

Affirming Identity through Musical Performance in a Canadian Arctic Hamlet¹

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In this article, I explore how the ongoing relationship between Inuit and the Southern people and institutions that govern them leads to change in the musical culture of Arviat, Nunavut. In turn, studying this relationship offers a suggestions of what Inuit music may look like in the future – an important question, given the great reduction in the performance and creation of traditional Inuit music I have observed over the past ten years. Turning to sociological critical theory, I seek to understand why Inuit make the musical choices they do, exploring the meaning created as they navigate changing social positions and stratification in the rapidly-changing contemporary world (cf. Kotarba 2013, 10).

Home to nearly 3,000 people, the Hamlet of Arviat – a primarily Inuit community located on the Northwest coast of Hudson Bay in Canada’s Nunavut Territory – is well-known and discussed as a musical place, an identity advocated by Nunavut Tourism: “Arviat is perhaps most famous in the territory for its gifted musical artists, including Charlie Panigoniak and Susan Aglukark” (www.nunavuttourism.com). I lived in Arviat from 2004 to 2009, working as a music teacher. Since 2009, I have returned for three research visits, most recently from December 2013 to January 2014, conducting over 25 interviews focused on the musical life of individuals and the community, and collecting ethnographic data as a participant-observer in multiple settings.

Music plays an integral role in multiple community connections. Music connects people with each other through music-making, with the town’s history through performance rituals, and with the geography of the place through song lyrics. Despite (or perhaps because of) the changing nature of musical practice, traditional Inuit song has largely disappeared from the community. In 2004, when I arrived, regular community drum dances were hosted in the Elders Centre (a mixed-use facility that cares for infirmed Elders while keeping them involved in community activities rather than marginalizing them) approximately once a month. Drum dances consist of a series of personal songs, or *pisiit* (sing. *pisiq*), sung by a group of older women sitting in an arc. Individual men take turns dancing in the centre of the group, while beating the large frame drum. The song repertoire contains aspects of the oral history of the community, with each song telling a personal story, often about a meaningful hunting trip, or some other aspect

of daily life. New songs are rarely composed or performed.

During my five years living in Arviat, drum dances became less frequent, but were still regularly held, usually in the Elders Centre, centrally located on the town’s primary north-south road. After being away for one year, and returning to the community for my first research trip in 2010, my wife and I were immediately told “we should have a drum dance for you – there hasn’t been one since you left” (Field Notes, July 2010). Elders arranged two drum dances during that month. Similarly, in the spring of 2012, as we entered an Elder’s home to visit, she quickly arranged to host a drum dance the following evening. By this time, a tourism-based organization, Arviat Community Ecotourism, had also been established in collaboration with a Southern agency to provide “traditional” performances for any visitors to town. Attending rehearsals by this group provided more opportunities to hear traditional Inuit music. Finally, during my winter 2013-2014 trip, there were no drum dances. Some of the key Elders who spearheaded these events in the past had passed away, and despite my best efforts over this holiday season, I was not able to attend, or arrange, a drum dance. With traditional music nearly gone, and the remainder being organized by a tourism organization, what fills the void to share stories of oral history and everyday life to bring people together? As I observe it, the meaning of musical practice remains largely the same for the people of Arviat; music still plays a key role in bringing people together, and in affirming their identity as Inuit and as Northerners. The way in which these ideas are presented and shared, however, continues to change, as more Southern genres become infused with the Inuktitut language and Inuit stories.

In reviewing my interview transcripts, *Arviammiut* (the people of Arviat) make a clear distinction between “Inuit Music”, the traditional music of the Inuit, and “Inuktitut Music”, popular Southern genres that performers sing in the Inuit language. Adding to the work of several scholars who examine the changing role of traditional music in Inuit communities (Lutz 1978; Cavanagh 1982; Piercey 2008), I consider the sense of historical continuity that accompanies the performance and development of Inuktitut song.

Kotarba, Fackler, and Nowotny (2009) demonstrate that language is powerful in defining identity

and nations in their study of Spanish language music in the US. Likewise, in the Canadian North, the presence of and focus on the Inuktitut language complicates the country's bilingual political discourse, with this aboriginal language achieving official status in Nunavut in 2013 (Nunatsiak News 2013), and serving to create a symbolic boundary between the Inuit population of Nunavut and the rest of the country (cf. Stokes 1994).

While in places such as New Zealand aboriginal folk songs have become part of the nation's cultural expression (Thomas 2007), and in Canada Inuit culture is becoming a more visible symbol for the country as a whole (evidenced by the plethora of Inuksuit (sing. Inuksuk) available in gift shops and built on the roadside across the country), Inuit use and adapt popular music – represented in this paper by country and electronic dance music (EDM) – in building a contemporary identity as Inuit, marking the boundary between their North and the white, or *qablunaaq*, South.

Studies that examine the expression of indigeneity consider how people use Western genres (such as opera in Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson's 2011 volume *Opera Indigene*) to present and extend traditional practices. Inuktitut popular music, which can be based in many different styles from country to gospel to house, celebrates Arviat's identity as a town with strong artistic and music traditions. In discussing the role of music in the community, "Ken", an approximately 45-year-old participant in my research, says the following:

It sounds inspirational in their own language [Inuktitut], and touched about some of them, and they really help them out and learn and try to tell they're really Inuit, and this is our way, and this is how we live... So, the white people show their music to up North towards North, so same thing, it would be like us, too, the Inuit people, would spread their own music, too. (Interview with the author, June 2012)

Through exploration of a single song, "Sinagvisaminik", an example of contrafactum, setting the tune of Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" to Inuktitut words, we can see how the community uses rituals of musical performance to solidify its collective identity as musical in nature. Furthermore, through the language of the music, they establish themselves as Northerners (cf. Hermanowicz and Morgan, 1999). This combination leads to community nicknames such as "Nashville of the North" and "Musictown Arviat" (Field Notes, December 2013).

Born and living his entire life in Arviat, Simon Sigjariaq² earned the nickname "Johnny Cash of the North". His performances are not only infused with

the style of Johnny Cash's music, but glimpses of mannerisms (or at least mannerisms perceived by his Northern audience) are also seen as part of his projected image as a musician. While many Northerners know many of Sigjariaq's songs, "Sinagvisaminik" is his best-known entry into a potential canon of Inuktitut song. In a televised 1991 Inuit Broadcasting Corporation appearance, Sigjariaq performs the song, sitting centre stage while his bandmates play standing around him. Of particular note in terms of mannerisms is an upward glance and head roll (at 2:20), which, while not obvious in Johnny Cash's recorded performance, is hinted at on the cover to his album, *Personal File*.³

While the musical style of "Sinagvisaminik" belongs to Johnny Cash – as mentioned above, this is a contrafactum of "Folsom Prison Blues" – the visual performance and the language of the text are refitted into the Inuit world to the point that in the North, Inuit attribute the characteristic riff that identifies the song to Sigjariaq rather than Cash. In describing the meaning of the words, a participant tells me that Sigjariaq "didn't just write a song, but he actually went through it, and he had touched in his life, how he was struggling or having a hard time, but through his music, he's been lifted up" (Interview with the author, June 2012).

After Sigjariaq's passing early in the 2000s, there was a period where his music was not performed live – but since 2008 this has changed, as his nephew, Peter Shamee, has begun performing this repertoire, and been praised by residents of Arviat for his likeness to his uncle, even assigning the moniker "the new 'Johnny Cash of the North'". Another video shows Shamee playing "Sinagvisaminik" at the Inumaaritt Music Festival in Arviat in 2011. This festival occupies a significant place in the musical life of the town, bringing together musicians from across the region, and more broadly around Nunavut, for three days of live performance in celebration of Inuit music. In my twin role of participant-observer and music teacher, I took part in this festival four times between 2004 and 2008.

The vast majority of the performances are popular genres performed in Inuktitut. While the audience experience is very different from any concert I have experienced in the South (surprisingly few attend to the music in the way the majority of Southern concert-goers do), when Shamee takes the stage and performs Sigjariaq's work, the response is instant. Playing the introduction while walking on stage in a black wide-brimmed hat brings immediate cheers (0:04), while signature mannerisms – such as the eyes-raised head roll – brings an eruption from the audience (0:38 and 3:00).⁴ Shamee's success is built on neither originality nor inspiration, but the ability to fit his

performance within this setting, one that does not associate his performance with Cash, but provides historical continuity of the town's musical past through reference to his uncle. Where Shamee asserts his individuality is in his concert attire, a lightly embroidered powder-blue Western-style shirt ("Western" here referencing the American West) that reflects neither Cash as "the man in black", nor Sigjariaq. Shamee's success and styling led to his being featured on *Closer to Home*, an online documentary series about aboriginal housing (RealWorld Films 2012). A clip from this show entitled "Meet Johnny Cash of the North" shows Shamee playing another Sigjariaq classic, "24 Hours", in his full attire.⁵ During the episode, Patsy Owljoot describes her reaction to seeing Shamee perform for the first time: "I saw Peter for the first time last year at the music festival. I was laughing – I was laughing not because it was funny. I was laughing because of the likeness of Simon that Peter was, and the way he was singing the songs, the way he was moving his body. Just like his uncle" (RealWorld Films 2012).

One of the themes emerging from my interviews was the expression of how much music is available to Inuit. "Daniel", a youth in his early 20s, says: "Today we have more variety of music. We have Inuktitut rap music, hip-hop ... Listening to what they were playing back in 1969 and listening to what we're playing today is a big, big leap. Big leap forward, for me" (Interview with the author, June 2012).

In contrast to the older-style country music, which remains popular in Arviat through musicians such as Shamee, an emerging electronic scene occupies several youth in the community. While not quite at the commercial stage, artists who are creating techno genres are using social media such as SoundCloud to share their work – and continue to express a Northern identity while creating new music in popular genres. One such artist says, "The least I would want out of the use of my music is that the listener knows it's Inuit-made" (Interview with the author, May 2012).

In a genre such as house, which uses little word-based language, DJ Nuka has found multiple ways to express an Inuit identity. In my first example, he plays with Inuit stereotypes, using the English language to clearly mark a boundary using the Southern perceptions of the North, with the line "In the North, yes we eat raw meat" being spoken at the beginning and end of the song (used with permission of the artist), expressing his Northern identity and suggesting a desire for a Southern audience. In browsing DJ Nuka's Soundcloud entries, I have found little doubt regarding his origins, as song titles such as "Welcome to Arviat"; "What I am Inuk"; and "iNukStyle" permeate his site. In a second example, DJ Nuka uses the traditional song refrain "Ayaya" to create a

heavy, beat-driven "Techno Ayaya" (used with permission of the artist).

In each of these cases, Arviat's musicians use language, through Inuktitut song and English song titles, to mark boundaries between their North and the South. Community music practices become routinized, drawing on historical figures such as Sigjariaq and the Inuktitut language to create rituals of performance, which *Arviammiut* celebrate. The resulting musical events strengthen the collective identity of *Arviammiut* as musical, as Inuit, and as Northerners. Mary Piercey forwards similar claims in her study of the musical choices of a single Inuk teenager from Arviat. For Piercey's participant, "her assertion to promote Inuit culture is her attempt to reclaim and reinscribe Inuit identity" (2008, 200). Hermanowicz and Morgan (1999) find that, while sociological and anthropological studies of ritual emphasize "separation from customary group practices" (197), "[i]den-tity affirmation occurs when practices being celebrated are both customary and already invested with a high level of sacredness" (200). If we apply the term "sacred" not only to those things holy, but also more functionally to beliefs and practices that are seen to be vitally important and treated with extreme respect (cf. Demerath 2000), we can extend Hermanowicz and Morgan's statement to the Inuktitut language.

The Inuktitut language plays a vital role in Inuit identity formation, as identified by scholars (Williamson 1974; Brody 1987; Bennett and Rowley 1994; Searles 2008), and the government through the adoption of the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (traditional knowledge and values) policy framework as a guiding principle for all activities in the territory, which is monitored by multiple groups, including Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami). The language "is vitally important as the vehicle for the traditions on which they depend for support in attempting to comprehend and engage the problems of the present" (Williamson 1974, 172). Restriction of the language, first by residential schools and then by churches, through policy such as requiring Inuit to take Christian names to receive health care, led to the attribution of such sacred value to Inuktitut (Stevenson 2012, 600), with current governmental and educational efforts reinforcing this message.

Ken states clearly that this body of Inuktitut-language music belongs to Inuit. It is "their" music, but he also wants to see Inuktitut song shared with listeners outside of the North. He says,

I would tell the Southerners that we the people from Northerners [*sic*], or here in Arviat, we can also share our music, or the people who sing here would show the Southerners, or any white people anywhere in Canada or around the world. To

share, or to see the *music of Arviat* is in good shape, too. (Interview with the author, June 2012, author's emphasis)

Inuit use music as a means to differentiating themselves from the rest of Canada. As Stokes writes, music is capable of providing "means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (1994, 5).

To reinforce the idea of these boundaries, I would like to offer a brief example of the possibilities of an artist crossing a cultural border. Most Canadians asked to identify an Inuit musician would likely pick Susan Aglukark (though Tanya Tagaq's recent Polaris Prize win may change this). Raised in Arviat and Rankin Inlet, Aglukark is the pride of both towns. Some *Arviatmiut*, however, condemn Aglukark for her choices after finding success as an Inuit musician.

Tracking the visual images of Aglukark from her mid-1990s recordings to those of a decade later demonstrates some of the shifts in her presentation of self (see Goffman 1959 for further reading). The cover for *This Child* (1995), her second commercial album, shows Aglukark wearing a traditional Inuit beaded headband, which *Arviatmiut* still use for ceremonial purposes today. In 2006's *Blood Red Earth*, Aglukark reclines wearing a turquoise necklace, downplaying her specifically Inuit heritage in favour of pan-Indianism. Song titles, too, shift with these images. Early albums include Inuktitut-language songs such as "Pond Inlet" (from *This Child*), whereas *Blood Red Earth* moves away from the specificity of the North toward "Citizens of the World", and the title track is, in the words of blogger Richard Marcus, "a good Native sounding title" (Marcus 2006). This shift to pan-Indianism troubles some *Arviatmiut*, as they recognize the cultural differences between Inuit and First Nations people, sometimes with hostility. Locals tell stories, for example, of Inuit being trapped in the North by Cree who guarded the tree line (Field Notes, 2007).

Rumours circulate Arviat that Aglukark became vegetarian after moving south, adding to the complexity of the relationship between the singer and the town. Though a 2008 article in the *Globe and Mail* refutes the rumour (Walker 2008), gossip is powerful, and some consider even this possibility as an affront to her heritage as Inuit, and a rejection of this culture that depends so strongly on hunting seal and caribou. Through the perceived association with pan-Indianism and First Nations issues in the South, Aglukark no longer fits the rituals of Northern/Inuit musical practice (for some) and becomes excluded (by some) from the discourse of belonging by her home community.

By exploring these examples of music from Arviat – and they are but a few samples – we can

clearly see how artists in the community use language alongside music, images, and discourse to mark symbolic boundaries between themselves and the continued and strengthening cultural encroachment from the South. Such boundaries demonstrate not only their indigeneity, but also their identity as Northerners. Peter Shamee demonstrates the importance of collective memory as the community's musical history becomes vital to his performance of Simon Sigjariaq's songs. Youth, such as DJ Nuka, who participate in the highly-globalized experience of EDM online, demonstrate their Northernness through song titles and text that heighten Southern stereotypes of the North. Inuit artists who do not fit cleanly into these tropes of Northernness can be excluded from community discourse, as in the case of Susan Aglukark. As "Johanna", a woman in her 50s who experienced many of the most significant challenges to Inuit culture, such as the residential school system, expresses, "... at the back of my mind, I know music is changing. Inuit music is changing. And there's no stopping it" (Interview with the author, June 2012). "Peder", a man in his 30s who regularly works with Elders and youth, speaks to the division in the reception of these changes, particularly the inclusion of traditional elements into popular genres: "Some people don't mind, but the Elders and the traditional people have a lot of issues about it, and [say] 'Hey, you're not doing it the proper way!', 'You're making it sound worse!'. That sort of thing. It's kind of a divided thing right now." (Interview with the author, December 2013)

Despite a changing musical environment, however, Inuit musicians in Arviat find ways to continue to express their experiences and affirm their identity by sharing these forms with audiences at home and in the broader global context. As "Theo", a singer-songwriter in his 20s who also covers Top 40 hits from Maroon 5 to Rihanna, said when addressing the historic role of Inuit music: "It's like a connection. Their music connected them with their friends, and it connected them together. So that's basically what I think music is." (Interview with the author, December 2013).

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Notes

¹ This research was conducted after review by the Institutional Review Board at Northwestern University and the Nunavut Research Institute. The names of all interview participants are pseudonyms.

² As with many Inuktitut names of this period, there are many variations in the spelling of Sigjariaq's name, including Sigyariak, Sigjaria, Sigjariak, Sigyariaq. I have opted to use Sigjariaq as it appears in a broadcast of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation referenced below.

³ This video is available on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhqNPTqfKiA>. Last accessed May 13, 2014.

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEAMBr2GBws>. Last accessed May 13, 2014.

⁵ <http://closertohome.ca/get-closer-home/seasons-episodes/season-2/episode-1>.