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Nanook and the Innocent Eskimo

Upon viewing many modern conception of "the Eskimo", such as the modern logo for Alaska Airlines (Appendix, Fig. 1), there is no doubt a dominant version of what a proper Eskimo looks like. Not surprisingly, the persistence of such images are rooted in the original descriptions of these people, which were based largely upon assumptions, projections, and in many times colonialist racism. In an attempt to describe the world in Western terms, the characteristics of the Eskimo were created in order to show a primitive version of ourselves. These long lasting stereotypes become so easy in everyday life considering most of them are so positive, and thus easily go unquestioned. Unfortunately, pushing distinct groups of people under an umbrella of essentializing characteristics, forces them out of any sort of historical progress, and allows them to be seen as unchanging and completely primitive. Denying them this distinct history makes it easy to define oneself as modern, but increasingly hard for them to become "modern" or even anything less than primitive, without being inauthentic.

The first descriptions of Arctic people ultimately created the lasting image of the Eskimo, surviving even until today. Initial contact with them came from the quest for the Northwest Passage, which brought them to the Central Canadian Arctic (Brody, 17). They were met by what we consider today to be the traditional Eskimo, which are igloo-building, dog sledding people, who ate blubber and wear fur parkas. Writings were sent back to the US and Europe, solidifying the entire Arctic natives as the stereotype of the smiling Eskimo who acted as a universal, despite the fact that, according to Riordan, "[the people] these generalized images are based accounted for less than 5 percent of the approximately fifty thousand people who made the Arctic their home in the nineteenth century." (1) This laid the groundwork for the

romanticization of the Inuit people, since the simplified version of Eskimos was a projection of Western desires for both a more simple time, but also the contrast of a primitive person. Their main characteristics clearly describe a mythical return to the place of origin, as they were described in childlike terms. Their settlement in the Arctic was the perfect backdrop for distant and isolated place which stood, in its natural form, in opposition to the artificial industry which had proliferated in Europe and the United States. "Fatalism and an unremitting workload in the face of grim circumstances seem to be accepted with cheerfulness that could be held up as a model to every factory worker in the newly industrial world." (Brody, 19) Whether this stereotype was correct or not was irrelevant since the legend was not the Inuits, it was those who wrote about them and their yearnings, ignoring any history which hints at contact or advancement, and instead creating a completely primitive version.

In 1922, Edward Flaherty was able to put, on camera, what people wanted to see as the essential Eskimo, and not only was he able to create this character, he successfully posited this image as the Eskimo most people imagine. Flaherty initially wanted to film an adventure movie about an Inuit in the Hudson Bay in 1914 and 1916 (*Freeze*, 48), but after burning his film reels accidently and returning in 1920, he had plenty of time to construct a film which documented the untouched Eskimo and his dexterity in overcoming the harsh conditions that surround him. Steffanson, an Arctic Explorer commented about the film in 1928, "it was not so truthful as I had hoped, nor yet (quite) as untruthful as I had feared" (*Freeze*, 48). His comment captures why Flaherty's appeal to preconceived notions of the Eskimo, since he put on film, which seemed completely real, a story which was not too farfetched, but surprising enough to be exotic, and yet confirming people's biases.

He also points out numerous incorrect aspects of the film, including the impossibility of

filming inside the igloo because of size, which meant only half of the structure was built, as well as the overdramatized scene of catching a seal, which probably was essentially a tug of war game. More damaging, though, are the ideas that Nanook would hunt large animals without guns, since this technology would have been adopted by this point in time during contact with traders. Additionally, he bites a phonograph in a childlike manner, underscoring his innocence, but also pointing out the historical inaccuracy, since this would be another technology seen by most Eskimos, because of traders. Flaherty wanted to show a purity of a past time, and his work was mainly done to preserve a culture before the period of contamination. He shows a good hardworking man, but Nanook is still smiling and playing with his children, which is a life to be envied by any factory worker. In reality, Nanook was very sick during the movie, supposedly vomiting blood at some points, and barely able to hunt enough for him and his family. He had to censor out any aspects of contact, because that would undermine his entire effort of denying any level of progress. The Arctic had to be seen as a barren wasteland for the true effect to come through. At the same time, Nanook is safely shown as different from us, by showing scenes of him eating raw flesh, which places him as a savage other. Flaherty captured the essential aspects of the modern hero, and the human condition that was envied, and thus the image of the Eskimo was established, as the smiling, waving, and noble other, with enduring characteristics that all people can associate some sort of desire with, allowing them to persist even to this day.

At first it seems that the stereotypes of Eskimos are not damaging considering they are relatively innocent, in comparison to stereotypes of other minority groups. Positive stereotypes endure more because they are less likely to be challenged, when what ultimately occurs is they are cast onto a timeline which exists in an industrialized frame, which ignores any other possibility of entering modernism through alternative means. It also ignores a rich and complex

history surrounding an entire region of the world. Most of these people do not just live on seal blubber and polar bear meat, but on a rich assortment of wildlife, fish, and fowl (*Eskimo*, 4) Additionally, Yup'ik Natives did not live all year in frigid conditions, but are able to hunt in all months except the most cold (*Eskimo,* 6). More importantly, it is often believed, especially through the visions in Nanook of the North, that these were completely isolated people, living in small familial clans. In fact, "a many as fifteen thousand people may have lived in western Alaska in the early 1800s, divided into at least twelve socially and territorially distinct regional populations. Each...in turn was socially divided into a number of village groups" (*Eskimo,* 9), which seems to destroy the idea that these people were uncultured, decentralized, and isolated. By keeping these people labeled as primitives, and forcing them into a frozen ahistorical period, they are kept from ever being modern. Those viewing them get to be modern, and set themselves in opposition, but they are not allowed to be part of the modern world since their authenticity has been defined by their primitive and savage qualities.

At the same time, Flaherty cannot be written off as completely malicious, or damaging, since despite his work being laughable in terms of complete authenticity, he did give a certain humanness to these otherwise unknown people. "Although the Inuit may have laughed at Flaherty, they also helped him immeasurably. Much of what Flaherty filmed reflected the Inuit image of their past." (*Freeze,* 54) In other words, they were allowed to show their own idea of the essence of their culture, and they willingly participated in the project. As opposed to seeing these people as brutal and violent they were shown as humans from a different part of the world, and different but also successful in their own real

Appendix

Figure 1: *Alaska Airlines* Logo

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