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Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel by Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk, translated by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure

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Sanaaq: A Story to Think With

***Sanaaq: an Inuit Novel* by MITIARJUK
NAPPAALUK**

Uof Manitoba P, 2014 \$24.95

Reviewed by **ZOE TODD**

Sanaaq opens with the titular character, Sanaaq, heading out to gather dwarf birch from the land. While travelling, she rescues one of her two sled dogs from choking on a bone by feeding it her last bit of food—a piece of blubber—before heading home to care for her young daughter, Qumaq. Every page thereafter pulls you into the stories of a woman whose life intersects with the encroaching movement of *qallunaat* (white people) and *qallunaat* institutions—Hudson’s Bay men, missionaries, doctors, nurses—as well as the family, friends, hunting partners, children, elders, animals, and other actors who shape life within her community in Nunavik. Each chapter weaves a different episode from Sanaaq’s life, or the lives of the people in her small, semi-nomadic community, into English and Inuktitut text, revealing a different facet of the political, physical, social, and cultural landscape of Nunavik in the mid-twentieth century.

In the foreword to the novel, arctic anthropologist Bernard Saladin d’Anglure explains that celebrated author Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk initially began to write the stories that make up *Sanaaq* in order to teach Father Lechat—an Oblate Missionary who spent some time in Kangirsujuaq, Nunavik, Canada—Inuktitut. The text flows much like a language lesson: conversational, weaving stories about fishing, sewing, cooking, hunting, travelling and community life together to teach specific words to the listener/reader. In fact, as I read through

the book, flipping back and forth between the glossary in the back of the book and the stories in the front, I felt the familiar pedagogy of Inuvialuktun language classes I attended in Paulatuuq, NWT, in the spring of 2012 coming back to life. Much as my teacher in Paulatuuq, the late elder Annie Illasiak, taught us the Siglitun dialect of her language through word play, stories, songs, and games, Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk guides the reader through a series of intricate language lessons without ever explicitly stating that teaching language is one of her goals. As the chapters progressed, I found myself beginning to pick up words, needing to rely on the glossary less and less as the lives of Sanaaq and her family unfolded page after page.

The richness of the text comes from the day-to-day life that it describes, and the juxtaposition of the forces of colonialism that are taking place at the edge—or directly in the middle—of each scene. Anthropologist Nicholas Thomas urges us to historicize and localize colonial narratives, and cautions us not to submit to the urge to apply geographically and historically ambiguous theories to local contexts without first ensuring we know a place through its stories and its people (11). Today, we have ample access to the written legacy of the northern colonial actors. However, in my own personal experience working with Hudson’s Bay Company and Oblate materials from the Western Canadian Arctic in the 1920s-1960s, this archival and textual history often elides the intimate day-to-day life of women and Indigenous peoples in favour of documenting official, institutional, or public happenings, though there are small glimpses of the “intimate” (to borrow a word from anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler’s work with Dutch colonial archives in

Indonesia) lives of women, children, elders, and others in these textual documents.

Sanaaq's life, and the quiet interplay of her home, the broader relationships she shares with the other families she travels and hunts and fishes with, and the *qallunaat* stationed nearby illustrate a part of mid-twentieth century life in arctic Canada that firmly challenges the *qallunaat*-dominated texts that had emerged up until the initial French version of her novel was published in 1984. Thomas points out the ironic, perverse, and ethnocentric way that some scholars, including some anti-colonial and post-colonial academics, privilege narratives that emphasize the strength, organization, unity, and vitality of Euro-Western colonial institutions and practices that oppressed Indigenous peoples without troubling such uniform discourse or exploring the resistance and resilience with which Indigenous peoples met colonialism (15). *Sanaaq* demonstrates how, as Keavy Martin has beautifully articulated, Inuit stories from this period portray not the loss of culture, but the ability of Inuit actors to don "new skins" as they contend with the complex, intertwined, painful, and staccato impacts of imposed *qallunaat* culture (1-11). It is therefore important to unsettle both a) the lens of the *qallunaat* and b) monolithic ideals and narratives of colonialism. The reader must grapple instead with the "discomfort and risk" that comes with the donning of these new skins (Martin 8). This unsettling can be achieved by listening *for* stories, which Cruikshank urges us to think *with* (76), that may complicate our collective understandings of how northern colonialism was formed, enacted, resisted, and refracted.

Sanaaq begins abruptly and ends with a spiritual release, and everything in between carries the reader along the life journey of a small community tangling with the paradoxes, juxtapositions, and day-to-day realities of northern colonialism while also re-affirming the livelihoods and knowledge that people use to assert local ways of knowing upon colonial actors. This novel, now available in English, is important reading for anyone wishing to better understand the trajectories and ironies of mid-twentieth century state projects to furnish "welfare" to Canada's northern peoples, and to understand how Inuit actors approached these new realities.

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