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**Reorientation in the Field: Why Religion Matters**

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## Reorientation in the Field: Why Religion Matters

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### Abstract

Defining religion as a negotiation about “what it means to be a human in a human place,” David Chidester invites scholars of religious studies to critically examine and name what it is that we are actually teaching, writing about, and researching. Certainly, many in our field have called for the elimination of “religion” as an academic term for a number of legitimate reasons. Yet our field continues to grow and thrive as an intriguing, if befuddling, discipline. Comparative studies of religion have an abhorrent legacy – a field mobilized systemically as an efficient agent of empire. Also because even the most well-meaning among us too often mangle, distort, and misapprehend much of what we encounter, and attempt to interpret, explain, or worse, analogize. Nevertheless, I follow Chidester’s lead and argue for strategic retainment of the term so as to reverse the flow of production, authentication, and circulation of what counts as knowledge about religion.<sup>1</sup> Chidester identifies a historical phenomenon – what he calls a triple mediation, whereby colonial agents absorbed, extracted and documented their perceptions of Indigenous cultural practices and then transferred that knowledge to the centers of empire, thus enabling our intellectual predecessors - “experts” of language, myth, and religion, to extrapolate cultural particularities for consumption and bureaucratic control of colonized peoples. This extraction has continued uninterrupted. Today, the pipeline flowing directly to imperial spaces (like universities), mainly requires quotation in order to function, albeit in circular fashion that feeds back on itself. The spaces embody the stains of the imperial agenda, as is the case in nation-state sponsored public institutions and private-endowment funded private universities. Indeed, this circularity has had a dominating effect. Indigenous theorists quoting imperial theorists, however, is the opening for an important strategic move: it is destabilizing and suggests alternative ways of both generating knowledge and establishing what is to be considered knowledge. Paying attention to these triple mediations, we may not only recover but also reclaim what has been erased by the flow from periphery to center. Doing so allows us to “combine critical reflection on our past...with creative possibilities for working through enduring categories in the study of religion to produce new knowledge.” This paper offers analysis of the film *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*, to demonstrate the effectiveness of this subversive and invariably intriguing counter-production of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Mediation, Religion, Orientation

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<sup>1</sup>David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism & Comparative Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

## Introduction

When teaching classes like World Religions or Comparative Religions, many of us utilize a comparative methodology. This methodology was fine-tuned by JZ Smith, who reminds us to not only focus on difference, but to remember that difference is above all, “a political matter,”<sup>2</sup> His work redefined the field in two major ways. First, it went far in helping us disentangle from an academic (and ideological) association with theology, and second, he insisted that we bear “responsibilities attendant on being a member of the academy.”<sup>3</sup> The ethnographic space itself highlights difference and yet we strive to create intelligibility across it. Today, more than ever, this is imperative.<sup>4</sup> Despite limitations in using the term “religion” I will explain why I think retaining it matters. Trying to agree on a definition of it has proven vexing, nay impossible; many among of us have suggested tossing it out for good. Tracing its etymology is as murky an endeavor as coming to agreement on a definition of what it is. Or does. Or means. Is it a derivation of the Latin root - *religio*, meaning to bind or to yoke? If so, Christo-centrism, or what Jacques Derrida names the “strange phenomenon of Latinity and its globalization,”<sup>5</sup> is clear. What is “the very matter – the thing itself – of religion?”<sup>6</sup> Equally difficult is trying to describe how religion functions. If it is, according to Émile Durkheim, “eminently social,”<sup>7</sup> how can we come to understand discrete, collective representations and realities of it? Joachim Wach calls religion “*norms for action*” without which, “life does not seem worth living.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Tomoko Masuzawa calls it a “discourse of Othering,”<sup>9</sup> she points out its usefulness for “churning the stuff of Europe’s ever-expanding epistemic domain, and forging... the essential identity of the West.”<sup>10</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon critiques “the mechanism whereby assertions on the importance of ‘archaic man’ are transformed into authoritative and normative judgements.”<sup>11</sup> Others describe it as “an adjective...describing the human condition, and a way

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<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, “What A Difference A Difference Makes” *Relating Religion, Essays in The Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004) 252.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathon Z. Smith, “The Devil In Mr. Jones,” *Imagining Religion, From Babylon To Jonestown*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), 121.

<sup>4</sup>For example, as I write this, news reports are saturated with updates from the Christchurch mass shootings, the Sri Lanka Easter bombings, and the shooting in a Poway, California synagogue that resulted in one death and three injuries.

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” *Religion, Cultural Memory in the Present*, edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>6</sup>Derrida, 23.

<sup>7</sup>Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, (NY: The MacMillan Company, 1926), 10.

<sup>8</sup>Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, edited with an introduction by Joseph M. Kitagawa, (NY: Columbia, 1958).

<sup>9</sup>Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention Of World Religions*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>10</sup>Masuzawa, 20.

<sup>11</sup>Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (NY: Oxford, 1997), 158.

of seeing, acting, and experiencing all things.”<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz writes that religion is a “system of symbols,”<sup>13</sup> yet Talal Asad, insists that religion cannot be separated from particular historical circumstances or the power of the state. I have stood on the shoulders of these giants to see farther, but have left the debates behind, even as I acknowledge “ethical and political urgencies”<sup>14</sup> in arguing for a new kind of study of religion. This is a strategic move.

## **Ethnography and Culture**

An innovative study is underway at the Qallunaat Studies Institute (QSI) in far-north Canada, in the territory of Nunavut. Scientific researchers are conducting experiments on living subjects, whom they have recruited from Qallunaat lands in the South. These subjects are now housed permanently at the Institute.<sup>15</sup> Generated by concern over a disastrous early immersion experiment, the researchers strive for transparency in their work to avoid causing unnecessary distress to their subjects. A videotaped recording of the immersion was recently released for educational purposes. In a section entitled “Recipe for Disaster,” viewers see field officers on snowmobiles trailing two disoriented Qallunaat subjects as they attempt to make their way from point A to point B across the southern tip of Baffin Island. There is no explanation as to why the duo is on foot in the subzero temperatures, nor where they are trying to go; even viewed from appropriate ethnographic distance, it is still difficult to watch the footage. It quickly becomes clear that the subjects lack any kind of sophisticated knowledge. The scenes play out grimly. Viewers observe as Subject 1 and Subject 2 squander precious energy while clambering clumsily over snowdrifts, their skis askew. One, haplessly scanning the white-on-white horizon for orientation, loses his grip on the toboggan, and sends it launching like a missile towards his companion, who has tumbled down a glacial slope. Appearing weakened, they attempt to start a fire. Gasping for breath and desperate for warmth, they are unsuccessful – Subject 1, after dropping the lighter into a snowbank, nearly loses his fingers to frostbite. At this point, the field officers must decide whether to suspend their scrutiny and intervene in the experiment, risking nullification of objective results. In spite of longstanding protocols put in place to minimize harm to human subjects in research projects, they appear (at least initially) reluctant to interfere. This choice is an ethical one however; in spite of being equipped with top-of-the-line manufactured gear and equipment, the Qallunaats are headed for disaster.

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<sup>12</sup>John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, Todd Lewis, *Religion and Globalization: World Religions in Historical Perspective*, (NY: Oxford, 2008), 8.

<sup>13</sup>Clifford Geertz, “Religion As A Cultural System” *The Interpretation Of Cultures*, (NY: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>14</sup>Derrida, Faith, 26.

<sup>15</sup>Institute personnel have arranged for visitors to view these experiments in real-time. For a nominal fee, one can see Qallunaat in carefully-designed replications of traditional settings, on Wednesday afternoons from 1-5 and Friday mornings from 8-12. Periodic cultural performances are scheduled in advance and are listed on the Institution’s website.

This flagrant misstep seems to have prompted researchers to agree that assimilation is priority number one. The Institute has now launched a social engineering program guided by a two-pronged methodology: first, recruitment of Qallunaat subjects displaying outstanding abilities. The hope is that with the proper conversion training, they can be taught Inuit ways to carry back to the southern territories. The second, a “voyage of discovery.” A team of scientists travels periodically to Qallunaat traditional lands, physically extracts a number of subjects from their homes and communities and transports them back to the Institute for training. This directed educational program will certainly disrupt family ties of the Qallunaat and rapidly destroy their culture. All agree however, that they must follow through with the natural consequences. Teaching Qallunaat the values of civilized society while persuading them to abandon their way of life is not an easy road. As history has shown, progress is never easy.

You have now probably realized that what I am describing is based on a satirical piece produced by Beachwalker Films: *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*.<sup>16</sup> My name is Wendy Felese. I am a Qallunaat woman. In the Inuktitut language, this means White person, but according to Zebedee Nungak, this designation has less to do with skin color, and more to do with characteristics I share with other Qallunaat people. For example, Inuit statesman John Amagoalik describes us as people who always want to do things...right now.

## **Methodology**

### *To Laugh at the Camera*

The film satirizes accounts of interactions in what Mary Louise Pratt calls contact zones. The interactions always reflect dominant perceptions that are then “transmitted via documents and texts that recount the experiences.”<sup>17</sup> The transmission happens through a triple mediation – imperial, colonial, and Indigenous. Here is an example of how it works. The 19<sup>th</sup> century founder of comparative religion, Friedrich “Max” Müller (imperialist), borrowed from the philologist Wilhelm Bleek (working in contact zone/colonial spaces of South Africa) in order to “classify and conquer.” He did this for three related purposes: first, to create a “science of religion.” Second, to centralize the British Empire in this endeavor, and third, to lend an empirical authority to his work. In a similar way, American prospector and explorer Robert Flaherty (imperialist), capitalizing on an American ethos of antimodernism,<sup>18</sup> undertook a year-long recording of so-called day-to-day life of an Inuit community living on the Ungava Peninsula of

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<sup>16</sup>Beachwalker Films, *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*, (National Film Board of Canada with Kent Martin, 2007).

<sup>17</sup>Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel-Writing and Transculturation* (UK: Routledge, 1992), 7.

<sup>18</sup>See T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Hudson Bay. The project, *Nanook of the North*,<sup>19</sup> features collaboration between his technicians and consultants (contact zone/colonial) and the Inuit peoples of Inukjuak, who are forced into negotiations between their ancestral practices and the impositions of the outsiders. Shari Huhndorf calls Flaherty's adventure "going native."

Although it was motivated by an ostensible rejection of Western paradigms, the attraction to native culture also embodied colonialist impulses...The Arctic...provided an important site on which these contradictory impulses came to bear...the Arctic had become the new and perhaps the last frontier...providing an exoticized vision of Native life for Western consumption but also documenting arctic colonialism in ways that transformed colonial relationships (textually, at least) by masking their motivations and hiding their violence.<sup>20</sup>

In *Qallunaat! Why People Are Funny*, Zebedee Nungak, John Amagoalik and others invert the exotification that W.E.B. DuBois describes as "double-consciousness," or, the "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others."<sup>21</sup> To explain, I highlight contrasting scenes to demonstrate how a form of *quotation* works to reverse the flow of production of knowledge. Huhndorf explains how naming and renaming is necessary in the production of knowledge.

Just as the arctic landscape on his European maps bore (and continue to bear) the names of its Western "discoverers," so too did Flaherty's natives, in his texts at least, carry the appellations he assigned them. Flaherty never used his real (Native) name...opting for a more "Eskimo-sounding" alias carrying primitive connotations.

Nanook's Native name was Allakariallak. Flaherty renames him Nanook (The Bear), dresses him and the entire cast up in anachronistic costumes and authorizes the construction of simulated igloos to transform him into an Eskimo for mass visual consumption in the United States. The ways Flaherty defined these Natives for Western audiences carried political implications as well. Because they seemed somehow less than human, their presence on the land was less consequential than the white man's.<sup>22</sup>

Inuit actors Zebedee Nungak, John Amagoalik, and Lori Idlout, among others, mobilize Chidester's strategy throughout *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*. As mentioned, much of the film is satirical, but the film is interspersed with insights and commentary from Nungak and others along with archival footage. The commentary is organized around several interviews and the person asking the questions is never seen by viewers. While certainly part of the strategy of reversal, the person filming and the camera itself function to capture more broad reflections on the issue of colonization and related asymmetrical power relations. One segment in particular, records Nungak being reunited with his boyhood teacher after decades have passed. His recounting of a memory embodies

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<sup>19</sup>Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North: A Story Of Life and Love In the Actual Arctic*, produced by Robert Flaherty, distributed by Pathé Exchange, 1922.

<sup>20</sup>Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native, Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001), 83-84.

<sup>21</sup>W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (NY: Bantam 1989 [1903]), 3.

<sup>22</sup>Huhndorf, 94-95.

the crucial aspects of my argument. I will discuss this scene in the following pages.

This paper, organized around my analysis of this film and the 1922 documentary *Nanook of the North*, offers an example of this strategic move and establishes what Fatimah Tobing Rony<sup>23</sup> and Michelle H. Raheja<sup>24</sup> call “visual sovereignty.” The term sovereignty, for this paper, is used in a specific way wherein “indigenous filmmakers and actors revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions...and reimagine Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy.”<sup>25</sup> The result of this reconfiguration illuminates often ludicrous assumptions about Native peoples that have been widely circulated through visual and other mediums by using the very same technology that has served as an agent of the Gaze. This illumination is critical for the reversal itself. Indigenous agency, performed visually within discrete contexts, confirms their persistence and rejects atavism.

## Discussion

The second term to be defined is *Indigenous*, which I do by closely following the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.<sup>26</sup> This term is interchangeable with *Aboriginal*. My analysis centers Indigenous Inuit communities of Nunavut and Nunavik, and more closely, the life’s work of Zebedee Nungak. Inuit peoples share a historical existence and identity that is separate and independent of the nation-state that surrounds them. Their lands are central and are important sites for expressing contemporary political concerns. Indigenous (Inuit) people identify as such and acceptance by their community is a key criterion of Indigeneity. They share historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies and have strong, longstanding, historical ties to their lands and the other-than-human beings that inhabit them. They are organized by distinct social, economic or political systems, and share distinct languages and culture. As non-dominant groups of society, they have the right to self-determination through maintaining their ancestral lands and social systems as distinctive peoples and communities. In terms of how to express the unique statuses of Aboriginal communities vis-à-vis nation-states, as well as to guarantee that their rights as such are upheld, the 46 Articles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>27</sup> serves as a blueprint.

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<sup>23</sup>Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye, Race, Cinema, And Ethnographic Spectacle*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup>Michelle H. Raheja, “Reading Nanook’s Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and ‘Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)’” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 2007), pp 1159-1185.

<sup>25</sup>Raheja, 1161, 1163.

<sup>26</sup>United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. <https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/arcticregion/Arctic-Indigenous-Peoples/Definitions>. Accessed April 24, 2019.

<sup>27</sup>[https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf). Accessed April 26, 2019.



Encounters and conflicts in colonized places emanate from conflicting ontologies. I draw from the work of Anishinaabe scholar Mark Freeland and use his metaphor of a house to explain an “interrelated set of logics that fundamentally orient a culture to space (land), time, the rest of life, and provides a prescription for how to live that life.”<sup>28</sup>

[It] provides the foundation, on which...conscious ideologies are built, like the walls and roof of the house. The institutions build walls within the house, sectioning off the house into compartments that the people of the culture can go in and out of. Finally, the people of the culture live in that house and their everyday performances provide the color of the rooms, the flooring on which they step and the décor and furnishings of their culture. This idea of building the culture from the ground up does work metaphorically and helps to understand the

### *Religion Matters*

The history of comparative religious studies is littered with examples of a dangerous and longstanding liaison between religion and conquest.<sup>29</sup> The triple mediation between imperial, colonial, and Indigenous agents continues to authorize elite theorists to use raw material extracted from “colonized peripheries.”<sup>30</sup> Production, authentication, and circulation of knowledge is carried out through these mediations, and relations between center and periphery are “asymmetrical relations of power.”<sup>31</sup> In elite, scholarly settings, that knowledge is produced via *quotation*, in a circular way that lends an air of authoritativeness to what we do. After all, who produces knowledge about religion? We do. How is it circulated? In venues like this one. Authenticated? Peer reviews, scholarly publications, and as Chidester points out, footnotes, that function as “capital in an intellectual economy.”<sup>32</sup> These mediations are still present, but I argue that the flow is reversed by Indigenizing the production of knowledge and opening a field of strategic possibilities that makes room for a different kind of study of religion.

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<sup>28</sup>Mark Freeland, *Conceptual Decolonization of Space: Worldview and Language in Anishinaabe Akiing*. 2015. Unpublished Dissertation, 43.

<sup>29</sup>As early as 494 ce, Pope Gelasius proclaimed that of the sources of power in the world, secular and ecclesiastical, the “sacred authority” of the church and its representatives was supreme. “Letter of Pope Gelasius to Emperor Anastasius”, James Harvey Robinson, *Readings in European History*, (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1905), 72-73.

In 1493 Papal Bull Inter Caetera, Pope Alexander IV instructed the monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, along with the “beloved son” Cristobal Colón, to ensure, through conquest, that “the natives and inhabitants of...aforesaid islands and lands (people who have no knowledge of our Faith) may be brought to the True Faith and the Christian Religion... and that barbarous nations be overthrown. C. Jesse, “The Papal Bull of 1493, Appointing The First Vicar Apostolic In The New World, *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol 11. No. 3/4 (September & December 1965), 62-71 (64).

<sup>30</sup>Chidester, 5.

<sup>31</sup>Chidester, 87.

<sup>32</sup>Chidester, 285.

*The Third Eye*

From a thematic perspective, neither *Nanook of the North* nor *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny* suggest that there is a *sui generis* Inuit ideology or identity, however, with some historical background, I will establish how and why Chidester's inversive technique works. Zebedee Nungak was born in Saputiligait, south of Puvirnituq, Nunavik, in 1951. At 9 years old, he, along with Peter Ittinuar and Eric Hanna Tagoona, were abruptly whisked from their homes and transported south to Ottawa. They were told that they had been chosen to study and live in Ottawa due to their outstanding leadership skills and "high IQs." They were allowed to return home years later but found it difficult to resume their lives and were often the target of ridicule from within their community. It was not until 1999, when all three were grown men with families of their own, that they learned the truth about the years they spent in Ottawa. The three had been part of a social engineering experiment designed to "expunge them of Inuit culture and groom them to become northern leaders with a southern way of thinking."<sup>33</sup> This practice highlights a kind of inverted colonization. Rather than invasion and outright coercion, the strategy is indoctrination. The following is an excerpt from the Canada Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, entitled "Memorandum For The Administration Of The Arctic."

Ottawa has been advocating southern schools for teenage Eskimos of outstanding ability. We are anxious to get Eskimo children capable of giving leadership in various phases of northern development. It can be argued that such a direct educational program will disrupt Northern Native family ties and will rapidly destroy Native culture. We must follow through with the natural consequences of that program."<sup>34</sup>

Nungak, explaining that this relocation was meant to demonstrate to them that the life they had been living was somehow defective, also relates how "being immersed in their world gave me a unique opportunity to observe them from close quarters."<sup>35</sup> He decided that his ability to write and speak English well should be harnessed in the service of his people. For example, in the hopes of establishing aboriginal self-government, Nungak joined the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and served as a political negotiator on behalf of Inuit communities. His involvement helped defeat the passage of Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien's White Paper proposal in the early 1970s. Assimilation had become the enduring justification for continuing colonialism, so he and others formed the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (The Eskimo Brotherhood) in 1972. The rejection of the White Paper meant that official government attempts to

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<sup>33</sup>Margo Pfeiff, "Eskimo Man, Interrupted," *Up Here*, September 15, 2012. <https://margopfeiff.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/zebedee-nungak-uh.pdf>. Accessed March 14, 2019.

<sup>34</sup>White Pine Pictures, *Experimental Eskimos* (Baker Lake, Nunavut, Canada: 2009). I chose these same words deliberately in my satirical introduction.

<sup>35</sup>Interview with Nungak in *Qallunaat!*

assimilate the Inuit were officially abandoned and The Confederation for First Nations was formed. Ittinuar served as the first Inuk member of parliament and Nungak became president of Makivik Corporation, a political organization “representing the Inuit of Nunavik since 1978.”<sup>36</sup> He fought for Inuit ownership of traditional homelands, which eventually resulted in the 1999 creation of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. He also represented the Inuit in their negotiations with Québec over a hydroelectric dam project, helping to “forge a landmark deal which acknowledged Inuit rights [to their traditional homelands].”<sup>37</sup>

### *Fighting For My Life*

In spite of being able to negotiate in two worlds, none of them ever fully recovered what had been taken from them when they were removed from their communities and everything they had known. In recalling it, Nungak states, “I don’t regret my time spent in Ottawa, but I will never recover from it.”<sup>38</sup> Further, he states how he was both victim and beneficiary of the social engineering program and recounts how “Inuit...learning these things as I did, came at a great cost to my own identity.”<sup>39</sup> In a subtle and quite powerful segment of *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*, Nungak is reunited with Mick Mallon, one of his educators during his years in Ottawa.

Viewers realize as the scene plays out, that Mallon had a different expectation of what their reunion would entail. He opens the conversation with “who’s gonna start?” then immediately takes charge, by answering his own question. He instructs Nungak to “tell your story” then looks directly at the camera with a bit of a wink, saying, “I’ll correct it later.” This is an extraordinary example of how embedded the colonizing mindset is long after overt assimilation techniques have ended. The following passage is transcribed from this scene. The parenthetical sections are descriptions of Mallon’s facial expressions and/or bodily gestures during the conversation. They also indicate where I have substituted an English word for Inuktitut. This is done when I don’t know or cannot hear the word as it is spoken. The speaker is Nungak.

I have several reminiscences to share with you. You’re my second Qallunaat teacher ever. You were one of the people that set me on the trajectory to formal education and for that I have many things to thank you for, but I’m not here to give you a catalogue of those; I just wanted to share some early memories of formal education with you as a teacher [nodding and smiling].

The consequences of formal education upon us as children was quite dramatic in that now we had to stay cooped up in a one-room classroom 9 o’clock in the morning until 3 o’clock in the afternoon, including in the

<sup>36</sup><https://www.makivik.org/>. Accessed April 27, 2019.

<sup>37</sup>Pfeiff, <https://margopfeiff.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/zebedee-nungak-uh.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup>Pfeiff.

<sup>39</sup>Qallunaat!

beautiful spring season. Of course, in those days, the hunting urge was still very strong amongst the boys and I remember one time I wrote a note to you saying, “Dear [teacher], I will be hunting today so I won’t be going to school. I think I signed my name. Another boy and I took off. We had just crossed the Puvirnituk river and were reaching the other side [chuckling, smiling]...when up runs [our teacher]...quite assertive. Aggressive and assertive [laughing, nodding]...very clear...making it very clear to us that we are to go back to school. My buddy and I were trying to make it just as clear that we’re not going back to school. But of course, you are the Qallunaat teacher. You are the boss. You prevail [nodding, smiling]. But you prevail at the cost of picking me up like a sack of flour [grimacing, red-faced] on your shoulder and grabbing the other guy by the wrist and dragging him physically back two miles [nodding abashedly, eyes closed].

We had quite a fight...you trying to get me inside the schoolhouse, without any success...‘cause **I was fighting actually for my life.**

The scene is extraordinary. For my purposes, it is the lynchpin of my argument. It demonstrates that for Aboriginal (in this case Inuit) peoples, the land, human beings, and other-than-human beings (animals, rivers, etc.) are connected. There is no separation between them – they are relatives. Hunting is a critical activity in this highly sophisticated, relation way-of-being. Carrying it out is important (I argue *more* important) than submitting to the techniques of discipline inherent in formal education. I wish to make note of several things. The basic retelling of the encounter is agreed upon by both Mallon and Nungak. The teacher’s priority was clearly the “civilizational mission” of assimilation and acculturation of Inuit students. The hunting activity was irrelevant. He probably thought the kids were essentially ditching class/playing hooky. The teacher’s actions were essentially in line with the imperial policy. Teach the northern kids in southern schools, and the acknowledged consequence of destroying culture is an acceptable (possibly desirable) side-effect. The reversal in this scene is for the film-maker to articulate that by going out hunting and resisting the teacher, he was in fact fighting for his life, i.e. way of life, and the central activities/behaviors that characterize that life.

While Inuit ontological concerns cannot be subsumed under the term “religion,” deploying the term in colonized settings has functioned as an instrument to sever longstanding, historical ties between people, places, and other beings. Simply put, for Mallon, “religion” takes place in one space, hunting another. From the Qallunaat perspective, religion is *absent* in the act of hunting. For Nungak, and by extension, his community, these distinctions are nonsensical -non-existent.

The segment also highlights the power of the third eye perspective by which “boundaries blur as those with a third eye attempt to put together all the dispersed fragments of identity...” while fully knowing that they have been

historically portrayed as “a museum display...an ethnographic spectacle.”<sup>40</sup> After a chance encounter with the director of Canada’s Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development (AANDC) program, Mallon was inspired to participate in the social engineering project as an educator. Accounts of his interactions, piped to imperial centers (the bureaucratic offices of Canadian government officials) are transmitted as part of a production of knowledge about Inuit culture.<sup>41</sup> This knowledge is circulated and authenticated via these authoritative structures. Reversing the flow is an empowering, subversive move. For those of us in the field of religious studies, this reversal is imperative. One way to do this is to center Indigenous theorists. The method is a form of quotation. Retaining the term “religion” is an important part of the strategy.

When Nungak decided it was time to “reverse those tables”<sup>42</sup> he had come to the realization that it was time for Inuit to present their own knowledge of Qallunaat. That is when he and filmmaker Mark Sandiford decided to create the satirical film.

### *Naming and Re-naming*

One of the ways that colonization (of lands and minds) succeeds through the process of renaming Indigenous lands and peoples. Henry VII of England, for example, referred to the land discovered by John Cabot in 1497 as the New Found Launde (Newfoundland). Nova Scotia is Latin for New Scotland, given in 1621. Prior to its official naming, the First Nations knew it as “Mi’kma’k.” The name “New Brunswick” was given to the area in honor George III who also held the title of Duke of Brunswick. After the 1867 passage of the British North American Act, this renaming became systematized through bureaucracy.

As discussed, Allakariallak was renamed Nanook and “Flaherty thus literally redefined [him] for Western audiences.”<sup>43</sup> The Canadian government, trying to “change the personality” of the Eskimo in order to “help him adapt or continue in ignorance,” took up a task of building new communities and government schools organized around “our ways of thinking.”<sup>44</sup> Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in an archival clip from the film, speak in clipped, official jargon of how they will transform Inuit communities to more closely resemble Canadian ideals. Their efforts are organized from the centralized location of subdivision headquarters of Baffin Island and begin with renaming the area itself.

I now turn back to the strategic inversion in *Qallunaat!* In one scene, Inuit researchers are recorded trying to create a sophisticated morphological system

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<sup>40</sup>Rony, 17.

<sup>41</sup>Please see Mick Mallon, *Intermediate Inuktitut* (Ittukuluuk Language Programs Iqaluit 1996) for an example of his attempt to create a morphology and phonology of Inuktitut. Also, please see CBC Radio, “How a rascally Irish immigrant became one of Canada’s top scholars of Inuktitut” <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-sunday-edition-november-26-2017-1.4417692/how-a-rascally-irish-immigrant-became-one-of-canada-s-top-scholars-of-inuktitut-1.4417724>. Accessed April 28, 2019.

<sup>42</sup>Interview from *Qallunaat!*

<sup>43</sup>Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 95.

<sup>44</sup>From archival footage in *Qallunaat!*

for organizing diverse Qallunaat communities. The system is based partly on similar cranial measurements and general cognitive capacity, but other physical characteristics as well. Clearly, the Qallunaat will have to be named in order to distinguish them from each other. However, Nungak, playing the part of the chief researcher, is concerned that the “tiny, square thought processes”<sup>45</sup> of the Qallunaat could be compromised by imposing a complicated naming process upon them; they decide to give them numbers as names. The task is performed efficiently, making use of techno-jargon common to the scientific disciplines. Subjects are required to wear their number on lanyards around their neck, and are depicted as gaining a new identity, leaving their old ways behind, as they learn to respond to queries like 26834, how are you today? Or, 75346, have a good day! The Inuit researchers, like Flaherty, are portrayed as indulgent and certainly benevolent and kind to their subjects. In some cases, they even give them fond nicknames such as Small-Buttocked One, Droopy Pants, or One Who Is Forever Cold.<sup>46</sup>

For another example of quotation inversion, an early scene from *Nanook of the North* helps us facilitate this strategy. Flaherty’s camera captures Allakariallak,<sup>47</sup> whom, as mentioned, Flaherty has renamed Nanook, because, he determines, it sounds more “Eskimo-like.” Allakariallak is traveling with relatives by kayak to a trader’s post. Among several staged scenes at the post, (Flaherty himself admitted to also simulating costumes, igloos, etc. to make *Nanook* appear more authentic),<sup>48</sup> that play out while they visit (including the trader “feasting” Allakariallak’s children with sweets that end up making them sick), he is shown gazing and smiling at the gramophone the trader has hauled out to impress him. Eventually, Allakariallak curiously picks up the record and takes a bite. This scene is meant to isolate and romanticize a contrived way-of-being, by producing “self-confirming, self-referential, and self-reproducing closed systems...of knowledge.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, the conventions that have produced and reproduced representations of Indigenous peoples. Clearly Flaherty wanted his viewers to experience both the Noble Savage, and his childlike, “primitive”<sup>50</sup> ways. With the exception of films produced by Indigenous filmmakers,<sup>51</sup> the tradition continues uninterruptedly.

The camera is still too often seen by ethnographic filmmakers as an unproblematic, innocent eye on indigenous peoples, a useful tool for science.

<sup>45</sup>This observation comes from Zebedee Nungak, chief researcher at QSI.

<sup>46</sup>Beachwalker Films, *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*, Written and Directed by Mark Sandiford, in collaboration with Zebedee Nungak, (National Film Board of Canada, 2007).

<sup>47</sup>When referencing his actions in the film, I use his name. When deconstructing Flaherty’s appropriation and audience reaction, I use Nanook.

<sup>48</sup>Claude Massot, *Nanook Revisited*, Princeton: NJ, Film for the Humanities, 1990).

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Thomas Biolsi and Larry Zimmerman, *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria Jr., and the Critique of Anthropology*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>50</sup>Many have written about the patriarchal, unilineal, stage, sequence, evolutionary paradigm that teleological constructs of Indigenous peoples in the infant stages of humanity. A discussion about it is too broad for this piece.

<sup>51</sup>Igloodik Isuma Productions, Inc., for example, has produced films from an insider perspective. It is a collaborative organization with most of the production company coming from Inuit communities

The episteme of the Ethnographic is still alive and well, especially in popular media. Television specials like Harvard anthropologist David Maybury Lewis's *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World* (1992), Hollywood films like Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990), Michael Mann's *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), or Frank Marshall's *Congo* (1995).<sup>52</sup>

Let us return to the scene in *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny*, when "field officers" trail hapless "subjects" over the frozen landscape. Visual sovereignty is enabled by use of the third eye, allowing for a deliberate inversion, a way of not only resisting the Gaze, but also strategically "quoting" and reversing. The Qallunaat subjects are portrayed as helpless, but also as naïve buffoons in a more complex world than the one they are used to. Save intervention by the more sophisticated field officers, literally in a position "above" them, they would have surely perished. Acting this out accomplishes several things: it quotes the so-called "experts" whose authority is established and articulated in a circular fashion, based on a misconception of superiority. It accomplishes this strategic quotation by using the third eye perspective. The result is visual sovereignty. I mobilized the strategy of reversal in this piece, as follows.

1. I quoted the memo from the Canada Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources in the introduction, correlating them with the experiments at QSI.
2. In footnote 15, I invented a visiting schedule at QSI that I imagined closely replicating the American Museum of History's 1899 live exhibits of six Inuit people.
3. I juxtaposed film snippets from *Nanook of the North* with segments of *Qallunaat!* to demonstrate how an Indigenized reversal of the flow of the production of knowledge is enacted.
4. In a more oblique way, I drew from the work of Huhndorf to show how Flaherty and other arctic explorers, whether unconsciously or not, imposed a way-of-being that was entirely foreign to Inuit communities, and generated by Qallunaat notions of inherent and innate superiority. These notions are replicated in quite often subtle and hidden ways. The raw materials they brought back to imperial centers (in some cases, people themselves!) were then extrapolated, circulated, and authenticated by so-called "experts" – namely, 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists and comparativists of religion.

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<sup>52</sup> Rony, 197.

## Conclusion

My purpose in writing this paper and attending this conference is to argue for a radical reorientation in the field of religious studies. As scholars, we take our place in imperial spaces as we carry with us and further extend a dubious legacy wherein our voices, our perspectives, our recorded interactions, and our publications authenticate the flow of production of knowledge. The direction of this flow has been part of a larger project that has not only misconstrued but often destroyed Indigenous culture. I am convinced that today, more than ever, we who write, teach, and think in these spaces have an ethical obligation to not only retain the term “religion” as a tactic of reversal, but as critical way of centering Indigenous memory and tradition. Given our close affiliation with the discipline of anthropology and the social sciences in general, this conceptual revisionism is required as a justice-seeking alternative to the constraining, limiting imposition of long-held, destructive, appropriative, encounters. Even in our most abstract undertakings, this is how we must practice responsible scholarship as students and teachers, as thinkers and writers. Most importantly, we might recognize, honor, and finally understand what Indigenous communities have long understood to be true. We are all related.

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