

Plenary Session

Not an Empty Wasteland: Place Names in Canada's North

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Abstract

Compared to many places in the world where indigenous people struggle to have their voices heard, Inuit in the Canadian Arctic are in an enviable position. Nunavut occupies $\frac{1}{5}$ th of Canada's land mass, a vast majority of its population (85%) is Inuit, and 70% consider Inuktitut their first language.

In harsh, treeless land considered by many to be mostly devoid of human presence, Inuit have a rich history of land use and occupancy that is reflected in thousands of place names that have yet to appear on Canadian maps. The Inuit Heritage Trust (IHT), a Nunavut land claim organization, is working to elevate Inuit toponymy to official status. Inuit involved in land claims outside of Nunavut, as well as other aboriginal groups in Canada's north are submitting new names and name changes by the hundreds to provincial and territorial authorities often in concert with land claims negotiations. In addition to existing as an expression of cultural and territorial sovereignty, place names constitute a significant source of baseline environmental information that can inform climate change research as well as the sovereignty debate.

Introduction – Wasteland of Nobodies

John Amagoalik is one of the key Inuit leaders who helped bring about the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. In an article from 2000 entitled, "Wasteland of Nobodies," he recalls, as a young person, journalists coming north but speaking only to teachers, police officers or local government administrators and returning south having spoken to Arctic 'experts'. He said somewhere in the stories they wrote they inevitably always referred to the Arctic as a wasteland where nobody lives. He said he couldn't understand this because he knows these journalists saw them, the Inuit, and he was annoyed that "these guys thought of us as nobodies or that we somehow did not qualify as human beings" (2000: 138). He surmises that if those same social scientists and journalists returned today they would see that the Arctic is indeed not a wasteland, that the Inuit culture still thrives, that their language is doing just fine, that Inuit have staggered but not fallen and they are adapting admirably to the new realities of the computer age, not to mention the fact, also, that they have signed the largest and most comprehensive land claim in history (2000: 138–139).

I would have thought he was right. However, despite the high numbers of journalists and scientists of all disciplines that visit the north every year, Inuit still need to work hard to make sure they are noticed.

The Inuit leader and Nobel nominee, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, has worked tirelessly in the past few years, for example, to remind the world of the need to put a human face on climate change by recognizing that the arctic, the homeland of Inuit, is being irrevocably changed by consumption patterns around the globe.

For many years, arctic science, especially as it relates to climate change has neglected to consider the human element. I recently came across a 2006 University of Waterloo Masters

Thesis analyzing cruise ship management policies in the Eastern Arctic. The student neither visited the arctic nor did she speak with any Inuit. She writes:

Contact of aboriginal groups and aboriginal individuals was beyond the researcher's capability. The researcher had been made aware of the fact that communication with aboriginal representatives could be difficult because of a language barrier and spatial distance. Therefore, there was no involvement of members of this group in the study... (Marquez 2006: 47)

Nine years after the birth of Nunavut, as discussions about climate change, northern security and sovereignty become part of an almost daily public discourse, Inuit still need to struggle to make their voices heard in the outside world. Fortunately, there are voices in the crowd acknowledging that the Arctic is the homeland of Inuit. The Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, in a recent interim report, has recognized that Canada's greatest claim to sovereignty in the arctic is that Inuit live there (Rompkey 2008).

The Inuit Heritage Trust is involved in a project to re-establish traditional place names in the Arctic. Through my presentation, I will demonstrate compelling evidence of a strong, ongoing, Inuit presence in this vast northern land.

Background

Inuit and their predecessors have occupied this northern land for the past four thousand years, the latest wave coming across from Siberia about 1800 years ago. The Canadian arctic, for the most part, is land without trees, considered an arctic desert where there is relatively little precipitation and where there was no possibility of agriculture or even animal husbandry. For example the federal government did try to introduce reindeer herding in the eastern Arctic in the early 1920s bringing Saami families, 600 reindeer, and even a few thousand bags of moss to supplement their food supply. However, after one year most of the families returned home. The experiment had not been a success because the reindeer had to range too far in the ice and snow to find adequate food (Paulsen, 2008: personal communication). Today Inuit hunters still come across descendants of these reindeer that have since interbred with local caribou populations.

Inuit were a hunting society. From animals came food, tools, transportation and clothing. For shelters, Inuit used the bones of whales, and skins of caribou and seals, and seal blubber for heating and light. Wood was not universally available except by chance in the form of driftwood.

Today there are 26 communities, all but one located on coastlines. The population of Nunavut is just over 30,000 in a land that stretches almost 2 million square kilometres.

Nunavut occupies one fifth of Canada's land mass. Its population is 85% Inuit and 70% of these consider Inuktitut to be their mother tongue (Statistics Canada 2001 Census). Given the fact that only in the past fifty or so years have Inuit moved into established settlements, Inuit continue to have a strong association with the land.

However, Inuit traditional place names do not yet appear on Canada's maps. The footprints of explorers are evident on maps across the arctic: Baffin, Hudson, Davis, and Franklin to name but a few. Why was the evidence of centuries of the first peoples' movement across the land left off the maps? Peter Steele, a long term Yukoner, evidently did not realize the abundance of indigenous names under the surface of historical and modern northern maps. In his book, *The Man who Mapped the Arctic*, Steele writes:

Mapping was why they [explorers] were there... The indigenous peoples appear to have given few names to prominent geographical features, certainly not the plethora that sprang from visits by Europeans. Franklin, Back and other explorers could, and did, walk in and map a continent. Then, by way of recognizing their patrons and sponsors these first white men sprinkled the maps they drew with the names of luminaries, major and minor, who are now recorded in perpetuity to the total denial of native culture (2003: Preface xx).

Interestingly, explorers often relied upon Inuit to draw maps for them. Rundstrom points out that Inuit maps, tested through a century of use by non-Inuit explorers and field scientists, were extraordinarily accurate, and he puts forth a number of explanations for why this should be. He surmises that accurate naming and mapping are the end products of a natural human reaction to environmental stimuli and Inuit had a heightened sense of needing to know the land because of their nomadic survival in a challenging environment (1990: 158–159).

He also considers the importance of travel and adventure in the lives of Inuit not just to locate food but also to meet up with family and friends and thus the need to know and remember the land.

Finally, Rundstrom settles on the value Inuit place on mimicry (2000: 165). Mapping, he writes, recapitulates other similar cultural behaviours, all of which spring from the basic value that Inuit place on environmental mimicry. Mimicry is a practical tool that Inuit might use to sneak up on seal or caribou, in the way of a seal or caribou. Mimicry is also having such an eye for detail that Inuit could draw observed details of the land using whatever new and foreign materials might be provided, just as well as they could reproduce accurate artistic renderings of arctic animals or other objects in stone or ivory or bone. This mimetic ability, Rundstrom goes on to explain, can be understood as a complex and even life-saving set of memorized procedures for meeting the challenges of the demanding arctic environment. Another factor we believe that helped Inuit recall so vividly the land so as to reproduce it on any medium, even in song, is language.

Our office was recently asked to come up with translations for a list of English place name generics such as peninsula, point, island, lake, inlet, and bay. Though such a request appears straightforward, responding to it was not. Inuktitut is a very descriptive language and English can be a blunt instrument in comparison. Translate ‘peninsula’ into Inuktitut? Well, *Nuvuk* could be a peninsula... but *Nuvuk* could also just be a point. If the peninsula is long, it could be *Nuvukutaak*; if it is short and wide, it could be *Nuvukallak*; or it could be *Akuliaqattaq* because it is a feature that is in the middle of two bodies of water; or then again it could be *Tikik* if it looks like it is pointing to something.

Inuktitut is a descriptive language that evokes specific visual images and this is especially evident when it comes to place names. However, as Steele has pointed out, the naming practice of the dominant western culture varies considerably with the Inuit tradition. With very few exceptions in thousands of recorded Inuktitut place names, Inuit do not name places for people.

Despite the remarkable ability of Inuit to accurately render coastlines, islands, and fiords from memory to map for explorers, their toponyms never made their way onto maps in any significant numbers; our official maps contain primarily English place names indicative of a European influence. Harley would characterize this act of omission as unintentional suppression of knowledge or unintentional silence:

Conquering states impose a silence on minority or subject populations through manipulations of place-names. Whole strata of ethnic identity are swept from the map in what amounts to cultural genocide. While such manipulations are, at one level, the result of deliberate censorship or policies of acculturation, at another – the epistemological – level, they also can be seen as representing the unconscious rejection of these “other” people by those belonging to the politically more powerful groups (1988: 66).

Perhaps because of its challenging terrain and climate and the lack of access to a road network linking north and south, the isolated arctic has so far escaped the kind of erasure of culture that Harley refers to. The north has not seen large numbers of others move in and partition up the land. And though there are few traditional place names on official maps, there is still time to address this omission.

The vast majority of Canada's population lives within 200 km of the 49th parallel, our border with the United States. In southern Canada, people in the millions from many ethnic backgrounds are connected by roads and relatively inexpensive public transportation. Canada's three northern territories are situated north of 60 degrees latitude and cut off, mostly because of cost, from the public transportation network that is taken for granted in the south. So, distance and difficult access and less favourable climate and now the land claim have helped keep Inuit land from being overtaken and appropriated by others.

Unintentional silence seems a logical explanation for the absence of an Inuit presence on maps. Maps are authoritarian images, however, and often without our being aware of it, maps can reinforce and legitimate the status quo. There was much indignation amongst northerners when Prime Minister Stephen Harper famously said "Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty in the Arctic; either we use it or we lose it..." (Shaw and Harnett 2007). Did the federal government forget that the north is Inuit homeland, and that they have occupied this land for centuries?

The Need for Maps with Traditional Names

Turnbull points out that,

Maps, like theories, have power in virtue of introducing modes of manipulation and control that are not possible without them. They become evidence of reality in themselves and can only be challenged through the production of other maps or theories (1989: 54).

The process of adding Inuit place names to maps is part of a significant trend in Canada. The development of new maps with the addition of thousands of traditional toponyms will go a long way to conveying substantial evidence of the long term presence of Inuit across the Canadian arctic.

Inuit have experienced dramatic changes to their lifestyles in the past decades. Whereas they used to live in small family groups, dependent upon the resources of the land, they were forced to move into settlements in the 1960s and 1970s.

True, the move to settlements meant the conditions of life were somewhat easier; the houses were always heated and, for the most part, no one lacked for food. However, what used to be a constant struggle just to survive became a struggle to maintain Inuit identity and values.

The implicit presumption underpinning the government's reorganization of Inuit life was rejection of traditional economic activities in favour of integration into the North American wage economy[.] Yet even when jobs were open to Inuit they were typically unskilled, low-paying and often of only short duration. Unemployment and under-employment thus became chronic problems that combined with alienation from the land and from traditional culture to engender social pathologies: low self esteem, alcohol and substance abuse, family violence, youth suicide and welfare dependency (Hicks and White 2000: 49).

Another unfortunate fact was that the new government settlements were not necessarily located with hunting in mind, influencing peoples' access to country food as well as the sharing of traditional knowledge with which to access this food. With children in school, families no longer spent months following the seasonal movements of caribou and seal.

Today, travelling beyond a certain distance from town may not be practical if you only have the weekend in which to hunt, and therefore knowledge of places situated beyond a certain radius from town might be expected to diminish over time.

Older Inuit consider that the lack of knowledge of traditional place names is partly responsible for young hunters getting lost on the land. MacDonald tells the story of a number of young hunters getting lost while out caribou hunting in winter. After spending two days sitting out a blizzard, they called to town on their short-wave radio and asked for someone to come bring

them enough gasoline for their snow machines to enable them to return home. They could not, however, tell anyone where they were because they did not know the place names. After some difficulty they were located and subsequently lectured about the need to know the place names – which could have pin-pointed their exact location and spared an extensive and expensive search and rescue (1998: 163). Some young Inuit today have said they don't need place names; they have Global Positioning Systems (GPS).

GPS are indeed useful but there is much they cannot offer. For example, many traditional place names contain valuable descriptive detail. Some of our favourite examples of exquisitely named places are *Tinuujjivik*, near Repulse Bay, named for an inter-tidal area where the fish go to digest their food. Apparently the fish show up there full-bellied to enjoy the warm water coming off the land. Inuit catch the fish when they become trapped at low tide. At *Millorialik*, as the tide is receding, people throw rocks to keep the beluga or the fish from leaving the bay with the tide, trapping them in the tidal pool. There are other named places where the walrus haul out to rest, places where there are hazardous ice conditions, and places where the pregnant harp seals are known to be, good fishing, good hunting, and so on. Traditional place names are a kind of environmental inventory, very useful knowledge to have. Maps with the traditional names, formerly held only part of an oral history, will serve to strengthen the ties of Inuit with their land but also physically demonstrate their 'footprints' on the land across the Canadian arctic.

The Inuit Heritage Trust (IHT)

The Inuit Heritage Trust is a Land Claim organization that is concerned with matters of heritage, archaeology and traditional place names. IHT's official obligations under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement are to 'review' traditional place names in order that they may become official. Given that there is relatively little systematic effort occurring in our vast territory, the IHT Board has supported its small staff in undertaking the toponymic research in communities.

In Nunavut, for the most part, there tend to be only three or four elders in each community who hold the bulk of the place names knowledge. In the central and eastern arctic where we have done most of our work, Elders tend to be unilingual Inuktitut speakers.

We estimate that we have more than 4,000 names in our records that need to become official. Just over 1,000 of these have been reviewed by our Board and are ready to send to the Government of Nunavut Toponymist.

IHT's Nunavut Map Series

The purpose of the Nunavut Map Series (NMS) is to represent clearly, and in as much detail as possible, the traditional places named by Inuit. In this series, we are producing maps with names in syllabics while also making the names available in roman orthography. These are not official government maps; official maps will need to have names written in roman orthography.

There are formal steps that need to be followed in order for place names to become official. In Canada, territorial and provincial entities have jurisdictions over naming; thus the Government of Nunavut is the body which makes the final place names decisions, in consultation with IHT. In the past couple of years about 450 traditional place names have been made official in Nunavut, thousands more are waiting their turn.

Named places in the NMS are delineated to show the extent of each named place. One of the reasons for this is because we are not using English or French generics, which is the norm in Canada – even North America. In other provinces and territories, generics are added to the name to identify the named geographical feature, such as island, lake, river, bay or a point. To native Inuktitut speakers, the types of entities being named are often self-evident. For example, *Qikiqtarjuaq* Island: *Qikiqta* is an island and *-juaq* is big. We are striving to avoid this tautology in Nunavut. In Nunavik, northern Quebec, home to just under 10,000 Inuit, the government

authority does add French generics to Inuktitut place names. There you will find Isle *Qikiqtarjuaq* and Colline *Pinguq* (the latter translates into the “Hill Hill”).

Another reason for the need to delineate features is that the Inuktitut place names do not always fall into neat categories of geographical space familiar to cartographers and map users alike. Akua and Qingua are two examples describing similar features in different dialects for ‘the end of the bay or inlet’. Akua, also a generic, is interesting because it also names the tail at back of the *amouti*, the woman’s parka with a built-in pouch to carry a baby. The shape of the tail is evocative of the end of an inlet, thus the same name for both. Though there is often no precise natural boundary that would satisfy a cartographer, elder-experts do not hesitate to draw in the boundaries on the paper maps during interviews.

In making traditional names official, many of the long-standing English names in the Arctic will lose their status and be replaced. These English names will no longer appear on official maps.

As technology has developed over the years, we have been finding it increasingly possible to not only produce paper maps but to share place names with a wider audience via the internet. In particular, Google Earth is enabling us to provide very graphic evidence of Inuit land use and occupancy over a vast area – an area that is increasingly wending its way into the imagination of North Americans as discussions over sovereignty and the Northwest Passage reach us through the mass media.

Power of maps

The free availability of Google Earth on the internet has revolutionized our ability to share place names information with the public. Until recently our focus was entirely on producing topographic and thematic paper maps, a slow process. In the meantime thousands of names obtained from elder-experts remained submerged and hidden waiting to see the light of day. With Google Earth we can share our collection of names in its entirety, astounding viewers with the sheer volume of names. Clearly, the names, downloaded as *.kmz files from www.ihti.ca demonstrate that the Canadian north is not an empty wasteland.

In addition, we have created an application we call Atanaattiaq that currently allows searches on just over 3,200 place names across the Arctic. Want to know more about caribou or walrus or good camping places or places where there are dangerous currents? This information is now available for thousands of square kilometres of the Canadian arctic.

All of our data is the result of interviews with elder-experts. We are releasing the information while also advising users that there may be errors and the work to verify the names is ongoing.

We do have some concerns about making all this information public and are wary about abuses. In particular, we are aware that cruise ship activity in the arctic is increasing and cruise ship passengers frequently visit archaeology sites and other sensitive sites, information about which we are making more available than ever. We feel that for the near future, access to the richness of the information contained in the place names database is more important than withholding it, something we can assess over time.

The Northwest Passage

Since the 1600s northern Europeans, led by Great Britain, have been seeking a passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The key has always been navigability. Ice has been the bane and the death of many who have attempted to cross from east to west. A northern passage would be 4,000 miles shorter than the alternative route between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic through the Panama Canal – saving time, fuel and transit fees.

Canada considers the various Northwest Passage routes to be its internal waters while other nations consider these northern routes to be international waters. Clearly, this debate needs to be

resolved. Inuit stand to be severely affected by shipping activity, including accidents in the high arctic. While acknowledging that larger vessels may forgo the northern option, Huebert warns that smaller, possibly more risk-oriented shipping companies may be willing to take dangerous chances with ship safety in pursuit of profit (2003: 303).

According to the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, average Arctic temperatures are rising at almost twice the rate of the rest of the world in the past few decades (2004). Though there has been much speculation about the increased likelihood of an ice-free northwest passage due to a warming climate, heightened insurance costs and delays caused by uncertain ice conditions are among the challenges that will prevent the high arctic routes from becoming highly desirable for international ship traffic.

After reviewing 37 years of sea ice condition records, Stewart et al. contend that there is little to no evidence to support the claims that the Northwest Passage will become more navigable as global temperatures increase. They found little to support claims that climate change will enable increased ship traffic through the Northwest Passage. They note that while some increases in open water have been noted, the navigable areas through the Northwest Passage have actually exhibited increases in hazardous ice conditions where navigation choke points remain. This is apparently due primarily to the influx of multi-year ice into the channels of the NW Passage. More variability in ice conditions means more uncertainty in the future rather than less (2007: 377).

In July 2007, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the establishment of a deep-water port in the Arctic, an effort to tell the world that Canada is demonstrating its control in the high arctic. A Canadian Senate's standing committee on fisheries and oceans has been studying the issue of Canada's sovereignty claim, releasing its interim report in June, 2008. One of the Standing Committee's recommendations is that "Canada should uphold its position that the waters of the Northwest Passage are its internal waters and Canada should be prepared to defend any legal challenge" (2008: 39).

The Senate Committee expressed concern that if adequate preventive measures are not taken with respect to unauthorized shipping activity, the waterway could become progressively "internationalized" and subject to the right of transit passage, with potentially serious environmental and security consequences (2008: 39).

One of the central points made in the interim report is that Canada needs to show that it can take control in the arctic, stating that Canada can best demonstrate control over the Northwest Passage by beefing up our Coast Guard, rather than by sending in the Navy. The Navy, as was pointed out by Christensen, has limited capabilities to function in the north and is unlikely to acquire a significant role in the Arctic in the next 25 years (2005). The Coast Guard would be deployed year round and would show the world that Canada is serious about controlling the Northwest Passage, "protecting Canadian interests and its people, and making the waterway a safe and efficient shipping route" (2008: 39).

The report also notes that the federal government should make NORDREG mandatory (p.40). NORDREG is a Northern marine traffic system that keeps watch on ships travelling north of 60 and provides them with ice and navigation information. Similar systems are mandatory on Canada's Atlantic and Pacific coasts; there, ships are required to give the Coast Guard four days' advance notice of their arrival in Canadian waters. In the arctic, the system is voluntary only; ships need not notify anyone of their presence.

The Committee felt that the United States might be more inclined to recognize Canada's legal claim if Canada had the tools, such as an improved Coast Guard, to monitor and enforce its laws and regulations (Rompkey 2008: 39).

Finally, the Senate Committee recommended that Inuit, with their unique knowledge of the region, be recruited for the Coast Guard wherever possible (Rompkey 2008: 39).

Unlike the Prime Minister with his “use it or lose it” comment, the Senate Committee appears to have an appreciation of the extensive knowledge and experience of Inuit. We believe the place names work we have been involved in can help provide compelling evidence of the unique and extensive knowledge held by Inuit, which is referred to in the Senate Committee’s interim report.

High Arctic Relocation

With regard to the issue of Canada exerting control over the Northwest Passage, we would be remiss if we did not mention the federal government’s efforts in the 1950s.

In 1953 and 1955, the federal government decided to relocate groups of Inuit from more southerly arctic locations up to what are now Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord. Both these communities, the most northerly in Canada, are at the gateway to the Northwest Passage.

This forced relocation caused severe emotional and physical hardship to the Inuit families, the effects of which are still being felt today. Though the government denied the relocation was for reasons of sovereignty, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Issues held hearings in the early 1990s and did find that the relocation took place at a time when the government was concerned about de facto Canadian sovereignty arising from the presence of the United States in the Arctic.

In the end, the Commission found that the weight of evidence did point to sovereignty as a material consideration in the relocation decision of these Inuit families, although primary concerns for the relocation were social and economic (Royal Commission ... 1994: 136).

Donat Pharand has written extensively about Canadian sovereignty over many years. During the Royal Commission relocation hearings, Pharand provided examples of the manifestations of sovereignty – and there was a long list – but among these, and of interest to us, was the approval of official geographic names (Royal Commission ... 1994: 119).

Conclusion

The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement was settled partly because these almost 2 million square kilometres of land in the arctic were recognized as Inuit homeland. The Agreement makes a direct reference to the recognition of the contributions of Inuit to Canada’s history, identity and sovereignty in the Arctic (1993: 2). We need to be concerned about impacts to the arctic that could result from Canada not investing in and asserting its control in the area of the Northwest Passage. Traditional place names demonstrate extensive land use and occupancy by Inuit and their predecessors across the Canadian arctic.

Inuit, both conveniently and inconveniently for the federal government, still embrace their homeland and have much to offer, as the Senate Committee Report has noticed.

Just as Canada has depended on Inuit for their ongoing ability to make this challenging northern environment their home, Inuit depend on Canada to take action to acknowledge and protect their homeland.

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