

From *Terra Incognita* to Nunavik: How the Inuit of Northern Quebec Have Defended Their Aboriginal Homeland

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Speech to the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association
Conference on Nationalism, Diversity and Globalization: Coexistence
and Conflicts, University of Ottawa, 2 June 1998

In the culture clash that has existed since contact with Europeans, Inuit have had to counter notions that they literally do not exist (terra incognita), and can be moved to and fro on the map. The Inuit of Nunavik continue to defend their ancestral homeland, most recently in the context of the efforts of Quebec sovereigntists to separate from Canada. While the names of printed maps conceived and produced by "Westerners" have changed considerably over the centuries, the names Inuit have for the places where they live have remained constant, based on oral tradition. The process to have these names etched on printed maps parallels the political process to develop self-government for the Nunavik region. Although the sovereignty movement has caused significant delay in the political progress of the Inuit of Nunavik, Inuit are determined to decide their own future in the context of the sovereignty debate, and to continue to work towards self-government.

De la Terre inconnue à Nunavik: Comment les Inuit du Nord du Québec ont défendu leur patrie autochtone

Avec le choc des cultures qui existe depuis le premier contact avec les Européens, les Inuit ont dû s'opposer aux notions qu'ils n'existent pas à proprement parler (terra incognita), et qu'ils peuvent être déménagés d'ici et de là sur la carte géographique. Les Inuit de Nunavik continuent à défendre leur patrie ancestrale, et plus récemment dans le contexte des efforts des souverainistes québécois voulant se séparer du Canada. Bien que les noms sur les cartes géographiques, cartes conçues et produites par des

"Westerners," aient changés considérablement au cours des siècles, les noms des Inuit pour les lieux où ils habitent sont restés constants et basés sur la tradition orale. Le processus par lequel ces noms sont gravés sur des cartes géographiques fait le parallèle avec le processus politique développant l'autonomie gouvernementale dans la région de Nunavik. Bien que le mouvement pour la souveraineté ait causé un délai important dans le progrès politique des Inuit de Nunavik, les Inuit sont déterminés de décider leur propre avenir dans le contexte du débat sur la souveraineté, et de continuer à travailler envers l'autonomie gouvernementale.

(Introductory remarks in Inuktitut)

I always open my speeches, however briefly, in Inuktitut because I am immensely proud of my identity as an Inuk, an Eskimo. The moment I start speaking English, it is a graphic demonstration that I am meeting you more than halfway in putting on a suit and tie and speaking your language to deliver a message on behalf of my people.

I dreaded the word paper, as it was described, because I normally don't deliver papers; I deliver speeches. And I recall one of my speeches at the Rotary Club in Toronto. Some people asking for a text of my speech before I delivered it. And because I didn't have a text, one of my assistants had to tell them, "Mr. Nungak does not give speeches, he *delivers* them!"

The title of my speech is "From *Terra Incognita* to Nunavik: How the Inuit of Northern Quebec have Defended their Aboriginal Homeland." I just first want to give a pre-1670 snapshot of what the early Qallunat, the White people who came across Inuit back then, found. And how the clash of values and cultures, the inevitable clash, happened. How it happened through the eyes of the people who experienced it.

I would first like to quote the polar explorer, Robert Peary, very quickly, where he describes in an appendix of his book, from his 1891 expedition to Northwest Greenland, about what he saw of the people, the Inuit, who were as yet undisturbed before the likes of him came upon the scene. Peary says, in his book, *Northward Over the Great Ice*:

There is no form of government among them, no chief, each man being supreme in his own family, and literally and absolutely his own master. Such a thing as real-estate is unknown to them. Every man owns the whole country and can locate his house, and hunt where his fancy dictates. . . . Every man is his own tailor,

shoemaker, boat builder, house carpenter and everything else; in other words, each family is literally and absolutely independent and self-supporting, and could continue its existence for an indefinite length of time without external assistance.

This is a snapshot provided by Robert Peary, the polar explorer.

To give you a clearer picture of what was in store, a prelude to before we get to the maps, I would like to quote another explorer, Sir John Ross of the British Navy, who spent four winters (1829–1833) in Boothia Peninsula in the central Arctic on his ship, the *Victory*. In this quote is a very clear picture of the clash that's already taking place upon the arrival of others in the Inuit homeland. To quote *The Arctic Grail* by Pierre Berton:

Ross made a vain attempt to move one Eskimo family who had built their snow hut close to the ship – too close to suit the captain. A hilarious confrontation followed. Ross had claimed the land in the name of the King. But neither he nor his nephew could make the Eskimos understand that the land that they had lived on for centuries was no longer theirs. The white men explained the purpose of their visit, or tried to. The Eskimos in reply offered them a slice of seal blubber. The white men asked how long the family intended to stay. The Eskimos asked if they had any fish-hooks with them. The white men explained they had taken possession of the land in the King's name. The Eskimos remarked, chattily, that the seals were becoming very scarce. It had not occurred to them that anybody owned the land any more than anybody owned the sea or the air. They were planning an immediate trip inland in search of caribou. The naval officers, seeing their snow huts, had come to the wrong conclusion: to a white man, a house meant permanence, but the Eskimos could build one in a couple of hours. They could pack a light sled in half an hour with all their worldly possessions. No landlord or tax collector ever came to their door. The concept of permanence, of real estate, of tithe, title, and deed was foreign to them.

All over the globe at this time the British were attempting to foist their own concept of morality on totally different cultures. John Ross was no exception. . . .

So here we see a very clear picture of what existed at the time of contact. At some point in the timeline, we became tenants in our own ancient, millennial, Aboriginal homeland. When I describe how we have defended our homeland, you will recognize the features of legal action, political action, lobbying, asserting our rights, putting on a suit and tie, speaking English, and talking to audiences such as this, to communicate a message about defending what we have, or what we think we have in the face of the onslaught that started with the contact such as I have just described. The only thing you will not hear about is armed conflict because we have never been defeated in war.

All throughout this relationship, from pre-1670 times to the times I have just described with Sir John Ross and with Robert Peary, there is, on the Qallunat side, an attitude displayed throughout. An attitude of arbitrary, unilateral, dense-minded, colonial-master, jurisdictional-father-knows-best, towards the Aboriginals that unfortunately is alive and well in 1998. I am about to demonstrate that to you in the little time I have.

Now, sometime in the timeline a threshold got crossed. In describing it, I like to quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. He said it best! How he described it applies just as well to what has happened in Canada. Bishop Tutu described the first landing of the White settlers in



South Africa. He said, "When the white people landed in South Africa, they had the book, the Bible, and the black people had the land. The white people, upon arrival, said, "let us kneel down, close our eyes and pray." And so they did. When they opened their eyes and stood up, the black people had the Book, and the white people had the land!"

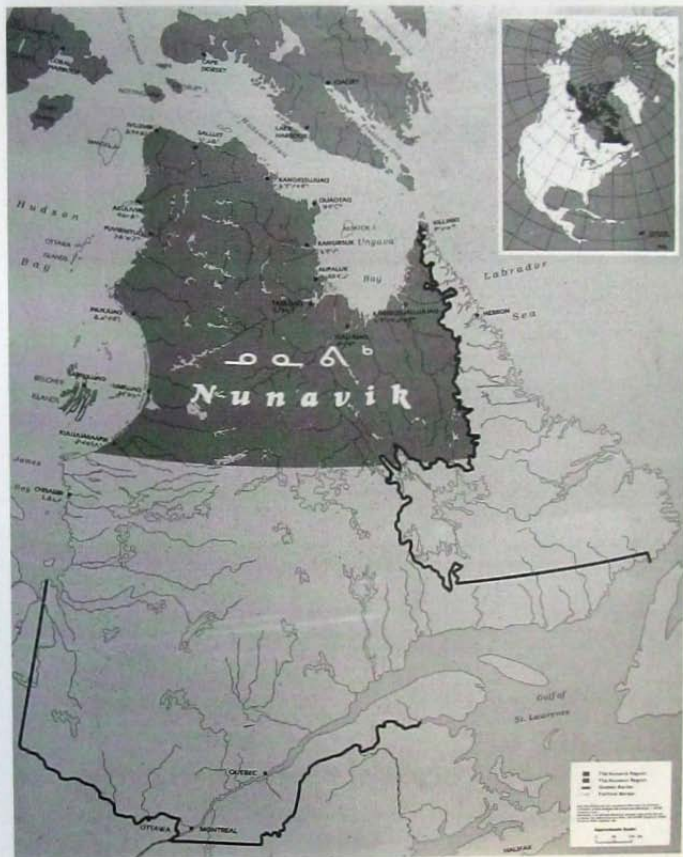
Somewhere, by some sleight of hand, by some fiat, the settlers had become the landlord. And this is what has happened in Canada!

I will just run quickly through the maps to show how that has happened in our particular stretch of tundra, which is on the second map to the right here (*points to map of Nunavik* [see page 19]). This is my territory. This is my millennial, Aboriginal homeland, the one shaded in orange. However, in 1670 it was coloured something on the map for the first time by a stroke of the pen of King Charles II of England, who gave that orange-shaded vast tract of geography to his cousin Rupert, and called it Rupert's Land. It was an arbitrary act, a stroke of pen! How would my ancestors living at the time be in any position to defend their Aboriginal homeland in light of such an act? There was no way! First of all because the king never bothered to send any of his representatives to tell our ancestors and their contemporaries that they are now living in such and such a jurisdiction by an act of a king's proclamation.





We were Rupert's Landers for two hundred years without ever once knowing it! There was no representative, there was no notice in the mail, there was no indication that the rhythm of life in the Inuit homeland was about to change in any way. But it was in the context that Sir John Ross in 1833 encountered the Inuit that were described in the quote that I have just given you. Ross had the confidence, and the knowledge that his king had declared that part of Canada Rupert's Land, and he had the run of the







place. He was the boss of all bosses! He was the boss of all that he surveyed! And when an Eskimo dared build an igloo too close to his ship, he tried to explain what the new order was.

I'll just skip very quickly through the other maps, but in this one (1870), we see three years after the formation of Canada as a country, the territory starting to be arbitrarily carved up. I'm sure, I'm quite certain, although I have not done any academic research, that none of the Aboriginal people living in any of these coloured areas were ever consulted, nor asked permission, nor participated in any process that determined the nature of these boundaries. And doesn't Manitoba look cute in this picture?! (referring to map of Canada in 1898). This map (1870) is at a time when my great-grandfather, Patsuraaluk, was a young man. He was born a Rupert's Lander.

Looking at this map, I want to make a short point about reversing the logic of these happenings by saying, "What if I, as a powerful Eskimo shaman, went with my shamanistic amulets to St. Malo, France, or to Plymouth, England, to heathenize and paganize the people there? And to tell them that their order of life, their political system, is out of order?! The way I see things is *the* way things are going to happen now!"

I would either be the laughingstock, or I would be run out of town! Because, being Christians, and *civilized*, they would probably have a stronger immigration policy than we had at the time. And they did not suffer any inferiority complex from other peoples, and other peoples' approaches. And therefore continued evolving Canada's geography as shown on these maps.

My great-grandfather lived for forty-two years as a Northwest Territories resident. Born a Rupert's Lander, he spent a major stretch of his life as a citizen of the Territories, until one morning in 1912, he became a newly minted citizen of *La Belle Province*. Again, by processes in which neither he nor his contemporaries had absolutely any input or any way to influence how these decisions were made! We see what it looks like today, and we are wrestling with the consequences of these fateful decisions.

I am not here to cry over historic spilt milk. I am not here to whine and wail over what has happened here and cry on your shoulder about how badly we've gotten the raw end of the deal.

I'm here to describe how we have defended our homeland. Now, just to go to the map for a minute (*Inuit settlement area map*). All these

coloured areas, the top third of the land mass of Canada, represent the Inuit homeland. Presently, it is divided into three jurisdictions, soon to be four with the formation of Nunavut, less than one year from today. Had the Inuit, as a distinct Aboriginal group, been given a seat in 1867 when Canada was giving birth to itself, Inuit leaders would have absolutely insisted that we not be carved up into different jurisdictions. We would have demanded that Inuit be in one unit. It has not happened that way, and we continue to wrestle with its consequences.

I will just skim over the 1975 event that Brian Craik described in his speech (*Brian Craik of the Grand Council of the Cree described the signing of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in 1975*). But this was the first instance in Canada's history that Aboriginal people from the Inuit homeland, had occasion, by treaty, to enter into a relationship between the governments of Canada and Quebec. It was with those of us who have the misfortune to be trapped in Quebec.

I want to touch upon, very briefly, an event previous to that which demonstrates the permanent state of tension between the federal authority and the province over the status of, and responsibility for, Aboriginal people.

In the 1930s, the government was not present in any way in our territory. In times of famine and starvation, the Hudson's Bay Company issued welfare and relief to some of our people. They sent the bill, which was three thousand and some dollars, to the government of Quebec. They had looked up the atlas, and seeing, yes, we are in Quebec, determined that Quebec should be responsible. The government of Quebec received the bill, looked at it, and said, "Oh, these are Eskimo Indians! Indians are section 91 (24) items in the 1867 division of powers. This has to be paid by the federal authority! So they sent the bill to the federal government. The federal government looked at it and said, "No, no, no! We gave you that territory, lock stock and barrel, back in 1912! You pay!" And the quarrel developed, which ended up in the Supreme Court of Canada.

In that court case, there were quotes of reports from General Murray, of Plains of Abraham fame, who had, as governor of Lower Canada, written reports of the different tribes, one of them Inuit, or "Esquimaux," as they are called here. General Murray's report was quoted in that case, because this was a monumental struggle between the province and the federal government about whose "Esquimaux"

these were. In trying to settle the question, part of General Murray's report quoted was, "They are called savages, it is true, but so are the Montagnais, and also the Hurons settled at Jeune Lorette. It is useful to note that he speaks in the first paragraph of the 'Esquimaux' as the wildest and most untamable of any, and mentions that they are emphatically styled by the other nations, savages."

You can't get more distinct than that, as I said in one of the constitutional conferences!

We have, in our particular stretch of tundra, lived with this tension since the first day we were able to transact communication with the governing authorities that gave themselves jurisdiction over our lands through this evolution. These tensions continue to this day. We had to assert our rights in 1977 when the charter of the French language was passed in the Quebec legislature. I don't have time to describe the whole activity, but we eventually got limited exemption from that law.

We participated in and were instrumental in the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the process that ended up in the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution from across the ocean in 1982. We played a pivotal role in the insertion of the recognition of ourselves as an Aboriginal people in that document. We were a mainstay in the First Ministers' Conferences on Aboriginal Rights in the years 1983 to 1987, which unfortunately did not resolve anything.

The status quo, as reserved for themselves by the jurisdictions, you see, is so entrenched that any rearrangement, any constructive damage to it we may pursue is very strongly resisted by those who have given themselves jurisdiction in Canada. All our pleadings, all our brilliant speeches, coaxings, cajolings and efforts at convincing and persuading have come to nothing thus far.

We have demonstrated our political gender every time there is a referendum in Quebec. We held our own in 1980 in the first referendum to profile our position, and similarly again in 1995. We do this to assert our position. We also, as Inuit taking full advantage of our right to vote as citizens of Quebec, vote in the mainstream referendums. This is aside from our ethnic identity and our ethnically held referendum. We make it clear, not only to the separatists, but to anybody who will listen to us, as well as the federal authority, that we are sure to be a very thorny agenda item in any process that will determine the conditions under which separation will happen, if it ever happens.

So, to sum up, we have had to learn very fast in the past twenty-five years how to engage the governments and developers, and in the defense of our rights and our place in this province and in this country. We have to be fearless about implementing legal action, political action, lobbying, asserting our rights, communicating our position across Canada, overseas, Washington D.C., and any other place in the world where this message has to be heard to counter what the separatists or the federal government are delivering as messages about how they treat Aboriginal people.

I would like to end this by asserting that we will continue to do this, even in the face of the most recent effort by the federal government to slough off its fiduciary responsibility. It is clearly defined in the BNA Act of 1867, under Section 91(24), that it has fiduciary and trust responsibility for Indians and lands reserved for Indians. We were tucked in under this provision in 1939 by the Supreme Court decision *In Re: Eskimo*.

In 1987, the federal minister of Indian Affairs attempted to slough off federal responsibility and restrict it to only those living north of the 60th parallel, and First Nations reserves south of the 60th. That would have excluded what I not so jokingly often describe as "us wretches from the provinces."

Recently, the present minister of Indian Affairs, Jane Stewart, articulated this position again at a meeting of federal and provincial Native affairs ministers in Quebec City last month (20 May 1998). The federal government declares for itself, again arbitrarily, unilaterally, dense-mindedly, in the manner of jurisdictional-father-knows-best, that their responsibility is now restricted to some imaginary geographic line. Those of us who do not fall within that imaginary line are somehow less fortunate than the ones who can be described as the favoured, the more fortunate.

So we will have classes of Inuit: Those of us living on the wrong side of that line being treated as lesser essences than those who are living on the right side of it!

To us, this is totally unacceptable, and we will say that. We will not only say it. We will confront the federal authority on the inconsistencies of that position. It ought not to be a subject of an arbitrary unilateral decision. If something like that is ever going to happen, I'm sure that the Inuit of Labrador, the Inuit of Quebec, and anybody else living on the wrong side of that line definitely have a rightful ambition to have a say

in how that is decided!

To conclude, I hope that you do not come away from my speech here scratching your head and wondering what my point is all about in speaking to you. I hope to impress upon you that we Inuit of Nunavik are not about to turn meek and docile in the defence and assertion of our rights in the face of these challenges. These have their beginnings way back, but are still alive and well even in this day and age, when I can speak perfect English to the present authorities about where we want to fit in.

Thank you.