Joan Scott’s text, she explores the problematic history of assuming that one shared an identity with his or her (socially designated) gender or culture. Scott argues that in past art historical and anthropological practices, the naming of the identity of subaltern communities has assumed a universal definition of all people in a community and rejected or silenced those that do not abide by that definition. This faulty defining was exclusionary and led to a policing of difference and a tendency to augment facts when individuals were found outside of a universalizing definition. Further, the restricted access to the location of the discussion in academia has kept the voices of many out of the discussion of identity, including the subjects of the proposed identity. I examine these three artists with an

---

awareness of the flawed models of assumption of cultural identities as restrictive acts of colonization and attempt to abide by a definition of identity that is mutable and fluid.⁸

Beginning from Joan Scott’s exploration of identity, I am going to look at the work of these artists in the context of community and postnationality. I will begin by providing a foundation of postnational theory for readers to understand the scholarship upon which I build my argument. An essential cornerstone of scholarship on communities is Benedict Anderson’s 1988 work, Imagined Communities. In this work, Anderson considers the origins of the rise of national consciousness in Western Europe. He claims that after the demise of traditional hierarchical forms of social organization associated with Christianity, economic conditions spread universal homogenous secular notions of national space, territoriality, and citizenship. Subsequently, the rise of capitalism, popular culture, languages, and ideologies disseminated across incredible spaces that previously shared no connection of experience or identity. After this, the idea of the “nation” was a mass-consciousness. The diversity of human culture prevalent in pre-modern eras was no longer a reality.

In the post-Enlightenment world, according to Benedict Anderson, communities are socially constructed or “imagined” into being. He dismisses the myth of nationalism as inspired by an elemental essence of place. He argues “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contract (perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity-genuineness, but by the style in

---

⁸ For further development of this topic from the perspective of a black female, I recommend Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
which they are imagined.” 9 Anderson proposes an emphasis on the role of “creative imagery, invented traditions, representation, imagination, symbols, and traditions in nationalism” as a constructed narrative about the nation-state. 10

Partha Chatterjee adds nuance to the argument of Benedict Anderson in his response in The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (1993), which further supports my consideration of Ólóf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq in this thesis. In response to Benedict Anderson’s work, he argues that Anderson does not consider nationalisms as an emancipatory concept for those struggling against colonial powers. Chatterjee argues that whether good or bad, nationalisms are a product of the political history of Europe and the constructed identity within nationalisms cannot be rejected completely. He says that in Imagined Communities, Anderson attempts to apply a totalizing universal form of nationalism onto all cultures of the modern world while failing to consider how it has manifest in anti-colonial nationalisms. Further, Chatterjee claims that the search for authenticity in an identity, conceivable through the globally understood terms of nationalism, demonstrates the search for strategies of resistance to regimes of power. 11

It is from the perspective of nationalism and community as a mutable concept that has the potential to be utilized by a non-dominant culture that I would like to consider the artists. I believe that their exploration of connections across the Arctic regions works with

---
10 Ibid.
an elevated understanding of the constructed definition of nation-states. Each artists puts forth pervading elements of Arctic culture that can act as a foundation for the building of a new “imagined community“ amongst the other currently existing communities within each hemisphere, region, country, state, and city that they inhabit.

In order to lay a foundation of scholarship on postnationality for this thesis, I will rely on the scholarship of Jürgen Habermas and Arjun Appadurai. After a career of theorizing nationality, Jürgen Habermas collected his works in *Postnational Constellation* (2001) and contributed two new essays. Habermas considers the dangers and possibilities of the public sphere amidst globalization. Globalization threatens nation-states as conceptually primordial essential entities, reveals the vulnerability of nations with the effects of interdependent economies and their ineffectiveness at meeting the challenges of diverse social justice issues, and spreads a new abstract and cosmopolitan consciousness.

Habermas concludes that the only historically possible, politically and ethically necessary outcome is a transformation of existing nation-states into social and economic orders able to respond to challenges of globalization. These orders will be developments of cosmopolitan consciousness that will replace national and cultural identities. The new transnational civil identity will be able to effect decisions that transcend national self interest and overlap “life worlds,” Habermas’ new terminology for the location of one’s existence.\(^{12}\) This new identity will also be more open to issues of social justice understood globally. It is Habermas’ belief that this global identity is inevitable as part of an evolution

that has already been occurring from the local and dynastic to the national and democratic. The next phase of that evolution will be “globality.”

Arjun Appadurai has also contributed a substantial body of scholarship to the postnational dialogue. His work in postnational theory provides contemporary case studies and concepts that lay a foundation for my exploration of Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq. In his essay “Sovereignty without Territoriality,” Appadurai argues that the relationship between territoriality and sovereignty is in jeopardy because of globalization. He writes that the basis of a nation-state is territorialization and the capacity for jurisdictional governance or state control of a civil society within a territory. Globalized construction of locality signals a disruption in the relationship between the nation and state because of global flows of capital, labor, information, and people. These movements produce ties to communities that are not rooted in the nation-state.

Appadurai proposes that, in our globalized world, we all have translocalities, multiple identifications and communities that we possess and thrive off of. He defines localities as “life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, relatively known and shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible spaces and places.” He puts forth two examples of these translocalities, one that is produced through the marginalization or abandonment of communities by the nation-state, such as border-sites or conflict zones. The other translocality is a plural community or city that is produced by cosmopolitanism.

In his discussion of what a translocal community might look like, Appadurai supplies the example of the Sikh postnational cartography. This “topos of community”

13 Ibid.
contests national maps and includes regions extending from India, Pakistan, England, Canada, and across the world. He explains that in postnational cartography “counterhistories and counteridentities are used to organize maps of allegiance and affiliation that are built around historical labor flows, emergent racial solidarities, and counternational cartographies.”

Arjun Appadurai’s theorizing of and prediction of a postnational “imagined community” most closely aligns with the goals of the three artists that I have chosen to highlight. The works of each artist expresses a locality that is not only defined by the nation-state which they are a member of, but a locality that exists in their shared experience of the circumpolar North. While demonstrating their locality in a non-nation-state identification, the artists do not always necessarily deny their nation-state locality.

The contribution of these scholars to the framing of this thesis is essential. The idea that a nation is connected to an essential being or place has been disproven for the social construction of communities. The “imagined” quality of communities lends themselves to the potential of use for anti-colonial communities, as they are in the nativist actions of appropriation performed by Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq. In addition, identity is not restricted by one’s assigned nationality and can exist inside and outside of that definition simultaneously. Most peoples find their identities exist in different localities, at times including nation-state associations and at times not. These three artists communicate their individual and collective identities as part of and in between imagined communities. Each expresses a personal identity that holds the concept of “nation” to different degrees of importance in their personal interpretive model of identity construction.

15 Ibid., 348.
16 Ibid., 349.
IV. The Arctic: A Brief History and Today

The Arctic, the area above 66°3 or the areas above the Arctic Circle, is largely populated by Native peoples to this day (fig. 1). Other than inhabitants of the far north of Norway and Russia, few non-Native individuals inhabit the Arctic year-round. However, the non-Native individuals who occupy the Arctic year-round or during other seasons share the Arctic community. The themes of community that are used by the three artists I have chosen encompass Native inhabitants and non-Native inhabitants. The extent to which they apply to an Arctic inhabitant is not definable by any totalizing statement but can only be inferred from each individual’s life experiences.

It is necessary to provide a historical background of and cultural context for the Arctic to understand the roots of connection across such an incredible landmass. Archeologists refer to the earliest known inhabitants of the Arctic as the PaleoEskimo. While we do not have an exact date for the advent of PaleoEskimo peoples, archeologists estimate that they may have existed over 25,000 years ago. These cultures include the Arctic Small Tool Cultures, the Dorset, the Independence People, and the Saggaq people that inhabited Siberia, Alaska, northern Canada and Greenland. This incredible area of habitation was due to movement across frozen ice roads, the Bering Strait connecting Russia to America and the Nares Strait connecting America to Greenland. All current surviving Eskimo cultures are descended from the NeoEskimo peoples, the Thule of northern Alaska who moved from Alaska to Canada to Greenland (fig. 2). The Inuit/Eskimo

---

17 Often, the notion of the cultural “Arctic” extends beyond the physical lines of latitude scientists use to defined the Arctic and reach throughout the nations that reach into the Arctic Circle. Whether or not something is “Arctic” or “Subarctic” according to cultural understanding versus scientific definitions and borderlines could be another thesis in and of itself.
(Inuit preferred in Canada, Eskimo preferred in Alaska) people inhabit half of the Arctic Circle and still maintain a nearly identical language.

The Sami people (previously known as the Lapps) live in the far north of Sweden, Finland, and Russia’s Kola Peninsula. It is believed that the Sami have inhabited this area at least for the last eight thousand years, since the last ice age.\(^1\) The Nentsy (Nenet singular) are tundra dwellers of northern Russia and Siberia between the White Sea and Yenisey. They are relatively recent, compared to the Sami, and may have pressured the Sami westward. The Nganasan are the most northerly Siberian peoples who inhabit Tamyr. They are also fairly recent in the Arctic and may have ancestors from southern Native communities and Nentsy peoples. Finally, the Chukchi inhabit the Chukotka or Chukchi Peninsula of northeast Siberia. There are other Native cultures that inhabit the Arctic, but these are the most prevalent.

The combination of ancestral connections and the parallelness of the Arctic environment across the globe have created a great number of similarities among the Arctic peoples. Tailored fur on skin clothing and footwear, historically permanent underground dwellings, and a partly nomadic lifestyle are nearly universal.\(^2\) The identical distribution of game across the Arctic has led to shared game hunting of sea mammals and inland reindeer. The dog sledge and the skin-covered boat are present in every Arctic nation. Also, all Native Arctic cultures have social organizations based on families and kinship groups with complex agreements of food sharing and economic cooperation. The belief in

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 8.
animism and shamanism is present across the Arctic globe, inherited from Asiatic ancestors. 21

While these peoples are separated by incredible distances, we have proof of trade routes throughout the Arctic Circle extending as far back as archaeologists can track these cultures. For example, we know that in the eighteenth century the Nuvuk Eskimo of the northernmost point of Alaska would travel to inland Alaska to trade with the Nunamiut who had goods to trade from their encounter with the Russians on the western coast of Alaska. The Nunamiut would then bring what they had acquired from the Nuvuk to the Mackenzie Eskimos in northern Canada, who brought the goods they had acquired from the Copper Eskimos of the central Canadian Arctic. The Copper Eskimos at that point had European goods from the Hudson Bay Trading Company and goods from the Greenland Inuit who had crossed the Nares Strait. 22 Trading across the Arctic was so fluid that scholars have convincingly argued distinct similarities in eighteenth century material culture between the Nganasans of Taymyr and some Canadian Eskimos, positioned exactly across the globe from one another. 23

The Arctic today is a manifestation of history beginning with the Native inhabiting of the North, but it is also the result of explorers, colonizers, those seeking trade, those in search of natural resources, and slave labor. The influence of missionaries pushing Christianity, sometimes violently and often at the expense of Native culture, has left its mark across the Arctic. The introduction of wage labor, the destruction of food populations by overhunting and pollution, and the forced arbitrary segmentation of Native cultures by

21 Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid., 15.
the Soviet Union have led to the demise of nomadic life. In recent political history, Arctic nations were abused as political pawns in the advent of potential nuclear war. Both Russia and America situated military bases and destructive weaponry on the Arctic land that they owned without consideration of the peoples that would have to be “relocated” or the destruction of the environment.

Despite all of these hardships, the Arctic has made great strides forward. Arctic populations have experienced a dramatic demographic upsurge largely due to developments in communication, transportation, and medical services made in the Arctic during World War II. With the increased population, individuals have spearheaded measures to cultivate Native languages. Further, more educated individuals are emerging from the Arctic and leading the way for political reconstruction and independence.

Arctic people have begun questioning the imposed nationality that they have long endured. In 1924, many of the Inuit people in Alaska had never been bothered by the Russians when Alaska was sold to America and they were named “Americans.” Some did not know they were ever “Russian” or “American” until years later. When the Chukchi were deemed Russian citizens in 1789, a large portion of the Chukchi population had no idea that they were being assigned a nationality. Each Arctic region has a similar story of imposed nationality, either without their knowledge or without their voice, as the world was carved up according to whichever power chose to occupy it and claim it as theirs.

---

25 Ibid., 287.
without concern for the indigenous inhabitants. Peoples of the North have started to assemble and make progress towards representation and attainment of power.26

V. Video Art and Subaltern Communities

It is my belief that the artists I have chosen are using specific qualities of video art to express their postnational sympathies. The effective use of video art by border communities to find a voice is a growing phenomenon. It is from the foundation of scholarship, primarily that by Arjun Appadurai, Faye Ginsburg, and Kristen Dowell, concerning this growing occurrence that I consider the work of my featured artists.

Arjun Appadurai found the utilization of video works to renegotiate realities so important to anthropology that he proposed a new realm of study, which he named “mediascapes.”27 In Appadurai’s essay “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology”, he articulates the creation of national and transnational identities in conjunction with media and the national imaginary. Technology advancements have fostered in an era in which independent producers of media can connect to the rest of the world.28 It is in this new media era that the artists I have chosen are able to utilize video works to talk back to the dominant narrative.

Faye Ginsburg’s scholarship on video art in indigenous communities articulates why and how film works are able to powerfully express the individual and collective identities of Ólóf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq. Faye Ginsburg contends that video art is

26 I will speak more to the specific political actions of Arctic inhabitants to achieve representation and power against imposed national identifiers in my conclusion. See page 73.
a unique medium that offers subaltern communities a counter-discursive voice and an ability to control their identity representation. Through this medium as a tool of activism, previously silenced individuals have the potential to question the popular narrative. Ginsburg further argues that media production can act as a tool with which border communities can organize for social action to reimagine cultural identities. The globalized reach and symbolic appropriation of the technology of a dominant culture provides the artists a “third space of enunciation.” From this liminal space, the artists can perform a self-conscious mediation and mobilization of their culture. Faye Ginsburg argues that the capacity to narrate stories and retell histories from a previously silenced point of view through media forms that can circulate beyond the local creates “screen memories”, a recuperation of their own collectives stories and histories that have been erased in the national narratives of dominant cultures and are in danger of being lost. This action is an important force for constituting claims for land and cultural rights and for developing alliances with other communities.

Additionally, Kristen Dowell contributes to my thesis an intensive discussion about the relationship between subaltern lifestyles and appropriation of the mass culture tool of film. The use of media by Native peoples has specific significance because of their history of being on the other side of the camera lens. Since photography and film technology have

---

29 I take the term “third space of enunciation” from Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1994). Bhaba defines the “third space” as “'differential temporal movements within the process of dialectical thinking and the supplementary or interstitial 'conditionality' that opens up alongside the transcendent tendency of dialectical contradiction.” Further, he claims that it is an "intervention of the beyond . . . (which) captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of the extra-territorial and cross cultural intiations” (1994:8-9).

been in existence, Native Americans have been portrayed by photographs and in Hollywood movies as their stereotypes, the brutal savage or the romantic Native with a primordial connection to nature.  

In her upcoming publication, Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast, Kristen Dowell has articulated how indigenously controlled media has been a part of cultural revival. She argues that in using video as a medium, boundary communities have utilized cultural values to achieve “visual sovereignty”, a powerful community definition outside of that provided by the dominant culture via the material onscreen. Apart from artistic expression, the medium of film has been used to record rituals, document traditional activities with elders, teach languages to young people, project political messages through the mainstream media or alternative arenas, communicate among dispersed communities, create award-winning feature films, act as legal documents in negotiations with states, and to assert a presence visually within the national imaginary of an audience. This revival has included an active redefining of peoples and land.

Ólöf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq take advantage of the advancement in video technology, the new availability of that technology, and the accessibility now afforded by the Internet that has positioned video art to reach previously unreachable audiences and numbers of viewers. They have recognized the power of the appropriation of film, a historically colonial tool, by subaltern communities, and the creation of an

---

31 For more on the portrayal of Native Americans by media, Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, eds., Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998) is an excellent look at the historic relationship between Native people and filmmakers. For a broader perspective on Aboriginal representation, particularly in museums, see Kylie Message, New Museums and the Making of Culture (Oxford, UK; New York: Berg, 2006).
“interstitial space” from which self-representation and social action can be achieved.  

Each artist has appropriated the film medium to achieve their own goals in conjunction with, and not in contention with, their Arctic lifestyle.

VI. Conclusion

The following chapters focus on the use of nativism and the focus on the everyday facets of life that construct the individual and community identities of Ólóf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq as residents of the Arctic. The self-represented individual and collective identity of the artists is within and without a national identification. Each artist’s representation exists throughout a past and present of history, trade, and lifestyles that sometimes include nation-state boundary considerations and oftentimes does not. Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq express identities that span throughout different localities and socially constructed communities. They utilize the concept of national identity and national boundaries to serve their own purposes of self-representation.

Each artist features community, postnationality, and the appropriation of film works to express their individual and collective identity as part of the Arctic in accordance with their own models of interpretation. Nordal self-represents with the utilization of folklore, Ryöppy relies on manipulations of time and space to highlight her identity in relation to nation-state boundaries, and Tagaq fully immerses herself in the techniques and arenas of mass media to spread a new narrative of Arctic community that defies previous colonial representation. These three artists are successful examples of the utilization of film media as a liminal space for the self-representation of their individual and collective identities that exist as part of a postnational Arctic community.

---

32 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. Refer to citation 27.
1. Ólöf Nordal: Folklore and National Narratives

I. Seal Maiden: Folklore and Community Groups

Ólöf Nordal is an Icelandic artist whose work addresses the stories, traditions, history, scientific facts, and emblems of nationality that constitute our daily lives and construct meaning. She looks at these factors that occur within Arctic nations and the effects of misrepresentation occurring outside of the North to decipher how national identity has been constructed. Nordal’s work denies the unstable foundation of nation-state definition from which inhabitants of the Arctic might build their identity and instead emphasizes the existence of mutable self-understandings that come from the amalgamation of many elements of living in a place. She negotiates her self-representation through the pervasive existence of folklore in the Arctic and the connections that oral traditions hold to video art.

In 2007, Ólöf Nordal created the video work Seal Maiden (fig. 3.). In this piece, the viewer is drawn into a mysterious underwater scene nearly as black as the dark room in which it is displayed. Flickering lights peak through the mysterious waters with a hypnotic pulsation. The broken, undecipherable song of a mezzo-soprano overlies the scene. Glimpses of a seal-like shape undulating through the water begin to enter visibility. However, upon closer inspection the creature has no distinct shape but appears to be an amalgamation of sexual body parts. In place of a neck and head, there are two bulbous breast-like forms.

Ólöf Nordal is evoking a folklore that is spread across the Arctic, that of the seal maiden. In one version of the narrative, a seal woman shed her sealskin to enjoy the beach as a human. A man saw her and became enraptured by her naked beauty. He stole her skin
and forced her to return home with him rather than return to the sea. Many years later, after the seal woman married the man and bore several children to him, she found where he had hidden her sealskin and triumphantly returned to the sea. While this folklore is known to be Native in origin, it is present in varying forms across the entirety of the Arctic. In the Faroe Islands, Islanders believe that this legend is the root of the thought that the seal is someone who commits suicide by walking into the sea.

Composer Thuridur Jónsdóttir (Þuríður Jónsdóttir) used an Icelandic song from folklore that many inhabitants of the North will recognize. She cut and reassembled the contemporary rendition of the song. In breaking and interrupting the music of the soprano, Jónsdóttir and Nordal diminish the swimming female form by taking away her ability to speak and be heard. She has no way to protest the active gaze of the viewer upon her sexualized form. The use of folkloric music in combination with the technology of digital editing is a marker of the contemporary importance of folklore. Folklore is not a function of Arctic past but remains as an important element of Northern life.

Ólóf Nordal uses this narrative to examine the relationship of folklore to historical and scientific knowledge. She critiques contemporary environmental policies by invoking the respectful codependence of historical Arctic relationships to nature and beliefs of animism, the belief that human souls can inhabit animals and vice versa. The feminine sexualization of the creature and the absence of a face signifies an inability to resist abuses. Nordal connects this faceless representation of women to the disconnection and unemotional destruction of land and animals in this national setting. In popular culture, the Arctic has been regarded as a “virginal” territory available for use by the rest of the world; in particular, by explorers, those in search of natural resources, or those looking for
a beautiful background in visual culture. The peoples who inhabit it are either not represented or depicted as symbols of the Eden-esque creation era landscape that never changes. Effects of the abuse of the Arctic are rarely to never depicted for the rest of the world. This issue of representation has silenced the damaging results of treatment of the Arctic world.

Using the often-ignored Arctic regions as a haven for human abuse is one particularly shocking example of the treatment of the North as a region that cannot speak loudly enough in our globally connected world. In Seal Maiden, Nordal hopes to invoke a criticism of the trafficking of enslaved women occurring in Arctic regions. Foreign businesses have been importing women to work in sex industries under the shadow of the North. A 2009 United States Department of Trafficking Persons report detailed trafficking statistics of Iceland: “Iceland is primarily a destination country and, to a lesser extent, a transit country for men and women from the Baltic states, Poland, Russia, Bulgaria, Equatorial Guinea, Brazil, and China trafficked to and through Iceland to Western European states for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation.” Recently, Iceland has instituted new laws prohibiting the trafficking of humans but they still battle this serious issue.

---

33 Recently collectives with environmental concerns like the World Wildlife Foundation and the Sierra Club have changed this long history of manipulated depictions by bringing photographs and video of the effects of climate change that is occurring in the North.
36 On April 17, 2012, members of Parliament passed a bill criminalizing the act of buying individuals for purposes of prostitution. The bill contains laws molded on the Swedish attempts to stifle human trafficking. Ibid.
I will discuss Ólöf Nordal’s use of folklore in further detail. Folklore has long been an area of study by anthropologists who believed that it lent to the understanding of identity construction. While folklore is an undeniably important facet of one’s community, here I would like to consider it from an atypical perspective of fluidity proposed by anthropologist Dr. Richard Bauman. In the most commonly read college-course-required book on folklore, Alan Dundes’ *The Study of Folklore*, he explains the parameters of folklore:

“The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is - it could be a common occupation, language or religion - but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions that help the group have a sense of group identity. Thus, if the group were composed of lumberjacks or railroad men, then the folklore would be lumberjack or railroad man folklore. If the group were composed of Jews or Negroes, then the folklorist could seek Jewish or Negro folklore. Even a military unit or a college community is a folk.37

Thus, by Dundes’ definition, folklore is a function of shared features of a life. Folklore is a product constructed through the creation and recreation of a whole group and those who came before them as an expression of a common character.

However, Richard Bauman argues that folklore is not the organic tradition that is connected to one group of people as previously accepted (and then policed) by academics. Instead, folklore is an active decision made by social groups that requires performance. Folklore does not and has never remained trapped in the ownership of one group of fixed identity. Instead, it has been purposefully used in social relationships as a form of communicative interaction.

---

While folklore cannot be used to pinpoint homogenous shared identities, diffusion of folklore *can* be traced to be most prevalent across certain social groups - “a plurality of persons not organized into a system of interaction . . . but who do have similar social characteristics or statuses.”38 True understanding of the social bases of folklore must be based upon investigations that focus upon those social identities that are relevant to the performance of folklore within the context of particular situations and events, the locus of interaction between folklore and its owners. While the identity of the peoples who associate with folklore require personal investigation, it is also useful to consider their part in a communication system that is actively defined by the interrelationships among people. Bauman argues that these social groups are most commonly spread across those who share ethnicity, religion, region, occupation, age, or kinship affiliation.

As I have demonstrated in my introduction, the peoples of the Arctic share many of these categories all the way across the globe. All Neo-Eskimos share a common ethnicity to the Thule peoples. Factors of Asiatic religion occur across the Arctic, including animism, shamanism, and a belief in the afterlife. The work of missionaries across the North has also led to a shared knowledge and acceptance of tenets of Christianity. The specific lifestyle that the Arctic environment requires is perhaps the most powerful connection among peoples of the Arctic. It dictates the occupation and social structures of all who inhabit it. These factors, and the knowledge of historic trade and the potential of community building via global connectivity lead me to argue that folklore is one of the most powerful themes of

community amongst the Arctic.\textsuperscript{39}

In Ólöf Nordal’s work, she is tapping into this theme of community as an emblem of the Arctic. As she puts forth questions of the contemporary behavior of our world and its dealings in and of the Arctic, she calls to the community of the North utilizing folklore. Nordal extends her concerns over the environment and manipulation of the Arctic for human trafficking to the entire community. Her sexualized creature stands in for the ageless image of the North as a virginal female to be used as seen fit by the rest of the world. By evoking the folklore of the seal maiden, known by most Arctic cultures, she asks inhabitants of the North to consider the creature as their collective identity, being abused by those who live within the community and the rest of the world.

\section*{II. Iceland Specimen Collection: Construction of National Narratives}

In 2005, Ólöf Nordal created Iceland Specimen Collection, a video work with a supporting sculpture installation. This work restages images and objects regarded as national symbols, which have been compromised by relocation from the narrative structure of folklore to the classification systems of science. Two great auks, a now extinct species of bird, were stuffed and cast in aluminum (fig. 4). Scientists believe that the last known pair of auks was killed in 1844.\textsuperscript{40} Once it was understood that auks were on the brink of extinction, hunters destroyed what remained of the species in an attempt to own one of the last auk specimen, primarily to sell to European buyers as an emblem of the rareness of the Arctic world. The auk came back into popular perception when, in the

\textsuperscript{39} This, of course, does not mean that I believe the folklore of the Arctic has not spread to other regions of the world. I only argue that its prevalent place in the daily life of Arctic individuals is part of the community building connectivity.

\textsuperscript{40} While Nordal has not commented on this fact, the work “auk” translates to “blood” in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. The artist that I consider in the following chapter, Tanya Tagaq, makes use of this wordplay in her 2011 album Auk.
1970s, the nation of Iceland banded together to buy back a stuffed auk from Sotheby’s. It is reported that children raided their piggy banks in order to return the great symbol of Iceland home. As described by Eva Heisler, acquiring that auk sculpture was “an acquisition of loss, loss in the form of an object whose sole purpose was to display that loss.”

In both instances, killing and retrieving the auks, the outside world was an essential element in the solidification of the definition of Iceland as a nation and the auk as its symbol. Nordal cast the auk in aluminum, the production of which by Iceland for foreign interests has decimated the Arctic natural environment. While the display of the auk monument mourns the loss of the auk species, it also implicates the behavior that led to the loss of the now-defunct bird.

The installation included large video in photographic frames of ten albino birds (ravens, snipes, arctic terns, thrush, and puffins) that are or were part of a natural history collection in Iceland (fig. 5). The birds were posed identically, floating in the center of the frame, with the beak pointing left and the legs, close to the body, pointing right. The background of the video is a crisp Reykjavik sky full of fluffy white clouds. At first, the images appear to be of a soaring bird on a beautiful Arctic day but, upon closer inspection, the birds are clearly dead. They lie unnaturally on their side with their wings sucked in close to the body. The contrast between the deflated bodies and the fluffy clouds is unmistakable. While the birds contain an air of familiarity and everyday, the stark whiteness of their bodies transports those who look upon them to a strange otherworldly

---

42 Ibid.
place. The images deceive the eye as they move back and forth from the illusion of framed natural history specimens to flying, living creatures.

Ólóf Nordal suggests the history of the albino bird in Arctic folklore with *Iceland Specimen Collection*. In folklore, the albino bird was regarded as a lucky charm or even a form of divine revelation. The sight of an albino bird was thought to precede unusual or fantastical events. Albino birds came to feature in much Arctic folklore. While it was not based in fact, European thought associated albino birds with the Arctic. The rarity of the albino bird and the stark surreal whiteness of the creature signified the accepted definitions of a rare and otherworldly Arctic. In reality, there are just as many albino birds in Europe as in the Arctic.

The folkloric identity of the albino bird was forever altered after science declared the existence of the albino bird as the result of a deformed gene. If one were to fully accept the scientific explanation of the albino birds that would render them void of their original folkloric content. In fact, both continued to exist in differing degrees. The folkloric signification of the birds was decentered under the weight of scientific fact but not eliminated. These birds continue to hold an unwavering significance for the Icelandic national identity. This mutability of meaning is for Nordal a key to the unstable elements that construct national identity. The birds encourage us to question the relationship between form and content, particularly in those forms that we cling to as emblems of nationality. They are not essential or permanent but constructs of meaning created by humans. As nonessential or permanent elements of our world, they can be adopted as needed as we create our personal and individual interpretive methodologies.

______________________

43 Ibid.
Nordal’s individual and collective identity exists within and without folkloric and scientific definitions of national identity. While the apparent conflicting messages seem unworkable, they are only two elements of her fluid identity. Allegiance to one does not require a denial of the other. “Iceland” or “the Arctic” are not eternal signifiers connected to an undeniable truth that she must hold as a citizen.

III. Theory and Ólöf Nordal

I would argue that Ólöf Nordal is working from the definition of nation articulated by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities (1982). She attempts to reveal the fragile nature of the national consciousness with the display of the elements that created and bolstered the narrative. Upon close inspection, the emblems of Iceland as a nation are compromised and changed by the world’s turn to science over oral narratives. While science holds great weight for the construction of meaning, the knowledge of folklore still extends beyond the nation and brings together a larger community, that of the Arctic.

I also contend that Nordal evokes Jürgen Habermas’s theory on postnationality in her work. In Iceland Specimen Collection, she makes evident that the history of Iceland and the great auk was dependent on the interaction of other cultures. The great auk was defined as an emblem of Iceland when European buyers put out a high priority demand for the dwindling bird native to Iceland. The renewed awareness of the link between the auk and Iceland came about when the New York–based Sotheby’s featured a stuffed auk in an auction. Jürgen Habermas argues that global identity is no longer deniable because of the entwined relationships between nation-states.\textsuperscript{44} In this instance, Iceland’s emblematic birds became so because of economic relationships outside of its national boundaries. This

\textsuperscript{44} Habermas, The Postnational Constellation, viii.
revealed relationship further weakens the existence of a nation with an essential permanent definition. The identity of the Arctic as affected by the interests of the world reveal the multiple communities that form the region (and all spaces). The emblems and narratives of the Arctic, like the auk, are defined and inside and outside of the Arctic boundaries.

Ólóf Nordal works with a nuanced understanding of postnationality that resembles the arguments put forth by Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas. Her desire to express the unstable foundation is successful because she reveals the concept of nationality as one that requires further understanding from the globally accepted construct; for example the importance of outside influence and the denial of an essential national quality. Nordal finds her identity by negotiating meaning making and self-representation made possible through postnationality.

IV. Video Art and the Oral Narrative Tradition

Understanding folklore as an act of performative meaning in social interaction and communication is vital to understanding the connectivity of oral traditions and video art, a connection being made by many. For example, the National Gallery of Canada exhibited Video and Orality in 1992, an exhibit centered on the shared qualities of oral traditions and video art. The featured artists, including Mona Hatoum, Toni Sherman, and the collaborative team of Serge Murphy and Charles Guilbert, were from around the world.

---

45 I take Judith Butler's definition of performative meaning as she has articulated it in Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (Psychology Press, 1993). and Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (1997). Butler defines performativity as the reiteration of citations that give language its meaning. She claims that, because of the constructed nature of meaning, we have the ability to redefine and renegotiate meaning through our performance. This performance is not a donning of a new costume everyday but a continual meaning making of identity.
Each provided a video work that demonstrated oral tradition as enacted through video art – either through their family, region, or some other community relationship.

Video art is specifically attuned to relay the substance and experience of oral histories. In art history lies a record of fascination with the idea of reproduction as made famous by Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in which he considered the loss of aura in reproduction, the basis of that aura in ritual, and the separation and freedom from ritual that occurs when an artwork is reproduced. Oral traditions rely on repetition and replication to stay alive. In fact, folklore is often defined by the active sharing of the narrative. It cannot exist as an individual story but must be continually dispelled by many in the same way that a video work, unlike other historic mediums of art, plays in repeating circles.

Folklore is often dependent upon layering of symbols. Audiences receive different meanings and symbols from the experience of folklore. When folklore was told to people with similar life experiences, their interpretation was very different than that of a culture with previously little interaction. In experiencing work like Seal Maiden, there are many different layers of interpretation. A Native person of the Arctic may think of long hours seal hunting by an aglu, the holes in ice that seals use to breach for air. Another inhabitant of the Arctic may think about the decrease in the seal population where they live. A resident who does not reside in the Arctic may only have photographs and movies that featured seals as a frame of reference. The fluid nature of experiencing a video according to one’s knowledge of symbols and embedded aesthetics of the Arctic makes Ólòf Nordal’s work

---

very similar to the performative experience of oral traditions. The meaning is limited by the knowledge, authority, social status, traditions, and conventions of the speaker and the audience.\(^47\)

In fact, the most famous Inuit filmmaker, Zacharias Kunuk, writer, producer, and director of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, 2001 Cannes Film Festival Camera d’Or winner, explained that he uses video because it holds so many similarities to Inuit oral traditions.\(^48\)

\(^{47}\)The community aspect of the production of video (writer, director, actor, makeup, costumes, etc.) is like the group-told stories of the Inuit. Also, the circular structure of the repeating video parallels Native American story structures. Cherokee author Thomas King wrote:

> There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details . . . But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle’s back. And the turtle never swims away.\(^{50}\)

In *Seal Maiden*, the creature swims in and out of focus without a linear narrative, so that there is no distinguishable beginning or ending. In *Iceland Specimen Collection*, the birds never end their Reykjavik flight.

The experience of viewing video art also has parallels to the experience of sharing in folklore as an oral tradition. Typically, the room is very quiet and dark so that all attention

---


\(^{49}\) Zacharias Kunuk’s *Atanarjuat* (2001), along with Igloolik Isuma Productions’ Inuit soap opera “Nunavut Series (Our Land)” was featured at Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor.

is focused upon the video work. The small, enclosed space sets the mood for an intimate exchange. The environment is constructed purposefully for personal communication.

Ólóf Nordal utilizes the continued presence of folklore in everyday Arctic life to speak to the Arctic community. Her use of layered symbols addresses different communities, some that define themselves with national affiliation and some that define themselves outside of the concept of “nation”. While she questions the emblems of Iceland in *Iceland Specimen Collection*, she uses the pervasiveness of folklore in the Arctic to act outside of national boundaries in *Seal Maiden*. The oral narrative-like experience of video art gives Nordal a vehicle to move her message in and out of national boundaries with different significations for different audiences. She acts postnationally to find her self-expression as a member of the Arctic community.
2. Catarina Ryöppy: Sameness through Time and Place

I. being misplaced: Movement through Boundaries

Catarina Ryöppy is an installation video artist with a history of negotiating borderlines and nation-state territories. She currently lives in Finland but has roots in Russia and Alaska. Ryöppy examines the boundaries that define our life experiences, particularly in the Arctic. She critiques the way that nation-state boundaries have led to an acceptance of differences that results in othering and exclusionary practices. Ryöppy's work makes obvious the arbitrariness of these boundaries and the meaning that we've attached to them by featuring the separation of peoples and destruction of communities. She relies on the manipulation of time and space made possible by the video medium to provoke questions of the nation-state constructs that we accept as part of our interpretive methodology for everyday life.

In her 2005 work being misplaced (fig. 6) Ryöppy uses her history as inspiration for a meditation on boundaries and the differences and similarities that occur across physical boundaries and those of time and space. In this work, landscape photographs line the wall. The photographs feature the sea and mountains of Sitka, Alaska at different times of the day and from different angles during the autumn of 2001 and the spring of 2002. Phones and power lines crisscross the landscapes, signs of communication that cut through the natural space. Two projected images, a man and a small girl, move around the walls of the room. Each figure stops momentarily within the landscape and becomes part of the image, part of the world represented within the boundaries of the frame.
being misplaced is a juxtaposition of the lives of two individuals in Ryöppy's history, her great-grandfather and her great-great-uncle's adopted Tlingit child. During the turn of the 1860s, both her great-grandfather and great-great-uncle served as officials in Russian Alaska. Her grandfather, Hampus Furuhjelm, was elected governor of Alaska in 1859. Both inhabited a base situated (after months of bloody fighting) in Sitka, Alaska. In 1867, right before Alaska was sold to the United States, Hampus was transferred to serve as the governor of Siberia. He and his family moved to Nikolayevsk, Russia. Once his service was over, they moved to Finland, at that time a land owned by the Russian Empire. In 1859, his brother and Ryöppy's great-great-uncle, Hjamlar, a mining engineer, bought Tsamo, the daughter of Tlingit Chief Naskhakhan, for money and goods. Chief Nashon and Chief Michail Kooxx'aan witnessed the exchange. Ryöppy studied the official caftan of Chief Michail Kooxx'aan and used the depiction as a formal inspiration in the placement of the landscape scenes in the gallery for being misplaced.

In 1862, Hjamlar and Tsamo travelled by ship to Finland. She was baptized and christened Aina Iliamna Moore in San Francisco on the way. The captain of the ship and his wife acted as the godparents. In Finland, Tsamo was kept as a maid in the home of Hjamlar and his new wife. Hjamlar reported that the peoples of Finland regarded Tsamo either with distrust and fear or as if they were in the presence of a small child. This response resulted in the repeated unhappy living arrangements Tsamo experienced in Finland until her death. Tsamo’s first mistress, Hjamlar’s wife, treated her with apprehension and dislike. Hjamlar reported that Tsamo poured boiling water on his wife at one point in

52 Ibid.
response to her behavior. She was then given to a new household in which she once again did not get along with the family. Finally, Tsamo went to work in a pastor’s household in which she endured similar treatment. Soon after, in 1868, she died of typhoid fever at age thirteen.

Fifty years later, in 1918, Ryöppy’s great-great-grandfather, Hampus, was executed in Toijala, during the last days of the Finnish Civil War. The Finnish Civil War was a battle between the Social Democrats, supported by the German Empire, and the non-socialist conservative-led Senate, supported by the Russian Soviet Republic. The Social Democrats, with ample military assistance from Germany, took the battle in May of 1918. Out of a population of three million people, 37,000 died in five short months. Hampus Furuhjelm, as a Russian politician, was one of many to be publicly executed.

In being misplaced, Ryöppy juxtaposes two individuals that came from very different worlds. Hampus Furuhjelm was a conqueror, Tsamo was one of the “conquered.” Both held very different views of themselves and their environments. Ryöppy took a personal journey to Sitka to create this piece where she explained that she found a “multilayeredness” of past and present. She was inspired by the questions that displaced peoples face and the fear, insecurity, and marginalization that comes out of the creation of and enforcement of national boundaries and identities constructed around these boundaries. Both Hampus and Tsamo were forced to leave their home for an unknown location when they emigrated from Alaska to Finland. Their travel destinations were the same but their experience, as dictated by national affiliation, was vastly different. While Russia, Alaska, and Finland all

---

53 Ibid.
55 Ryöppy, “Being Misplaced.”
hold many similarities in landscape, languages, religion, hunting, and more, it is only the
differences, as seen by Hampus and Tsamo and as applied to them by others, that defined
their experiences. In the end, political loyalties structured around nation-state boundaries
led to Hampus's execution and the prejudice of the Finnish families towards Tsamo and her
different country of origin led to her miserable end.

The experience of being misplaced is jarring to one's sense of time and space. The
image of the sad scared little Tlingit girl looks out at the viewer from within the frame of a
mountain side or a rocky seashore just long enough for one to begin to contemplate what
emotion she is conveying (fear? sadness? concern?) before she jumps to a new frame, a
new landscape, a new space. Ryöppy's proud grandfather stares out from his portrait in
the landscape that Tsamo just inhabited and it acquires a new meaning according to our
previously held understandings of an indigenous girl in Alaska in contrast to a Russian
officer in Alaska. Suddenly, his image jumps to the next frame and it too is redefined. The
ordering of the images on the walls appears both random and ordered at once. There is no
logical pattern, but a specificity about their location. As previously mentioned, the images
are arranged according to the pattern of Chief Michail Koox’aan’s cloak, witness to the
exchange of goods for Tsamo.

Tsamo and Hampus follow the same distinct, abrupt movements around the room.
The difference in interpretation only occurs within the viewer as they read the photo of the
individual in the landscape. On her website, Ryöppy explains “I have tried to achieve the
sense of estrangement and otherness that I myself experienced, as anyone does, when
moving from one culture to another.” The places in being misplaced are the same but we
impose meanings, specifically differences, according to the nation-state affiliation that we associate with the individuals in the photographs.

*being misplaced* provides a case study for the detriment of essentialized nation-state identity construction. It also implicates the viewers as part of the harmful system of dividing a world according to national boundaries. Postnational thought is an interpretive methodology that would allow for an emphasis on connections and similarities that pervade boundaries, rather than the harmful emphasis on differences bred by nation-state boundaries and demonstrated in the life stories of Tsamo and Hampus. Both emigrated from Alaska to Finland. Both were regarded according to their nation-state identification. Both Tsamo and Hampus experienced feelings of being out of place that were bred from the global acceptance of nation-state identity definition and separation in which we all complicity participate.

**II. Disappearances: Connected Movements**

Ryöppy emphasizes similarities as a means of discrediting the preoccupation with differences in her 2006 work *Disappearances* (fig. 7). She uses connective experiences to cast doubt on the separations imposed by essential nation-state identity construction. The work consists of a video and accompanying photographs. The video circulates between low fidelity (low-fi) film shots of bare feet taking tenuous steps upon snow, dewy grass, concrete, and other surfaces. The film is sensuously tactile. It powerfully evokes body memories of the feel of surfaces on a viewer’s bare feet. The delicate quality of the film engages the emotions and thoughts of a viewer as well as the physical body. The experiences of each person watching flood the space of meaning left open by the artist. Each foot is random with no other part of the body revealed in the film. They could belong
to any person, including those watching the film. The anonymity of the owners of the feet and the shared experience of the feeling of bare feet upon grass or snow connect us as human beings and erase our differences. We each associate our own experiences and histories with the video but also sense the connection with others and their experiences and histories.

Catarina Ryöppy photographed the accompanying images at the Louvre in Paris, France. Each image is that of feet from a sixteenth century painting (fig. 8). The artists, nationalities, and subjects of these works are the mapmakers of our history. Great European powers that travelled the world and divided it up according to what land they desired also sponsored financially and culturally the construction of the sixteenth century works that Ryöppy chose. She chose to take photographs at the Louvre, an institution birthed out of the need of kings to store their stocks of commissioned and stolen wealth, to add signification to this implication of colonizing power. Ryöppy takes the power away from the subjects by focusing on their feet and removing signs of their wealth, nobility, and power. She describes the feet “The feet are random, individual, and could belong to any one of us.” 56 The feet become ambiguous and interchangeable on the wall. They are not part of the body of a particular someone but could be any person’s feet, even those who negotiated the divisive boundaries imposed on the world.

Ryöppy decided to focus on feet because they are a means of encountering and of communication. One’s feet are intended for journeys, which are means of coming into being. We walk with them but we also feel and recognize. She argues “When we look at

feet, the conventional focus of art, the head, begins to look overrated."\textsuperscript{57} They provide a physical and mental mobility. This mobility allows us to travel and encounter other cultures. Once our feet have carried us to new spaces, an arbitrary line signifying a new place provokes the sense of being an outsider and a stranger in ourselves and in others. It is this arbitrary incitement of a sense of otherness that reveals how fragile and shaky our construction of human identity is when understood according to nation-state boundaries.

Ryöppy wants to unveil what it is that happens on the margins, outside of official histories and national boundaries. She believes that visible and invisible boundaries tear people apart all over the world and give rise to alienation.\textsuperscript{58} Looking through the shared experience of a bare foot touching upon dewy grass from a shared realm of experience, separation by national boundaries becomes strange. She believes that we each have our own prejudices and repressions that can be contemplated by looking at images of selected reality, like feet, from the perspective of another and contemplating our own gaze. In another work with a similar theme, \textit{encountering the stranger} (1999-2003), she invoked Julia Kristeva's quote “The other is my own (and proper) unconscious.”\textsuperscript{59}

Ryöppy's works rarely contain people but often focus on the traces left by the everyday lives of peoples. Most specifically, she prefers to focus in on a specific landscape, home, or a detail of the human body. The small glimpses of a total reality, often with shifting focus, blurred outlines, changing viewpoints, or elusive pictures put the onus on the viewer to construct a context of broader reality using their own experiences and beliefs that construct their everyday experience. She encourages participants to use individual or

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
personal experiences as a starting point from which to consider collective meanings. The lack of focused images within the video and photo works is an invitation to question accepted functions of our existing worlds. In particular, Ryöppy implicates the shaky foundation of nation-state boundaries and the negative implications - feelings of alienation, anger, war, displacement, destruction of community – to which they give rise.

_Disappearances_ evokes personal experience in a full-body evocation of senses. Ryöppy utilizes the memory and physical sensations to bring forth the connections that pervade all national boundaries. The separations that are accepted as a consequence of imposed nation-state boundaries are weak in comparison to the tactile sensation of community brought forth by _Disappearances_. The postnational connection evoked permeates through history to present and from place to place.

**III. Time-Borders: Manipulation of Freedoms**

The next work that I will discuss by Catarina Ryöppy, _Time-Borders_ (2009), first inspired me to consider postnationality in the Arctic when I saw it at the Anchorage Museum in the summer of 2012. In this work, Ryöppy demonstrates the extreme of nation-state boundaries separation and the potential destruction of communities as the outcome of that separation. She utilizes real time film powerfully to reveal the silent complicity of global acceptance of imposed boundaries and the unease that comes from awareness of the arbitrariness of those boundaries and the harm that comes from their imposition.

_Time-Borders_ is a three-screen video installation (fig. 9 and 10). Two screens fill the walls. One is on a raised screen flat on the ground below. The screen below is a moving image of ground as someone walks through an icy landscape. The artist shot the film by holding a camera facing down as she walked. The time is not distinguishable as
manipulated or looped. It appears to be just the film of a long walk in an unknown landscape. The two films on the wall show landscapes with hundreds of thousands of birds nesting on rocks, amongst trees, and upon icy ledges. The birds fly freely as they please. Both screens appear to be of one location – the birds are of the same species and the landscape appears to be identical.

In reality, the footage of the two screens was shot on two separate islands, Little Diomede Island, Alaska, and Big Diomede Island, Russia. Little Diomede and Big Diomede are about 2.4 miles apart. The two islands lie on the narrowest part of the Bering Strait, directly between Alaska and Siberia Russia. Between the two islands lies the border between Alaska and Russia, the border between two continents, North America and Asia, and the International Dateline. When it is Monday on Little Diomede, it is Tuesday on Big Diomede. The time in Big Diomede is twenty-three hours ahead of its sister island not even two and a half miles away.

During World War II, Big Diomede served as a Russian military base. The indigenous inhabitants of Big Diomede were relocated to the Siberian mainland. In addition, any inhabitants of Little Diomede who strayed too close to Big Diomede in the waters was captured and held captive by Russia. The people of the Diomede Islands experienced the loss of their home, their culture, and their family. Communication was completely cut off between families living on both sides of the imposed border. This loss is evidence that, by drawing unyielding borders, we create situations of exclusion and suffering. Julie Decker, curator of the Anchorage Museum explained “(Ryöppy) was really struck by the villages that are there today. How the birds could pass easily from island to
island during the Cold War and today... that humans have created these barriers that are oppressive and restrictive and arbitrary.”

Upon first impression of *Time-Borders*, Ryöppy evokes romantic nineteenth century stories of inhabitation of remote Arctic islands. The beautiful rare birds that freely take flight in the open spaces look otherworldly. In reality, Ryöppy is painting a picture of captivity. One vertical screen is that of Little Diomede and the other is Big Diomede. While the birds can pass freely from island to island, during World War II, the Cold War, and still to great extent today, humans have created restrictive barriers between islands. These barriers are both arbitrary and oppressive.

Ryöppy also uses the birds as a metaphor for the necessity of community. The birds represent the freedom and independence of their unrestricted flight, yet they congregate to form large flocks. Their individuality remains but they choose to merge with others. They are unified and diverse. In the catalog accompanying this work, art critic Leena Kuumola states, “Differences to the contrary, other people are a necessary part of meaningful life.”

Ryöppy uses the ground-simulating screen below to tie all viewers into the call for community against boundaries. Much like *Disappearances*, viewers can see their own experiences and histories in the movement of the ground below. The tape is two looped film experiences, one in Little Diomede and one in Big Diomede. The point at which one becomes the other is unrecognizable. The ground that is deemed American or Russian reveals no difference and those who walk upon it undoubtedly share as many similarities.

---


The ground is Arctic land and the lifestyles they lead upon that land connect them. That connection and the community of that connection pervade any imposed boundary.

The situation in the Diomede Islands is a consequence of the global acceptance of the “nation-state.” As we visualize our own feet and our personal experience of walking in the ground screen of *Time-Borders*, we find ourselves in the world of arbitrary separation by boundary. Little Diomede and Big Diomede are not fantasy lands from a story book, but two places that are connected to the global constructs we all live by. The evocation of our personal experiences of time and space as fluid and connected rather than disjointed and separated unsettles the complicit acceptance of nation-state boundaries. Just as the birds in *Time-Borders* fly freely from place to place, individually and as a collective, Ryöppy looks to the postnational possibilities of peoples and communities living outside of nation-state boundaries.

**IV. Time and Space**

In her video work, Catarina Ryöppy manipulates (or resists manipulation of) time and space to meaningful effect. In work like *Time-Borders* and *Disappearances*, she lets the video reflect the pace of life as we experience it. She also fits the visual of the camera screen to the frame of vision that we see. She evokes the time and space scale of our everyday life experience. The fast-paced narrative style of Hollywood is not offered but a real time audiovisual experience of walking and watching is.

The shared sense of reality with other viewers and the filmmaker herself is meant to suggests a community through the experience of time and space. In *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre explains the difference between biological, physiological, and physical time from social time and the difference between geometric, biological, geographic, and
economic space from *social space*. Social space and social time are defined by the environment of a group and by the individuals within that group. An individual is an active member in placing themselves within a social space and social time and living in it. They consist of a dense fabric of networks and channels that are an integral part of one’s everyday life.

The most apparent differences in social times are cyclical and linear time scales. According to Lefebvre, social cyclical times have their origins in nature and are often connected to “profound, cosmic, or vital rhythms.”[^62^] Peoples who hold knowledge, reason, and technique most dear most commonly hold social linear times. Linear scales are often aligned with those most concerned with economic and technological growth. Henri Lefebvre also says that one can have a multiplicity of time scales – at work and with your family for instance.

In the Arctic, many peoples share a community history of social circular time. Inuit/Eskimo peoples, Nentsy, Nganasan, Chukchi, and the Sami peoples all share social circular time and space beliefs. Norwegian folkloric history also depends on circularity in time and space. Though, in our globalized world economy, no person is totally unaffected by social linear time and space. In the same manner and, indeed, as a piece of the bigger picture, Arctic peoples have a multiplicity of localities, social spaces and times, and communities.[^63^]

The effectiveness of Ryöppy’s work is dependent on the metaphysical layer concerning manipulation of time and space that the film medium contributes to her art.

[^63^]: I use the word “localities” here as a reference to Arjun Appadurai’s term “translocalities”, discussed on page 12.
Digital film, which she uses, is really only a sequencing of ones and zeros. It is infinitely reproducible. When it is displayed, it fools the eye into believing that there are multiple dimensions presented by the projector when, in actuality, it only presents the single dimension of the projection. Digital film can be manipulated through an endless array of editing processes – lenses, airbrushing, cutting, lighting, and more. It is because of the awareness of the indirectness of film in contrast to its often accepted reality that Yvonne Spielmann argues that “Video gains access to the emergence of aesthetic forms of expression in digital media, above all in such construction as mixed reality and augmented reality, where physical reality merges with digital reality in new spatial environments.”

Film is always to some extent a lie, which makes it a perfect medium to explore the construction of our nation-state dominated world for Ryöppy.

In *Time-Borders*, Ryöppy presents the time and space of the Diomede Islands to us. It seems apparent that the places are identical. It also presents itself to us as circular, without an end. The ability of film medium to project real-time information that is typically accepted according to perception as reality and truth by viewers further cements these assumptions. In fact, the video is not what it seems. The two places are separate and, according to established notions of nationality, very different. The film is not circular; it is a linear time line captured with a linear functioning camera and affixed together from beginning to end by digital technology. It is a construction.

In *being misplaced*, time and space are unnaturally segmented by the film. Tsamo and Hampus jump from one “place” to another. There is no fluidity to time and space as in reality. Time as we experience it does not really shift from one nation to another. Land and

---

sea do not stop at boundaries for empty spaces of transition. The interruption of real time and space in this work is a vantage point from which to view the manipulation that is taking place in the artwork and in globally accepted concepts of nation-state boundaries.

Ryöppy’s intention is that once a viewer discovers the narrative of the film, the next mental process will be to question the entire scenario and, then, reality on a broader spectrum. She explains, “my images prompt contemplation of our own selective seeing. Visible and invisible boundaries are tearing people apart all over the world.”65 In Disappearances, the walking feet are not actually one; they are separated by the boundary of the linear film capture. The manipulation of a world to accept arbitrary boundaries of nation-states appears to us in our perceived everyday time and space as normal, but upon closer inspection of peoples and their separations it is without a foundation.

Ryöppy’s uses her work to bring to light the possibilities of postnational thought. Without the restriction of nation-state boundaries, the community of the Arctic can grow strong together and achieve representation and self-definition, as individuals and as a collective, that they have for so long been denied. Her videos call forth the connections in time and space as experiential knowledge as it contrasts to the constructs of the nation-state that arbitrarily restricts and separates. Ryöppy’s insistence on connections and similarities through national boundaries is a postnational action.

---

65 Ryöppy, “Translucent Steps.”
3. Tanya Tagaq: The Ice, the Ocean, the Seal, and the Caribou

I. Tungijuq: Breath of the Arctic

The final artist that I will discuss, Tanya Tagaq, represents the powerful meaning that the land and the animals of the Arctic hold for self-identification of Arctic peoples. Her artworks are responses to a history of misrepresentation of the Arctic land. The North has been exhibited as an untouchable fantasyland with bastions of ice and a surreal mystery to continually protect it. Beginning with the Greeks, the North was thought to contain the paradisiacal land of the Hyperboreans. Mapmaker Gerardus Mercator depicted the Arctic as four giant ice towers with a gaping hole that led to the center of the earth. Sixteenth and seventeenth century explorers, like Martin Frobisher, reported back that the land was only sea monsters and impenetrable waves of rolling ice.\(^{66}\) Literary heroes used the Arctic as a device to represent an unreachable paradise or monstrous mystery land, like Edgar Allen Poe in *A Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* or Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*. The collection, selling, and display of Native Arctic art has been narrowly defined as the work of a people stuck in the Stone Age due to greedy members of the art market like James Houston, who controlled the production of and sold most of the Inuit art work coming from Arctic Canada in the late twentieth century.\(^{67}\) It is the repeated surreal paradisiacal or monstrous hell representations that have muffled the very real sounds of destruction occurring in the North. Tanya Tagaq adds a new voice to this long history of harmful representation with her video works. In her art, she expresses the land, animals, and peoples of the Arctic as

---


they define her individual and collective identity. The Arctic is a very real place and the meaning of the natural constituents of that place is a connective force that exists trannationally.

Tanya Tagaq is best known for her success as a contemporary Inuit throat singer. Inuit throat singing, according to Tagaq, is “a game between two women that is an emulation of the sounds from the land.”\(^6\) Tagaq’s success has led to worldwide tours, collaborations with Icelandic singer-songwriter Björk, and multiple awards recognizing her talent. Tagaq has collaborated in the production of video works that primarily concentrate on her relationship to the Arctic. Tagaq explained her passion for video work by saying that “Visual art can represent a reality that sound cannot penetrate, a marriage between sight and sound.”\(^6\) All of these video works are the result of the work of individuals with varied backgrounds with whom Tagaq has chosen to work. Many, like *Tungijuq*, the first film I will discuss, have received international acclaim. *Tungijuq* was an official selection at the Sundance International Film Festival in 2010, the Toronto International Film Festival in 2009, the Montréal International Film Festival in 2009, and the winner of the Best Short Film at the ImagineNATIVE Film Festival in 2009.

In 2009, Tanya Tagaq collaborated with Zacharias Kunuk\(^7\), well-respected Inuit writer, director, and producer, Félix Lajeunesse, and Paul Raphaël to create the short film *Tungijuq* (figs. 11-14). This film is a meditation on hunting and what it means for traditional Arctic ways of life. The captivating visual imagery (part live action and part

---


\(^7\) Tanya Tagaq, Interview by Nicole Dial-Kay. Email. February 24, 2013.

\(^7\) I previously discussed Zacharias Kunuk in Chapter 1, page 32.
digital animation) provides viewers with a stark confrontation of the relationship between humans and nature in the circumpolar North.

The film begins with the word “tungijuq” written in blood across the screen. Tagaq’s musical accompaniment begins to fill the space. Her emotional and expressive throat singing brings to mind creatures in ecstasy and in pain, howling wind, or the sound of the ocean. Her music rises and falls with the narrative of the film. Tagaq appears on screen with unnaturally blue eyes and wrapped in the fur of a wolf (fig. 11). She is hunting a caribou that runs through the swirling white ice and snow as if it is floating. Suddenly, a wolf, the fully transformed Tagaq, appears behind the caribou and takes down the creature with a bloody bite. Through the snow, an animal struggles to move but it is no longer the caribou; it is now Tagaq in the caribou’s skin (fig. 12). The wind blows another gust of snow and Tagaq is revealed naked with an open bleeding chest cavern (fig. 13). She struggles to roll across the ice into the ocean to die.

Once in the ocean, blood fills the water and surrounds her. Her body thrusts and jerks, now resembling a sea creature (fig. 14). Out of a cloud of blood emerges Tagaq in the form of a seal. The seal rushes to an aglu, an air hole in the ice, to breath. Two Inuit hunters wait at the top and kill the seal with one quick motion. Throughout the film, Tagaq’s music follows the loss of breath and infusion of breath as the spirit leaves and becomes one creature to the next. The hunters are Zacharias Kunuk and Tanya Tagaq. They butcher the seal and enjoy the bloody raw meat. Tagaq lovingly caresses the open carcass with organs displayed. She takes a bite of the bounty offered in front of her and chews, looking straight into the camera with pleasure.
This video is a powerful summation of the relationship between the people of the Arctic, the land, and the creatures that inhabit it. This relationship to land pervades the everyday life of all those who live in the circumpolar North. The continuity and connection to place is one of the strongest elements of community that can be argued for a postnational Arctic identity. I rely on Lucy Lippard’s 1997 publication *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, a highly personal mediation on the situation of place and identity construction in our contemporary world, to argue my point. Lucy Lippard argued that art historians have previously dismissed conversations about our relationship to place because it commonly invoked emotional and personal relationships that were considered unprofessional. She says that it is precisely the emotional and personal qualities of the discussion of place that has the power to universally connect. Lucy Lippard contends that we now live in a world of “multicenteredness” and the embrace of our emotional connection to land and place is more important than ever.

Lippard argues that places contain “psychological echoes as well as social ramifications.”\(^\text{71}\) Our connections to place are mediated by cultural norms including political and economic forces. She writes that recent discussion of “bioregionalism” – opposing artificial nation state boundaries and remapping according to biological distinctions, has come as a response to the new fluidity of our identity in relation to place. Individuals desire a more organic manner of place boundaries because our nomadism has made geographic location seem less and less important.

The Native American relationship to place is of particular importance. Native American beliefs do not allow for the separation of land and the spiritual. Since

colonization, Euro-American colonizers have inhabited the land that Native Americans hold as sacred and as part of their identity. Native artists are also responding to a globalized art market that commonly contradicts their connection to geographical place. Artists deny the American relationship to the future that involves amnesia of the past. Colonization and place remain as two of the most important themes within Native contemporary artwork.

Considering Lippard’s argument that place holds immeasurable importance to our individual and collective identities that is not restricted by national boundaries, it makes sense that Tanya Tagaq (and the other artists that I have chosen) experiences a connection to place as contemporary and as a continuum of a long history of reliance on the land. While the people of the Arctic are now connected to the rest of the global world, social and economic definition of the Arctic region still rests upon the environment. The primary trade of Arctic nations is natural resources. Tanya Tagaq explained her interest in the resources of the Arctic: “The Arctic environment is one of the last places on earth with so many natural resources. It’s so scary watching the barracudas coming to eat it all. I hope for some semblance to sustainability.”72

The Arctic contains a large amount of the world’s oil, natural gas, minerals, fresh water, fish, and forests. In fact, the Arctic holds 1/5 of the earth’s water supply, an issue that is sure to come to the forefront of natural resource discussion in the upcoming decades as supplying water for our world’s growing population becomes an increasingly urgent issue.73 The bounty of the land, in part due to the lack of human settlement, defines the

---

72 Tanya Tagaq, Interview.
Arctic for many outside countries. Economically and politically, the control of natural resources is a significant aspect of the Arctic.

The presence of such valuable natural resources has resulted in dramatic efforts to impose national boundaries in the Arctic. It has also led to a shared concern among Arctic nations about sovereignty, defense, resource development, shipping routes, and environmental protection (which I will discuss later in this chapter). These priorities have resulted in the spread of shared occupations in all Arctic regions.

The continuity of the landscape across the North has also led to a shared relationship to those resources apart from foreign trade. The environment dictates the development of cultural norms like shelter building, diet, hunting, and entertainment. Arctic regions are most notable for their icy plains with high winds persisting throughout the year, towering mountains and never-ending valleys, behemoth ice sculptures, and clear blue-green water. In the North, every nation experiences the midnight sun and the polar night, night lasting longer than twenty-four hours. The average temperature for the warmest month is below 10°C (50° F).74 While television, Internet, and other contemporary pervading forms of mass media connect the nations, these elemental features of daily life continue to command the actions of inhabitants. The experience of that land-determined lifestyle fosters a community of Arctic inhabitants.

Inuit residents of the Arctic, like Tanya Tagaq, feel pride in continuing the lifestyle of their predecessors. All Inuit communities continue some elements of Arctic lifestyle that has been practiced for generations. There are many elements of Native lifestyle that have been passed to non-Native residents of the North, like navigation techniques, weather

---

predictions, shelter building, and hunting. The perfected methods of living in the Arctic, crafted over thousands of years of experience, have helped the people of the Arctic thrive in their environment. This Native knowledge of the land, as it exists in varying degrees in each Arctic individual resident, allies Arctic inhabitants.

Tanya Tagaq’s *Tungijuq* expresses the interconnectedness of the Arctic land and peoples, specifically for Native residents. That relationship with the land is a facet of lifestyles all throughout the Arctic region without interruption due to nation-state boundaries. It is a relationship that is unique to this region and holds great importance to the Arctic community. Land and peoples are co-dependent for life, as Tagaq expresses in her film. In fact, this relationship is, for many Arctic inhabitants, spiritual. That relationship is interwoven with the important history that the Arctic holds to animism, as further expressed in the next film of Tagaq’s that I will discuss, *Anirniq*.

**II. *Anirniq*: “We ARE Animals”**

Tanya Tagaq uses the relationship of Arctic residents to animals and the land to compel the community formed around this sense of place. It is the actions of navigating, finding shelter in, and hunting on the land, the performative actions of Arctic inhabitants of the past and present, which construct the relationship to the Arctic. In Keith Basso’s 1996 essay “Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape”, he argues that it is the routine lived actions of a people that create senses of place. He says that he follows Heidegger’s proposed concept of *dwelling* to conclude that “dwelling consists in the multiple ‘lived relationships’ that people maintain with places, for it is solely by virtue of
these relationships that space acquires meaning.” It is Basso’s assertion that the sensing of place is an awareness of the everyday expressions of attachment to the physical world. He also claims that these expressions are typically performed in a community. He says “places and meanings are continually interwoven into the fabric of social life, anchoring it to features of the landscape and blanketing it with layers of significance.”

Previously, I mentioned that the existence of wildlife is close to uniform across the Arctic. This fact has led to a shared lifestyle of hunting nearly identical game in nearly identical conditions across the top of the globe. The divide between how much interior wildlife (like caribou) is hunted and how much sea mammal hunting occurs varies but nearly all Arctic cultures participate in both. Native methods of hunting and tracking are still commonly used but often hunters now make use of modern weapons for their purposes. Tagaq’s film Anirniq demonstrates some of the continuity and discontinuity that has occurred in past and present Arctic hunting (figs. 15-17). The lifestyle of reliance on the Arctic wildlife binds together the northern regions. Anirniq expertly portrays the youthful exposure to hunting, the skill necessitated, and the emotional process of relying upon an environment that you have an intimate relationship with.

Anirniq (2010) is another award-winning film in which Tagaq participated. The film was winner of the Best Short Film at the Vancouver International Film Festival, Official Selection at the CFC World Wide Short Film Festival, finalist for the Best Short Film at the Banff Mountain Film Festival, and a finalist for the Best Short Film at the New Zealand


Feld and Basso, Senses of Place, 57.
Mountain Film Festival. *Anirniq*, “breath” in Inuktitut, is a stunning interpretation of an Inuit fable in which a man confronts the loss of his father as a young boy while on his first narwhal hunt as an adult. The film captivates viewers with its exploration of natural elements of connection. It highlights the environment as a dictation of lifestyle in the Arctic and explores the connection of animal life and human life.

*Anirniq* opens with the quote “The great peril of our existence is that our diet consists entirely of souls” written across the screen and spoken in Inuit. A contemporary Inuit hunter runs through the blinding white Arctic tundra with a worried expression on his face and a beautiful ivory necklace bouncing on his chest. The screen fades out to the face of a child in place of the man’s. The child sits in a cave lit brightly with a fire across from his father who holds a large, beautiful narwhal horn (fig. 15). The young boy asks “What is it?” His father replies “It is a unicorn” and gives his son a wink. He places the ivory necklace around the boys neck, presumably narwhal ivory. Tanya Tagaq’s loud, quick breaths and strained, noisy stringed instruments rise up as the film fades back to the contemporary Inuit man running fast. The screen begins to flash quickly back and forth between the past and present. In the past, the young boy is following his father through the icy landscape, keeping close to the Arctic seas in search for narwhal. The musical accompaniment is a low, serene violin. As the screen quickly flashes to the future, the man with the narwhal necklace is revealed to be carrying several spear guns and traveling with a companion that leads the way. Tagaq’s rushed breathing encapsulates the viewer in the tension that the hunter feels.

In the past, the boy and his father spot a narwhal in the crystal waters surfacing for air. The future hunter and his partner also encounter a surfacing sea creature. A close up
of the now grown young man reveals paralytic terror as he flashes back to his father falling through the ice into the unforgiving waters. His father struggles to return to the surface and fails. The pack of narwhals move into view and the boy’s father utters his last word in Inuktitut, “beautiful”, before swimming after the narwhals. (fig. 16) The spirit of the boy’s father has joined with the sea unicorns. The young boy waits with heavy sadness on top of the ice.

In the future, the narwhal surfaces and the man’s partner takes aim at the magical creature. The man in the narwhal necklace pleads to himself “Get away! Get away!” His partner shoots the creature. The man approaches the dead body of the narwhal on the ice and rests his head upon its body for several seconds (fig. 17). The music slows from a roaring stampede of strings and Tagaq’s voice to the serene violin of the boy’s past. In the final shot the man tells the narwhal, his father’s spirit, “I’m sorry.

Tagaq explores animism in Anirniq, as well as in Tungijuq. Beliefs in animism pervade the Arctic and the shared belief unites the community of the North. Animists, as defined by scholar Graham Harvey, are “people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons.” In animism, a spirit can be in a human being, animal, rock, blade of grass, or land as a whole. Beliefs in animism vary greatly amongst peoples and individuals.

In Anirniq (and in Tungijuq), Tagaq focuses on the belief that spirits move between humans and animals. The opening quote of the film “The great peril of our existence is that

our diet consists entirely of souls” invites viewers to consider the complexities of animalistic beliefs for a culture that depends on hunting. Graham Harvey explains, “Animists engage (responsively or proactively) with the real world in which . . . people must eat other persons, may be in conflict with other persons, will encounter death, and will need to balance the demands made by a series of more-or-less intimate and more-or-less hostile relationships.”78 While beliefs in animism vary in the Arctic regions, all regions have animistic beliefs in their history through ancestors, shared folklore, or cultural interactions. The prominent history of Asiatic movement to the North is accepted as the greatest propagator of beliefs in animism. Animistic understanding affects the decisions made by Arctic inhabitants relying so directly upon the land. Death, birth, hunting, and survival are all defined by the circularity of spirits in animism. Reliance on animals and the land requires respect and awareness of the sacredness of that interdependence.

Beliefs in animism extend beyond the relationship between animals and humans. In animism, persons can also be the land. Historically, Euro-American thought has struggled to accept this non-metaphorical belief. The land contains a spirit, as a person does; it does not represent or symbolize a spiritual belief. When asked about her relationship to animals and the land of the Arctic, Tagaq replied “We ARE animals. We ARE the land.”79 This understanding of animism is necessary to understand the relationship that Arctic inhabitants hold to the land and the strength of a community that shares that relationship. Once again, the pervasiveness of this belief in an Arctic inhabitant’s life varies greatly but it

79 Tagaq, Interview.
is an underlying structure in all Arctic cultures. This belief takes on specific importance today when we consider the use and abuse of the Arctic land by insiders and outsiders.

_Tungijuq_ and _Anirniq_ both demonstrate that intricately connected relationship for Arctic peoples. Land and animals are not secondary concerns for residents of the Arctic but one and the same as humans for those practicing animism. That interpretive methodology dramatically defines relationships. Nation-state boundaries do not divide this pervasive foundation for living that residents throughout the Arctic hold. Tanya Tagaq focuses on this belief system as a shared aspect of everyday life that unites the Arctic community.

### III. _This Land_ and The National Parks Project: Sirmilik: The Appropriation of “Nation”

In this section, I am going to discuss two projects that Tanya Tagaq collaborated on in conjunction with the Canadian government. Her willingness and desire to work with an institution of the nation-state provides a different insight into the work that she creates. Tagaq demonstrates nativism as she utilizes the resources of the national government and the possibilities of the power of the national construct to self-represent her relationship to the Arctic land. In 2007, Tagaq collaborated with the National Film Board of Canada to create _This Land_ (figs. 18-20). The National Film Board is an agency of the Canadian government that reports to the Parliament of Canada through the Minister of Canadian Heritage. It has produced and distributed over 13,000 films that have won over 5,000 awards, including twelve Academy Awards.⁸⁰

In _This Land_, seven male rangers, Inuit and non-Native, and a female filmmaker, Dianne Whelan, travel 2000 miles to raise a flag on the northernmost coast of Canada.

---

Tanya Tagaq composed the music for the film, sang, and acted as the narrator. The tip of land is just above the most northern settlement (Inuit) in Alert (fig. 21). It is only 412 miles from the North Pole. The rangers perform this task, as they do every year, to signify the ownership of the northern lands of Canada as Canadian to other countries that may challenge that ownership. The film follows the group through incredible distance, monstrous blizzards, a labyrinthine track through boulders of sea ice and nearly impossible glaciers, all through an average temperature of -50°C (-58°F). The rangers display an incredible amount of knowledge, skill, and courage as they move towards their goal. On the way to their destination, they read the messages left by explorers before them dating back one hundred years at the cairn left by explorer Robert Peary. The film is an extreme demonstration of community as they work tirelessly together during the day and then comfort one another with songs, stories, and food during the evening.

While it is impressed that the mission is of dire importance, there are few details given about who would question that land ownership or why the physical placement of a flag would rectify such a complicated issue as a land’s national affiliation. The race to claim land is not a thing of the past in the North. As the ice recedes, political and sovereignty issues have become points of anxiety. Canada reinforces their ownership of the land closest to the North Pole each year. In 2007, Russia planted a rustproof flag on the Arctic seabed beneath the North Pole.81 Economic interests are rising at the potential of oil in an Arctic free of its icy jail and countries are acting. Canada claims the move is symbolic and Russia

---

claims science as its motivator. While science and national unity may be a motivation, no
one is convinced that there are no future fiduciary interests for both nations.

Placing of the flag in *This Land* also must be understood as a symbolic ritual to
reaffirm the importance of Canada’s right to the land. Interestingly, while the area in which
the flag is placed is Canadian, it is actually a part of Nunavut, the land deemed sovereign
Inuit territory in 1999. The peoples of Nunavut have long expressed the opinion that they
are not Canadian and not concerned with the arbitrary boundaries forced upon them by the
rest of the world. Nunavut residents manipulated the acceptance of the nation-state
concept by the world to gain back their freedoms and sovereignty but most have not
changed their opinion on the existence of borderlines. The act of placing the flag is an
attempt to cement the community identity of Canada. The fact that those who participate in
this symbolic act are both Native and non-Native is no mistake. As the individuals of the
mission rely on one another and grow close, those watching the film are to see the rangers
as representative of the whole of Canada.

The film is shot in a familiar documentary style. Much like the rest of the film world,
the directors are aware of the implied credibility that a film in documentary style holds
with the viewing world. The camerawoman often breaks the “fourth wall” as she is needed
to assist in the building of temporary shelters and cooking of food. The casual, real-life
mood of the film cements the acceptance of the truth in the message being delivered by the
viewers. Instead of questioning the bizarre actions of the team (suffering through harsh
landscapes and terrible weather to repeatedly plant a metal pole into the ground year after
year), the formal structure of the film, with its documentary format and candid views of the
characters, encourages placid acceptance of the storyline by viewers.
The second collaboration which Tanya Tagaq participated in with the government of Canada was the National Parks Project. The National Parks Project was created for the centennial of the creation of the National Parks in 1911, which made Canada the first nation to have a National Parks program. The best of the best in Canadian music and film came together to create a celebration of the diverse environments (tundra, jagged mountains, lush forests, deserts) contained in Canadian national parks. The films showcase the beauty of Canadian landscape and the talent of those that call Canada home. The films also make evident the changes that are occurring throughout Canadian land and calls viewers to action. The Project is divided into one episode per park, with thirteen National Parks. The films are not created in a popular North American fast-action narrative style but are slow and often filled with silent moments so that viewers can focus in on the echoing valleys, rushing waters, animal calls, and tangible silences of nature. The tagline for the series is “The Power of Nature, the Magic of Art.” The powerfully visceral combination of sight and sound made the films very successful on the national and international stage. It has been nominated for the Canadian Genie Awards, featured at Berlinale, and was a finalist in the South by Southwest Interactive Awards (for the video work and the accompanying Internet presence).

Tanya Tagaq teamed up with director Zacharias Kunuk (also of Tungijuq), Dean Stone of indie rock band Apostle of Hustle and his partner Andrew Whiteman, also a member of indie rock band Broken Social Scene, all of Canadian nationality. This collaboration created the film for the national park Sirmilik in Nunavut, northern Canada (figs. 22-25). Sirmilik means “the place of glaciers” in Inuktitut. The narrative of the film

explores the changes of the Arctic environment as made evident in Sirmilik and the Inuit community of Qikiqtaaluk in Nunavut. The meditative haunting music of Stone, Whiteman, and Tagaq accompanies Kunuk’s incredible imagery to impress the subtle changes occurring in the great expanses of ice, rock, and water.

The film relies on the personal narrative of a resident of Qikiqtaaluk. The Inuit man relays his experience growing up in the Arctic. The film opens with a pan over the blinding reflection of the sun from the snow over mountains, valleys, and glaciers. The Inuit man’s voice plays over the scenes of Sirmilik. He explains that since he was five his father taught him how to hunt, create shelters, and enjoy life by learning the land. An electric guitar and hand drums fills the space as scenes of the Arctic flash by the screen. Even as an outsider, it is obvious that something is not right. There is too much exposed rock, impressed by the ghost of now melted glaciers, and thin ice and moving waters line the ocean’s edge.

The scenery shifts to the town of Qikiqtaaluk, a town of steel buildings littered with an amount of garbage that would offend most Euro-American sensibilities. A group of young boys play basketball on a basketball court that has been placed upon the permafrost. One captures a mouse and shows it off to his companions. The background to their playground is an expanse of ice so vast that it plays tricks on one’s eyes.

The camera pans nearby to discarded oil barrels on the ice and, a few feet away, the oil pipelines that line the Arctic landscape. Tanya Tagaq’s throat singing echoes as if it was contained within the pipelines. Her singing intensifies as the film cuts to open water, behemoth ice structures, and icy plains. Tagaq, Stone, and Whiteman sit below one of the

---

83 Issues of waste management in the Arctic is a complicated topic of conversation. Dismissing boundary communities as unclean or depressing because of the difference in waste management accessibility is a common insensitivity amongst outsiders.
towering ice statues, near the water’s edge and freely play music inspired by the land (fig. 23). The recording of all of the music took place in this actual location. A narwhal surfaces for air and reveals its magical speckled body before submerging.

The voices fade to the sound of howling wind. The Inuit man appears on screen on a snowmobile and searches for a seal’s aglu (breathing hole). His voice explains to the audience the different ways that the sky reveals the coming weather for the week. He butchers the seal that he captured after waiting patiently by the aglu. Visions of the Arctic landscape are explored in the camera and the feeling of icy absence becomes more and more apparent. The final words of the film are spoken by the man as he says, “These days the weather seems to have changed. I seem to make a mistake whenever I predict the weather.”

The Arctic is experiencing the most dramatic effects of climate change. Scientists have long agreed that global warming is occurring at a much faster rate here than anywhere else in the world.\footnote{“Welcome to ACIA,” accessed March 22, 2013, http://www.acia.uaf.edu/.} Scientific analysts agree that the Arctic will experience complete melting of sea ice by 2100, though, some predictions cite complete loss as early as 2040. Summer ice loss is estimated to occur by 2029. Even with these frightening numbers, some scholars still believe that they may be drastic underestimations.\footnote{Emanuella Grinberg, “Ice Melting Across Globe at Accelerating Rate, NASA Says - CNN.com,” accessed March 22, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2008/TECH/science/12/16/melting.ice/index.html.}

Climate change is causing such terrifying effects as the rising of sea levels, changes in weather patterns, and the release of methane stored in the permafrost, which further accelerates global warming. It is affecting the population and distribution of animals that use ice as protection, the base from which to hunt and travel, and as a zone from which
they find food. For example, in January of 1996, Bathurst Island in High Arctic Canada experienced the decimation of muskoxen and caribou species due to unnatural weather patterns. A freak warm rainstorm occurred when the temperature normally does not reach higher than \(-20^\circ\) C \((-4^\circ\) F). When the temperatures returned to normal the day after the storm, the rainwater turned into impenetrable sheets of ice. The muskoxen and caribou could not break through the armor of ice to reach the plant life that they survived upon. Many disappeared, some falling through thin ice in attempts to reach other islands that might carry food. Others froze and starved to death in the snow. Entire families of frozen muskoxen were found all across Bathurst Island. The populations dropped from hundreds one summer to thirty-four muskoxen and thirteen caribou the next.

The loss of protective ice barriers has also led to destructive contamination from the south. The influx of mercury from burning coal, pesticides, and other pollution in lower latitudes is directly related to the rapid melting of snow. The North has the second lowest pollution rate of any populated region (next to the Antarctic) but contains some of the most contaminated lands. The sea is polluted and the fish become contaminated; the bears and humans that eat the fish are then affected. Contamination is so serious in the Arctic that Greenland and Arctic Canadian Inuit are discouraged from breastfeeding.

In addition to the destruction of species, the change in weather has irreparably damaged the invaluable knowledge of the land kept by Arctic inhabitants. In *The Earth is Faster Now*, a collection of indigenous observations of climactic change by Igor Krupnik and Dyanna Joly, a Bering Sea Eskimo man relayed what a village elder told him “the Earth is faster now . . . she is not meaning that the time is. She is talking about how all this weather

---

87 Ibid., 269.
is changing. Back in the old days they could predict the weather by observing the stars, the sky, and other events. The old people think that back then they could predict the weather pattern for a few days in advance. Not any more!”

The loss of ice has also led to new political concerns for those who dwell in the Arctic. The Northwest Passage is now a plausible route for commercial trade because of the retreat of icy barriers. It is expected to experience an increase in traffic in the next fifty years that will forever change the Arctic. This knowledge has led to much discussion concerning the sovereignty of the peoples occupying the North. The opening of the waters and the new inhabitability of distant islands has also led to concern about illegal immigration (including sex trade routes), terrorism bases, pollution concerns, unpoliced access to resources of newly revealed regions, and the potential for military use.

While the alliance with the Canadian national government may seem antithetical to beliefs in postnationality, for Tanya Tagaq it is not. Tagaq believes that it is a means to an end. The funding and exposure of the national programming was the most powerful arena for Tagaq to present the environmental and political issues of the Arctic to the world. The concerns that she brings to light in these works reach far beyond Nunavut, Canada, or even the Arctic. When asked about the barriers of nation-states as they have divided the Arctic, Tagaq says “It’s like watching a child that came from a broken home try to play with well-balanced children for the first time. I choose to utilize notions of boundaries when I can point out the difference between patriotism versus discrimination and ownership versus

---

harmony.” While nationality frames the scene, Tagaq expresses the dire situation of the North and looks postnationally to the community of Nunavut, the community of Canada, the community of the Arctic, and the global community to turn their eyes North and take action. National affiliation and allegiance is a tool that Tagaq uses to accomplish her goal.

IV. Film and Popular Culture

Tanya Tagaq is unique in this meditation on three artists because of the popular culture arena of her film work. While all three artists use the medium of film with knowledge of the appropriation of a historically colonial tool, Tagaq does not just symbolically appropriate the medium; she uses the style of filmmaking and the arena of mass media. Her films are not shown in art gallery settings but as feature films in theaters, film festivals, and on locally, nationally, and globally accessible television networks. Not only are they shown in this arena but they have been wildly successful as made evidence by her array of awards.

Scholars have filled books with the countless faulty representations of Native peoples by film and television. Hollywood and American film has been a particularly guilty culprit in the misrepresentation of Native Americans. In 1922, American Robert J. Flaherty created the most famous representation of Arctic Native peoples, the Criterion Collection film *Nanook of the North: A Story of Life and Love in the Arctic*. The film to this day constitutes what most in the world hold in their minds as the Arctic inhabitant. The film followed a group of Canadian Arctic Inuit through a “typical” season of hunting, trading, birthing, creating shelter, and other everyday life activities. However, it was later revealed that Flaherty and crew had staged several scenes to preserve the image of

---

89 Tagaq, Interview.
90 Rollins and O’Connor, *Hollywood’s Indian*. 
Nanook, the star, and his family as Stone Age peoples confused by the greatness of the White Man. In fact, Nanook and most Canadian Inuit peoples had had some contact with Europeans and Americans for a century at that point. Despite the knowledge that the film was staged, it is still respected as one of the great feats of film. The touting of Flaherty’s work as a masterpiece has exacerbated the acceptance of the false image of Arctic Native peoples.

The feature film arena of Nanook was the medium of powerful influence that made it a legend. Tanya Tagaq inserts herself into the same arena with the goal of adding a new narrative. (In fact, she is currently working on a project where she performs live the soundtrack to Nanook of the North as reclamation of the film by a modern Inuit outlook.)91 In the epilogue of Kristen Dowell’s 2012 work Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast, she interviewed artists and members of film crews that she had worked with over the course of writing her book. An overwhelming amount of those involved in Aboriginal media works argued that there must be a future in feature films and mainstream media. Dana Claxton, a successful Tlingit video artist, said “I’d like to see more and more feature films, lots of feature films because that’s what people want. People don’t want experimental cinema! They don’t!” She laughs out loud because she is an experimental media maker and continues, ‘I’ll just keep plugging along doing what I do, but people want feature films.”92

---

91 For more on the controversy surrounding Robert J. Flaherty, Nanook of the North, Documentary, 1922 and the response, see Claude Massot, Nanook Revisited (IMA Productions and La Sept, 1988).
The desire to spread the message outside of communities does not necessitate a leaving behind of community values. Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers argue, in response to Australian Aboriginal artists when they worked, “Through their cultural production, the indigenous artists and intellectuals whose work we study and support are creating – in a range of media, from dot paintings to feature films – an indigenous presence for themselves and a force with which others must reckon."93 Working within mass media does not diminish the subject matter or ideals presented within film works.

I believe that Tanya Tagaq is particularly successful in spreading her message through the use of popular culture while retaining Inuit values. Her videos are not only shown in the feature film world but exhibit qualities of popular culture film. She utilizes the inundation of senses that is so prevalent in contemporary film. Startling visuals and rapturous sound are always paired to encapsulate the viewer in her films.94 She has also taken advantage of the popularity of documentary features to express herself.

However, each work that I have featured in this chapter exhibits circularity in the narrative. Tungijuq and Anirniq both have no clear beginning and end. This Land ends with the placement of the flag in the North and the return to prepare for the next year’s journey to, once again, place the flag. The National Parks Project ends just as it begins, with an Inuit man struggling to predict the oncoming weather in a visibly changing icy plain. Tagaq manipulates time and space in her films like Ryöppy to reflect the conceptions of time and space that differ from those of American-European understandings of linearity.

94 For an analysis of the pleasure of looking from a position of privilege, specifically from male to female in cinema, see Mulvey, Laura, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Feminism and Film Theory, ed. Constance Penley (Psychology Press, 1988), 57–68.
Tanya Tagaq has successfully used the feature film medium to first bring together the Arctic community and second to prompt the rest of the world to turn their attentions to the Arctic. Each of her films relies on a certain amount of previously held knowledge to access its meaning. Much like the work of Ólöf Nordal, Tagaq relies on layering to access different audiences. One must understand animism to fully appreciate Anirniq or Tungijuq. One must have felt the growing social anxieties of the North to understand the importance of placing the flag in This Land. A viewer must comprehend the importance of weather predictions in the North to fully realize the imminent danger of the North. Tanya Tagaq calls on those with that shared experience as the most important audience with which she speaks.

It is only in the collaboration with the Canadian government that lines of nationality are evoked and, for Tagaq, they are appropriated for her message. In a personal interview with Tagaq, she expressed her disinterest in such lines. For her, the Arctic community lies in lifestyle rather than in “arbitrary lines created by greed.”95 In This Land, the obsession with national lines is revealed as petty and a fool maker of men. In the National Parks Project, Tagaq sees no real focus on Sirmilik as Canadian, but only a concentration on the land.

It is her ability to negotiate those national lines that has given Tagaq such a broad voice. She ingeniously acts within and without the notion of nationality to achieve communities of several translocalities. She calls on those of Nunavut, Canada, the Arctic, and the global world in her different films to achieve her prime directive. She appropriates popular film as a colonial tool of narrating one understanding of the world and asks all

95 Tanya Tagaq, Interview.
peoples to listen to the reality of Arctic life. Her call for community stems from the revelations of Arctic daily living and that relationship to land and animals. She asks other inhabitants of the Arctic to share in the celebration of that community while looking at the rest of the world for a new understanding and respect.
Conclusion

In 1979, the peoples of Greenland organized to transfer the capital from Copenhagen, Denmark to Nuuk, Greenland. Greenland is now a completely self-controlled entity (apart from foreign and defense measures and financial investments for the future of Greenland.) In 1999, Canada established the Nunavut Territory (“Nunavut” means “our land” in the Inuit language), which ranges over two million square kilometers or twenty percent of Canada.96 The peoples of the Nunavut Territory largely govern themselves. The Scandinavian countries developed Saamediggi, a Sami parliament elected by Sami people and representing the Sami perspective in Nordic government proceedings. Northern Russia is still picking up the pieces of the collapsed Soviet Union but a conversation is developing concerning the rights and representation of the Native peoples.

All of these movements have been made with acknowledgement that the Arctic peoples are using the principles of land ownership and rights brought to them by the colonizing world. While the construct of “nation” is not historically an Arctic ideology, the Arctic people adapted it to their own purposes to find empowerment through the language of their oppressors, an act of nativism. The actions of these nations is a response to the problem of holding a loci of power southerly located. For example, Greenland’s capital resided in Denmark; Washington D.C. controls Alaska; Ottawa was the central location of power for northern Canada; and Moscow controls Siberian Russia. These locations of power not only cause a serious lack of political representation, but make the conceptualization of the Arctic region as a connected world to be nearly impossible for the

---

96 McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place*, 93.
rest of the world. The resituation of power is a major step towards redefining the Arctic region.

However, not all peoples of the Arctic believe that they need to make use of the nation-state construct to attain self-representation. When asked if the Sami people planned on forming a transnational Sami nation, a representative replied “they have always dealt with too many national boundaries and do not wish to create even more.” The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, an organization that represents Greenlanders, Canadian Inuit, and the Eskimo peoples of Alaska and Chukotka, also expresses this perspective. Working outside of national boundaries is, for many, the preferred understanding of Arctic peoples relationship to place.

The power to self-represent from the North, as exhibited by Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq, is a means of escape from the prison of European American representation throughout history. As the countries of the Arctic take action to find representation in the global political arena for members of all different communities, the self-representation of these artists that is not restrained by nationality, but invested in community, is another important action.

Ólóf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq are taking social action by pursuing a new self-representation to add to the previous colonial national narrative in the artworks discussed. Each artist works with individual nuance around their personal interpretations of allegiance and identity toward nation-states to define their identity as part of the Arctic community. The manner of self-representation used by these artists, the utilization of those everyday experiences that constitute individual identities, creates identity understanding.

97 Ibid., 260.
98 McGhee, The Last Imaginary Place.
that is fluid and unique to the artist. In the “third space” of video art, these artists have found a location from which to represent individual and collective identities that can exist within and without the definition of a nation. In performing these new representations, the artists have self-actualized a postnational identity for themselves and others of the Arctic community. This identification exists as one of many potential facets of identity for the heterogenous populations across the enormous Arctic landmass, a region constituted by complex cultural landscapes.

Historically, nation-state boundaries have minimized the connections that exist across the Arctic and silenced the multiple locations of identity, including transnational, that residents of the Arctic experience. Identifications with the nation and the region have changed since the initial inhabitation of the Arctic and will continue to change. As the ice melts and the use of the Northwest Passage grows rapidly, the Arctic will become far different from the sparsely inhabited North as it now exists. In the catalog for the exhibit True North: Contemporary Art of the Circumpolar North, curator of the Anchorage Museum, Julie Decker states “As interest in the Arctic and Circumpolar region grows, so too does the cultural significance of its residents and their need to assert their identities, autonomy, and partnership in a global community.”\(^9\) Individual and collective identities and their association with the Arctic region will change with the world and as they change self-representation by Arctic inhabitants must continue to develop.

Art and politics have a complicated relationship in history.\(^{10}\) Art allows those with a political agenda a medium with which to find a community in expression and exposure,

\(^9\) Decker, True North: Contemporary Art of the Circumpolar North, 17.

\(^{10}\) For an in-depth discussion about the relationship and power of art and politics, see Jeremy MacClancy, ed., Contesting Art: Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World, 1st ed.
while bringing sometimes complex and often unrecognized issues to the public. However, other than the most powerful political art movements like the AIDS movement and the feminist art movement, the sad truth is that most political art has not achieved dramatic social change. Political art is often dismissed as a spectacle rather than political action or relegated to a corner of culture as an outsider voice.

Ólóf Nordal, Catarina Ryöppy, and Tanya Tagaq face these issues and other problematics with community building. They share a goal of building a transnational postnational community that would hold a voice against interests seeking to abuse the Arctic as a means of fiduciary and political advancement. In order to achieve that goal, viewers must believe in the viability of a community voice to speak back to the money and power-driven entities that seek what the Arctic holds in its lands. Proposing a postnational community also asks a great deal from viewers by asking that they reevaluate the boundaries with which they have been told their world exists.

I believe that the goal of the artists is a reality because they are not building a postnational community alone; the political movements by each nation that I addressed at the beginning of this conclusion, actions to attain representation apart from imposed boundaries, supports the postnational community espoused by Nordal, Ryöppy, and Tagaq. The artists are not working from the ground up but joining their voice to the desires of those in the highest tier of Arctic society. Their voices can not be segregated as the voices of the radical; they are a part of a community forming from all sides of the Arctic region.

(Bloomsbury Academic, 1997). The authors in this edited work provide a compelling argument for the importance and efficacy of art’s influence in contemporary politics and identity creation.
That community will offer strength to face the behemoth structures that are looking
towards the North for personal advancement.

In each of the artists’ artwork, they utilize unique means to express postnational
sympathies. Ólöf Nordal uses folklore that transcends throughout the transnational Arctic
community and brings to light the weak foundation of symbols of nationality. She achieves
her goal by drawing on the connections of video art and oral narrative traditions. Catarina
Ryöppy implicates viewers and our focus on differences across boundaries rather than
similarities. She manipulates time and space in her video work to reveal the acceptance of
nonexistent boundaries by us all. Tanya Tagaq exhibits the overwhelming presence and
connection of Arctic peoples to land and animals as a community cornerstone. She displays
the potential of appropriating “nation” in popular culture to effectively reach her goals.

Ólöf Nordal’s work is directly connected to the political, while Catarina Ryöppy
implicates personal relationships to nation-state boundaries. Both are two important
realms of support for the continuance of boundary acceptance. Catarina Ryöppy makes her
goal of building a postnational community most obvious and direct in her work, but Tanya
Tagaq is willing to manipulate her message, her medium, and her arena to spread her voice.
Both share the goal of expressing the transnational connections of the Arctic and building a
community but Tagaq is more flexible in her content if she is spreading some small aspect
of that message. Tagaq only makes film works that are a complete community effort, with
her name as one of many in the tagline. The community of the creation of the film is
important to her. Ólöf Nordal cites the community of film creation as an important
connection to Inuit oral tradition but more broadly interprets that as the community of
creators/storytellers and audience.
The effectiveness of the artists’ efforts to self-actualize a cultural contribution that represents postnationality can be best understood through an analysis of each artist’s audience. Ólóf Nordal exhibits primarily in Iceland. She asks her audience to identify themselves with the folklore of their nation and then look to the transnational connection throughout the Arctic. Catarina Ryöppy exhibits her work across the Arctic region. Her curriculum vita reveals shows ranging from Finland to Canada to Alaska in the last year. Ryöppy’s work speaks to the damaging effects of living according to imposed borders as she moves her work fluidly through those boundaries. Finally, as discussed in Chapter 3, Tanya Tagaq exhibits her video works to a global feature film audience. She is embraced by popular newspaper film critics, social media websites, and film festivals.

While I argue each arena that these artists are working in is important, in terms of spreading a transnational cultural community, Tanya Tagaq leads the way. As I’ve discussed (Chapter 1: Section III: Theory and Ólóf Nordal), community definition is created from within and without a community. The world outside of the transnational Arctic community is an important element in solidifying a postnational identification. While Nordal and Ryöppy address important communities within the Arctic, only Tagaq is creating a postnational cultural identity that is regarded by members of the Arctic community and the global world.

Tanya Tagaq’s global success with feature films is a beacon of potential for the future of Arctic self-representation. Film may have a defining role in the future of the Arctic. The medium offers a global audience in a manner that most find engaging. In addition, the oral tradition roots of the Arctic have created many talented storytellers in the region that can define the future of the global knowledge of Arctic community.
While the Arctic undoubtedly has an uphill battle ahead with climate change and resource wars on the horizon, the actions of their governments and individual citizens to work within and without the arbitrary and oppressive boundaries of national boundaries gives me great hope for the future. This acknowledgement of fluidity of identity will allow for an understanding of differing allegiances and relationships with identity. Just as the Arctic contains connections and contradictions, as a space that is the “last frontier” and globally connected, peopled with those that value tradition and are also on the edge of technological development, a place both rare and connected, the self-representation of Arctic inhabitants will introduce the complexities of identity that exist outside of national identifications in the North. In the light of these changes Arctic nations may be able to work as a community to protect the land and the rights of the peoples who inhabit these lands.


Figure 4. Ólöf Nordal, Great Auk, Aluminum, 120 x 40 x 40 cm. In the possession of Reykjavik Art Museum. Photo reproduced http://www.artnews.is/artnews_article.php?no=03_01&is=3 (Accessed March 20, 2013). This image is not as the sculpture appeared in the exhibit, Iceland Specimen Collection, discussed in Chapter 1. It has been placed outside of the Reykjavik Art Museum.


Figure 15. Tanya Tagaq, RJ Sauer, Amy Jones, still from Anirniq, 2010. Film still captured by Nicole Dial-Kay. March 21, 2013.

Figure 17. Tanya Tagaq, RJ Sauer, Amy Jones, still from _Anirniq_, 2010. Film still captured by Nicole Dial-Kay. March 21, 2013.


Bibliography


Dowell, Kristin L. *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast*, n.d.


Flaherty, Robert J. *Nanook of the North*. Documentary, 1922.


http://www.ryoppy.net/beingmisp_engl.html.

http://www.ryoppy.net/dispar_engl.html.


