MediaTropes eJournal
Vol VII, No 1 (2017): 185–202
ISSN 1913-6005

"WHO WE ARE NOW": IÑUPIAQ YOUTH *ON THE ICE*

JOANNA HEARNE

Introduction

Cinema from the Arctic has been at the forefront of the global rise of Indigenous filmmaking. Many of these feature films—such as *Atanarjuat*, the *Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, *Ofelas*, and the *Kautokeino Rebellion*—are either set in a pre-contact past or address conflicts and resistance efforts stemming from earlier periods of colonization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, presenting challenges of and to traditional subsistence systems, cultural and spiritual practices, or political rights. Like other exemplars of Arctic cinema, Iñupiaq director Andrew Okpeaha MacLean's first feature film, *On the Ice,* tells a story that originates in the community where it was shot, but it also expands this small canon in several ways.[1] MacLean's English-language film focuses on the lives of present-day youth, sharing with other Indigenous new wave films—*Smoke Signals*, *Four Sheets to the Wind*, *Boy* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, among others—the uptake of Hollywood film genres (road films, comedies, science fiction) to tell Indigenous coming-of-age stories. As director MacLean said in an interview with *Filmmaker* magazine, "One of the stereotypes about Indigenous filmmaking is that you see many idealized versions of the past, and I wanted to do a film about who we are now." To convey this sense of "who we are now," MacLean's Iñupiaq youth stage their

[1] Of the ten or so feature-length dramas by Arctic Indigenous peoples in distribution, the films of the Igloolik groups Isuma Productions and Arnait Video are the most widely available—*Atanarjuat* (*The Fast Runner*, 2001), *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006) and *Before Tomorrow*, (2009) all stream on Isuma.tv—followed by Sami filmmaker Nils Gaup's *Ofelas* (*Pathfinder*, 1987) and *The Kautokeino Rebellion* (2007) and the filmmaking team Anastasia Lapsui (Nenets) and Markku Lehmuskallio's *Seitseman laulau tundralta* (*Seven Songs of the Tundra*, 1999), and *Jumalan Morisan* (*A Bride of the Seventh Heaven*, 2004). These films share a range of aesthetic and production practices: fluidity between documentary and dramatic discursive modes; location shooting; use of nonprofessional actors; privileging of Indigenous languages; economic and aesthetic valuation of traditional subsistence hunting skills and crafts; and attention to traditional social organization as well as storytelling, song, and shamanic forms of spirituality.

identities in a contemporary moment that is also embedded in generational time, shifting languages and codes as they interact with parents and grandparents, and explicitly weighing what traditional elements to carry forward in their future families.

The film follows two close friends coping with their transitions to adulthood as well as an influx of methamphetamines in the small Iñupiaq community of Barrow, Alaska. As Qalli (Josiah Patkotak) prepares to leave for college with the support of a strict, stable family, his friend Aivaaq (Frank Qutuq Irelan), who lives with his alcoholic mother, plans to find a job (or possibly begin selling drugs to make money) after learning that his girlfriend may be pregnant. The teenagers decide to hunt seal on the spring sea ice with their friend James (John Miller), but when Qalli arrives to rendezvous with them he finds Aivaaq and James fighting and still high from the previous night's party; he tries to intervene but accidentally kills James with Aivaaq's hunting knife. Rather than bringing James' body back to the community, they sink it and his snowmobile in the sea, and return to town claiming that James hit a patch of fog and fell through the ice. Although their story is believed, Qalli's father Egasak (Teddy Kyle Smith), a member of Barrow Search & Rescue, continues to investigate and eventually finds their tracks and the body of their friend.

MacLean explains that he "decided to tell a story that had very universal aspects. It's a story that could happen anywhere: two boys get involved in a killing and cover-up. You could set that story in suburban New Jersey if you wanted to." What makes *On the Ice* an Iñupiaq story and not a New Jersey story is that much of the film's action, and much of its production, is specific to a landscape dominated by sea ice. Exploring MacLean's filmmaking practices and the film text in relation to the film's location on the ice—including local casting and the intergenerational blending of Iñupiaq culture and global influences—reveals the film's relationship to broader issues in the field of Indigenous media production. Fourth Cinema films continue to occupy and decolonize First Cinema genre systems—not only Westerns but increasingly also genres such as gothic, vampire and zombie films, that have less often incorporated Indigenous images. By wielding First Cinema's genre systems, MacLean adopts a system of stories that could be told anywhere ("you could set that story in suburban New Jersey if you wanted to") but makes them unique to the Arctic climate and geography—unique to Arctic ice— and to Inuit knowledge. He describes the film in terms of his understanding of contemporary youth culture in the Arctic:

> I decided to make it about young people, because I think that the young people in the Arctic right now are going through the kind of change that's analogous to what my grandfather's generation was going through. It's this last generation … who have never experienced the isolation of the Arctic, and presumably no generation ever will again … because of the internet. Everything is so connected, everything is so fast…. It's a fundamental change. When I was growing up there … there was just a feeling of separation from the rest of the world that doesn't quite exist anymore. And so what that does to the young people up there—it grants them so many more opportunities. It gives them a kind of power, it allows them to tap into the wider culture. But that also then ends up presenting a choice that you really have to define yourself a little bit more. You have to define yourself as an Inuit person, as an Iñupiaq person, if that's what you want to do. It's a much more conscious thing. (Hearne, Land, and MacLean, 206)

On the Ice explores the stakes of this new and powerful youth self-definition in the context of both Arctic specificity and the "placelessness" of the internet, for if sea ice was the condition of isolation for northern peoples, that isolation is now an artifact of the pre-digital age, and the film reaches out to Indigenous youth by recognizing that this audience is as immersed in mainstream global popular culture as an audience in New Jersey. Yet rather than the cliché of Indigenous youth in stasis ("trapped between two worlds"), the film's characters convey both agency and fluidity in their identity-making from multiple sources, using their generation's mastery of snowmobiles and hip-hop as well as hunting to seek community validation. Much as the characters in *On the Ice* appropriate widely distributed urban rap music to express their Iñupiaq identities, MacLean himself engages established film genres (the thriller, the Western) in order to explore generational dynamics in the Arctic—some critics have called *On the Ice* "Arctic noir," or "*film blanc*" (Means). These related threads—the representation of contemporary Indigenous youth and the translation of their moment to wider audiences, Fourth Cinema appropriation of First Cinema genre forms, and the specificity of potentially generic plot elements to the setting on Arctic sea ice—undergird an overarching concern with the continuation of Iñupiaq systems of knowledge.

Inuit knowledge and Iñupiaq worldview in *On the Ice*

In its focus on "who we are now," *On the Ice* measures this generation's negotiation of Indigenous knowledge and the intergenerational transmission of that knowledge amidst systemic incursions from colonizing forces. Mindful of the diversity of Arctic peoples, in this essay I follow Andrew MacLean's use of "Iñupiaq" to refer to the western Arctic community in the area of Barrow (or Utqiaġvik) represented in *On the Ice*, while reaching more tentatively towards some wider contexts from Inuit peoples in the eastern Arctic. Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsley writes that the translation of "Inuit" is not simply "Humans" or "The People" as is sometimes assumed, but rather "The Living Ones Who Are Here." While this more precise translation may evoke associations for Inuit who remember, through oral traditions, earlier "Tunit" Arctic cultures, it also underscores the sense of "here, now" in the reflexive work of Inuit designation. As Tad Lemieux has noted, "'Who we are now' is always an articulation of 'Inuit.'"

In her 2012 study of Inuit literature, *Stories in a New Skin*, Keavy Martin turns to a document outlining Inuit cultural concepts, the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* ("IQ") ("what Inuit have known for a very long time"), which was commissioned by the government of Nunavut, the largest of Canada's three territories and the first Inuit majority territory, to guide the integration of Inuit values within the self-governing province. The IQ framework describes the quality of *qanuqtuurniq*, or "a quality of resourcefulness in problem-solving," suggestive of resilience or plasticity; as Qitsualik-Tinsley asserts, "Inuit are the embodiment of adaptability itself" (qtd. in Martin 3, 8). The IQ report foregrounds a model of traditional Inuit conceptions of knowledge that already encodes systems for incorporating the new, because its very definition as knowledge entails the ability to adapt resourcefully to changed circumstances as a central value. While *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* ("IQ") is linguistically and culturally Inuit, built from the participation and knowledge of elders from the eastern Arctic (Nunavummiut communities), its articulation of a mode of Inuit knowledge—along with western Arctic Iñupiaq concepts—can begin to offer a broad scaffold for understanding the characters' interactions with ice and with each other in *On the Ice*, and for thinking through the film's Indigenization of American film genre forms.

MacLean's concern with the transmission and adaptation of Iñupiaq knowledge also engages "a core belief in the Iñupiat community called *paalaqtautainniq*, which roughly translates as 'non-violence' or 'avoidance of

conflict'" ("Andrew Okpeaha MacLean"). Beginning as early as the 1950s, MacLean says,

> all of a sudden the way we lived started to be more directly impacted by the larger society and things like Western models of justice became more relevant and became more present in the society…. There's a concept in the Iñupiaq world view called *paallaqtautainniq*…. It's like non-violence but more to do with finding ways to resolve a situation that don't create antagonism…. And I think that was at the heart of what had been the model of justice, what had been the model of the way community works out these sorts of things. I was comparing that with the Western model, which is a much more antagonistic one. You know, somebody commits a crime, uses force in a criminal way, and so the response is to use force against them, to forcibly imprison, even forcibly kill somebody. (Hearne, Land, and MacLean, 204–205)

The setting of the film, in Barrow and on the ice, contextualizes the importance of these differing knowledges as they are manifested by hunting skills and forms of performativity. These Inuit and Iñupiaq value systems privileging adaptability and nonviolence saturate *On the Ice's* structural movements between interior shots of group performances and outdoor action sequences on the ice. The film's engagement with the thriller and Western genres is especially important in this regard, because the suspense of concealment and detection hinges on the differing horizons of each character's local knowledge and that of the audience. *On the Ice* is concerned with the transmission of knowledge in these different ways: in the village, where characters establish degrees of traditionality and demonstrate the adoption of new cultural systems through performances, social interactions, and closely watched relationships; on the ice, a place signifying both lawlessness and the discipline demanded by Iñupiaq territorial environment; and in the production of the film itself, where the filmmakers and actors had to have working knowledge of the Arctic and Iñupiaq systems in order to make the film, yet also acquired and shared new filmmaking skills with community members.

While hunting and the violence that displaces it occur on the ice, three community performance scenes—the opening scene of a traditional dance and drumming event, spontaneous rapping at a house party, and a singspiration (an informal memorial service or wake)—take place in town and integrate the youth more deeply into their community. In contrast to these public performances, watched by all, action on the ice that takes place out in the open

is physically hidden from community view (yet simultaneously suffused with the very community presence made visible in the scenes of performance). The lead characters' occupation of these different spaces—and the deep intergenerational reverberations in the community in response to events on the ice—reveal transformed social relations in the new Arctic.

In Barrow

One current manifestation of Indigenous adaptability—and in *On the Ice*, a specifically Iñupiaq way becoming "who we are now"—is the widespread immersion in the remix culture of hip-hop. For Mark Lanctot, curator at the Montréal, Québec museum where the Indigenous hip-hop art show *Beat Nation* was recently a featured exhibit, Aboriginal culture is "always changing, always takes from other cultures" while "the idea behind hip-hop is the idea of a mix" (Sommerstein). Artist SCZ attributes to Indigenous remixing the power to "disorient the logic of coloniality": "Indigenous mobilizations of technology" recognize the historical connections among Indigenous and diasporic peoples through "sampling (reclaiming sonic pasts), remixing (renaming to create new meaning) and redistributing (reoccupying sonic spaces)." For scholar and DJ Mark V. Campbell, hip-hop provides the "lingua franca" or "common grammar" needed for intersectional conversation in public space—the art of the mix teaches us "how we might live with social difference," "bringing into relation that which is sold to us as distinctly different, separate and unrelated." Sonic "mixes" challenge genre systems—systems based on marketing the distinctions of "kinds"—by recombining categories. Northern adaptability—manifested as "remix"—is on display in many of the village scenes in *On the Ice*, and although the teenagers seem to feel a tension between the confrontational aesthetics of some hip-hop and *paalaqtautainniq*, the underlying discourses of law and lawlessness are also articulated to the specificities of Indigenous knowledge and justice systems. Arguments over music and lyrics divide the young men (argumentativeness already indicating a non-Iñupiaq form of knowledge or world-making), yet the characters also integrate the local by referring constantly to their environment—snow, northern lights—in their own rhymes.

On the Ice observes the integration of hip-hop in northern communities by juxtaposing two scenes of music and dance performance early in the film—scenes which illustrate the way young people are faced with choices, yet also able to "remix" across shared colonial contexts in ways that are often synergetic. The first scene—just after the first establishing shots of Barrow—depicts a large gathering involving Iñupiaq drumming, song, and dance in a

brightly lit community space, with participants wearing traditional dress including purple cotton parkas, skin boots and mittens. A series of medium shots depict the row of drummers, and the men dancing. Qalli and Aivaaq leave the drum line to perform, displaying their traditional dance skills to enthusiastic applause. Immediately after this series of evocative shots of the dance, viewers are re-introduced to the characters in their ordinary clothes, as they exchange news, plans, insults and rap rhymes. They mix English slang with Inuktut, calling one another "dude" and "Inuk," bragging about selling "chronic" and catching *natchiq* (seal pup). Qalli and Aivaaq parse the new roles and relationships they expect to have once Aivaaq's child is born; Aivaaq says "it's about time I made my mom an *aaka* [grandmother]" and that "you know you're gonna be like my boy's uncle, right? Give him all that wisdom you got in your head, you know, keep him on the level." However once they join a larger group of young men, gathered around a video camera loaded with home-made snowmobiling videos, they begin trading barbed insults with the others about hunting, girlfriends, and music, eventually crossing the line from verbal to physical altercation when James insults Aivaaq's mother.

These conversations negotiate an emergent adulthood, and while both Aivaaq and Qalli seem comfortable blending local and transnational discourses, they are also clearly feeling their way toward establishing their generation's level of traditional practice. For example, at a house party that evening, Aivaaq tries to reassure his girlfriend Uvlu that he will live up to his responsibilities as a new father. But when he happily declares that he is going on a hunting trip ("You ain't gotta worry about a thing. I'll provide! You got to learn how to cut a seal, though. I'm gonna be a hunter … I'm old school!"), the less-traditional Uvlu reacts with scorn. She wants him to get wage work: "Well, I'm new school. I'm not changing no fox-skin diapers so your ass is getting a job." Qalli's father Egasak had, earlier, over a family dinner of caribou, (*nikipiaq*, which means "Iñupiaq food," but which Egasak translates as "real food") expressed deep satisfaction on hearing that the boys planned to go hunting to restock the family freezer with seal pup meat, but the traditional ways of becoming an adult man—including successful hunting—are suddenly no longer enough as Aivaaq and Uvlu are further challenged by the need to agree on how traditional their family subsistence will be. The camera catches glancing fragments of conversation, mimicking the way that everyone watches everyone else in the close quarters of the crowded, dimly lit party (a dynamic that echoes traditional practices of trading and performing songs in the *qaggiq* or community space). This complex matrix of gazes becomes full-fledged spectatorship when the young men begin performing their rhymes, watched by the crowd. Aivaaq's rap situates youth drug use in their community ("Northern

lights up above, green as bud"), describes himself as a "professional Eskimo, gangsta in the snow," and asks the audience to "show some love for these Arctic thugs." The film's textual and titular connection of signature elements of the Arctic to the material substance of illegal drugs (the green of northern lights and marijuana, the white transparency of ice and crystal meth) create a sonic aesthetic and visual parallels between environmental specificity and the film's primary sources of narrative conflict (especially methamphetamines). The song encapsulates the previous conversational tension over "traditional" and "modern" ways of making a living in Arctic territory, since Aivaaq is planning to sell marijuana to support his new family, even as the material production of the music itself makes such distinctions irrelevant by creating a syncretic space for blended realities. As scholar Kyle Mays argues, "embracing the great diversity of what it means to be Indigenous today" means advocating "indigenous modernity" over the "false lens of 'modern/traditional.'" Aivaaq's demand that audiences "show some love for these Arctic thugs" suggests what Lakota hip-hop artist Frank Waln argues Indigenous hip-hop does, offering people "born with historical trauma, frustration and colonial rage" a "framework for decolonial love" and a way to "feel the full spectrum of emotions like all other human beings."

MacLean's placement of these drumming and hip-hop performative sequences in close proximity invites audiences to see them as concurrent forms of cultural expression and sources of value and status for young people. Waln notes the similarity of rap's beat and storytelling to Indigenous drumming and music—"sharing communal narratives through song and lyric." The teens are applauded and affirmed for their mastery of both Iñupiaq ceremonial dance and rap rhymes, and their pairing in both performances and in their hunting expedition (they share Qalli's snowmobile) signals their partnership and emotional bond (see Wenzel on snowmobiles and hunting travel in an eastern Arctic community). It also rehearses the way that the boys must perform in an everyday context later in the film, when they struggle to keep the killing a secret and maintain a front of normalcy while withstanding significant community scrutiny after James' death. Their ultimate inability to do so is suggested by a failed performance, when Aivaaq refuses to stay at the singspiration, although Qalli had reminded him that participation would be expected. Each of these performative sequences reinforces a visual language of spectatorship that furthers the narrative while allegorizing the work of the film itself. In the context of changed politics of viewership arising from the Indigenization of media production and reception, scenes involving audience-performer relationships freight the film itself with a dual performative role as the film speaks to its audiences in emergent, adaptive ways that are both

traditionally Iñupiaq and appropriated from popular urban genres. Part of this expanding expressive repertoire of Arctic audiences involves the generational negotiation of knowledge, measures of cultural continuity mapped onto discourses around hunting and portraits of functional and dysfunctional family life realized through images of domestic space (Qalli's family's house, Aivaaq's family's house, and Qalli's grandmother's house).

After these performative sequences, at the center of the narrative, Aivaaq and James' drug use takes place off screen while the camera instead follows Qalli, who leaves the house party to visit with his grandmother (Aivaaq later expresses incredulity over this—"Who leaves a party to visit their *aaka*?"—suggesting that Qalli's choice signals an unusual closeness across generations). Qalli understands his grandmother's Inuktut but answers her in English; their conversation alludes to various kinds of addiction, suggesting the longevity of the community's need to address the consequences of dangerous imports. First, Qalli cautions her not to take too much pain medication for her arthritis, and then she invites him to play cards while warning him about the dangers of this potential habit: "Right now you and I are gonna play some cards, but playing cards when you're supposed to be hunting, that's a bad thing. Like right now you would be out hunting somewhere trying to get a *natchiq* for me, if you're hooked to these you'll never be a good hunter. Never, ever. Play some cribbage?" Although she asserts that playing cards interferes with hunting, here it also keeps Qalli away from the meth at the house party, and later he takes refuge at his grandmother's house during the worst of his own grieving and guilt over James' death. The scene reinforces the generational and cyclical emphases in the film—the younger generation's repetition of and differentiation from older adaptive patterns, as we see in their continued dedication to hunting and in Qalli and Aivaaq's relationship with Egasak.

On the Ice

Unlike the small, dark, somewhat claustrophobic interiors of houses in town, much of the film's action takes place on the bright expanse of sea ice. The sea ice critical to the film's production, action, and genre revision is also the sustaining environmental condition for Iñupiaq culture. It is the context for, and signifies the value of, Iñupiaq knowledge. "Iced" as slang for killing connects the murder at the heart of the film's story with both the fragility of that cultural knowledge and the threatened loss of sea ice on a warming planet. While the ice is sustaining (the site of harvests), crystal meth ("ice") represents the harsher environment of colonization (reaching beyond the specificity of Iñupiaq youth towards broader parallels with other disenfranchised communities). *On the Ice*

engages both meanings, as the accidental killing of James happens on the ice and while he is under the influence of methamphetamines. Ice becomes a flexible signifying system—a metaphor for drugs and for both the strength and the tenuousness of Iñupiaq knowledge transmission within the community. In the context of climate-related discourses about ice in the broader mediascape, the film's images of ice also signal the actual instability of the Arctic during environmental warming. Thus the crime that evidences Indigenous interruption (death on the ice, substance abuse) can also be read to signify environmental degradation and the potential disintegration of the sea ice itself. Ice is, then, both the subject and environmental condition for filming, becoming the site of equivalent production activities (filming and whaling) for the community. The way that ice structures the narrative propulsion—the uniqueness of ice as a setting, as well as production location—distinguishes it from other genre films and lends it the material territoriality of Fourth Cinema. The film underscores the importance of icy ground (and transit across it) early on, when the teenagers show one another home videos of their snow-machine stunts. The shots prefigure the film's later preoccupation with tracking the movements of individual snow machines, while pointing to the youth's mediated lives and the Indigenization of machine technologies, from walkmans and video cameras to snowmobiles.

The ice determines elements of the story as well as the way the film is shot, with the crew moving back and forth between Barrow and the open, shifting shelf of sea ice. Suppressed conflicts in town become violent on the ice, which then becomes the site of crime, search and rescue efforts, and detection that signal the film's activation of the thriller genre. But Arctic ice also works well as a "Western" landscape in its visual qualities—its expanse dwarfing human figures—if not its temperature or aridity. Maclean describes the ice as a location evocative of the lawlessness of the film Western: "You have the environments of the ice, which it feels very open, it seems like you can see forever… It feels like it's possible to kill somebody and to hide it, much like a desert in the Western. Then you have the town, which it's completely different, you are surrounded by people that know your entire life, the most are related to you, there's no secrets so that has a very claustrophobic feeling" (Moreno). "…Westerns to me were all about people being able to reinvent themselves, people finding themselves outside of the normal bounds, and sort of being able to rewrite the rules. And there's a feeling of that that you can kind of get outside of town in a place like Barrow, you're just in this wide open vastness. It just creates this feeling of possibility—of like, okay, I can get away with things out here—in a way that's at the heart of Westerns" (Hearne, Land, and MacLean, 207). Maclean thus relocates generic patterns of the thriller and the

Western to the sea ice, a landscape far enough away from community expectations to invite violent action and subsequent detection as well as hunting for provision, infusing First Cinema generic structures with an Iñupiaq story about Arctic knowledge and community rivalry.

Generational negotiations and demonstrations of *qanuqtuurniq* take place here as well, especially around the management and exchange of imported technologies, such as rifles and snow machines that are instrumental to the plot. The apparatus, locations and discussion of hunting permeate the film, but there are no hunting scenes. Hunting weapons (knives, rifles) are repurposed against friends and hunting skills like tracking are engaged to find human bodies instead of animals. Qalli's father Egasak's revelation—that he has found James' body—is initially hidden, as Egasak stops the hunt near a ridge that separates them from the view of the hole in the ice. He presides over a lunch break, first commenting that Aivaaq's rifle has been well cared-for, and then telling the story of how the rifle, once Egasak's, was won by Aivaaq's father in a dog-sled race. Although Egasak's dogs were known to be faster, Aivaaq's father surreptitiously fed them large amounts of walrus meat before the race, slowing them down enough to win the race and rifle. Egasak's story of losing a prized rifle in a rigged contest between friends, and the continued care of the rifle through generations, manifests the longevity of relationships and rivalries in the community—instead of a Western gunfight, we get stories about complicated social interactions and the re-distribution of resources. The rifle has survived technological changes (from dog teams to snowmobiles), as well as the contests of young men with their peers, and the transition from fathers to sons. The rifle story—another connection to the Western—measures the depth of relationships over time and across multiple generations, signifying other, unspoken stories about the origins of intracommunity gossip, rivalries, hidden guilt, and the potential future of destructive secrets. It also models ethical action taught through choices informed by storytelling, not enforced through violence.

Egasak's determined truth-finding as he scans tracks and interrogates each character's story for veracity, illustrates the way the film's action depends on the characters' and the community's relationship to ice—it is much more than simply a place where the contained conflicts of village life can erupt into unchecked violence. The cracks, coastline, and breathing holes (where seals breathe and can be hunted) are all important to the plot; much of the travel takes place on flat ice, but rises and ridges are strategic to the film's action (as when Egasak first hides and then reveals his knowledge of the killing and retrieval of the body). The ground itself is evidence because of the visibility of blood in the snow and the capacity of snow to record and erase tracks. The ice horizon and the coastline are the focus of many panning and aerial shots across the

landscape, which reinforce the characters' activities of tracking and scanning for a number of purposes—including weather conditions, orientation, detection. The film returns again and again to sequences in which characters follow tracks and scan the horizon, as Qalli does when heading out onto the ice trailing the snow machine tracks left by his friends, and when Egasak tracks the marks left by Qalli and Aivaaq's snow machine, attempting to discern the actual events of James' death.

In contrast to what Stephen Leuthold describes as a focus on "unmarked" landscapes in Indigenous films, several establishing aerial shots and the many panning shots in *On the Ice* inventory roads, towns, and satellite dishes.[2] The left to right pans, overhead and bird's eye view shots, and other kinds of cinematic grammar fuse the documentary's representation of land with the dramatic establishment of setting. *On the Ice* is not a documentary, yet the film also must engage in some of the explanatory or pedagogical work of documentaries in order for its action to make sense to non-Iñupiaq viewers.

This need to provide multiple audiences with differing access to the specifics of the contemporary Arctic location and Iñupiaq cultural practice is articulated textually in constructions of local knowledge. The outsider-audience orientation implied by the "showing" and "explaining" of documentary is occasionally the topic of conversation among characters who are simultaneously embedded in the dramatic play of concealing, detecting, and revealing integral to the suspense of the genre film/thriller. For example, in an early scene after Qalli leaves the house party, he stands for a moment to watch

[2] In his book on Indigenous documentary media, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, Stephen Leuthold writes that "aerial landscape flyover shots" and other "images of nature are subjects in their own right but are also used to construct frameworks for viewing other issues" (126) in Indigenous documentaries from the twentieth century, such as Burdeau's *The Pueblo Peoples: First Contact*, Bigcrane and Smith's *The Place of Falling Waters* (1990), and Bearclaw's *Warrior Chiefs in the New Age* (1991). *On the Ice*, although it is a drama rather than a documentary, features similar pans and "flyover shots appear in key opening and transitional passages." Such shots express "a continuity of physical relationship" to the area of land "that transcends any specific historical period." Leuthold asserts that "significantly, all of these aerial shots are of natural landscapes unmarked by roads, towns, phone lines, satellite dishes…" (126) and that rather than "inventory natural resources," as wilderness and Forest Service documentaries have been said to do, Indigenous documentaries frequently activate spiritual relationships to land, as well as the territorial sovereignty that is authorized by spiritual and material knowledge of the land. *On the Ice* showcases the way Iñupiaq community stories and histories transmit knowledge of places, and snow and ice conditions, while its panning and flyover shots do different work than in the thriller, the Western, and the documentary, even as these shots call up associations with all three genre conventions.

the sun, which is low on the horizon. His friend and love interest Michelle, who has also left the party early, approaches and comments:

> "You're going to be waiting a long time."
>
> "What?"
>
> "The sun doesn't set till August."
>
> "Thanks for the info. I would have been out here all night if it wasn't for you."

Michelle's pretence that Qalli has mistaken the Arctic's long late spring day for a sunset establishes a shared humour that prefigures their later intimacy. Treating Qalli like a tenderfoot invites us to measure the distance between an imagined tourist, unfamiliar with the most basic elements of the Arctic, and the depth of Qalli's cultural fluency and skill as a newly minted independent hunter. The sequence brings our attention back to the distinctiveness of this landscape and the knowledge needed to live there—knowledge as basic as when a day begins and ends. We are reminded that the characters are not in New Jersey despite the opening shots of graffiti, water tanks, and other standard infrastructure in contemporary Barrow, and that they are not in a Western desert despite the structural invocation of frontier lawlessness on the open ice. These visual grammars, organized around an environment of sea ice, invite us to see how systems of law might work in post-contact Iñupiaq communities where traditions of ameliorating conflict exist alongside imported legal systems that deploy punitive use of force to address crime.

Production on the Ice

The sea ice functions in the film as interstitial space—not land, not sea—that is a rich site for the harvest of migratory sea animals yet also physically dangerous and outside of community law. It is constantly changing yet consistently present as a world-making force for Arctic peoples, a condition that demands both continuity and adaptation. Ice matters as the site where flows of transnational products—both material goods (rifles, snowmobiles) and cultural products (rap, cards, and of course movies)—move in and out of the community. The legibility of ice, then, and the need for and acquisition of specific skill sets to read it, are conveyed by the film's narrative and visual preoccupation with tracking and detection (fusing the Arctic setting with the thriller genre) and investment in hunting as a signal element of Indigenous identity in the Arctic. If *On the Ice* instantiates visual sovereignty as Michelle Raheja has defined it—a "reading practice for thinking about the space between

resistance and compliance" (193)—it does so by rendering Indigenous knowledge as a visual practice, an interpretive relationship with landscape honed by interdependence with ice. Although the film is not about climate change, its release in 2011 in the midst of amplified public culture discourses about melting Arctic ice also makes it hard to read the ice in *On the Ice* without considering the changing land and seascape upon which the action takes place. MacLean describes the ice as a unique shooting location:

> There's something fundamentally unstable about it. It's a landscape that just constantly is reinventing itself, at a rate that can be actually dangerous to human life, and that sense of danger is important and informs the feeling the characters have about going to this place. And that from a practical plot perspective creates the plausibility of a death out there, and it also creates the need for the characters to be skilled…. It also has cultural significance to it, in that the kind of knowledge that you need to be out on the ice is something that previous generations learned from the time that they were walking. Now within the culture it's much more of a learned thing and there are people who should not be out on the ice without supervision … and then there are people that know the ice, they can read it, they know the wind conditions, the current conditions, they can be there safely, so that the environment itself becomes a kind of a test of identity. (Hearne, Land, and MacLean, 209)

Thus as both a symbolic and physical location, the sea ice stands for what is at stake for Iñupiaq peoples of this generation—not only the continuation of their specialized skills and lifeways but also the existence of the Arctic as a physical place and an Indigenous territory. The film's Indigenization of the thriller is here an exemplar of adaptation for survival, grafting Iñupiaq relationships with ice to a film genre developed in southern California and intended to transcend specificities of location to portray action taking place anywhere. Filming itself, then, is an Indigenous adaptation not unrelated to hunting in its emphasis on location, upon activities such as scanning, detecting, and tracking, and in its opportunism, the need to stay alert for imported resources and those that float to shore from elsewhere. Given all the dangers on the ice, MacLean

> had to bring a film set out there and finding a safe day and a safe spot to put a film set that would also give us the looks and the shots that we needed was probably the biggest challenge of the film and it was a very challenging film to make…. It's also just a very beautiful place…. It's like shooting on a gigantic bounce

> board. The light just reflects from every direction and it reflects and picks up and shows you every color—it changes color drastically. It's pure white, but then you start to film it and you look at the dailies and you realize it's not white at all, there's not a single moment of whiteness. Every single shot at every single time of day, the ice and the snow is a different color…. It's just one of my favorite places to be of anywhere in the world for those reasons, for the complex relationship that it has with who we are. (Hearne, Land, and MacLean, 209–210)

We can begin to think about some of MacLean's narrative focus on intergenerational continuity by expanding Faye Ginsburg's observation—that Indigenous media engages in the "mediation of rupture" through the work of film production—to consider the relationship between the film text and the social practice of its production. Translating Iñupiaq familiarity with Arctic ice, animals, and seasonal conditions to the work of filming in the Arctic engaged an already culturally privileged emphasis on readiness and learning new skills. Weather, whaling activity, and the hazards of spring ice and changing shore conditions wreaked havoc with the shooting schedule and transportation, while the necessity of hauling people and equipment to and from locations on the ice made the crew dependent on a limited number of snowmobiles, which frequently broke down and stalled the schedule.

The local cast engaged with the production as a new source of economic sustenance, since MacLean cast nonprofessional actors for the major roles. The lead actors are already the hunters that their characters aspire to be, since hunting is the primary subsistence activity in Barrow along with whaling (hunting bowhead whales in the spring and late fall is one of the Iñupiaq practices that is distinct from Canadian and Greenland Inuit peoples). MacLean has described the way the production was shaped by ongoing community subsistence work: "The whaling was in full swing while we were shooting. We had to be very careful about not disturbing the whaling crews…. In the scenes shot at the Barrow Search & Rescue, which is a lot like a headquarters for the whaling crews, we had to call the shoot early because they landed a whale while we were there. Everyone [in town] started showing up." Frank Qutuq Irelan (who plays Aivaaq) notes that "In Barrow, kids can't wait to go hunting, they can't wait for springtime and they can't wait to go whaling." Josiah Patkotak, too, describes making the film as a novel alternative to the more familiar activity of whaling:

> Well, I would've been out on the ice anyway. I was gonna go whaling if I didn't do the movie. Most of the time when we were

> filming I didn't want to sit around. I'd crack jokes with the crew and learn about all their jobs. I learned about the work behind the camera. Sometimes I helped out the continuity guy 'cause I was good at that, or the director of photography. I liked the machine that measures the amount of light that falls on your face. (MacLean, "Press Kit")

The aesthetic of equivalence (filming/whaling) in production casts these activities as alternative forms of generative sustenance, their similar locations on and around the sea ice and similar need for technical skills intertwining hunting with its representation, not unlike the snowmobile videos that the teenagers share with one another early on in the film. *On the Ice* is about Iñupiaq skills and knowledge of how their world works, manifested here in Qalli's *aaka*'s advice about hunting, Egasak's dog race story and consummate tracking, and Qalli and Aivaaq's emerging skills on the ice, including their ability to cover their tracks. The setting of the action on spring sea ice signifies among other things the necessity of this knowledge as well as its fragility in the face of global transnational imports.

Conclusion

The last shot of the film depicts Qalli, abandoned by his father and his friend, walking home on the ice, a small figure in the vastness. Ice, as a setting, represents the key point of articulation between Iñupiaq territorial identity and mainstream film genres, the place where generic devices can be Indigenized. The very grammar of the camera—eyeline match, shot/reverse shot, tracking shot—Indigenizes the cinematic gaze by appropriating the focalization of accurate vision, re-aligning the skills required to scan, track, and identify marks in the landscape. Suspense hinges on Iñupiaq knowledge of ice and on the uniquely western Arctic tension within communities defined by their relationship with the open ice. The film's Indigenization of the thriller and the Western grafts Iñupiaq relationships with ice to film genres developed in southern California, genres intended to indicate yet transcend specificities of location through aesthetics of substitution—from redfacing and styrofoam igloos to Westerns filmed in Spain or New Jersey. At the same time that it re-draws the boundaries of Iñupiaq identity, *On the Ice* makes visible to non-Arctic viewers the environmental horizons of their genres—the somewhat limited purview of Westerns in which the law resides at one or the other end of a gunsight, and sunsets are always sunsets. At the same time, the Iñupiaq sovereignty of the camera, as an adaptive aesthetic practice, strengthens the work and the value of traditional knowledge in a connected world.

Works Cited

"Andrew Okpeaha MacLean." 2013. *Native Arts and Cultures.* http://nativeartsandcultures.org/andrew-okpeaha-maclean

Barclay, Barry. 2003. "Celebrating Fourth Cinema." *Illusions* 35: 10.

"Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture." N.d. http://www.beatnation.org/index.html accessed 20 February 2015.

Campbell, Mark V. 2015. "Sonic Intimacies: On Djing Better Futures." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 25 March. https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/03/25/sonic-intimacies-on-djing-better-futures/ accessed 27 May 2015.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Task Force. 2002. *First Annual Report of the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) Task Force.*

Ginsburg, Faye. 1991. "Indigenous Media: Faustian Contract or Global Village?" *Cultural Anthropology* 6(1): 92–112.

Hearne, Joanna, Land, Jacqueline and Andrew Okpeaha MacLean. 2017. "'You Have to Define Yourself as an Inuit Person, if That Is What You Want to Do': An Interview with Andrew Okpeaha MacLean." In *Native Apparitions: Critical Perspectives on Hollywood's Indians*, edited by Tom Holm, M. Elise Marubbio, and Steve Pavlik, 198–224. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Lemieux, Tad. 2017. Personal communication, 5 September.

Leuthold, Steven. 1998. *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art Media and Identity.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

MacLean, Andrew Okpeaha. 2011. Press Kit, *On the Ice.* http://www.ontheicethemovie.com.

Martin, Keavy. 2012. *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Mays, Kyle T. 2015. "Can We Live—and Be Modern?: Decolonization, Indigenous Modernity, and Hip Hop." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 12 March. https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/03/12/can-we-live-and-be-modern-decolonization-indigenous-modernity-and-hip-hop/ accessed 27 March 2015.

Means, Sean P. 2011. "Sundance Review: 'On the Ice.'" *The Salt Lake Tribune*. 28 January.

Moreno, Victor. 2011. "Stockholm Film Festival 2011." *Shift*. 19 December. http://www.shift.jp.org/en/archives/2011/12/stockholm_film_festival_2011.html accessed 24 August 2017.

Qitsualik-Tinsley, Rachel. 2004. "Is It 'Eskimo' or 'Inuit?'" *Indian Country Today*. 11 February. https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/qitsualik-is-it-eskimo-or-inuit/ accessed 1 November 2017.

Quinn, Ellis. 2014. "Eye on the Arctic—Indigenous Art & Urban Culture." 3 January. http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2014/01/03/eye-on-the-Arctic-indigenous-art-urban-culture/ accessed 20 February 2015.

Raheja, Michelle. 2011. *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representation of Native Americans in Film.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

SCZ. 2015. "Remixing: Decolonial Strategies in Cultural Production." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society.* 10 March. https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/remixing-decolonial-strategies-in-cultural-production/ accessed 23 March 2015.

Smith, Damon. 2012. "Andrew Okpeaha MacLean: *On the Ice*." *Filmmaker Magazine*. 15 February. http://filmmakermagazine.com/40519-andrew-okpeaha-maclean-on-the-ice/#.UtAaov2CPN8 accessed 20 February 2015.

Sommerstein, David. 2014. "Hip-Hop's Aboriginal Connection." *NPR,* 3 January. http://www.npr.org/2014/01/04/259428743/hip-hops-aboriginal-connection accessed 20 February 2015.

Waln, Frank. 2015. "Indigenous Hip Hop and Performance as Resurgence." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 19 March. https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/03/19/indigenous-hip-hop-and-performance-as-resurgence/ accessed 27 March 2015.

Wenzel, George, Condon, Richard and Peter Collings. 1995. "The Best Part of Life: Subsistence Hunting, Ethnicity and Economic Adaptation Among Young Adult Inuit Males." *Arctic* 48(1): 31–46.