

## Why Do You Ask So Many Questions? [Learning How Not to Ask in Canadian Inuit Society]

[N]o amount of telling somebody in mere words that one is or is not angry is the same as what one might tell them by gesture or tone of voice. . . . Anyhow, it is all nonsense. I mean, the notion that language is made of words is all nonsense -- and when I said that gestures could not be translated into "mere words," I was talking nonsense, because there is no such thing as "mere words" ...

Gregory Bateson 1972: 13

I sit there in total silence. It's always interesting to leave Europeans in silence. For them it's a vacuum in which tensions grow and converges towards the intolerable.

From *Smilla's Sense of Snow* by Peter Høeg

### *Introduction*

Soon after arriving in Iqaluit, Northwest Territories, Canada in 1994, my wife, Michelle C. Johnson, and I met Pauloosie Pisuktie at the town's ice skating rink.<sup>1</sup> Pauloosie is an adult Inuk from southern Baffin Island and his father is the leader of an outpost camp in Frobisher Bay. Pauloosie and I became friends during the summers of 1990 and 1991 when we worked for a team of archaeologists investigating the contact history of Inuit and Europeans in Frobisher Bay.<sup>2</sup> Because I wanted to learn more about outpost camps<sup>3</sup> as well as have an opportunity to live with an outpost camp family, Michelle and I became regular visitors to Pauloosie's house in town.

One night, Pauloosie invited us to the Royal Canadian Legion, a 'members-only' social club built for (and by) members of a formal association of veterans and former employers of the military installations in Iqaluit.<sup>4</sup> When 'the Legion' opens its doors to the public at night, it becomes one of Iqaluit's most popular spots for socializing and dancing. Those who are not members must find a member to invite them, making it difficult for non-members like Pauloosie to get in, but he managed to find enough members to sponsor him and the two of us (only one guest per member).

After checking our coats at the door, Pauloosie led us to a table where his friend Noah was calmly enjoying a beer. As we sat down, Pauloosie told us that Noah had grown up at an outpost camp. I was excited to meet another person familiar with outpost camps, because I was already feeling anxious about getting the information I would need for a dissertation.

Although Michelle and I were always encouraged to drink tea and eat *palauraq* (bread) whenever we visited Inuit in their homes, our questions were usually ignored and several visits had involved painfully long periods of silence -- some lasting thirty minutes. In the Legion I saw Inuit socializing

in ways I had not seen before, and I thought we, too, would have a chance to get them to talk more openly about their experiences and attitudes.

Pauloosie decided not to socialize, however, and headed for another table, leaving us alone with Noah. The cheerful energy Noah displayed when Pauloosie teased him just a moment before made me hopeful that he would not be bothered by a few questions. I pressed him for more details after he confirmed that he spent much of his childhood in an outpost camp near Pangnirtung, the next major settlement to the north. After my third question, he did not respond right away. The pause in our conversation felt like an hour. Perhaps the music from the dance floor was making it difficult for him to hear, I thought. When he leaned toward me from across the table, I thought he was getting closer so that I could hear his story better. Instead, he gave me an ambiguous smile and said in a soft voice, "Why do you ask so many questions?"

Suddenly disoriented and embarrassed, I had no answer for his question. I joined those around me silently watching the crashes, falls, and slapshots of a TV screen full of hockey players in colorful uniforms. Like the players on the screen, my plans for gathering detailed life histories were crashing into Noah's ideas about this *Qallunnaat's* annoying questions.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, this collision had positive consequences. Noah's question made me reflect on my own ideas about conversation (especially questions) as a path toward learning and understanding used as a framework for doing ethnography with Inuit people.

#### *Understanding 'Anti-conversation'*

In this paper, I will attempt to show that in the context of Inuit social life a dialogical approach to culture and language as it is articulated by Tedlock and Mannheim (1995) is incomplete without an understanding of interpersonal exchanges which are anti-conversational. Assuming that meaning and culture are products of ethnographer and subjects engaged in conversations, deploying various strategies of collusion to produce an "emergent" cultural and linguistic reality, the model proposed by Tedlock and Mannheim cannot explain those moments between ethnographer and subject which *strictly avoid conversation*, but which are nevertheless dialogical. Social interaction in Inuit society consists of monologues, commands and co-present periods of silence and shared experience that enable individuals to develop meaningful, complex relationships. Tedlock and Mannheim's dialogical model, oriented toward texts, life-histories and conversations (like *Qallunnaat* attitudes toward embodied agency in general) is narrowly preoccupied with verbalized action as the source of self-expression, social action and agency (cf. Farnell 1995a, 1995b; Urciuoli 1995; Williams 1995).

The tendency of social scientists to treat social action as word-dependent, whether as a product of conversation or written into texts, leaves little room for an anthropology of those actions which are non-vocal and non-conversa-

tional (Hastrup and Hrevik 1994). In this paper, I argue that 'dialogue', as enacted by Inuit, includes the mutual engagement between two or more co-present persons without conversation. Agents use non-vocal gestures, monologues and commands to create meaning and reveal sentiments to others. This definition of dialogue retains the definition offered by Tedlock and Mannheim (1995: 4-8), as a site where culture and language emerge out of the interactions between subjects, including the ethnographer and subject. I expand their definition to include those non-conversational interactions in which cultural and linguistic forms are created and reproduced through social action.

We will first look at a survey of key studies of anthropological approaches to dialogue and social interaction in Native American societies, showing how dialogues in these settings reveal similar attitudes toward conversation which are different from those found in Euroamerican societies. Second, we will look at the research setting and its actors -- Inuit and Qallunaat living in Iqaluit, then, we shall survey recent studies of Inuit social interaction practices, including those which reveal Inuit attitudes toward questions and conversation. Finally, (using a series of ethnographic vignettes) I will ask readers to explore with me the dialogical tendencies of Inuit and Qallunaat. Using the model of embodied agency defined by Farnell (1994, 1995a and 1995b) and Williams (1995), I attempt to show how non-vocal gestures are used to create meaning and express emotions in the context of Inuit social life.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, I want to expand dialogical anthropology to include those culture-producing, meaning-making actions which are organized by concepts of interaction and agency, but are nevertheless non-conversational.

#### *Social Interaction Practices in Native American Societies*

Anthropological studies of social interaction in Native American societies reveal how it is that culturally-grounded models of agency, society and interaction are enacted in social encounters (see Basso 1979; Black-Rogers 1988; Briggs 1970 and 1998; Darnell 1988, Farnell 1995b; Hensel 1996; Morrow 1996; Philips 1983; Rushforth 1988 and Scollon and Scollon 1981).

Basso's study of Apache portraits of the white man, for example, identifies Apache rules about agency and sociality which are repeatedly violated by the white men they meet on the reservation. Through caricatures of the way Euroamericans greet Apaches, the jokers reaffirm Apache concepts of self and society that "Whitemen" do not understand:

When Western Apaches stage joking imitations of Anglo-Americans, they portray them as gross incompetents in the conduct of social relations. Judged according to standards for what is normal and "right," the joker's actions are intended to seem extremely peculiar and altogether "wrong." . . . In short, Anglo-Americans pretend to what cannot and should not be pretended -- hasty friendships -- and it strikes Apaches as the height of folly and presumptuousness that they do . . . "Whitemen say you're their friend like it was nothing, like it was air" (Basso 1979: 48).

Basso's study reveals the particular ways in which gesture, eye contact and touch – embodied signs of rapport available to non-Native speakers – are interpreted by Apache as manipulative and coercive.

Farnell's ethnography of Assiniboine agency and philosophy (1995b) illustrates how Assiniboine rules for social interaction and greeting differ from those of Euroamericans. For example, when greeting strangers, Assiniboine women use a gentle handshake to confirm their Indian identity or "at least someone who is familiar with Indian ways," but Euroamericans unfamiliar with this handshake interpret it as an expression of coolness or distance (1995b: 287). When visiting family and friends, Assiniboine do not exchange greetings, a pattern which Euroamericans find cold or even hostile. Among the Assiniboine, however, the absence of verbal greetings constitutes a different kind of greeting that is non-conversational and which reaffirms familiarity and closeness between members of a community:

Relatives and friends who see each other frequently will often enter each other's houses and sit down without any exchange of words or acknowledgment of any kind. . . . To enter and quietly sit, or help oneself to coffee, is to mark oneself as an insider, a relative, in a world where there are for the most part relatives or strangers. To draw attention to oneself is not necessary or appropriate (Farnell 1995b: 290).

By exploring the semiotics of embodied action according to Assiniboine models of agency, Farnell persuasively argues that bodily movement is a central feature of Assiniboine notions of time, space and knowledge. "Assiniboine theories of social and personal action appear to be centered in a form of meaningful social life in which body movement is intrinsic as a way of knowing" (1995b: 243).

In her studies of the courtroom actions and attitudes of Yup'ik Eskimos living in Bethel, Alaska, Morrow shows how lawyers frequently misinterpret the motives of their Yup'ik clients. Yup'ik dislike questions that require definite answers because they are coercive ("They must be answered no matter what") and because they damage social relations (1996: 412). The types of questions lawyers and judges ask as well as the interactional strategies they use in a courtroom setting are "inappropriate amongst people who stress mutuality, personal autonomy, and egalitarian relationships" (Morrow 1996: 412). Yup'ik act to avoid questions through practices that frustrate lawyers and judges alike.

### *Research Setting*

In the eastern Canadian Arctic, the basic living patterns and daily routines of Inuit have changed radically in the past fifty years (Dorais 1991; Duhaime 1983). Whereas before World War II, most Inuit lived in seasonal camps, traveling from one hunting spot to the next, ninety-five percent of them now live in permanent settlements, some of which possess large populations of Qallunaat, who differ greatly with respect to knowledge and interest in Inuit culture and language. Iqaluit, the capital and largest town of Nunavut, has a

majority of Inuit but a large population of Qallunaat who are either temporary government employees or permanent residents.<sup>7</sup> Many 'Northerners' -- as Qallunaat of the latter category call themselves -- have lived in the Arctic for many years and have family and/or friendship ties to Inuit families in Iqaluit and other communities in Nunavut.

Inuit participate in a consumer-based society much like other Canadians, with several differences. One is that food and other consumer goods are often two to three times more expensive in Iqaluit than in the metropolitan regions of southern Canada (e.g., Montreal and Ottawa). Another difference is that most Inuit regularly consume huge amounts of 'country food' (food obtained by collecting, hunting, and fishing), even those who have full-time jobs which restrict their hunting opportunities to weekends and paid vacations (*cf.* Duhaimé 1991). While some Inuit have high-paying executive salaries and travel frequently to other parts of Canada and the world for work or vacations, others are dependent on a variety of social assistance and pension programs for food, shelter, and other basic needs.

Although Inuit society is heterogeneous economically, Inuit cultural and linguistic practices show surprising resilience (Dorais 1996). This is not so obvious, however, to all Qallunaat living and working in Iqaluit. Many visitors and even some permanent residents in the Canadian Arctic assume that because Inuit buy food in stores, rent videos, and drive cars, they have become fully assimilated members of Canadian society, and that their culture is no different from the average Canadian. These and other misconceptions about Inuit continue to persist, despite studies which reveal the contrary (see Dorais 1991, 1997a, and 1997b, and Graburn 1998). Graburn writes: "[T]he Inuit and metropolitan outsiders construct stereotypes of self and other which constantly change in response to each other, and to the media penetration and globalisation of popular culture" (1998: 165).

As a researcher living with different Inuit families, I learned that Inuit act 'Qallunaat' in some contexts to accommodate Qallunaat styles of social interaction, however, in their homes and out -- hunting, fishing, camping or traveling -- Inuit act in ways that underscore distinct notions about sociality, agency and personhood. 'Inuktitut' (literally: 'in the way of the Inuit') refers generally to the spoken and written language of the Inuit of Nunavut. As Hugh Brody remarks, however, the original meaning of Inuktitut includes much more:

[It] also refers to the way in which [Inuit] do things. A person can talk, hunt, walk, eat, sleep, raise children, dance and even smile *inuktitut*. Everything the Inuit do is revealed in their manner of doing it. A distinct identity is bound up as much in the details of everyday behaviour as in the use of language (1987: 151).

Why anthropological studies of Inuit society remain unconcerned with how Inuit reproduce cultural forms through embodied social action remains a mystery to me, although one explanation may be that Inuit 'action' continues

to be analyzed under the rubrics of "hunter-gatherer" studies, where parameters and definitions are already assumed. Those who do this kind of work examine how foraging actions reveal particular adaptations to the natural environment (e.g., Collings 1997; Kemp 1971; Smith 1991), but the meanings that are attached to these actions remain obscure (see Briggs 1997; Concon *et al* 1995; Morrow and Hensel 1992; and Stairs 1992 for important exceptions).<sup>8</sup> Although anthropological studies of Inuit language and culture exist (a complete bibliography is available in Dorais 1996), they do not explore how language and culture are created through social interaction. Except for the pioneering work of Briggs (1992 and 1998), how Inuit create meaning in dialogical contexts through social action remains an unexplored topic.

### *Inuit Attitudes Toward Social Interaction*

Although I have said that Inuit are "anti-conversational," I do not mean to imply that they dislike talking to one another.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I assert that Inuit think and act in ways that involve much *less* talking about one's personal life, personal perspectives and experiences compared to Euroamericans,<sup>10</sup> who usually rely on a combination of self-disclosure and empathy to achieve emotional intimacy and friendship and to keep relations active (McDermott and Tylbor 1995). In Euroamerican contexts, empathy is often expressed by asking pertinent questions about someone else's personal concerns, interests and routines. Inuit, on the other hand, have a particular antipathy toward these and many other types of questions, brilliantly summarized by Briggs:

There is a logic behind the formulation of questions in Inuktitut, as in other languages. This logic has to do with the wish to avoid confrontation, demandingness and invasion of another's mental space, as two Inuit friends from different parts of the Arctic have -- in almost identical words -- confirmed (Minne Aodla Freeman and Rachel Qitsiulak Tinsley, personal communications 1996). Especially in adult conversation, Inuit tend to avoid open-ended questions. "Closed" questions, though in a sense "directed," allow the person interrogated to answer with a simple, unelaborated (and occasionally, perhaps, false) yes, no, or maybe, thus keeping most of the contents of his or her mind private. Open questions like "why" are heard as both intrusive and critical (Briggs 1998: 262-263).

Briggs (1970 and 1979), who lived in Inuit outpost camps in the 1960s and 1970s, has meticulously documented the emotional aspects of Inuit social life. More recently, she has written about the mutually constitutive processes of culture psychology, and personal meaning as they are revealed in the experiences of a three-year-old Inuit girl interacting with various family members and Briggs herself (1998).

Crago (1992), a psychologist and linguist who studied the language acquisition practices of Inuit in northern Quebec, observed parents encouraging children in subtle ways not to ask questions. Parents would intentionally ignore a child who asked them questions while the adults were engaged in conversation. Parents expected children to learn through observation and by listening to stories told by adult Inuit, but they were taught "not to obtain in-

formation by questioning" (Crago 1992: 498). In this way, parents teach their children to become patient listeners and observers of action and not to use questions with adults, although they think it is appropriate that children ask other children questions. Many Inuit children have no inhibitions about asking other children questions or talking about their experiences, but their parents believe that the talkativeness manifested in youth will decrease as their children grow older. A sign of Inuit maturity, then, is outgrowing the childish desire to be talkative.

We noticed that in the presence of parents and elders, young Inuit learn to sit calmly and quietly and listen attentively to the words and commands of adults. Younger family members and guests learn to show respect for the autonomy of elders by not interrupting their conversations or any other actions. This period of waiting can involve an extended period of co-present silence. In this way, thoughts, conversation, even friendships are thought to emerge in a way that is respectful of the privacy and autonomy of others. The inappropriate timing of questions, or the narration of a recent event, can disrupt the thoughts and actions of others, thus imposing on their privacy and autonomy. When visiting, then, the silence that occupies the space of co-presence when one visits Inuit households does not have the same meaning to those Qallunaat who assume that silence indicates tension or disapproval. *Silence means just the opposite to Inuit*: it means that one has the composure and presence of adults, who act calmly and patiently.

Another important linguistic development for young Inuit is learning to use the non-vocal gestures which accompany speech. As soon as children begin to talk, they learn basic facial expressions that they use to communicate with their parents. Even three-year-old children (and under) know how to say, 'yes' and 'no' without uttering a sound. 'Yes' is expressed by raising one's eyebrows, and 'no' by tightening the muscles of the face so that the nostrils and upper lip are compressed together. In these ways, children answer their parents, siblings and even peers without uttering a sound. These practices continue among adults who develop a wide range of gestures that replace spoken words.<sup>11</sup> Shrugging the shoulders, (which means 'I don't know') is commonly used. In addition, many Inuit develop individual styles of performing routine tasks; riding a snowmobile, butchering animals or rolling and smoking cigarettes.

Participating in Inuit social relations forced Michelle and me to reconsider our personal anthropology (Pocock 1994 [1973] and Williams 1991). After the incident at the Royal Canadian Legion (pp. 182-83 above), we learned to limit our use of questions in many contexts, even when doing so made us uncomfortable. Without the habitual rapport-building resources that questions provide Qallunaat, we felt lost, but we learned how not to ask -- and to experience long periods of silence. Although adopting this approach prevented us from getting life histories, it did enable us to understand the

many non-vocalized ways in which Inuit express themselves and create meaning.

*Adamee, Eva, and the Experience of Social Relations*

I had become friends with Eva's husband Adamee in 1990 and 1991, but I did not know Eva well, and my wife had not met either of them before 1994. When we visited their house for the first time in 1994, Adamee was gone, but Eva was sitting on a couch close to her two-and-a-half year old daughter, Panik, who played with (and tormented) their newly acquired puppy, named 'Toughie'.

When we entered the house, Eva said, 'Hi', but she did not get up from the sofa or seem excited to see us. Instead, she continued to watch television and oversee the play between Panik and Toughie. Although she turned to look at us on several occasions, she did not engage us in conversation. Instead, she regularly reprimanded her daughter for tormenting the puppy, at the same time teasing and soothing her with expressions of love reserved exclusively for young children (cf. Briggs 1998). Altogether, we exchanged no more than a few words and several discreet glances during (roughly) an hour's time. Although we elicited several laughs from Eva and Panik when we played with the child and the puppy, we felt uncomfortable because we hadn't talked to Eva that much. We left her house thinking that she was ambivalent about developing a friendship with us, although we really had no idea what to think because we did not understand how Inuit interact without using conversation.

One week later, when we returned to Eva's house, we again encountered what we thought at the time was lack of interest when we entered. Eva was in the process of making a hat. She glanced at us and smiled after we sat down. She eventually took a break, putting down her work for a few minutes. It was then that she jokingly reprimanded us for not visiting her. She said that perhaps we did not like visiting Inuit, and we were confused. The last time we visited she seemed unable to divert her attention from her daughter, the puppy and the television. We discovered that we felt like strangers, but she did not think of us that way.

Eva never clearly acknowledged our arrival at her house with formal greetings. She never questioned us about our project, nor did she ask how we found life in Iqaluit. She enjoyed watching us play with her daughter, her son and the puppy. Whether or not we shared our feelings through spoken dialogue did not concern her, nor did it appear that she thought this was a proper way of getting to know us. Instead, she learned about us through our interactions with her family -- *through situational contexts of co-presence without conversation*. She revealed her positive attitude toward us a week later when she asked us to care for her children while she went out with her husband. This same general pattern repeated itself with other Inuit in many households.



We thought that because Inuit rarely asked how we were or questioned us about our research that they did not care about us. We learned through others how mistaken we were. For example, we learned through others that many Inuit were impressed with my wife's willingness to travel to the outpost camp in the middle of winter -- something that many Inuit men refused to risk. We also learned that Inuit living in town and at the outpost camps were exchanging information about us on the radio, including who we were with and where we were going. Many Inuit had been interested all along in how we were doing and what we were learning, but we did not know enough Inuktitut to grasp when someone mentioned us on the radio or in our presence. We became *takkua qallunaat* (those White people) who were interested in outpost camps and who would spend all their time in Inuit homes, who would travel regularly with an outpost camp family. On several occasions, we were complimented on how Inuit we were becoming: one teenage girl said that I must be half-Inuk because the *palauraq* (fried bread) I made was almost as good as her mother's.

### *Logistic Challenges*

My anxiety about the hunting abilities of our Inuit companions interfered with my as-yet-undeveloped capacity to be patient: learning enough to understand the *purpose* of their actions. While I worried about whether we would ever catch anything at all, Pauloosie patiently did his job as a hunter. Every morning we arose early, beginning a long day of travel to different sites looking for different types of marine mammals that Inuit hunt regularly: walrus, ringed seal, bearded seal, and polar bear. Although we saw signs of *natsiq* (ringed seal) because of the presence of their fresh breathing holes in the sea ice, we never stayed too long in any one place. After a week of being at the outpost camp with no hunting-success, I grew impatient. I asked Pauloosie if they ever ran out of food at camp. He said simply, "The *qammaq* (traditional Inuit sod-house)<sup>12</sup> is always full." He could see that I was worried about our lack of success, but he would not explain why he moved around so much, nor why he would hastily move on to the next hunting spot.

Suddenly, one day, as we circled back to a spot we had just left, Pauloosie and his brother spotted and killed a bearded seal coming up for air. A day later, Pauloosie caught two ringed seals. I much later realized that Pauloosie was surveying a huge territory of frozen sea so that he could locate where the seals were during what intervals. Once he had identified those breathing holes which the local population of seals used more frequently than others, he reduced his search to one particular area.

I was constantly thinking of questions that I wanted Pauloosie to answer instead of letting Pauloosie teach me about hunting Inuit-style and what it means to be Inuit. He loved to tease me and would frequently pull out my beard-hairs when I was not looking. Although painful, I realized that he was demonstrating concern for my well-being. He wanted me to 'stay light' and to

enjoy myself at camp. Teasing me this way would usually make everyone laugh. In fact, Pauloosie enjoyed our company, and I think he appreciated our progress, for we eventually became very good at avoiding questions.

The same was true for Pauloosie's older brother, Udlu. During one of our early visits to his home, I asked, "Who funds the outpost camp?" After thinking for a minute, Udlu replied, "Why, do you want to start one?" His response served its purpose of discouraging further questions about outpost camps directly to family members, and this made Udlu more relaxed. We later learned from his wife that initially our presence made him extremely uncomfortable. Later, he repeatedly asked us to join him on hunting and fishing trips.

On one particular fishing trip, Udlu showed little expression as he reeled in his fifth Arctic 'char' (*Salvelinus alpinus*). Although he was aware that I had failed to get a nibble in the same period of time in the same stretch of river, he did not say anything. Frustrated, I took a break and watched him closely for several minutes. After casting, I realized that he allowed his lure to sink to a specific depth in the river. When I replicated his technique, I suddenly began to get strikes. He said, "Now you are getting the hang of it." He never thought of telling me this, nor did I feel it right to ask him. He was pleased that I had learned how to fish this hole on my own.

It was through shared experience, rather than extended conversation that we learned that Udlu had a particular passion for fishing that impressed many Inuit. Even though he had chronic problems with his hip that made walking extremely uncomfortable, he would invite me on hikes of fifteen kilometers or more to introduce us to some of his favorite fishing spots. This was truly an act of generosity because fishermen living in Iqaluit feel a certain possessiveness that prevents them from letting others know where the fish may be striking.

Udlu was proud that my fishing skills improved. When he heard how frustrated I felt when I lost a fish while fishing near the outpost camp, he remarked, "You should not dwell on your mistakes, it only means you are learning." I was surprised because this was the first time he had addressed me in such a forceful manner. Up until this point, I was not sure to what extent he was interested in my thoughts and concerns. With only a few words exchanged every now and then, we developed a hunting and fishing partnership through mutually engaging in these activities.

#### *Intra-cultural Differences*

Although I have pointed out a deep, underlying feature of Inuit culture -- resistance to the use of questions and the resulting effects upon co-presence -- there are Inuit who are comfortable with conversations, and they use them to create meaning in a variety of special social contexts. For example, an interview I had with John Amagoalik, one of the authors of the historic settle-

ment which created Canada's first truly aboriginal-controlled government, demonstrates this capacity. As a spokesman and negotiator for Inuit sovereignty which led to the creation of Nunavut, John is both passionate and persuasive in his articulation of Inuit political rights. He appeared many times on nationally broadcast television programs during the nineteen-seventies, 'eighties, and 'nineties, and he has a weekly column in Nunavut's most widely read newspaper: the *Nunatsiaq News*.<sup>13</sup> I arrived at his office on time, and he shook my hand, offered the usual greetings and then led me to his office at the NIC (Nunavut Implementation Commission), where our interview lasted about one hour.<sup>14</sup> He invited me to sit in a chair opposite his enormous desk.

He sat behind his desk and asked me what I wanted to know. I responded by asking him about Inuit identity, the land claims process and how he thought Inuit and Qallunaat are different. Although his answers provided me with important insights pertaining to my research on Inuit identity and differences, the texture of our interaction -- hence of our co-presence -- was completely unlike my encounters with other Inuit, because our meeting took place according to Qallunaat-style office meetings in which the goal of the participants is to achieve maximum efficiency and *verbal* exchange. The framework of the encounter was that of Canadian bureaucratic or corporate hierarchy, and he was a master of those.

Our dialogical experience was framed in ways that many Inuit find objectionable, even intolerable, but the social and political realities of northern communities are such that negotiation of Inuit land claims required some Inuit to master the discourse strategies used by the negotiators for the federal government. By asking the right questions and saying the right things, Amagoalik and others were able to persuade the federal government to allow Inuit to create and run their own government. This is not a unique case: many Inuit living in Iqaluit have adopted Qallunaat interactional styles in order to have access to employment, educational, and business opportunities.

There are two important points here: 1. Qallunaat styles of interaction and co-presence *also create meaning and produce culture*, and 2. It is possible for Inuit -- and Qallunaat -- to cultivate *more than one way in which they interact with others*, although many Inuit find their privacy and traditional styles of interaction seriously breached by non-Inuit working in Iqaluit. A striking example of non-communication was the case of a public health nurse who interrogated an Inuk woman, Uu, after she had given birth to a boy in a hospital in Iqaluit. The male nurse asked Uu questions about her personal life and sexual practices in the presence of her entire family. Uu was deeply offended and the interchange did not benefit either participant. Although the nurse was in a position to offer Uu some useful information about her own health and the health of her baby, he did so in ways that are completely inappropriate to traditional Inuit interaction styles. These unfortunate kinds of encounters are part of the daily reality for many Inuit and Qallunaat living in northern Canada.

### *Conclusion*

I argue that only with an adequate model of human beings -- one that focuses on the moving body as a signifying agent<sup>15</sup> -- is it possible fully to comprehend Inuit constructions of personhood and agency as well as Inuit ideas about social interaction and co-presence. Sole reliance on a dialogical approach to agency and interaction tends to privilege the spoken word (conversation) over other forms of social action that, as I have attempted to show, create meaning and 'culture' as well. To privilege verbal interactions over all others tends to trivialize non-conversational forms of social interaction. I have argued that Inuit attitudes toward conversation and questions are not trivial. They open up new realms of possibility in which to explore meaning and social interaction which are sorely needed if we are to transcend the boundaries of racial tensions which often arise through attitudes based on a concealed 'dominant-subordinate' opposition.

Inuit engage in daily interaction and co-presence with different models of being and knowing than do Qallunaat. These differences are involved in all forms of everyday social interaction. Inuit are concerned with respecting the privacy and autonomy of others -- something that Qallunaat do not always understand. Qallunaat engage in daily interaction and co-presence mainly with verbalization. The difficulty is to avoid treating either model as 'right', as against the other which is conceived to be 'wrong'. Understanding how *both* handle co-presence provides an important starting point for evaluating how a combined future might be handled with more tolerance and understanding.

I have attempted to show that by focusing on the semiotics of human movement in the daily fabric of co-presence in everyday life, one is better able to link 'routine' actions to cultural constructions of agency, knowledge and power. As Urciuoli so succinctly puts it:

The creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships; people enact their selves to each other in words, movements, and other modes of action. All selves are culturally defined, as time and space themselves are culturally defined. Time and space are never simply there; they are continually cut to fit the agenda of the moment (1995: 189).

Problems that emerge during Inuit and Qallunaat interactions in the Canadian Arctic occur in large part because Qallunaat and Inuit fail to recognize that the 'Other' approaches co-presence differently than they do themselves.

As Johnson (1997: 145) observes in her preliminary work on the revival of Yup'ik dancing traditions in Bethel, Alaska, although traditional ways of knowing and acting appear to be less important and pervasive now than they were fifty years ago, it does not mean that they do not exist.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, perhaps there are just too few scholars who are sensitive to different

interactional styles in daily life and the models of human beings on which they are based.

Different ideas about mind, body and causality are involved in the most mundane contexts of human social interaction, but they are not always easy to recognize or understand. Whether or not one sees these different systems at work also depends on a willingness to understand competing systems of knowing and being by *acting differently* in the presence of others.

Ned Searles

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> My nine months of research on outpost camps and identity in the Canadian Arctic was funded in part by the Canada-U.S. Fulbright Foundation and the Department of Anthropology, University of Washington. Follow-up research conducted in 1996 (from which notes are included here) was funded by the International Council for Canadian Studies [ICCS].

<sup>2</sup> For details of the results of this expedition, see Fitzhugh and Olin (1994).

<sup>3</sup> Outpost camps are the official designation of places claimed by certain Inuit families as places of primary residence. The term 'outpost' refers to their remoteness, as they are often hundreds of kilometers from the nearest settlement. My dissertation (Searles 1998) deals extensively with the significance of some of these outpost camps in the everyday lives of Inuit and non-Inuit living in the Canadian Arctic.

<sup>4</sup> *Iqaluit*, originally called Frobisher Bay, started out as an airport for the United States and Royal Canadian Air Forces during World War II. In the 1950s, it was a base of operations for the massive Defense Early Warning Line Project, in which radar bases were built and staffed by military personnel throughout the high latitudes of North America and Greenland. *Iqaluit's* identity as a town, then, is linked to its role as a site of military operations in the North American Arctic (see Duffy 1988 and Searles 1998).

<sup>5</sup> *Qallunnaat* is the word Inuit use for 'white people'. For a more detailed study of how Inuit classify others, see Dorais (1988).

<sup>6</sup> The production of meaning through embodied action is a central feature in the work of Farnell (1994, 1995a, 1995b), Urciuoli (1995), Varela (1995) and Williams (1995), who seek to transcend a Cartesian model that opposes mind and body, rendering the body inconsequential to the signifying practices of agents. In arguing that agency is the product of people who use "embodied actions—whether spoken (vocal gestures) or signed (manual gestures) ... as signifying acts which are performed by persons using culturally grounded resources and strategies to create and communicate meaning" (Farnell 1995b: 5-6), those who use a semasiological approach to action expose new and important paths of inquiry and understanding.

<sup>7</sup> Nunavut ("our land" in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit of the Eastern Canadian Arctic) is the name of Canada's newest territory. In 1999, the Government of the Northwest Territories, which held jurisdiction over the region, handed over its powers and duties to the Government of Nunavut. Although this government is not Inuit-only, Inuit constitute a sizeable majority in the region, and Inuktitut is (with English), one of the official languages.

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<sup>8</sup> The tendency to divide the social world into instrumental and symbolic realms of action is easily discernible among those who study Inuit: either one studies hunting systems or one studies 'symbolic' systems, such as mythology, language and religion. Following Farnell, I believe that any action within a particular society is part of a larger cultural system which is produced and reproduced through the embodied actions of social agents (Farnell 1995b). The analytical gap acts as a barrier to more fruitful research on how social actions create meaning.

<sup>9</sup> It may be that 'a-conversational' would be a preferable term.

<sup>10</sup> Not all Inuit are averse to conversation and self-disclosure, of course. I met Inuit who were willing to talk about their experiences, attitudes and relationships, however, I do think that these Inuit were employing interactive strategies closer to those with which I (a Qallunaat), was comfortable.

<sup>11</sup> I recently interviewed a woman from Greenland, who identified a third facial gesture that signifies, "I am teasing you." She tightened her lower lip against the bottom row of teeth so that the tops of the teeth are showing, then the jaw is moved back and forth laterally in a quick, rolling motion.

<sup>12</sup> When Pauloosie's family built a new house in 1985, they converted the *quammaq* into a storage shed for meat, fishing nets, boating equipment and old furniture. During a nine-month span in 1994, the *quammaq* was always filled with various kinds of country food, including parts of caribou, walrus, polar bear, ringed seal, bearded seal and duck eggs.

<sup>13</sup> The cover of *Northern Voices: Inuit Writings in English* (Petronne 1988) consists of a picture of Amagoalik standing in front of a dozen microphones, obviously at a press conference. No caption or description of the content of the photograph, however, is given.

<sup>14</sup> The NIC is an Inuit-run organization responsible for ensuring the new government and the principle set forth in the land claims settlement are implemented according to the schedule established by legislation.

<sup>15</sup> The model I advocate is that proposed by Farnell (1995b, Urciuoli (1995), and others.

<sup>16</sup> Graburn(1998) writes, "Though their material culture may have changed and many say, 'Inuit *pivalliajut*' – the Eskimos are progressing ... in character, in family life and personal interaction. Especially with children in the home, the Inuit have (thank goodness!), *not* changed in ways that really count."

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