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Framing the Arctic: *Nanook of the North* (1922) in the Digital Borderlands

Abstract. This article traces the troubled legacy of *Nanook of the North* (1922) into the digital borderlands of the twenty-first century. Rather than revisiting long-standing scholarly debates, it follows the film's migration into online spaces. On social media, Nanook circulates in fragmented, decontextualized ways that reignite questions about race, representation, authenticity, and colonial storytelling. Social media comment threads become an informal archive of how contemporary audiences confront, resist, or reproduce these themes. By examining this digital reception, the article shows how the film's unresolved tensions not only persist but intensify online, revealing how colonial images continue to shape public understanding in an algorithm-driven media landscape.

Keywords: algorithmic publics, digital ethnography, postcolonialism, documentary film, indigenous studies

Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is celebrated as the first feature-length documentary, a foundational text that shaped ethnographic cinema. A century later, its legacy is fiercely contested: hailed as a pioneering portrait of human resilience yet condemned as a staged colonial fantasy. This critical stalemate between admiration and accusation has typically played out in film journals and classroom discussions. However, the debate has in recent years found a new public arena, the comment sections and algorithmic feeds of social media. By analyzing my own inadvertent role in circulating the film, a YouTube upload that has to date garnered over 1.5 million views, this essay argues that *Nanook* must be understood not as a fixed artifact but as a mutable border object. Its meaning is continuously reconstructed, first through Flaherty's ideological framing and now through its digital afterlife, where fragments of the film

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circulate without context, and viewers clash over authenticity, indigeneity, and history in real time. In the digital borderlands, the century-old conflicts surrounding *Nanook* are not resolved but amplified, revealing how platforms like YouTube transform historical media into battlegrounds for public memory.

On the Margins of Genre and Geography

Nanook emerged at a moment of heightened Western interest in polar exploration. It was only in the 1910s that intrepid teams finally reached the poles, but for decades previous, the journalistic and popular press wrote of the triumphs and tragedies of such expeditions. Tellingly, polar themes weaved their way into works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Jules Verne's *Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866), while published memoirs of real-life polar explorers—like those by Elisha Kent Kane (1854; 1856), Fridtjof Nansen (1890; 1891; 1897), Roald Amundsen (1908; 1912), Ernest Shackleton (1920), and Robert Peary (1898; 1907; 1910) and his wife Josephine (1893; 1901; 1903), among others—were widely circulated among a readership enamored with heroic tales of conquering the most inhospitable places on Earth. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* was part and parcel of this polar fascination.

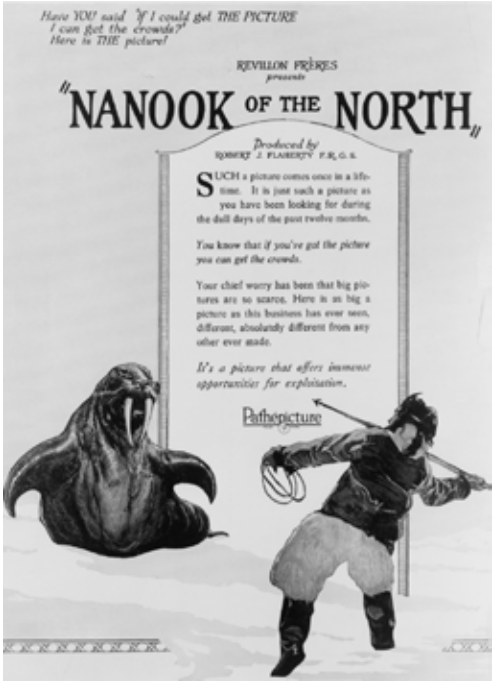

Fig. 1 "It's a picture that offers immense opportunities for exploration." Advertisement for *Nanook of the North* in *Motion Picture News* June 17, 1922.

While the film's subject offered a glimpse into distant ways of life, Flaherty's method placed the film on unstable ground. Often credited as the first feature-length documentary, *Nanook* is more accurately a docudrama that uses real people and cultural performances in service of an idealized narrative. Flaherty was not a trained ethnologist, but his methodology was in many ways ahead of its time albeit questionable by today's anthropological standards. In Flaherty's words, "I wanted to show the Inuit. And I wanted to show them, not from the civilized point of view, but as they saw themselves" (Griffith 1953, 36; Ruby 2000, 87). In other words, Flaherty set out to tell a story about a culture he indeed knew better than many outsiders, but he went about it in ways that intentionally veiled modern ways of life behind an ethno-fictional narrative that ultimately cast the Inuit as relics of the past.

Flaherty pioneered the idea of cinema as a tool for ethnographic representation. Before the term "documentary" had even been coined—John Grierson introduced it in 1926 in reference to Flaherty's later film *Moana* (McLane 2012, 4)—Flaherty was already adapting cinematic melodrama to telling ostensibly real-life narratives. His particular brand of filmmaking was characterized by crafting scripted scenes based on his understanding of his subjects' cultural traditions resulting in films that were visually and ethnographically interesting and narratively entertaining. It is important to remember that what we now expect from documentary, unmediated truth and spontaneity, is a product of conventions established after Flaherty's time. In this light, *Nanook* is best understood as a precursor to documentary cinema, one that set the stage for future debates about realism, ethics, and representation.

Jay Ruby (2000) acknowledges Flaherty as a foundational figure in the history of ethnographic cinema and one whose work has been largely misunderstood. Admonishing critics who disparage *Nanook* as essentially "fake" or fundamentally "staged," Ruby highlights how *Nanook* blends fact and fiction, an intentional choice that helped Flaherty construct a compelling narrative. He writes, "Apparently, some people are under the impression that narrative means fiction alone," and "when critics recognized the narrative form of *Nanook*, they automatically assumed they were watching a fiction film or a 'faked' documentary" (2000, 70). Taking a more critical approach, Fatimah Tobing Rony characterizes *Nanook* as a cinematic form of salvage ethnography, in which Flaherty preserves the illusion of vanishing cultures through scripted authenticity (1996, 15). She likens Flaherty's role as filmmaker to that of a taxidermist who "uses artifice and reconstruction in order to make the dead look alive" (ibid., 14), concluding that *Nanook* constructs not a present Inuit reality, but a timeless Arctic fantasy aligned with Western desires for the exotic and elemental.

Fig. 2 Publicity still from *Nanook of the North* (1922) produced by Révillon Frères. Image courtesy McCord Steward Museum.

Despite Ruby's insistence on a moderated approach to Flaherty's work, a consistent critique of *Nanook* rests on the film's skewed portrayal of Inuit life. On the one-hundredth anniversary of the film's release, *The Economist* (2022) published an article tellingly titled "The vexed legacy of 'Nanook of the North.'" The subtitle read: "A century ago, Robert Flaherty released a pioneering documentary film. The problem was that it was staged." A more damning critique comes from Adam Piron (2022) writing for *Documentary Magazine*, bluntly referring to the legacy of *Nanook* as a "100-year stain." Indeed, a perfunctory Internet search for "Nanook" and "staged" returns hundreds of results. While many are clickbait, others like those from *The Economist* and *Documentary Magazine* seem caught in a kind of feedback loop, applying contemporary critiques about issues of power, authority, and authenticity in documentary film to *Nanook*, a film Flaherty never claimed to be objective.

Meanwhile, it is important to understand that, while Flaherty certainly maintained control over the film, collaboration with the Inuit was essential to making it possible. The Inuit cast and crew helped design scenes and performed traditional activities that had meaning for them. These performances for the camera clearly demonstrate that Inuit knowledge and skills were essential to the filming process, suggesting a level of co-authorship even as Flaherty ultimately controlled and claimed ownership over the final product. Ruby even points out that Flaherty's collaborative method was not only practical but forward-thinking:

> The Inuit performed in front of the camera, reviewed and criticized their performance, and were able to offer suggestions for additional scenes in the film—a way of making films that, when tried today, is thought to be "innovative and original" and confounds the naive assumption that ethnographic films are merely a record of what happens in front of the camera. (2000, 88–89)

Yet, while collaboration was key, one thing remains clear in hindsight: Flaherty's vision was to show the "former majesty" (ibid., 89) of the Inuit people who had become his collaborators. In doing so, he was therefore guided by a belief that the film would be more captivating by depicting a nostalgic view of Inuit life rather than scenes of Arctic modernity that bore traces of cultural and commercial exchange with outsiders. As a result, and this despite Flaherty's often-professed admiration for the Inuit, the film imposes an external perspective that flattens historical and cultural realities. Rather, *Nanook* exemplifies a vision of indigeneity that aligns with settler desires for authenticity, rendering native peoples visible only when conforming to expectations of timelessness and primitivism (Raheja 2013). This strategy functions to validate colonial authority by presenting indigenous people as dependent on the ethnographic gaze to be understood.

Contextualizing *Nanook*

Born in 1884, Flaherty became a professional mineral prospector in his early 20s, a trade he learned from his father. It was during a mapping and prospecting expedition funded by the Canadian Northern Railway that Flaherty first took an interest in motion pictures. Already an amateur photographer, he took along a hand-cranked Bell and Howell movie camera on a 1913 trip to the Hudson Bay. In 1916, after further visits to the region, Flaherty had amassed about 30,000 feet of film, a good portion featuring vignettes of Inuit life (Barnouw 1993, 35; McLane 2012, 22). While working through this material at home in Toronto, he inadvertently dropped a cigarette, and the film went up in flames. Nearly all was lost apart from a working print that managed to survive. Encouraged by scholars, ethnologists, and other filmmakers—and indeed urged by his wife and collaborator Frances—Flaherty toured throughout the U.S. and Canada screening the surviving print of the film to raise money for another Arctic expedition. As life returned to normalcy after the end of the Great War, he finally secured funding from the fur company Révillon Frères to return to Hudson Bay in 1920 with the express intention to make a new movie about life in the Arctic. This time, he stayed for sixteen months (Barnouw 1993, 46).

The film was meant in part to be a kind of advertisement for Révillon, whose trading post was prominently featured in the film. As such, Flaherty was relatively well-paid and took along a bevy of modern motion picture cameras and a full complement of developing, printing, and projection equipment. With this, he arrived in Port Harri-

son with a loose plan to create a film that highlighted Inuit traditions. As he had done previously, he employed locals as crew and cast them to play parts in the film.

The film includes many apparently candid moments. But the narrative largely proceeds via a series of loosely scripted vignettes. The main character Nanook was played by a man named Allakariallak. And Nanook's on-screen wife Nyla was played by Alice Nevalinga. This "family" is first introduced in the now-iconic kayak scene, where three adults, a child, a baby, and a small puppy improbably emerge, one after another, from a vessel clearly designed for a single person. The reality of this moment is immediately suspicious as the logistics alone strain credulity. Approaching a degree of slapstick humor, the scene is disarmingly charming. It invites viewers into a narrative space where realism gives way to performative intimacy. Rather than undermining the film's appeal, this act of cinematic artifice functions as an entry point into Flaherty's romantic vision of Inuit life, one that strives toward an emotional connection from the start. Here the familiar and the exotic are blended in ways that both delight and deceive. In this context, the viewer is gently nudged to suspend disbelief, not in spite of the artificiality, but because of the warmth it projects. Flaherty hooks us from the outset, crafting a sense of feigned authenticity through humor that resonates on both narrative and affective levels.

Fig. 3 The kayak scene. Stills from *Nanook of the North* (1922).

Another sequence involves the building of an igloo. Despite the staginess of this scene, it nonetheless holds significant ethnographic value. A striking visual moment in the film, it highlights Inuit expertise and practical ingenuity. The script certainly called for the Inuit to construct the igloo, yet Flaherty seems not to have directed them how to do it. Rather, the know-how emerges directly from cultural tradition. However, the nature of the process complicates its on-screen authenticity. Especially so since the igloo we see from the inside is bifurcated, sliced down the middle to allow sunlight to

pour in enabling proper exposure for Flaherty's camera. This halving transforms the igloo into a kind of theatrical set, with the interior filmed not as it would have been experienced by its builders, but as a cinematic spectacle crafted for the viewer. While the labor is real, the context is mediated, underscoring how the film continually blurs the line between documentation and dramatic construction.

Just as individual scenes were arranged to fit the film's narrative, so too was the general portrayal of the Inuit crafted to emphasize tradition and exclude contact with modernity. For example, Flaherty discouraged the use of rifles during hunting scenes, despite their established role in Inuit subsistence practices by the early 20th century. Such constructed primitivism is also apparent in the gramophone scene, in which Nanook, seemingly encountering the device for the first time, bites into a gramophone disc in comic confusion. The moment reduces him to a figure of naive curiosity, a "happy-go-lucky Eskimo" according to one of the film's title cards. In truth, by the 1920s many Arctic communities were familiar with outsiders and trading posts where items like gramophones and rifles were common. Though engaging for the viewer, such mischaracterizations underscore Flaherty's narrative priorities that favored past practices over present realities.

Fig. 4 Nanook encounters the gramophone. Stills from *Nanook of the North* (1922).

Why does it really matter whether what we see on screen is candid or scripted? After all, *Nanook of the North* tells a compelling story using real Inuit people engaged in culturally significant activities. Does the fact that some scenes were staged or selectively framed necessarily negate the film's emotional resonance or historical value? Aren't all films, documentaries included, mediated constructions shaped by the choices, perspectives, and intentions of the filmmaker? Even with the best intentions, any documentary is inevitably subjective when filtered through the filmmaker's lens, both literally and ideologically. Why then be so critical of *Nanook* in particular?

Perhaps part of what makes us uneasy about *Nanook* is not simply that scenes are staged, but the broader sense that Flaherty took advantage of his Inuit collaborators. Judging the past by the ethical standards of the present is always problematic. However, the line between artistic license and misrepresentation becomes especially fraught

when the resulting images are taken as ethnographic truth. Deliberately or otherwise, Flaherty used the Inuit to construct a narrative that served his own goals, an act of cinematic appropriation reflecting related modes of colonial extractivism. The film becomes emblematic of a broader historical pattern in which Westerners, under the aegis of exploration or science, collected knowledge, labor, and cultural capital from indigenous peoples without reciprocity. That Flaherty's personal life mirrored this power dynamic makes such ethical questions even more pointed. His well-known relationship with Alice Nevalinga, who played Nyla in the film, resulted in the birth of a child he apparently never acknowledged. This boy, Josephie, would later be among the Inuit forcibly relocated by the Canadian government during the 1950s, a policy now widely condemned as a violation of human rights (McGrath 2007). Such underscores the entanglement of personal and structural power imbalances behind the camera, raising questions about the legacies left in the wake of such cultural confrontations.

Far from being a neutral window into Inuit life, *Nanook of the North* reinforces long standing Western myths about indigenous peoples. Many of its most iconic moments—the kayak scene, the gramophone encounter, the igloo-building sequence—in part rely on the viewer's understanding of Inuit life as equally ancient, resilient, and vanishing. In this sense, the film aligns with early ethnographic cinema's tendency to portray indigenous subjects as timeless, isolated, and on the brink of disappearance. These portrayals are not benign. They contribute to a discourse in which native peoples are frozen in the past, rendered objects of nostalgia or scientific curiosity. By presenting Nanook as both noble and primitive, the film reaffirms the binary logic of civilization versus savagery, aligning its Inuit subjects with nature and hardship, and Western audiences with progress and reason.

This framing seems to have resonated with cinemagoers of the 1920s, a time when pseudo-scientific claims about racial difference still held sway. Only two years prior to *Nanook's* release, Lothrop Stoddard published his notorious volume *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920), a widely influential book that situated white Europeans as the rightful rulers of the world, specifically denounced blacks as inherently inferior, and warned against the inevitable downfall of white civilization if the impure hordes of immigrants were left unchecked. This period was marked by a resurgence of pseudo-scientific racial theories that justified colonialism, segregation, and exclusionary immigration policies. Stoddard's book, along with others like it, helped solidify the idea of a racial hierarchy positioning non-white populations as obstacles to progress and the superiority of the white race.

It's within such a race-conscious climate that *Nanook of the North* emerged as a surprise cinematic hit, a film that offered mainly white audiences a romanticized yet ultimately patronizing portrayal of indigenous life. Buoyed by Flaherty's ostensibly ethnological approach, *Nanook* reinforced contemporary racial ideas, reassuring viewers that non-white peoples existed in a distant, unchanging past, curiosities to be observed rather than equals in a modern world. In this sense, the film not only shaped popular perceptions of Inuit culture but also contributed to the larger cultural narrative

that portrayed Indigenous peoples as relics of a bygone era. The film's international success, earning about $250,000 soon after its cinematic release, can thus be understood not just as a triumph of early documentary filmmaking, but also as a reflection of the era's broader anxieties about race, civilization, and the inevitability of Western dominance. These sentiments were central to *Nanook's* initial success, the film's enduring legacy, and its circulation in the digital borderlands of the 21st century.

Fig. 5 Screenshot of my upload of *Nanook of the North* on YouTube.

Nanook in the Digital Borderlands

Nearly a decade ago, I uploaded a version of *Nanook of the North* to a YouTube channel I had been curating as a space for public domain silent films; part hobby, part professional interest (Fig. 5). I had found the film on Archive.org, downloaded it, and then uploaded it to YouTube under the title "'Nanook of the North' (1922) – Robert Flaherty – Original Silent Version."[1] Eventually, I lost interest in managing the channel and stopped interacting with it altogether. However, I continued to receive occasional email notifications when viewers left comments on various videos, though I largely ignored them.

[1] All mentions of this video and the comments attached to it refer to the following: " 'Nanook of the North' (1922) – Robert Flaherty – Original Silent Version," http://youtu.be/3IAcRjBq93Y. Excerpt where indicated, all quotations from the video's comments section preserve original grammar, punctuation, etc.

While preparing to teach *Nanook of the North* in a film seminar last year, I revisited my long-neglected YouTube channel and made a surprising discovery. The video I had casually uploaded years earlier had amassed 1.5 million views and more than 400 comments. Somehow, this version had become the most popular iteration of the film on YouTube. I can't say for certain why it happened, but I suspect that the title's emphasis on authenticity—I had tagged it as the "original silent version" after all—attracted curiosity, while algorithmic promotion took care of the rest. What had begun as an informal contribution to the digital commons had become a widely circulated digital artifact where contemporary viewers debated their own understandings of the film's meaning. The thread of comments that unfolded over the years reflects how a century-old documentary continues to provoke strong reactions shaped by current cultural attitudes and viewing habits. It also reveals the ways in which public domain media can take on new lives in online environments, far removed from their original contexts.

The viewership of my upload of *Nanook* spiked noticeably at several points: mid–2020, late 2021, summer 2023, and again in January 2025. Curious about these surges, I dug into the analytics but found no consistent explanation. The only clear pattern emerged in 2021 and early 2022, when *Nanook's* centennial prompted a wave of online articles and blog posts, some of which linked directly to my upload. Beyond that, the spikes appear to be algorithmic, periodic moments when YouTube's recommendation system pushed the video into more users' feeds. In other words, the film's digital circulation seems less driven by scholarly or pedagogical interest than by opaque, automated processes that temporarily elevate its visibility. That said, I found some rather interesting uses of the video. Among other instances, the video was reposted many times on social media platforms, linked from university syllabuses, mentioned several times on an online kayaking forum,[2] and linked as number one on a list of "nature films" in a story on the website of Marie Claire Hungary (2025).

The widespread circulation of *Nanook* in such disparate digital spaces, from academia to lifestyle journalism to niche Internet communities, speaks to the film's enduring lifecycle. Its presence on university syllabi reaffirms its place in film history. Meanwhile, its emergence in unexpected contexts, such as the kayaking forum and Marie Claire, suggests that it continues to shape public imagination about the Arctic and indigenous life. This exemplifies how algorithmic promotion and digital archiving can reshape film reception, sometimes reinforcing traditional canons and at other times situating classic works within entirely new discursive frameworks.

The comments section is of course where the magic happens. Many commenters seem to perceive *Nanook of the North* as an unfiltered glimpse into Inuit life. "What a fantastic historical evidence," one commenter wrote, while another remarked, "Showed us real Eskimos. Thank you." Others admire the resilience and ingenuity of the Inuit, reflecting on the harsh conditions depicted in the film and making comparisons to their own circumstances. "What a beautiful people in such a hard environment!" wrote crazycoy-

[2] For example: https://www.kayakistesdemer.org/viewtopic.php?t=13942

ote1738, "Thanks for sharing it with us." Dalehammon1704 noted, "And I'm freezing when our house gets down to 60 degrees Fahrenheit during the winter!" Meanwhile, Sergey.SU.69 bluntly stated, "Tell the Eskimos that you have problems!"

Another recurring theme is the perceived ancientness of Inuit culture. Crazycoyote1738 described the film as "an amazing piece of history frozen in time!!" ThomasOsullivan2285 added, "It seems to come from deep, deep in the past. Ancient." Gijsschubert7901 expressed a sense of awe: "I'm silenced by these incredible heroes, who must have developed this lifestyle over thousands of years." Many comments contrast Inuit toughness with the apparent softness of modern life. "Nowadays we still don't know how good and easy we have it," writes leftymadrid. Mikeridge3229 agrees: "Modern man could not do this—lost the skills and lost the power of survival instincts." Such seemingly uncritical admiration of the film and its subject reveals the immediacy of *Nanook's* narrative of indigeneity and endurance of the film's half-truths as they circulate in online spaces.

The film's status as a landmark in cinematic history seems to also influence viewers' comments. The film's prestige lends legitimacy to its portrayal of Inuit life, solidifying its place in the public imagination as an authentic ethnographic record rather than a carefully constructed narrative. And now in the 21st century, the film carries an added mystique, its age reinforcing a sense of historical truth. As a result, misinformation and faulty assumptions carry forward into the digital arena where knowledge becomes a battleground, everyone is certain they are right, and everyone else is misinformed.

While many viewers take the film at face value, responding emotionally to Nanook's struggles and expressing curiosity about Inuit life, others recognize that much of the film was scripted. This tension plays out in comments where admiration and skepticism collide. For example, Andyhart4534 wrote, "I feel moved to see how indigenous people worked together in such harmony, this is priceless thanks for posting." This comment sparked a slow-moving debate that unfolded over several years. Reisswegman3850 responded bluntly, "It's all a sham actually." MrYukon2010 countered, "And you know that because… ? BTW, 'I know' is not proof." Then Xrayron1 added, "Because Nanook's wife was not his but the director's girl…" Finally, diegojustice4635 chimed in, questioning the very premise of the original post: "u assuming they indigenous?" And in a nearby comment, Roberth3094 was defiant: "You can say it's fake and maybe parts of it [have] been staged. But it does show the real life of living in the Arctic. Its no more or less staged than movies today."

This exchange reflects a broader pattern in online discourse where facts, assumptions, and personal interpretations intermingle without clear resolution. The accessibility of historical media on YouTube creates a space where viewers not only consume but also reinterpret the past, often with little guiding context. Social media comment sections are "unruly public arenas" where diverse perspectives, including objectively untrue observations, come together in a mish-mash of knowledge-making (Dobber and Hameleers 2025). For example, where Andyhart4534 initiated a thread with rather innocuous praise for a film that clearly centers on indigenous traditions, diegojus-

tice4635 threw the entire premise of the film into question by suggesting the film's actors were not even real indigenous people. While "don't read the comments" is an oft-repeated adage these days, comment threads are nonetheless important for understanding how users engage with online content as well as how the quality and quantity of comments drive further interactions between and among commenters (Schultes, Dorner, and Lehner 2013), which ultimately, for YouTube at least, becomes a factor in algorithmically promoting a given video (Vybihal and Desblancs 2022).

Social media platforms are like digital borderlands, liminal spaces where ideas are mediated, discovered, interpreted, shaped, and reshaped on a daily basis. Unlike in physical archives or as curated museum exhibits, historical media posted on online platforms allows users to engage with the past in unpredictable ways. As *Nanook of the North* circulates online, its digital afterlife reinforces the significance of both tangible and metaphorical borders. This is not only true of the comments section in my upload of the film, but also in various other iterations and references to the film across the Internet. For example, in the comments section from an edited clip of the kayak scene posted as a video on Facebook, one viewer jokingly asked, "Is this the local Greenland city-bus?"[3] Such an off-hand comment encapsulates the legacy of *Nanook*: it suggests the Arctic has been left behind while the world progresses. That such a sentiment so closely reflects Flaherty's original intent in making the film is instructive. The borders between us and them, now and then, have strengthened with time and widespread dissemination. The persistence of such borders in the digital age is surprisingly enduring, and particularly evident in the ways audiences engage with *Nanook* online. Digital platforms complicate borders by allowing content to be repurposed across different environments. Unlike traditional film screenings or academic discussions, where appropriate context can be provided, the Internet in large part operates without editorial oversight.

The digital borderlands in which *Nanook* circulates include not only YouTube but also Reddit discussions, academic blogs, Tik Tok videos, Instagram reels, and myriad other forms. In these spaces, the film's authenticity is constantly reassessed. Online algorithms do not distinguish between ethnographic significance and historical fiction. Instead, in such a no-man's-land, *Nanook's* digital worth surfaces according to clicks, tags, and engagement. This results in fragmenting the significance of *Nanook* as educational resource, historical document, and meme-worthy curiosity. And in the comments sections of these instances of the film, viewers post everything from nostalgic reflections to critiques of colonialism. Many express admiration for Nanook's perceived strength and perseverance. Others call out the film's constructed nature and Flaherty's staging. Some wonder about the fates of the real individuals depicted on screen. The tone ranges from reverent to ironic to mournful, reflecting the film's layered status as both artifact and active cultural object.

[3] Posted on the Facebook profile of Caiaque RG on 18 February 2016, https://www.facebook.com/caiaquerg/videos/1695843387354190.

And what hand did I have in all this? By uploading *Nanook* to YouTube, I have in a real way contributed to the ongoing perpetuation of the film's stereotypes. I made *Nanook* more widely available online, to my knowledge the most watched version of the film on YouTube. And I have done so without the kind of context I would provide if I were teaching about the film in the classroom or writing about it here as I am now. Aware of the film's contentious reception, I might have considered whether providing access to *Nanook of the North* without critical framing was ethically responsible. While archival preservation and accessibility are valuable, merely placing the film in an online space where it could be viewed in isolation and stripped of necessary critique may have unintentionally bolstered its mythologies rather than disrupted them. Have I played a role in sustaining its problematic legacy? This raises larger questions about our responsibilities as casual digital curators: Does making a film more accessible inherently mean endorsing its messages, or is it more important to create a space for conversation and critique?

Conclusion

Framing is central to both Flaherty's visual method and the digital afterlife of *Nanook of the North*. The camera frame selects and excludes, in this way constructing audiovisual borders between what is included and left out. Flaherty framed the Arctic as a land of elemental purity, erasing signs of colonial presence and Inuit modernity. This construction cast the Inuit as timeless figures, performing for the lens rather than living as contemporaries, this despite some level of agency as members of the cast and crew.

In the digital age, notions of framing and performance take on increased significance. When circulated online, *Nanook of the North* emerges as a ghostly presence as the setting, characters, and narrative are reanimated via online platforms designed to maximize visibility. Flaherty's film is no longer tethered to the places it haunted for decades previous: the lecture hall, the classroom, the museum. Today, it has largely severed such foundations and now travels globally at the speed of broadband. Through algorithmic promotion or simply by chance, this circulation finds new types of viewers including those encountering *Nanook* for the first time and those who come to the film through adjacent interests.

Inuit-led initiatives, such as the media company Isuma Productions, represent a deliberate turn away from the kinds of externally imposed representations that have extended from *Nanook* and similar texts. Isuma's 2001 film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* directed by Zacharius Kunuk offers a potent counter-narrative in this regard. As a modern retelling of an old Inuit folk tale, *Atanarjuat* foregrounds Inuit oral history, values, and aesthetics while claiming audiovisual sovereignty in the representation of Inuit culture (Ginsburg 2002; Raheja 2013). Meanwhile, other Inuit commentators have revisited and reinterpreted the legacy of *Nanook*. For example, famed Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq has used sound to engage with the legacy of the film. Tagaq acknowledges that in *Nanook* "they put a bunch of bullshit happy Eskimo stereotypes" on screen, but admits that the film is part of her people's ancestral archive (Gordon 2014). In

2012, Tagaq and a group of collaborators composed a new soundtrack for *Nanook* that was first performed at the Toronto International Film Festival that year. In doing so, Tagaq and company worked to counter the film's problematic legacy through sonic intervention, an eclectic soundscape centering Tagaq's neo-traditional Inuit throat singing. "Even though I have no doubt in my mind that Robert Flaherty had a definite love for Inuit and the land," she says, "it's through 1922 goggles" (ibid.). As such, the composition of a new soundtrack for the film is an effort to reclaim *Nanook* in a way that does not call for the film's erasure, but rather a thorough reconsideration in light of its enduring impact on the Inuit people.

Fig. 6 Stills from YouTube short "Was Nanook of the North Fake?" posted by @pbsorigins, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/459aD4QxPBE

But on the Internet, *Nanook* largely escapes such contextualization. While numerous versions of the full film are available on YouTube and other streaming sites, many iterations that circulate online exist as truncated Instagram and TikTok videos that take the film's stereotypes at face value. Most of these present decontextualized clips without attribution to Flaherty or acknowledgment of his Inuit collaborators. Such bite-sized clips increase the chances that viewers will uncritically engage with such content. Online platforms often replicate and amplify existing structures of inequality (Nakamura 2007). Such is evident in the comment thread for my upload of *Nanook*, where old stereotypes have been both perpetuated and, more importantly, reproduced. On the other hand, some social media posts use footage from *Nanook* to take the opposite stance, condemning Flaherty and declaring the film to be entirely fake. Though well-meaning, these also participate in a form of replication, not of outdated stereo-

types, but of unnuanced accusations of fakery, accepting or rejecting the film wholesale without room for complexity (Fig. 6).

In the end, *Nanook of the North* is not just a documentary artifact; it is a border object, crossing lines between documentary and fiction, between ethnography and entertainment, between colonial gaze and indigenous collaboration and reclamation. Its current digital life reveals how historical media can be continually reframed through new lenses, shaped by algorithmic distribution and user interaction. In the digital borderlands, truth is shaped not by expert analysis but by the push and pull of user interactions. The comment section of my upload of *Nanook* illustrates how digital media can straddle the line between historical fact and fiction, creating an ever-shifting landscape where knowledge is both shared and contested. By examining these interactions, we can better understand how narratives develop in the age of social media and how digital platforms facilitate both the preservation and distortion of the past. Ultimately, *Nanook* remains vital precisely because of its contradictions. It offers us a chance to examine how media frames the margins of human experience, and how those frames shift as they pass through the porous, ever-changing terrain of the digital borderlands.

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