

Avva's Telling

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In my first viewing of *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner* at its première in the Garneau Theatre in Edmonton, 2001, I recall my initial anxiety about gazing into an underlit igloo where dark-skinned Inuit, speaking Inuktitut, sit on seal and other various animal fur skins to play an ancient game that ends tragically. The eerie laugh of the unknown 'visitor' in this opening scene added to my anxiety that we, as audience, were in fact peeking into an otherworldly, exotified realm. I was reminded of dated anthropological documentary style images circa Franz Boas' era. However, the strength of *Atanarjuat* is that as the distant-time story unfolds, it is precisely the specificity of location, character and events that reveals the humanity of the Inuit, allowing the viewer to access an evocative emotional relationship with the people whose lives are altered through careless, ill-intentioned Shamanism resulting in suffering that comes from adultery, murder, sexual violence and cruelty. Ultimately, the small community survives, in a new way.

Igloolik Isuma's second major production, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, was created by Kunuk and Cohn in a process of sifting through ancient oral accounts held and shared generationally. A stylistically steady and restrained film, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, set in the 1920s, embodies a lack of action sequences (the action seems to be the inner life of the characters). The stylistic cinematography in sustained camera focus on individual faces grows out of historical photographs framing the film's beginning and end. In the opening shot, the characters, seated in a wood cabin, literally prepare and pose for a photograph, captured in the frame of the photographer's lens. The audience immediately knows that the setting of this film lies



within historical rather than distant time, altering our relationship to the characters of the film. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, evidenced in its title, relies on written text, at least primarily, as the premise for its research. The written text allows Euro-Canadian audiences to accept the film as a kind of valid documentation of a historical moment. *Atanarjuat*, in contrast, was based on research into Igloolik Inuit's orality and could be dismissed as fanciful 'legend' rather than truth, however erroneous that assumption may be.

The premise of the film is that we are witnessing a historical moment when the last shaman of the Igloolik area, Avva, is poised to convert to Christianity by breaking Shamanic law (by eating the part of an animal that is forbidden), which inevitably misplaces his known relationship to the spirit world, and arguably, that of all Igloolik Inuit. However, Knud Rasmussen and his Danish team's presence do not appear to be the major shift occurring in the film. Knud Rasmussen is merely a 'journalist,' taking notes on what are, presumably, authentic cultural practices that he documents before they 'disappear.' His presence is never alarming; he does not overwhelm Avva's family. Any anxiety the Inuit family experience surrounding the Dane's presence is subtle, found only in their eyes.

I wonder if we enter the filmscape like Knud Rasmussen, as journalists listening in on the Inuit's stories, jotting down what we believe to be the facts; perhaps we desire to view Inuit images and stories in *National Geographic* style, evidenced by the failure to recognize or award the actors' performances in *Atanarjuat*. This lack of recognition revealed an underlying Eurocentric assumption that the Inuit in *Atanarjuat* were displaying authentic cultural practices, rather than performing in a highly skilled and mindful way: how can an Inuit play anything but an Inuit? What is Inuit?

Avva's monologue detailing his birth between worlds, as transcribed by Knud Rasmussen, pushes the questions surrounding Inuitness through the film's cinematographic choice of sustained image. In some moments, I found the sustained close-ups of characters uncomfortable, and I questioned whether the cinematographer's gaze was reminiscent of Edward Curtis-esque photographs depicting park-ruffed 'Eskimos,' or if he was attempting to coax the viewer to move beyond static images of Inuit, to stay with each character in order to recognize moments of their singular humanity. As Avva intimately shares with Knud Rasmussen a prolonged sequence that relies on the notion of orality, his wife, Orulu, seems to grieve the telling of his birth as human and as shaman to an outsider. I wonder if Orulu's grief is a subtle expression of her knowledge that with the telling of his story, Avva will lose an aspect of his Shamanic power, referencing the value within northern Indigenous systems that what we utter has repercussive power, and we must be cautious with what words we choose to speak. This notion found within orality adds a powerful layer to the storytelling. The subtlety of the filmmaking is evident in the sparse, mostly unspoken, but prevalent references to Inuit cultural values and practices that underlie Avva's transformative journey.

Pakak Innuksuk's artistry in the role of Avva is masterful as he portrays a dynamic inner life, with complex relationships to human and spirit relatives, aided by his theatre background, no doubt. Innuksuk's process as an actor for this film is one of cultural reconstruction, in a sense, of imagining himself in another time, when the Inuit lived within both a physical and spiritual realm; his task was to rebuild the inner life of Avva, when all he had were the notes of Knud Rasmussen to rely on. Innuksuk had to commit to the Inuit belief in the Inuit spiritual realm, when it no longer exists fully.

As a viewer, I was keenly aware of imagining my ancestors' his-



torical experiences, their moments of loss. I am Alutiiq from Kodiak Island, Alaska; we are distant cousins to the Inuit of Canada, related linguistically, and named 'Pacific Eskimos' or 'Koniag Eskimos' by anthropologists. Within distant time, and even historical time, during the Russian occupation of our home, the Alutiiq deeply believed in a complex, dynamic spiritual world that permeated the physical landscape through our masked ceremonial dances, where spirits of masks danced through our physical bodies, to tell stories, to communicate with our people, one aspect of Shamanic spiritual systems. However, the Russian occupation of our lands brought the Russian Orthodox Church. It is a complex history, in which the church baptized Alutiiq in order to alter their status to citizens of the Russian State, providing the Alutiiq with human rights in order to protect my ancestors from the brutality and enslavement of Russian fur traders.

Almost ten years ago, I was visiting with a carver from Old Harbor village, a man who went to school with my father in the 1970s. As we sat together in the expansive Alaska Native Heritage Center at his table of carvings, the Alaskan summer sun streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a small lake, on the outskirts of Anchorage. He told me, 'In the old days our people



had a mask for everything.' Placing his business card between us, he explained that he had scanned a photograph taken of an old Alutiiq mask found within anthropological text onto the card. As we peered at the tiny image, he told me that the mask somehow tells the story of the Bible in its entirety, but he did not know how. As we studied this image of unknown origin between us, I wondered, who was the mask carved? Which village did the mask emerge from? When was the mask carved? Was the church established or emerging on our island? Gesturing to the carvings that sat between us, looking skyward, lips shaped into a perpetual whistle, he said, 'You know, these masks, they were powerful. But, now, they do not hold any power because we no longer believe in them.'

The masks were originally created and constructed with care, attached to specific stories with the express intention of calling our spirit relatives to be with us. The guidance, instruction and sharing of spiritual knowledge that occurred during our communication with spirit masks was an integral aspect of our humanity as Alutiiq. When we collectively believed in the masks' ability to call our otherworldly relatives, the masks held this power. Once the Russian Orthodox

Church systems of belief entered our landscape, Alutiit began carving masks that reflected the Bible and its intricate path of connected stories. The Alutiit Bible mask reflects the Alutiit transition from Shamanic systems to Christianity, becoming a powerful metaphor for our historical experiences. With the advent of Christianity into our landscape, our communities and our minds, a contemporary collective un-believing in our old ways now pervades Alutiit consciousness.

It is a similar kind of contemporary collective un-believing that Pakak Innuksuk was faced with when he began to portray the role of Avva. One of the most poignant scenes in the film is Avva's banishment of his ever-present, silent spirit relatives, and their haunting cries when he tells them in a halting voice to leave him. The name itself, pronounced A-u-a, sounds like an echo. As though his spirit relatives call his name again and again, mourning the loss of their human counterpart, crying after their banishment, while generations of Inuit also begin to utter his name, grieving the loss of their last shaman. This echoing is significant, in that Avva's name comes to hold power locked within memory that is mostly unknown.

As Avva's family and the Danish team arrive in Igloodik, we soon learn of new systems of food distribution, where power becomes concentrated – not with Europeans but with Christianized Inuit – and the hungry must submit to violating Shamanic law, to eat the part of the animal that is forbidden, in order to eat at all. As I watched hungry Inuit kneel and submit, I felt my insides unravelling a deep grief, a memory I did not know I held.

Avva's daughter kneels on the snow while Christian hymns are sung in Inuktitut, falling all around her. The songs land on the snow. The songs land on her body. She is defiant. She submits. She is fed.

I see a shift in Indigenous cinema. I imagine the magnitude of colonization told within specific, intimate moments when our ancestors were faced with the choice to violate Indigenous law for the purpose of survival. Like Orulu, I grieve the telling.