Super Shamou versus Captain Al Cohol: Inuit Cultural Productions and the Discourses on Inuit Drinkers

ABSTRACT

The history of alcohol control policy in the Canadian Arctic is perverse. In the 1960s northern administrators regarded alcohol consumption as the right and responsibility of masculine citizens. Thus, they undertook to provide tutelage to Inuit in the “proper” use of the substance in the hopes that Inuit could be produced as proper citizens of the nation. A decade later the alcohol education message directed at Inuit changed. The new message told Inuit to abstain from drink. Many of the educational materials delivering this message, such as the Captain Al Cohol comic book series, started with the premise that Inuit were naïve users of alcohol and that Inuit alcohol abuse stemmed largely from a lack of knowledge about its effects. Nothing could be further from the truth. In this paper I examine Inuit cultural productions dealing with alcohol use and abuse. Some of the works, such as Manassie Akpaliapik’s well-known whalebone and stone sculpture of a bottle embedded in a man’s head, were produced for non-Inuit consumers of Inuit art and culture. Others, including cartoons, short stories, journalism, filmic works and the Super Shamou comic book, were directed at Inuit audiences. I consider how Inuit understandings of citizenship, alcohol, and the self are reflected in these cultural productions.

RÉSUMÉ

L’histoire de la politique de contrôle de l’alcool dans l’Arctique canadien est une histoire perverse. Dans les années 1960, les administrateurs dans le Nord considéraient la consommation de l’alcool comme le droit et la responsabilité des citoyens masculins. Ainsi, ils ont entrepris de fournir une formation aux Inuits sur la « bonne façon » de consommer l’alcool en vue de faire des Inuits de bons citoyens de la nation. Une décennie plus tard, le message de l’éducation sur l’alcool visant les Inuits a changé. Le nouveau message dit aux Inuits de s’abstenir de l’alcool. Parmi les matériaux livrant ce message, tel la bande dessinée Captain Al Cohol, plusieurs sont basés sur l’idée que les Inuits sont des usagers naïfs de l’alcool et que l’abus de l’alcool chez les Inuits a découlé largement d’une manque de connaissance sur

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The April 1975 issue of Inuit Today magazine included a cartoon imagining the gravesite of comic book superhero Captain Al Cohol (Ipellie 1975). A discarded bottle and beer can are visible, half-buried in the freshly dug soil. The cartoon, drawn by artist and magazine staff writer, Alootook Ipellie, accompanied a brief article reporting and celebrating the demise of the Captain Al Cohol comic book series.

Captain Al Cohol is a four-issue English-language comic book series written by Art Sorensen (1973) and produced by the government of the Northwest Territories’ Department of Information as alcohol education for Inuit. The title superhero, Captain Allen Cohol, is an intergalactic space traveler rescued and revived by Inuit hunters after crashing into a pingo. In gratitude, Captain Al uses his superpower—great strength—to help his Inuit hosts. Like all superheroes, however, Captain Al has a fatal flaw: he is an alcoholic with a painful past caused by his abusive drinking. Apart from his alcoholism, Captain Al Cohol may have been drawn to resemble a Mountie.¹ He is tall, fair-haired, wears a red suit, and he rescues imperilled Inuit, counselling them on the dangers of drink. The Inuit characters, in contrast, are short, dark-skinned, and fur clad.² Readers of the series saw Captain Al Cohol succumb to drinking after suffering a personal loss and, as a consequence, become homeless, end up in jail, and learn that his own father is also an alcoholic. In the last panel of the last book, Captain Al seeks help at Alcoholics Anonymous.

The high production values of the Captain Al Cohol project distinguished it from previous governmental efforts to educate Inuit about alcohol, but like earlier efforts, this one reflected simplistic, decontextualized, paternalistic, and racist administrative discourses about the cultural and psychological characteristics of Inuit and their drinking habits. The books present Inuit drinking as similar to the alcoholic hero’s: deviant, escapist, excessive, uncontrolled, capable of inciting violence and criminality, and thwarting ambitions. Advertisements throughout the books urged readers to write for more information about the dangers of alcohol.
Captain Al Cohol was representative of alcohol control policies and programs that reflected one set of truths about Inuit and alcohol. Originating with non-Inuit northern administrators, and repeated in academic papers, government memos, and policy documents, this set of truths regarded alcohol consumption as an essential aspect of citizenship, but framed Inuit drinking as dangerous and deviant. Discourses on alcohol were similar to other administrative discourses concerning the North, in which Inuit were presented as inexperienced and naïve in the ways of the world. Northern administrators differed, however, on the question of whether Inuit could be tutored to Canadian norms of citizenship.

This paper originated in archival research I started fifteen years ago to trace the evolution of alcohol control policies and governance for Canadian Inuit. Few Inuit voices were included in the official records of the pre-land claims era. Where Inuit ideas were recorded, they were almost always reactions to the policies and programs imposed by government agents. Inuit were never presented as agents and authors of modernity, and only rarely do government records offer glimpses of Inuit as people with individual personalities, opinions, and proclivities. Rather the records offer persistent glimpses of what officials assumed were Inuit proclivities. It was not immediately apparent to me where to look for Inuit statements about alcohol from this earlier era, so I set the project aside for several years. Eventually, I recognized cultural productions—fine art, journalism, films, cartoons—as places where Inuit ideas about alcohol use and abuse were preserved, and returned to the work. I begin this essay with a brief introduction to alcohol control policy and pre-land claims era administrative discourses on Inuit drinking. Then I turn to Inuit discourses of alcohol in cultural materials produced for other Inuit and for the non-native art market. The administrative discourses narrate drinking as a pleasurable reward and responsibility of citizenship, but also juxtapose a competing narrative in which all Inuit are cast as potential alcoholics. Inuit discourses on alcohol also employ narratives of pain and pleasure, but often in a more nuanced way that recognizes agency and individual subjectivity. In the final section of the paper, I explore the work of the recent Nunavut Liquor Act Review Task Force as a rare moment when each of the competing narratives are given standing.

Citizens of Canada with all the Privileges

Captain Al Cohol may have been a discursive triumph for those northern administrators who believed that Inuit drinking was inherently problematic and had to be discouraged; but beginning in the late 1950s, for approximately a decade before Captain Al Cohol, northern administrators pursued a policy based on very different assumptions about Inuit alcohol use. Canadian administration of Inuit and Inuit lands began in earnest only after the Second World War. In that period, alcohol policy was just one of the bureaucratic and administrative practices through which the state worked to regulate, reorganize, and remake Inuit culture and communities
(Kulchyski and Tester 1994; Paine 1977; Tester and Kulchyski 2007). Records archived at Northwest Territorial Archives, the Library and Archives of Canada, and the library at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada reveal that it was during this period that northern administrators established policies and practices to allow, even encourage, Inuit to consume alcohol.

Inuit were not subject to the *Indian Act* (1952) and its prohibitions on First Nations’ alcohol use.³ The legislative ban on drinking by First Nations had been justified as a necessary means of civilizing and assimilating them, but by the 1950s and 60s when the majority of Inuit came under day-to-day surveillance by the state, Canadian government administrators took the opposite position.⁴ To be clear, assimilation remained the goal of both Indian and Inuit administration, but by the 1950s, it became apparent that the *Indian Act* and especially its alcohol prohibitions had worked to mark First Nations’ “externality from the nation and separation from the rights and duties of Canadian citizenship” (Blackburn 2009: 68). Northern administrators imagined that they could develop policies for Inuit that might avoid repeating that separation (Williamson 2004).

The fact that Canada had signed no treaties with Inuit meant that it was legally free to establish whatever relationship it chose with them. By the middle of the 20th century, in the context of the Cold War, the state chose to identify Inuit as Canadian citizens. The official model of citizenship was a liberal one in which Inuit were to be no different than other Canadians; however, the formal and substantive aspects of citizenship were introduced incrementally. Officials understood drinking to be integral to full participation as an adult member of society. Public discourse on alcohol in Canada, like Great Britain, associates drinking with “neighbourliness, generosity, and egalitarianism…as public and sociable: a model republic, though a largely masculine one” (Kneale 2001: 54). Individuals who voluntarily abstain from alcohol may be seen as more suspect than those who regularly drink to inebriation. Public discourse on drinking has been highly racialized. As late as 1990 in Ontario, white citizens whose drinking was inebriate could be prohibited from drinking by placing their names on the “Indian list” (Valverde 2004). In the minds of many senior northern administrators, Inuit represented an unspoiled population (Marcus 1995) who could be tutored in Canadian ways of thinking, acting, and being. Alcohol control policy became a technology for erasing distinctions between Inuit and Euro-Canadians (Honnigman and Honnigman 1965).

To be clear, alcohol was not and has never been uniformly available to Inuit throughout the Canadian North. Rather, government administrators facilitated the establishment of retail stores and bars at the same sites where they located military bases, mines, and administrative centres: Aklavik, Inuvik, Resolute Bay, Rankin Inlet, Coral Harbour, and Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay). These sites were chosen because government officials regarded alcohol as essential to the establishment of Canadian civilization in the Arctic because it would attract non-Native professionals
to work in the remote regions. Senior administrators persisted in their claims that equal access to alcohol bridged the distinctions between Inuit and Eurocanadians (Williamson 2004). A broad reading of the archival record indicates that it was inconceivable to officials that Inuit might create different drinking norms and want to use alcohol differently than “ordinary Canadians” (cf. Brodie 1994).

Official policy declared that Inuit had the same rights as non-Aboriginal Canadians, but the alcohol regime was implemented by individuals with a variety of personal prejudices and agendas. Inuit drinkers were frequently relegated to undesirable and disreputable drinking establishments (Ervin 1968), given lower consumption limits than white patrons (Williamson 1974: 128; Graburn 2003), plied with alcohol for sexual exploitation (Clairmont 1962, 1963), and/or denied access to drinking establishments. Joseph Idlout, the Inuk star of the ethnographic film Land of the Long Day (Wilkins 1952) who was pictured on the Canadian two-dollar bill, carried on a correspondence with W.G. Brown, Deputy Commissioner of the Northwest Territories (1957-1965), mostly about his problems obtaining from alcohol. One set of letters concerned the Department of Transport (DOT) bar at Resolute. The bar was officially for Air Force personnel and employees of the DOT, but at various times Inuit men and women were permitted to drink there. Idlout, a DOT employee, was banned from the bar and wrote to Brown to complain,

You see when I have something to say I don't hesitate to ask. I am writing to you as this is important to me and I want to know what you have to say. Now all the Eskimos here in Resolute Bay are not allowed to drink at all. The Air Force men tell us not to drink. Even I am not allowed to drink now and the white people who are not working for the Air Force are not supposed to drink also. I do not understand why we are not allowed to drink anymore and what is the reason for not letting us drink. (Idlout 1961b)

Brown replied that Idlout was correct to have written to him in this matter, and that he (Idlout) was “a citizen of Canada with all the privileges” (Brown 1961b). The letter continues, “Of course, if any Eskimos are going to work drunk, the Air Force officers are right when they say that they cannot do this because they cannot do their work properly” (ibid). Brown also promised to investigate the matter—existing memos indicate that he did—and invited Idlout to continue to bring matters of concern to his attention: “If you have any other difficulties, I would like you to write to me about them, if you think that I could be of help” (ibid).

Certainly, Idlout’s previous contact with government officials gave him a status not generally extended to most Canadians, much less to Indigenous Canadians. He regularly asked Brown for liquor import permits and assistance with ordering alcohol, which Brown provided, a seemingly unusual duty for the senior bureaucrat responsible for the administration of the Northwest Territories. The corpus of their correspondence suggests that Brown felt he had a special, if paternalistic,
relationship to Idlout. It is clear that Brown also understood that Inuit drinking did not generally conform to middle-class Euro-Canadian norms. In one letter he advised,

I know you are a leader among the Eskimos and that you will give them a good example and advise them not to take too much liquor at a time. Eskimo people who have liquor can show the police and other people from this part of Canada that it is not necessary to drink too much at a time and that they do not have to quarrel with their families and others. I am sure that you will advise the people not to drink liquor before going to work and tell them not to drink liquor while they are on their jobs. (Brown 1961a)

And Idlout, who became known as a chronic and troubled binge drinker (Greenwald 1990), assured Brown that,

Some of the people at Resolute drink beer frequently and they don’t get annoyed from it. It’s true that a couple of fellows get excited about it last year, but the rest aren’t like that. There aren’t many of us who drink beer here. Some just can’t drink beer and they don’t mind and they aren’t envious of us who do. (Idlout 1961a)

The archival record indicates that non-Native drinkers were responsible for most of the alcohol-related public safety problems in the North, but it was Inuit “drunken comportment” (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969) that garnered the most administrative attention. Northern officials came to believe that Inuit motivations for drinking were different from those of Euro-Canadians. The government employed several researchers to study why Inuit drank in “deviant” ways (Clairmont 1962, 1963; Ervin 1968; Honigmann and Honigmann 1965, 1970; Lubart 1969). The researchers, mostly anthropologists, offered different theories about Inuit drinking. Not surprisingly, given the dominant alcohol theories at the time, they all blamed cultural and psychological orientations rather than structural factors or policy decisions (cf. Valverde 1998). And in most cases, the research findings did not point to straightforward, cheaply and easily implemented policy directives.

The exceptions to the policy dilemma were the findings of John and Irma Honigmann (1965; 1970). As described by the Honigmanns, drinking was no different than other citizenship practices for which Inuit required tutelage. They described native drinking in Inuvik as “comparatively normless” (1970: 100) and claimed that Inuit in Iqaluit “purchased mostly beer and lacking a tested pattern of drinking that would have regulated speed and amount consumed at any one time, drank it without the full awareness of consequences” (1965: 75). This was because Inuit in Iqaluit had “not had a chance to observe the style of drinking that goes on ‘at the Lord Elgin’ [an upscale hotel in Ottawa] but only the kind that construction workers do” (ibid: 79). The Honigmanns presumed that Inuit desire to acculturate to Euro-Canadian norms of citizenship was not only great, but that Inuit would model elite Euro-Canadian behaviours if only they knew how. In fact, the Honigmanns
claimed that Inuit leaders in Iqaluit were doing just that, citing as evidence the chairman of the community council who drank “socially” and served champagne at his 1962 Christmas party (ibid). At the same time, the Honigmanns neglected to note that Inuit drinking patterns differed from the working-class Euro-Canadian norm of heavy drinking that concealed impairment as part of masculine display.

In 1966 the government hired the Northwest Territories’ first Director of Territorial Alcohol Education to create an alcohol awareness program for Inuit. The initial effort consisted of a series of mimeographed two-page bulletins, which reveal that northern administrators had little knowledge of, or regard for, Inuit culture, authority, or intelligence. The second bulletin described the properties of alcohol as similar to the numbing effects of dental novocaine:

[Like] the stuff the dentist used…alcohol can put our nerves so far “asleep” that we will “pass out” and not be able to feel anything. When a man is passed out, he can freeze to death, or burn to death and not know what is happening to him. This is one good reason for never drinking too much alcohol. (Huggins n.d.)

This program appears to have assumed that Inuit would drink in moderation if only they were taught the dangers of overconsumption. The Captain Al Alcohol campaign, launched a few years later, contained a different message: Inuit were still assumed to be naïve, thus Inuit drinking was necessarily inebriate. Consequently, Inuit should abstain.

The discourse that posited Inuit as inexperienced was powerful and pervaded many policy arenas. In the realm of alcohol control it transcended a major shift in the policy regime, from teaching Inuit to drink to educating them to abstinence. The claim that subalterns behave badly out of ignorance is part of many contemporary discourses of improvement and is not unique to alcohol or Inuit (cf. Clark 2014; Merry 2001). Still, the idea that Inuit are naïve remains with us today and is repeated as a self-evident truth in numerous public forums (see I. Brown 2014). Nothing could be further from the truth.

Inuit Discourses on Drinking

The transition in education from teaching “proper” drinking to teaching abstinence is related to the wider shift from liberal to multicultural citizenship approaches. The liberal approach to citizenship for Inuit relied on the assumption that through assimilation, Inuit would become ordinary Canadians who shared the same values and goals as middle-class Euro-Canadians. This approach does not provide for the possibility that Inuit could have different goals, ones that did not fit with the governmentality of a liberal democracy (Paine 1999). Nor could the proponents of liberal citizenship imagine that Inuit might assume the right to participate in shaping alcohol policy. While certainly many individual Inuit chose to drink and
enjoyed doing so, many other Inuit protested, with justification, that alcohol was forced on their communities by the same government officials who criticized Inuit drinking practices (see Riches 1975). Inuit were not permitted to participate in regulating the geography of alcohol availability until the mid-1970s, when Canada transitioned from a liberal to a multicultural conception of citizenship.

In 1976, the NWT Council amended the Territorial Liquor Act to allow municipalities to hold plebiscites on local liquor availability. Within a short time, eight communities in what is now Nunavut voted themselves dry. Another twelve enacted less extreme restrictions on the sale or consumption of alcohol. John O’Neil described the 1978 referendum in Gjoa Haven to ban alcohol as a successful act of self-determination performed against the advice of “white advisors from the various health, social, and corrective services agencies” (1985: 341).

Local-option plebiscites are one site of discourse about alcohol availability and the effects of alcohol consumption on Inuit culture and communities, however, they do not necessarily reflect actual practices. Bootlegging is widespread in Nunavut (Nunavut Liquor Review Task Force 2012b). If enforcement of local decisions about alcohol availability was once managed through “local social pressure without reliance on White law enforcement officers” (O’Neil 1985: 343), this is no longer the case. Discussing his arrest for illegal alcohol possession in 2001, the mayor of Gjoa Haven declared that the law needed to be changed because, “It’s supposed to be a dry town, but it’s not. Every Friday there’s people drinking and there’s drinking during the week, too” (Joseph Aglukkaq, qtd. in McCluskey 2002).

It is not my intent to discount the problems that many Inuit associate with alcohol consumption. To be certain, alcohol and other substance abuse are implicated in serious legal, social, and public health problems in Inuit and other northern Indigenous communities. Individual Inuit frequently identify alcohol and drug abuse as among the most serious problems facing their communities. It is critical to recognize, however, that many Inuit drink in moderation, and others who take pleasure in occasional inebriation cause no violence or social disturbance. Further, Inuit, like other Canadians, are not uniform in their use of alcohol or their opinions about its desirability.

Cultural productions such as art, literature, and film are other sites of alcohol discourse. Like administrative discourses these include narratives of pleasure and pain, with pain forming an especially dominant trope in Inuit fine art. In contrast, cultural productions directed at other Inuit reference healing and agency. They also contain discourses about an appropriate Inuit citizenship threatened by alcohol. The critique of colonialism forms a third narrative that emerges in many of these cultural productions. Like the Ipellie cartoon about the death of Captain Al Cohol, many of the works contain a blunt analysis of the alcohol-control regime established by northern administrators.
Inuit Fine Art and Narratives of Pain

Canadian Inuit art as it exists today originated through efforts to improve the economic status of Inuit in the 1950s and 60s, made by James Houston and others including Oblate missionaries, Fr. A.P. Steinmann and Fr. Henri Tardy. Houston, an artist and entrepreneur, tirelessly promoted Inuit art in Canada and beyond, showing this work in fine art venues and encouraging others to share the story of Inuit art. The commercial success of Inuit fine art is owed to Houston’s ability to enlist government financial and institutional support. As it turned out, some of the government funds used to support the development of the Inuit art industry came from the revenues generated by northern alcohol sales (Graburn 2004: 155).

Inuit artistic representations of alcohol stand out as anomalies. For many years non-Native gatekeepers, such as the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council, pushed Inuit artists to produce prints and carvings that conformed to a primitivist view of Inuit culture, rejecting pieces that seemed “too modern” (Graburn 1999; Potter 1999). While this expectation has begun to change, animals, shamanism, drum-dancers, camp life, hunting, and mothers with children persist as dominant subjects, as does the fiction fostered by Houston of an unspoiled, uncommodified Inuit culture (Berlo 1999). Still, with respect to the artistic presentations of alcohol I describe here, it is important to bear in mind that the pieces depicting alcohol are part of the artists’ much larger bodies of work that are (generally) more conventional in subject matter. In what follows I present several important and telling examples of Inuit fine art representations of alcohol, but this is not a comprehensive list. Many of these images are well known, and have received out-sized, almost sensational attention, precisely because they are shocking.

One of the best-known pieces concerning alcohol is a 1991 whalebone and soapstone sculpture by Manasie Akpaliapik that was featured on the cover of the Winter 1993 issue of Inuit Art Quarterly. The piece consists of a man’s head held almost, but not quite, propped-up his left hand. His face, carved from whalebone, is pock-marked. The visible right eye and facial expression suggest that the man is in pain, undoubtedly the result of the bottle of whiskey, also carved from smooth soapstone, that is firmly embedded in his skull. The sculpture is emotionally powerful, but much of the emotion comes from knowing that the artist is an Inuk. The same image created by a non-Native artist would reveal one man’s personal struggles; from an Inuk artist it exposes the struggles of an entire people. In an interview the artist reported:

That particular piece is a hangover kind of thing: you’re fed up; you have this bottle in your head; it’s controlling you. I felt it’s not just for me, but for a lot of Inuit people who are caught in that situation. This was especially true when I was in Montreal, when friends came down. They wouldn’t drink up there, but when they came down, all they wanted to do was drink, drink, drink. After a while, you get the impression all the Inuit people are doing
Alcohol is also the subject of a widely published drawing by graphic artist and 2006 Sobey Art Award winner, Annie Pootoogook. The Cape Dorset artist’s drawings chronicle the mundane and intimate aspects of contemporary northern life, including watching television, shopping for groceries, preparing meals, and visiting with friends. Her work forms a kind of visual diary that includes the good, the bad, and (most often) the ordinary. *Memory of my Life: Breaking Bottles* (2002) depicts the artist standing outside a house in contemporary Cape Dorset smashing bottles of liquor against a rock. About the drawing, she said, “…one time I drew when I broke bottles ‘cause I got tired of drinking people every day. So I had to broke... break their bottles on the rock so they won’t drink tomorrow. I think I did a good job” (qtd. in Campbell 2007: 13).

Annie Pootoogook’s drawing of breaking bottles is unusual, not just for its subject matter, but for the depiction of Inuit agency with respect to alcohol. Other art locates Inuit problems with alcohol in relations of colonialism in which Inuit are the losers. A 1996 untitled drawing by the late Cape Dorset artist Kananginak Pootoogook (Annie Pootoogook’s uncle) shows a white man and an Inuk drinking. Both are inebriated, but the Inuk is much more impaired, unable to sit upright or to hold his glass steady. A description written by the artist reads, “This is the Inuk man’s first drink ever. Even though it’s only wine he is very intoxicated. This is the beginning of alcoholism” (qtd. in Igloliorte 2009).

Sculptor Ovilu Tunnillie also presents alcohol as a form of colonial control. One piece called *Woman Passed Out* (1987) depicts a male figure straining under the weight of a woman, lifeless in his arms, her long hair hanging down. Another is entitled *Thoughts Create Meaning* (ca. 1980). In this piece the central figure is a male, crouching low, head tilted back, a drink to his lips. A large hand reaching up from the ground grasps the man by his torso. A man’s disembodied head sits to the side of the drinker. Both pieces are included in the book *Inuit Women Artists* (Leroux, Jackson, and Freeman 1994) with the statement that they are works “of aesthetic inspiration and not intended as a social commentary” (235). Really? Immediately adjacent to the disclaimer, the caption for *Woman Passed Out* quotes the artist,

> The liquor was brought up from the white people, not from Inuit. This one is taking a drink. This is a drunken person that tempted others to drink more. This person is passed out, because the alcohol can make you do anything, like this one. A woman doesn’t mean to be the way she is here, but although she may never be one to be seen in as such, but it happens after she had too much to drink. (qtd. in Leroux, Jackson, and Freeman 1994: 235)

What are we to make of these artists’ works depicting Inuit as helpless against alcohol’s intoxicating effects? Within the survey presented here, aside from Annie
Pootoogook’s *Memory of My Life: Breaking Bottles*, Inuit are not presented as agentic. Is this because this particular narrative matches the expectations of art-buyers? Or is this indeed the way Inuit experience alcohol? One possibility is that non-Native curators and other intermediaries are directing the artists’ statements either tacitly or explicitly. Non-Native gallery owners and other promoters often control access to the artists, their thoughts, and work processes. The image of Inuit artists created by James Houston “as Savage Savants—learned yet untaught” (Potter 1999: 48) remains widely invoked. Contemporary Inuit art promoters frequently describe Inuit as passive and helpless recipients of intrusive modern technologies, and Inuit culture as disappearing (Root 2007). Stories of the artists’ own struggles with alcohol are whispered to potential buyers. While a handful of curators and art historians are Inuit, most of the interpretation of Inuit art is done by non-Natives for non-Natives. Consider, for example, an untitled (1993–94) drawing by Napachie Pootoogook (Annie’s mother) included in the exhibit *Forms of Exchange: Art of Native Peoples from the Edward J. Guarino Collection* at Vassar College in 2006.

Like Annie’s drawings, Napachie’s work frequently presented actual events she witnessed or participated in. The item in question depicts four people: two are men who have been drinking. One of them is upside-down, perhaps passed out; the other is on his knees, a broken bottle lies on the ground. Standing is a woman holding a child in one hand and a bottle in the other. The man on his knees appears to be reaching for the bottle. Is she bringing the bottle to him or taking it away? The accompanying label, written by a curator, asserts that it is the latter. The label continues, “Although White people helped the Inuit market their art, Napachie witnessed first hand how they also introduced harmful substances into the Inuit community. The image reveals with heartbreaking clarity the devastating consequences of this form of exchange with the outside world” (Keesey 2006).

A second possibility is that artists are actively accessing the interests and desires of buyers, and are representing Inuit alcohol use in ways that are understandable and acceptable to collectors, curators, and other participants in the art world. Inuit fine art is created for non-Native collectors and Inuit artists, like all artists, adapt their symbolic and aesthetic presentations to the demands of the market, as they perceive them. According to Ovilu Tunnille,

> I try to make carving that will sell.... When I was in Vancouver I made a nude carving and people liked it, so I made more of them.... I was thinking, “Why do people enjoy alcohol?” I was thinking, “Why do people want a carving of people drinking alcohol when alcohol is no good.” That is how I figure out how to make a carving. I want them to be recognized, I want them to be appreciated and admired. (quoted in Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 1993)

Selling Inuit art is in part about selling the idea of Inuit culture. The authenticity of the pieces comes not from the fact that the artists are genetically or even
culturally Inuit, but that the artists can make some claim to living and thinking in ways non-Inuit art consumers imagine to be authentically Inuit. Art that depicts Inuit as modern people threatens that sense of authenticity. The presentation of Inuit alcohol use as problematic, a colonial imposition that Inuit are helpless to resist, helps to restore the idea of a pure, timeless Inuit culture. This is part of the “primitivist perplex” (Prins 2002; also Ranco 2007) in which Indigenous peoples may only speak on certain subjects and are only taken seriously when they perform recognized Indigenous identities. Aboriginal peoples are often expected to live and act in the modern world, but to do inconspicuously so as to maintain their claim to Indigeneity. Harald Prins writes, “Having become a key element in their rhetoric of self-fashioning, [an assertion of primitivism] shows up in their ‘visual performances’ and thus may serve as a persuasive device in their collective quest for biological and cultural survival” (2002: 58).

Nelson Graburn (2005) reports that Inuit artists also work to please themselves and their Inuit artist peers as well as buyers. Still, Inuit and other Native peoples often find it politically and practically necessary to resort to formulaic representations of themselves and their cultures in interactions with non-Natives and with powerful non-Native institutions (Conklin 1997; Dybbroe 1996; Povinelli 1995; Ranco 2007). In the realm of Inuit fine art, Graburn (1999: 371) notes that some aboriginal artists who refused or neglected to play along with the fiction of primitiveness have found themselves excluded from the markets for their work.

One consideration Prins does not address is the extent to which Natives who deploy primitivism take on and begin to believe those dispositions themselves. Though they are not an example of fine art per se, the outtakes that roll with the credits in Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (Kunuk et al 2000) suggest that perhaps Natives do not take on these dispositions. Though the story told in the film is set long before Inuit met Europeans, the Inuit filmmakers include shots of actor Natar Ungalaaq (Atanarjuat) in a leather bomber jacket, wrapped in a blanket, dancing to music he is listening to on headphones in order to keep warm before his naked run across the ocean ice. The outtakes also reveal some of the production process, including shots of crew members pulling the camera operator on a sled to capture Atanarjuat’s run, and residents of Igloolik watching the filmmaking. By including these outtakes the Inuit filmmakers poke a little fun at non-Inuit viewers, reminding them that what they have watched is a movie, not “real” Inuit life (Dickinson 2006: 102). The filmmakers proclaim that Inuit are modern people who know that modernity is not the absence of tradition and vice versa. The same can be said of Annie Pootoogook’s drawings even as some non-Native interpreters insist that her work depicts the transition away from what is authentically Inuit (see Baewaldt 2007).
Inuit Productions for Inuit and Narratives of Cultural Healing.

Inuit fine art is produced primarily for non-Indigenous consumers, and access to this art is mediated primarily by non-Indigenous curators, art historians and art dealers. Inuit also create cultural products for Inuit audiences. Cartoons, comic books, films, short stories, and political biographies contribute to a different discourse about alcohol and Inuit than the ones found in fine art. As with the fine art described above, the works identified here are not comprehensive, however I believe they are representative of the kinds of cultural productions Inuit produce for other Inuit. The three key examples I present were disseminated through institutional channels such as the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) or Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), formerly Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC). Because these illustrations bear the endorsement of formal organizations, the representations of alcohol are at least quasi-official, informed by elite and institutional perspectives about the acceptable ways to present alcohol drinking and drinkers. This is not to say that the representations are untrue or divorced from the perspectives that circulate in Inuit households and communities; rather the discourses are channelled in ways that suit institutional purposes.

One Inuit response to Captain Al Cohol was Super Shamou, an Inuk superhero. The character was created by Peter Tapatai and Barney Pattunguyak as a children’s program for the IBC. The superhero is the alter ego of Peter Tapatai, an ordinary Inuk with the shamanic powers of flight and the ability to hear the cries of people in danger. Three episodes of the program aired in the North. The series also spawned a comic book, drawn by non-Native graphic artist and health educator Nicholas Burns. IBC distributed bilingual Inuktitut-English and Inuktitut-French editions, intended to discourage children from sniffing solvents. Burns, who lived in Rankin Inlet for nine years and has written several health-promotion comic books, based the story on conversations that he had with Inuit kids about why kids sniffed, reporting, “I wrote a story that represented what I’d heard” (Nicholas Burns, personal communication). Tapatai and Pattunguyak acted as advisors and influenced the artwork.

The story told in the Super Shamou comic book (Burns 1990) begins with children playing alone in a boarded-up house in the fictional community of Safe Harbour. Some older boys have glue or a solvent which they are preparing to sniff. Younger children are present, two of whom refuse to participate and depart, leaving a small boy alone with the older boys. A fire starts in the shack. Peter (Super Shamou), walking with a friend, smells the smoke and hears cries for help. He sends his friend to summon the fire department and, once alone, transforms into Super Shamou. He rescues the children and takes them to the health centre where he learns from the nurse (also an Inuk) that the children have been sniffing. As it turns out, none of the boys has a father who is able to take him on the land: the youngest boy has been adopted by an elderly grandmother; one of the older boys is white and has an
abusive father; the other, an Inuk, is neglected because his mother is a drunkard. Other children knew that the two boys sniffed, but did not say anything to adults. Super Shamou tells the residents of Safe Harbour that they cannot rely on him to fix all problems: they must solve their own problems by noticing and helping others, locking up gasoline, and spending time with their children. Peter, no longer Super Shamou, takes the first step by inviting the two older boys to accompany him on a hunting trip.

Alcohol plays a role in the story, but unlike Captain Al Cohol there is no attempt to lecture about the dangers of drinking. This is partly because children were the primary audience for and principle characters in the Super Shamou comic book. Children are affected by adult drinking, as the story reveals, but children are not generally drinkers. Rather the message concentrates on possibilities for Inuit agency; it says that Inuit can and must take responsibility for solving the problems in their communities rather than waiting for someone else to step in. The administrators who introduced Captain Al Cohol denied that Inuit could be agentive about alcohol and many other social problems.

The possibility of agency is also present in the IBC fictional drama A Summer in the Life of Louisa (1986). The story, in Inuktitut with English subtitles, employed a trope which links spousal assault directly to alcohol. The title character Louisa lives with a physically abusive husband (Peter). Viewers first see her injured from a beating by her husband. Some weeks or months later Louisa and Peter are drinking together in a bar. Drunk, Peter accuses a stranger of flirting with his wife and attempts to provoke a fight. At home later that night, Peter accuses Louisa of infidelity and begins beating her. Their child is awakened from sleep and cowers behind his bed. Louisa ends up in the hospital; Peter ends up in the drunk tank. At last Louisa takes action, telling Peter that he has to seek help to deal with his anger so that they can be happy together. Next, viewers see Peter, Louisa, and their son at camp. Peter asks an elder for advice about how to control his anger. “Sometimes my anger is too strong. I can’t control it,” he says. The elder asks, Peter “Do you ever take a knife to her?” When Peter replies that he would never do that because he loves Louisa, the elder observes, “So you do make choices. You control your anger a little. You have to learn to control your anger more. You have to be stronger than your anger.” There is no appeal to abstinence, but rather an appeal to responsibility and self-control. Appropriate to Inuit norms of non-intervention (Condon 1983), the issue of whether Peter should abstain from drink is not raised by the elder.

The 2007 short film Issaittuq/Waterproof (Haulli and Rasmussen 2007) offers another variation on the themes of responsibility, self-control, and the land as a healing space. Written by and featuring Igloolik resident Bruce Haulli, the film was co-produced by Igloolik Isuma Productions, the company behind Atanjuarat and The Journals of Knud Rasmussen (Cohn and Kunuk 2006), and Artcirq, a youth circus program also based in Igloolik. At the start of the film a group of young Inuit
are having a drinking party in a private home. They have been drinking, but are not notably inebriated when the protagonist John enters the house. He is visibly drunk, carrying a beer bottle; no one is happy to see him. Immediately, he groges and crudely propositions one of the women, leading the men to forcibly eject John from the party. A woman announces, “He shouldn’t drink at all!” The next scene, a flashback, shows John with a girlfriend. They are very much in love; she shows him a small ivory amulet that she found in an old sod house, and puts it around his neck “so that you won’t forget me.” In retrospect we realize that she was dying. John awakes from the dream on the sofa in his unkempt, poorly furnished house. He is drunk, alternately angry and distraught from grief. Outside his house John turns his anger on a passerby walking on the road, beating up the man after he berates John for being “drunk all the time.” In the drunk tank, John dreams or hallucinates that he is naked in the ruins of a sod house. A bird screeches overhead and a fur-clad figure in the distance turns her back on John and walks away. John awakens and learns that he is being charged with assault. An Inuk judge sentences John to two months at an outpost camp.

Next we see John arriving by boat at an outpost camp. The hunter who lives at the camp with his wife and children reassures John that living at the outpost camp “is not boring.” He introduces John to his family as a friend who has come to visit; they make him welcome, include him in their activities, and do not intrude on his thoughts. The hunter smiles constantly; he exudes a sense of someone content in his life. John is still wearing the amulet, which the hunter asks about. John replies, “I don’t want to think about it. I don’t even want to talk about it.” The hunter assures John that “Someday you will be able to talk about it and you will get used to it when the animal [depicted in the amulet] starts passing by.”

That night John leaves the cabin and wanders alone on the tundra. Again John hallucinates or has a vision, seeing first his dead girlfriend and then the same fur-clad figure that he spied from the sod house. He follows the figure but is unable to catch up and gets lost. Meanwhile the hunter and his family are searching for John; worried, they consider calling in Search and Rescue. Eventually the hunter finds him. He does not castigate John, but instead takes him to a gravesite, and tells him a story about a hungry family long ago. The old woman in the family is wearing John’s amulet. She takes it off and gives it to her granddaughter, who is frightened and unhappy to be married-off and taken away from her family. The grave turns out to belong to John’s great, great-grandfather—his father’s namesake—and presumably the amulet belonged to his daughter, John’s great–grandmother. The hunter tells John that he is alive today because his ancestors faced their difficulties with strength. Calmly, and without recrimination, he tells John that it is time to show some strength and personal responsibility: “You’ve been brought to us because of your bad lifestyle. You went too far because of all that drinking. Let’s hope that you will soon get over it...so that you can take responsibility and be happy with your life.”
None of the three examples presented here explicitly condemn Inuit drinking or even drunkenness. Rather these works appeal to Inuit to act in ways that affirm Inuit values of self-control, non-interference, and conflict-avoidance. The calm, indirect manner of the hunter in *Issaittuq* is contrasted to the hostile and direct criticism from the town-dweller John assaulted. The ideal Inuk exemplified by the hunter is cheerful and easy to be with. He or she is “responsible, works hard, does not make demands of others, laughs at his/her own mistakes, controls his/her emotions, avoids conflict, and without interfering anticipates the needs of others” (Stern 1997: 508; also Briggs 1970; Condon 1983). Self-control is also invoked in *Summer in the Life of Louisa* when the elder tells Peter that he has to become stronger than his anger. Implicit is the message that both Peter and John can find the strength to change their lives.

Importantly, each of the examples identifies “the land” as the place where Inuit can locate the strength to overcome sadness, anger, boredom, and other negative emotions that threaten the safety and security of Inuit culture and communities. The land is constructed as the place where Inuit can most easily practice the ideals of being *inummarik* (a full adult, a genuine Inuit person). Indeed, hunting, fishing, or even just visiting the tundra are presented as essential to the survival of Inuit culture and of Inuit as a unique people. Lisa Stevenson (2006) draws a contrast between what she calls the ethical injunction to young Inuit to remember traditional Inuit ways of living that they have never experienced, with the needs trauma survivors have to forget. The hunter in *Issaittuq* encourages John to remember his ancestors and their struggles as a way to put the pain of his girlfriend’s death behind him. Longing for drink is to be replaced by longing for the land (cf. Stevenson 2006: 181).

For Inuit today, living in permanent towns and villages, the land has thus become “a socially useful idiom for communicating a host of moral concerns and identities” (Quintero 2002: 6). Talk about drinking plays a similar role. Rather than identifying alcohol as an inherently dangerous substance, these works present alcohol abuse as a symptom of other problems, notably avoidance of responsibility. The young Inuit in *Issaittuq* are having a pleasant time getting drunk together until John arrives to make trouble. Their response is to assert that John is someone who “shouldn’t drink at all!” This is consonant with conversations about alcohol use and abuse that I observed during my ethnographic fieldwork in the North: drinking was discussed as pleasurable, but some individual drinkers were described to me as “really bad for the booze” (Stern fieldnotes, March 2000).
Nunavut Liquor Act Review Task Force: Pain or Pleasure

In 2010 the government of Nunavut established the Nunavut Liquor Act Review Task Force to review and propose changes to the existing legislation. The Nunavut government took this step because it recognized that the Liquor Act as-written was unenforceable. In particular, the local-option provisions, which allowed individual communities to ban or restrict alcohol, are widely subverted by smuggling and bootlegging. Inuit forms of social pressure that the act anticipated failed to moderate drinking practices in many cases. Instead, enforcement remained a criminal justice matter. Also underpinning the task force’s work was the understanding that alcohol use in Nunavut is linked to suicide, violence, and crime (Nunavut Liquor Act Review Task Force, hereafter NLARTF, 2012b).

The Task Force held public hearings, accepted written submissions, and in some cases took private testimony in each of Nunavut’s twenty-six communities, issuing an interim report and a set of recommendations (NLARTF 2012a, 2012b). What is apparent from these documents is that discourses on alcohol in Nunavut are more diverse than a reading of cultural productions alone suggests. Many current discourses harken back to the administrative discourses of the 1960s and 70s, represented in programs like Captain Al Cohol, which regarded any Inuit alcohol-use as tantamount to alcoholism. Others correspond to earlier administrative discourses that regarded alcohol use as an aspect of democratic citizenship.

The Task Force documents reflect that Nunavummiut are deeply divided regarding the causes of alcohol problems and their solutions, and to an extent, over whether the state is the appropriate locus of regulation. Many of the people who spoke to the task force asserted that Inuit are more susceptible than others to the effects of alcohol, while others asserted that Inuit alcohol abuse has roots in the intensive colonial domination and culture loss of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Others located problem-drinking by Nunavummiut in the failure of the Indigenous-led Nunavut government to address contemporary social issues. The report reads, “People representing diverse groups agreed that positive changes [in the drinking culture] will be difficult to achieve if other societal issues are not addressed. Examples of these other issues included inadequate housing, the lack of employment and meaningful educational opportunities, and the loss of cultural identify [sic]” (NLARTF 2012a: 42). Some Nunavummiut called for a total prohibition on alcohol throughout the territory. Others argued for easier access, asserting that overconsumption (and bootlegging) are produced by an alcohol-control regime that creates artificial shortages. An unnamed hearing participant explains, “A hunter will try and get as much as he can before the quota runs out. I see the same attitude with alcohol. Limiting alcohol drives many of the problems we see today” (qtd. in NLARTF 2012a: 8).

One thing that was made clear by the activities of the Task Force was that many Nunavummiut regard drinking as pleasurable, but find it less acceptable to admit as much (NLARTF 2012a: 19). Indeed, if drinking were only a source of pain, Inuit
would have quickly abandoned alcohol. As Pat O’Malley and Marianna Valverde observe, even alcoholics have a favourite beverage which they take pleasure in consuming. At the same time, when faced with the kinds of problematic behaviours that are linked with Inuit alcohol use, there is a tendency to “deny or silence the voluntary and reasonable seeking of enjoyment as warrantable motives” for drinking (O’Malley and Valverde 2004: 26).

The dominant discourses on alcohol in the cultural productions I have discussed are about pain. Yet, in Canada, including Nunavut, drinking can be understood as a source of pleasure, a component of sociability that can advance a sense of collective belonging and civic engagement. The task force provided some glimpses of this more complex reality. Indeed, some Inuit cultural productions can be read as presenting drinking as pleasurable, or at least as an activity that Inuit choose. The opening scene of Issaittuq, for example, shows young Inuit socializing amiably with alcohol. They can presumably drink, perhaps even get drunk, without causing violence.

A contrasting example, but one that also reflects a nuanced perspective on alcohol, can be found in cartoons drawn for Inuit Today by artist, poet, and writer Alootook Ipellie. Inuit Today was a bilingual Inuktitut–English news magazine published by Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. Ipellie worked for the magazine in the 1970s, initially drawing cartoons as filler material to accompany news stories. Like the R.I.P Captain Al Cohol cartoon described above, Ipellie’s cartoons suggest a sort of detached amusement about alcohol. The cartoons present Inuit as agents who can decide whether or not to use alcohol. Many cartoons acknowledge that some Inuit desire alcohol while poking-fun at situations in which that desire is thwarted. For example, the November 1977 issue of the magazine contains a report of the results of a local-option referendum in Pangnirtung: the residents voted to prohibit the importation or possession of alcohol. The accompanying cartoon (Ipellie 1977: 52) depicts an airplane on the runway at Pangnirtung, the propellers still turning. The pilot announces, “Remember Pang has gone dry…If you can’t take it, we’ll be taking off in half an hour.” Another cartoon accompanied a story about the temporary closing of the territorial liquor store in Frobisher Bay (Iqaluit) (Ipellie 1976: 56). This one depicts a chain and padlock around the liquor store building. An Inuk who looks on remarks, “Dam ’it! Not again?!” A story about an alcohol treatment centre in the bush near Ft. McPherson (Ipellie 1977b: 74) is illustrated with a drawing of a log cabin. Smoke billows from the cabin’s chimney and a sign out front reads, “Welcome to ‘No Booze’ Lodge.”

Two final examples of Inuit art need to be considered. These are a pair of soapstone sculptures made by Pootoogook Jaw. The first, called The Musician (1996) depicts a single male figure sitting on his knees on the ground. He is playing an accordion; an electric guitar and amplifier lie unused at his left side. On the ground at his right sits a pint of whiskey. The second sculpture Musicians (c. 1990) is more complex.
The piece consists of three figures, two men and a child. One of the men, attired in a suit, is singing and playing an Inuit drum; the second is wearing a parka, though a necktie hangs down his back, and is singing and playing an electric guitar. A quart of alcohol rests at his feet. The child, holding a microphone, is smiling and moving to the beat of the music. It is a joyful scene, though academic descriptions of both sculptures describe the presence of alcohol as an ominous sign (Barber 1999: 92; Mayer and Shelton 2009: 107). Interestingly, these two pieces have not received the same level of recognition and publication as Inuit artistic representations of alcohol that reaffirm a discourse of pain. It is conceivable that the art-world has ignored these works because they do not fit the dominant paradigms. The presentation of drinking as sociable disturbs the primitivist image of Inuit cultivated by non-Native curators.

Conclusion

Artistic productions both create and replicate knowledge about social phenomena, in dialogue with multiple sources of social regulation including state policies. At least this appears to be the case with Inuit alcohol-control policy, where discourses and images of disordered use of alcohol have long been implicated in demands for state involvement (cf. Kneale 2001). Although particular policy paradigms and discourses have predominated at specific historical moments, discourses of pain and a presumption of disorder related to alcohol persist in the artistic and policy creations by and for Inuit. The work of the task force of the Inuit-led territorial government has just finished, and it may or may not result in a new alcohol policy regime. Unlike the simplistic discourse on Inuit drinking presented in productions like Captain Al Cohol and in curatorial presentation of Inuit art, the hearings provided a forum for a frank airing of diverse perspectives on alcohol. These perspectives transcended the dominant narratives of pain, and some even entertained the possibility that alcohol can be a source of socially regulated pleasure in the Arctic, as it is in southern Canada. A closer reading of Inuit cultural productions suggests the same.

Notes

1. I can only speculate as to the reasons behind the specific content and aesthetic choices in the Captain Al Cohol comic books. In contrast to other government alcohol projects in the Northwest Territories the archival record is silent on Captain Al Cohol. Author Art Sorensen declined my 2002 request for an interview.

2. In the late 1970s the Northern Service of the CBC radio adapted the Captain Al Cohol comic books for broadcast adding a background soundtrack of generic ai-ai-ai singing and drumming.

3. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 1967 that the alcohol prohibition in the Indian Act was unconstitutional.
4. There was no distinction of any consequence between and federal and territorial officials in this period. The administration of the Northwest Territories was located in Ottawa until 1967. With the establishment of a government bureaucracy in Yellowknife, the commissioner—a federal appointee—had near total authority. This ended in 1976 with the first fully elected governing council, the precursor to the territorial assembly. That fifteen-member body was comprised of a majority of Aboriginal members. The position of the commissioner became more akin to that of a provincial lieutenant governor.

5. The requirement that Inuit and non-Native residents of the Northwest Territories obtain liquor import permits for the “medicinal” use of alcohol was discontinued around 1962. The requirement for individual import permits was part of the Nunavut Liquor Act, but was recently amended.

6. The Nunavut Liquor Act was adopted with little modification from the NWT when the territories divided in 1999. The Nunavut Liquor Act continues to provide for identical local option referenda. As of this writing, liquor is prohibited in seven communities, restricted in thirteen, and unrestricted in five.

7. This untitled work is in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada and can be viewed online at: http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=43248s/artwork.php?mkey=41078.

8. Several of Annie Pootoogook’s drawings, including Memory of my Life: Breaking Bottles, are viewable at Gender on Ice Gallery, Barnard College: http://sfonline.barnard.edu/ice/gallery/pootoogook.htm.

9. This sculpture is in the collection of the Canadian Museum of History (formerly the Canadian Museum of Civilization) and can be viewed online at: http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/aborig/iqqaipaa/inuit-e.shtml.

10. View the image online at: http://faculty.vassar.edu/lucic/formsofexchange/images/POOTOOGOOKAlcohol.jpg.

11. I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Ulukhaktok (previously called Holman) beginning in 1982. Topics investigated include adolescent development (Condon and Stern 1993; Stern 1999), reproductive health (Stern and Condon 1995a), marriage and household formation (Stern and Condon 1995b; Stern 2005), time discipline (Stern 2003), and wage employment (Stern 2000).

12. Following the task force recommendations the Nunavut’s legislative assembly amended the Liquor Act in September 2013, making it easier to purchase alcohol legally and vastly increasing the potential fines for bootlegging. The local option for individual municipalities remains in the amended act.

13. John O’Neil (1985), writing about Gjoa Haven in 1978, reported that the local option policy did initially have the intended effect.

14. Ipellie also wrote short stories for Inuit Today as well as essays which more pointedly condemn Inuit drinking.
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