In her travel narrative describing her trip to Povungnetuk, Baffin Island, in 1946, to become the wife of a Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) trader, Wanda Tolboom recounts her anticipation of her perfect wedding, with bouquet, cake, and ceremony, in the land of ice and snow. There were few couples like us, she noted, who could boast that their wedding was “attended by every white couple within 600 miles.” The promotion of these white weddings as romantic ‘firsts’ in an uncharted, empty land — captured visually in the Beaver’s photograph of a Pangnirtung wedding — was symbolic of changes in the Arctic in the post-World War II period, denoting an increased influx of white women sojourners in the north, the promotion of new and ‘proper’ domestic, marital, and consumptive roles linked to the Euro-Canadian presence, and also a cultural erasure of the existing Arctic bride — the Innu woman.

The images of Inuit life in white women’s travel narratives published from the 1940s to the 1960s are the subject of this article. Women’s sojourning narratives were part of a well-established, popular form of writing extending back to the nineteenth-century settler accounts of life in the ‘wilds’ of Upper Canada. Women’s accounts of the twentieth century Arctic, published within Canada and internationally, offered powerful portrayals of cultural encounter and difference at a critical point in the history of the Canadian North. We need to ask what the “reciprocal relationship” between the “political and textual practices” of colonialism was in this travel literature: what were the likely readings, and thus political and social consequences, of the ‘knowledge’ circulated in women's travel narratives? Even if the images of the Inuit bore little resemblance to the identity of the Inuit themselves, their
potential power as an arbiter of public opinion was important, particularly because they were published as the Canadian state was extending its control over the Arctic, as Canadian society revealed a renewed, popular fascination with the ‘North.’ These sojourners’ portraits of Inuit life, consumed as authentic accounts of exotic peoples, thus created the cultural landscape on which political and economic decisions could be rationalized.

Sojourners’ renditions of their encounters with the Inuit of the eastern Arctic stressed themes of racial and cultural difference, often arguing for understanding and tolerance between whites and Indigenous peoples. Yet this cultural relativism could also operate as a form of “anti-conquest,” articulating liberal tolerance while nonetheless reaffirming Euro-Canadian cultural and social hegemony. Writers employed a variety of techniques of colonial discourse, surveying, classifying, sometimes even idealizing their Inuit neighbours. Contemplating the strange behaviour of the ‘other’ — the Eskimo — sojourners’ accounts ultimately suggested dichotomized images of civilized and primitive, modern and premodern. As such, they became part of Canada’s distinct history of internal colonialism, sustaining unequal relations of gender, race, and class, sanctioning a story of the inevitability of white settlement coupled with the transformation/displacement of more ‘primitive’ Aboriginal ways.

By illuminating the dominant constructions of the imaginary Inuit North, we can also uncover prevailing cultural images of the postwar ‘south,’ however overly simplistic that term may be, for colonial visions often imagined the metropolis as the “antithesis of the colony.” At the time, most Canadians presumed that peace, order, and progress moved in one direction — northward — but in fact, a dialectical relationship was created through this image: by constructing the Inuit north as primitive and untouched, the predominantly Euro-Canadian south became the very epitome of progress and development. Postwar images of Canada’s economic progress, its embrace of modernity, its celebration of consumption, were also the mirror image of the Eskimo North, the land, we learned in the incredulous language of our school texts, where people still lived in igloos and rode on dogsleds.
Looking primarily at women’s narratives foregrounds the question posed in recent writing on women, travel, and imperialism: what was the role, rationale, and meaning of white women’s participation in colonial ventures, their “investment in the racial hierarchies of colonialism”? The risk in over-valorizing a singular binary of race or colonialism within this query, however, may be the erasure of other axes of power, such as class, age, and gender, thus eclipsing the complexities of gender relations as they were lived out in colonial contexts. Women’s travel accounts were to some extent shaped by their gender, and they are useful texts precisely because women were especially curious about Inuit women, their work, and their family life. At the same time, women’s responses were shaped by age, race, and social position. For instance, although white women sojourning in the North were less likely to adopt the masculine persona of the “bold hero adventurer,” their narratives sometimes overlapped with those of male northern travellers, revealing a colonial, superior surveillance of Inuit ways.

That superiority has much to do with ‘orientalist’ ways of seeing. The white person’s Inuit was manufactured using discursive strategies such as disregarding, essentializing, and generalizing about their cultures; as a consequence, their subject position was erased, and they remained curious objects of colonial scrutiny, often counterpoints to whites’ self-portrayal as modern, rational, progressive, and scientifically superior. Hugh Brody put it well: the “Eskimo are seen by whites only as Eskimo,” never as individuals. Drawing on stock, repeated stories, whites construct tales depicting the true, original essence in all Eskimo people, often doing so by pointing to the bizarre in their culture. “They are illustrations.” Orientalism was also gendered. White women played an active role in constructing orientalist discourses through cultural forms such as travel writing, while Aboriginal, non-white women were often perceived as sexualized, rendered passive, the objects of masculine as well as colonial fantasy and conquest.

One inherent problem with our focus on colonial representations is the way in which we can lose sight of the subjective position and experiences of Inuit men and women, ironically making them, again, the objects of our
inquiry, rather than active subjects. I offer no definitive solution to this conundrum, though we can also read these accounts against the grain, paying attention to the silences and subtle articulations of displeasure or disagreement expressed by the Inuit, an indication that sojourners’ views were not shared by the Inuit themselves.

Moreover, our explorations of the cultural ‘contact zone’ of colonialism should not ignore the historically specific, economically and socially structured inequalities of colonialism. An analysis of travel narratives must also historicize, linking them to the prevailing politics, social relations, state practices, and labour regimes. 11 Most eastern Arctic Inuit communities at this time were facing a rapidly changing social and economic context, shaped not only by continuing missionization but also by the changing intentions of capital (not limited to the Hudson’s Bay Company) and of the Canadian state. The accounts discussed here were published precisely as the North was being invoked by political visionaries and economic leaders as Canada’s last frontier to be developed, and as the government strove to reassert Canadian sovereignty/property rights in the paranoid atmosphere of Cold War international politics. 12 In the eastern Arctic especially, the Inuit economy was in precarious shape due in part to drastic fluctuations in the traditional fur trade economy.

By the later 1950s, the state abandoned hope that ‘benign neglect’ would allow traditional economies to survive; its interventionist approach now attempted to integrate the Inuit into the dominant economic order and a wage economy, creating new services for the Inuit by centralizing and relocating them. This strategy, shaped by their penchant for economy as well as paternalism, inevitably undermined existing social, cultural, and economic links between individuals, families, and communities, the most infamous of which was a coerced, highly contentious relocation of some Inuit to the high Arctic. 13 The provision of new services was imagined by the state as an aid to the Inuit’s assimilation into the ‘equal citizenship’ of the welfare state, and they were encouraged by experts like anthropologist Diamond Jenness, who portrayed the Inuit as a primitive group, unintentionally undermined by the forces of modernity, now in need of “wise” federal policies reflecting Ottawa’s “moral responsibility for its Inuit.” 14 In the midst of these changes, portrayals of the Inuit as stubborn adherents to a premodern culture could only reinforce existing
power relations, perpetuating Canada’s distinctive brand of internal colonialism, which involved not only ‘geographical incursion’ but also the ideological construction of a hierarchy of white progress, culture, and history.15

Impressions of an Alien Environment

White women’s travel accounts varied considerably in style. Some used conventions of the autobiography and the exploration narrative; others utilized anecdote, irony and ‘humour’; one author recounted immense scientific and environmental data; and some were more openly pedagogical in nature.16 Commonalities were nonetheless evident. Most women stressed that they were anomalies in a land inhabited by few whites: “I was [a] museum curiosity, remembered Wanda Tolboom of her arrival, “fingered by old women.”17 However, this rhetorical technique of self-effacing reversal, as Mary Louise Pratt argues, can also mask, as much as undo, relations of power and hegemony.18 Women’s sense of difference was also relayed in the language of exploration and conquest as they stressed their presence in an empty, silent, unknown land, a technique that negated the Inuit human presence.

Women writers identified their travels with the histories of famous white explorers and their accounts proclaimed their place as ‘firsts’: the first white woman on a particular island, the first white woman to negotiate a particular journey or the “most northerly wedding.”19 Even accounting for language differences, when white women spoke initially of loneliness, they clearly longed for the company of other white women. Yet, as Mena Orford recounted in her Journey North, the same longing was not true for children; hers quickly made Inuit friends, with whom they chatted, played, and visited in their homes.

White women saw themselves as bonded by their common isolation, and they often claimed that divisions of class or female rivalry were not a part of their northern experience. In part, this may have been their autobiographical reluctance to reveal uncomplimentary views of themselves and others, though the northern (western) autobiography of HBC trader’s wife Jean Godsell is replete with tales of hostile, nasty, competitive, and class-conscious white women.20 Many of the Arctic sojourners discussed in this article, of course, came from similar backgrounds: most were
high-school– or university-educated, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, from farm or middle-class families. Manning was a graduate nurse, trained in Halifax, working in Montreal, Marjorie Hines a British-born welfare teacher, and Katherine Scherman a scientist from the United States. Miriam McMillan, much younger than her explorer husband, came from a cultured, middle-class New England family. Orford, too, came from a comfortable prairie family who saw her marriage to a poor rural doctor husband as something of a decline in status. Elsie Gillis, who had attended university, actually joked that she was a “spoiled city girl” whose farthest travels had been to New York City, while Tolboom, though she came from rural Manitoba, was also educated and middle-class in outlook.

Their cultural distance from Inuit women was accentuated by the fact that the latter were often employed by them as domestic servants, thus making the racial simultaneously a class relation. White women embraced the use of paid help in a domestic environment they found overwhelmingly difficult, if not impossible, to survive in. Manning’s ability to survive entirely on her acquired skills was seen as extremely unusual and “courageous” by local HBC traders who dubbed her a veritable “white Eskimo.” More common was the experience of Mena Orford, who, when she arrived, was told, in the language of household effects, that her maid Nukinga “went with the house.” Faced with unending dishes, Gillis looked around the settlement for an Inuit woman who might “have some vague idea of white man’s ways.” “I would be glad to have Inooyuk as my maid,” she told her husband, who then had the HBC trader strike the “bargain” for Inooyuk by paying her in HBC credit. Most sojourners, publishing in the 1940s and 1950s, would not have portrayed themselves as imperious employers; rather they tried to employ humour and anecdote to describe their cultural estrangement from their hired help, though this too often revealed a clear sense of hierarchy.

White women were also understood to be a potential liability due to their inability to weather the physical surroundings. As a result, their narratives were characterized by an ambivalence, awkwardness, and a need to justify their presence, dissimilar to the tales of many men. Of course, unlike nineteenth-century middle-class women travellers, these modern sojourners had citizenship rights, participated in the professions, and had recently been exalted during the war for their equal embrace
of male labour. Even the professional women, however, commented on the difficulties they encountered. “It’s a man’s country,” was the recurring theme Hines found when she applied for jobs in the North: “Had I been a man it would have been fairly easy to find a job in Arctic Canada at that time. . . . Nursing and teaching had been undertaken by [female] missionaries — but neither missions nor matrimony attracted me!” Manning, who accompanied her husband on his geodetic surveys, had trouble persuading the government to make her an assistant on the second expedition, nor could she find an RCAF person who would fly both of them into the North. The idea was greeted with a “burst of laughter” and only a strategy of immense persistence worked. While Hines and Manning could position themselves as adventurous, path-breaking explorers, those who went as wives often cast themselves as reluctant or intrepid partners in their husband’s Arctic ventures.

Women were considered potential problems in an environment associated with hostile natural forces, danger, masculine bravery, and contact with ‘primitives.’ Writing of her earlier travels before World War II, MacMillan described how she had to prove herself relentlessly, taking on task after task to prepare for her husband’s expeditions, and when she was finally allowed on board, also taking her night watch like the men. Despite her husband’s claim that the “crew would not want a woman on board,” the crew eventually produced a petition calling for “Lady Mac’s” participation in the trip. Women also found their distinct space by stressing their feminine roles and attributes. In North Pole Boarding House, Gillis, like some other narrators, became a social, domestic focus of the all-male community, a surrogate mother or sister to other local white, single men, helping to celebrate birthdays and provide domestic rituals and Xmas celebrations.

Moreover, in the post-World War II period, white women were increasingly welcomed in the North, in feminized professions (as nurses and teachers), and also as wives of fur traders. The earlier HBC practice of traders marrying Indigenous women was now discouraged and every effort was made to make the white HBC wife comfortable with chesterfields, canned food, even washing machines. Not surprisingly, these white HBC wives often portrayed liaisons between white men and Inuit women as undesirable or unworkable. Some depicted Inuit/white liaisons
as a remnant of the whalers’ (irresponsible) past, though others, drawing on nineteenth-century racial theory, implied that their ‘mixed blood’ progeny might produce a “superior” type of Eskimo. A man from white “civilization” who married “an Eskimo woman,” an RCMP constable told scientist Scherman, “would be dragged down.” Gillis related an incident in which a young white man at their weather station was teased about the attention he was receiving from an older Inuit woman. He then received a warning: “an Eskimo woman’s skin, so I was told, looks very brown to a white man during his first year in the Arctic. In the second year, it may not look so brown. If, in the third, it looks white, then it’s high time for a man to get out. He’s in danger of becoming bushed.” While Hines was less critical of interracial marriage, she was scathing about white men’s sexual use of Inuit women, and she suspected that the fascination with wife-trading tales of the Eskimo had much to do with the predatory voyeurism of white males.

Women, then, were conscious of their status as precarious outsiders even though they were favoured as partners for white men. Like white men, they were preoccupied with physical survival in an environment that was equated with danger: the North was described as physically inhospitable, frightening, literally at the end of the universe. Both men and women invested considerable detail in discussions of the making and wearing of Arctic dress, travel by komatik, the building of snow houses, hunting for food, and the preparation of skins and meat afterwards. Their detailed descriptions of daily survival became a form of anthropological and scientific “classification,” a technique that carried with it an air of authorial certainty.

Women, however, were more self-deprecating about their own uselessness and vulnerability. When she first arrived, Manning imagined the Inuit women thinking — with justification — who is this useless woman who knows nothing about preparing skins and clothing? On the other hand, some of the wives informed their readers that their white husbands became such skilled, masculine outdoorsmen that they were “almost Eskimo,” respected for their survival skills. Some also waxed eloquent on their husbands’ paternal kindness to the Eskimo. “He loved these simple people,” said MacMillan of her husband, and according to her, they revered him.
Ice and snow were not the only dangers described. More than one woman recounted the tale of an RCMP wife “torn to pieces” by husky dogs.33 Since this one incident took place in the 1920s, and was still being recounted in the late 1940s, it had clearly become an ‘Arctic myth’ symbolizing the vulnerability of white women in the North. The Inuit were also a potentially menacing presence. Despite the dominant picture of the passive, jolly Eskimo, many narratives included at least one tale of a vicious murder and/or cannibalism, suggesting the Inuit might lack an evolved sense of humane compassion. Since many women had read standard Arctic travellers’ accounts, they called up incidents from these works reinforcing this point of view — sometimes citing the very same cannibalistic “event” from Peter Freuchen’s book.34 These descriptions of death in the Arctic often lacked intensive knowledge of the Inuit culture; they might also dwell on the gruesome details of death, perhaps included consciously as a means of inciting the reader’s interest in the narrative.

Nor was their picture only one of male violence. Hines recounted a much-repeated story of a woman in her community who, years before, had participated in a religious-crazed, cold-blooded murder of some of her family, sending them out to the ice floes. On one of their ship’s stopovers north, Gillis’s husband was commandeered on to a makeshift jury trial for an Inuit woman accused of murdering her husband. Gillis characterized her as a woman without remorse, creating an image of an amoral primitive: “Her beady brown eyes looked unconcernedly at us and her face broke into happy grin. This is really serious business, I thought, shocked at her deportment . . . Then I remembered that here was a daughter out of another era, a child out of the stone age, suddenly thrust among people thousands of years distant from her . . . Obviously she was completely unable to understand all this colour and ceremony to teach white man’s ways to her and her people.”35 Even a quick glance at Gillis’s account suggests a more complex situation: the woman, pressed into a marriage she did not want, claimed she was abused and threatened with a knife; a signed “confession” in syllabic was produced even though she did not write, and the trial was undertaken in English, which she did not speak. Gillis, a newcomer to the North, ventured that her sentence of banishment was desired as a mark of prestige, further proof of the need to impose new values on those who could so cold-bloodedly take a human
life. Since the interwar period the state had slowly tried to impose its superior legal norms on the Indigenous North. Travellers’ accounts could only reinforce support for this project, since they evoked a sense of fear about the occasional but unpredictable violence of the Inuit.36

The more preponderant image of the Inuit was that of the primitive and simple, happy, and good-natured people, a cultural motif often replayed in popular magazines like the Beaver, with photos of “The Cheerful Eskimo.”37 Descriptions of these “stone age” peoples in women’s narratives were so numerous than one cannot begin to recount them. Katharine Scherman’s first impressions will suffice: titling her opening chapter “Back to the Ice Age,” she describes the Inuit as “exotic gnomes” with oriental eyes, men of the “stone age” who had the “simplicity and directness of children” and who taught her scientific party what it was like to be “uncivilized” again. Describing Idlouk, the guide who sustained their expedition to Bylot Island, Scherman’s use of temporal metaphors stressed the ‘cave man’ image: “he was cut off from us by a barrier of many thousands years of progressive civilization, the counterpart of our Asian ancestors who drifted east and west out of an unknown, faintly remembered Garden of Eden.”38 While Scherman was there to study birds, her stature as scientist also endowed her observations of the Inuit with the impression of veracity.

In their descriptions of Inuit society, writers utilized orientalist techniques, such as generalizing and essentializing, to create an image of a Stone Age people in a collision course with modernity. Scherman’s book recounted many Inuit stories, collected by the local HBC trader from elders; these myths, she explains, with their animalistic spirits, were not “abstract or symbolic,” as in more developed cultures; they were merely full of “magic.”39 Other writers claimed that the Inuit had no real forms of governance, only “hunting leaders,” that they embraced superstitious fantasies, especially about the spirits of the dead, and even “drilled holes in the heads” of those who appeared insane.40 Although some women also wrote of Inuit “intelligence,” even this was dependent on white assessment. MacMillan, for example, cites her expert husband: “they could be as intelligent as whites . . . and my husband had evidence to prove it.”41 This repeated language of ‘primitiveness’ inevitably had a cumulative ideological impact. ‘Primitive’ denotes ‘barbaric, savage, prehistoric, crude,’
designating someone less technologically and intellectually advanced, without a complex social organization, cultural world, or history. Denying non-Western indigenous peoples a history, as David Spurr argues, is one of the key rhetorical means of denying them humanity.\textsuperscript{42}

The trope of the noble savage was also used by some writers. Manning noted that she found the interior Eskimo, “poor but gentle,” their character proof that those Eskimo with “the least contact with whites were the finest.”\textsuperscript{43} The Inuit were presented as a communal people lacking in individualistic selfishness, an image that idealized, but also essentialized in its simplicity.\textsuperscript{44} Some northern travellers saw themselves as escaping the pressures and spiritual vacuum of modernity, claiming that the simple Inuit had not yet absorbed the bad traits of a materialist society: “Eskimos” Gillis related, “never stole even when they were hungry.”\textsuperscript{45} Hines had little use for such romanticization, noting that there were “good and bad” in all peoples, and that Inuit could certainly steal, including from her: “When Eskimos know the English language well enough to read what has been written about them,” she concluded sardonically on this score, “they’ll get enough laughs to last a life-time.”\textsuperscript{46}

Despite immense respect for Inuit environmental skills, whites were still portrayed as those in leadership roles, with the best interests of the Native in mind, a view also reflected in some ‘progressive,’ social democratic attempts to improve the lives of northern Native peoples at this time.\textsuperscript{47} Utilizing the language of British imperialism, authors described the Inuit as “children” and whites as their paternal protectors. While fur trade history does suggest relations of some reciprocity,\textsuperscript{48} HBC sojourning wives tended to portray the company as paternalism incarnate, emphasizing instances of credit, food, and medicine humanely extended. When families faced “hunger and hardship,” and men came to the post, destitute, Tolboom explained, they gave them their old clothes, and spread the biscuits “thick with lard” (the company ration) to help them out.\textsuperscript{49}

Like the traders, the RCMP were also benevolent and fair. Retired chief of the Eastern Arctic Government Patrol, McKeand, noted Gillis, was a “great white father” to the Eskimo, while Scherman reassured her readers that the northern RCMP “are good men who want to do something for the native, not exploit them.”\textsuperscript{50} Because the Inuit did not understand
what was best for their children, writers explained, payment of family allowances was overseen by the RCMP. Without this humane check, Eskimo parents might have purchased useless luxuries rather than the pablum they should have. These paternal metaphors are ironic given the way that the Inuit saw whites. Describing the early RCMP on Baffin Island, elders remember “they were just like kids . . . like children,” as they had to have everything done for them — clothes made for them, posts cared for, igloos built, and even their tea mugs held in the cold!51

Not all accounts, however, described religious missions and residential schools favourably. Reflecting a more secular age after World War II, authors like Scherman noted that judgmental, moralistic missionaries had destructively disparaged Inuit traditions. Other women praised the missionary work of whites in the North (usually referring to a few heroic individuals), but overall, women writers were less adamant about the need for conversion than nineteenth-century writers had been.

Many sojourners’ accounts debated the pros and cons of whites’ incursions into the North; though framed within relativist terms, these did not always reflect a true ‘reciprocity’52 of equals, as much as a subtle paternalism premised on some of the same sentiments as missionization. Furthermore, the image of a less materialistic people, living a “timeless gypsy life”53 was used not only to idealize, but also to suggest the Inuit’s lack of initiative, shiftlessness, and a premodern fatalism. Recounting the three most noteworthy things about the Inuit (who had been indispensable to their expedition), Scherman lists: “no sense of time, laziness and unending sociability.”54 In Orford’s account, her doctor husband becomes exasperated if not enraged because he claims that the Inuit won’t save food or plan for the future. As a result, families are starving: “They are just too bloody fatalistic and improvident to provide for tomorrow.”55 Yet most whites learned how to cache food under rocks from the Inuit, and material goods always had a different meaning for hunters who had to carry things with them. Like the poor, blamed for their own unemployment, the Inuit were viewed as architects of their own fate. Inuit “fatalism” explained why the Inuit were starving, rather than trade conditions, the depletion of resources, or social dislocation. Conservation by the Eskimo, Manning wrote, was completely inadequate due to their lack of modern understanding of firearms. Citing her husband as expert, she
claimed that the Inuit fired “wantonly” on seals and needed whites to oversee the walrus hunt in order to protect this species. Hines’s harsh judgments about Inuit relocation are especially salient: those who were relocated “were supplied with everything necessary for the undertaking. . . . Inertia on their part was the cause of poor return. . . . now that there is a good market for Eskimo handicraft there is no need for any Eskimo to be penniless.”

Inuit culture was thus celebrated as a remnant of a nobler, simpler past, but impugned for its primitive, fatalistic ways. The image of the Innu woman as “post native” made this clear: she should become civilized, but she could never really be so. Inuit women might “act white” but never embrace whiteness. Inuit labour was essential for northern whites, yet sojourners warned of the danger of “post natives” becoming “spoiled,” as they wanted the same luxuries without working for them. Describing a woman working as a servant for the HBC, Scherman noted that “Makpa was one of the few examples I had seen of Eskimos ruined by coddling. They were easy to spoil, being adaptable and lazy. . . . It was obvious that this elegant, neat, lazy girl could never again live the life of her people. . . . She was no longer a true Eskimo but neither was she anywhere near being a woman of our civilization.” Since it was children who were normally spoiled, this language suggested the infantilization of the Inuit in the eyes of their white ‘parents.’

Family, Sexuality, Consumption

One of the signs noted by many writers of the ‘spoiled Eskimo’ was her taste for the dress and makeup of white women. Women sojourners’ narratives offered detailed descriptions of Inuit women’s dress, work, family life, domesticity, and consumption, categories of particular fascination because Inuit women were portrayed as highly valued for their work, but nonetheless subordinate members of patriarchal households. Authors often equated primitive with patriarchal, referring to a recent past of Inuit men fighting violently for women, of female infanticide, or arranged marriages. There was some interest in the notion of ‘wife trading’ too, though this was more often discussed in men’s accounts of their lives in the North. Ignoring anthropological evidence of egalitarian
relations between Inuit men and women, white narratives adhered to
the image of their own social order as more progressive, egalitarian, and
fair to women. Although white women were sometimes equated with
vulnerability, they also became symbols of modernity, particularly in
discussions of sexuality, family, and consumption. As in other colonial
situations, the imposition of ‘superior’ white norms, especially relating
to domesticity, was accomplished not by direct coercion but rather by
repeated example, image, and subtle ideological persuasion. 61

Inuit childbirth was often endowed with notions of the primitive,
portrayed as easily accomplished, with less pain and disruption than
for white women. 62 Writers noted how soon Inuit women were back at
their work, though this may have been a necessity, as it was for some
working-class women. While there is some evidence that white nurses in
the North were trying to relate Inuit practices to new ideas of “natural”
childbirth, 63 many sojourners’ accounts still invoked images of primitive
reproduction. Manning’s one example was telling: “The [woman] was too
lazy to do more than she had to do any time, but I did think she would
make something ready. As an Eskimo baby’s layette consists of a single
garment, a hood, there is little sewing to be done. . . . there wasn’t even
a hood ready, and as soon as the baby was wiped — with her hands —
she snatched the filthy rag of a hood that Lizzie had made for her doll.
Neither did a sepsis have any place in the whole procedure.” 64 Manning
may well have been unaware of the Inuk tradition of not making clothes
for a child until it was born. 65 Mena Orford was horrified to find out that
her young daughters had witnessed an Inuit home birth and didn’t want
them to give her curious husband a description (especially at the dinner
table), fearing the children might be “damaged” by witnessing this pri-
mal scene. Pressed on by the doctor who had not yet seen a Native birth,
their description convinced him that midwives were ignorant, not tying
the cord properly, causing women’s deaths. Mena’s most modern northern
birth, in contrast, took place in the hospital, while she was under
anaesthetic, “out like a light.” 66

Rituals such as marriage became markers of domestic difference. Bou-
quet, dress, bridesmaid, all had to be in place for Tolboom’s wedding, and
though she is gently self-mocking in her description of her vigilance with
respect to custom, it is clear that this symbolized the proper standards
of marriage. The fact that a white wedding denoted a virginal one was made clear with contrasts to Native weddings. When the Anglican minister made a visit to Povungnetuk, Tolboom recounts, he was perturbed to find a Native couple who had their child baptized, then announced they wanted to be married. Facing an “impatient and annoyed” minister, the “couple grinned foolishly” and in response to his lecture about the proper place of marriage, they explained, “we forgot.”67 Some women’s accounts also lauded the existence of long-lasting Inuit unions — particularly to counter accounts of wife trading — but the underlying sense that marriage might be taken less seriously by the Inuit remained.

Nowhere was the difference between the primitive and the modern more evocatively symbolized than in descriptions of food and dress. Consumption defined white domesticity, indicated by the pantries of white women, often provisioned for a full year by the visit of the Nascopie (or other ships after its sinking in 1947). Describing the arduous work of unpacking, Tolboom notes that her shelves included everything from “staples” to “shredded coconut, olives and strawberries, and cases of fresh potatoes, eggs and oranges.”68 Gillis’s shelves were so full after ship time that they “looked like a full grocery store.” Using ready-made ingredients, she describes their desserts alone of “canned fruit, pies, cakes, puddings, jello . . . Apple pie, raisin, dried apricot, pumpkin, caramel, chocolate, butterscotch, lemon.”69 The contrast with the “biscuits covered in lard” served to the Inuit is striking. On a visit to a local tent, Tolboom realized that her garbage was being recycled as household items; her table scraps went to Inuit families. Gillis relays her charity in sending her rotten eggs and potatoes to thankful families.70 For white women, now accustomed to consuming, not producing food, the thought of losing ship provisions was disastrous. The nine hundred pounds of meat sent north for Gillis’s boarding house never made it, resulting in her images of “starvation” and incessant “public complaints”— the latter so embarrassed her husband that he became publicly enraged with her.71 Some women, however, also came to value Inuit food, especially the meat provided by local hunters, and Hines was understandably critical of both the introduction of infant formula and the government’s attempts to tell Inuit women how to preserve game!72

Household items and dress also marked out ‘the modern.’ Many white
women wanted to create familiar domestic space, importing everything from wallpaper to crystal, silver, and china, and a full closet of clothes. Sojourners had to have winter clothing made for them by Inuit women, as otherwise they would have frozen, yet white fashions — from nail polish to stockings — remained a symbol of social prestige, as the Eskimo baggy ‘shift’ was disparaged. Some writers portrayed the advent of the catalogue, the harbinger of consumption, as a ray of hope for the untidy Inuit women, dressed in “shapeless, long, ugly cotton skirts” (admittedly a Christian mission influence). Immediately after Gillis accused her maid of being spoiled by proximity to whites, she explained how she had acted as a role model in terms of fashion and manners: “On Sundays, of course, I always wore one of my best silk dresses [for dinner]. On Inooyuk’s first Sunday with me [as an extra maid] she came dressed as usual. She did not again make that error.”

Yet when Inuit women imitated white dress, they were often ridiculed. Appearing for Christmas incongruously mixing white and Native costumes, Kowtah (the maid) wore a “lady’s maroon felt ribbon trimmed hat, over her black braids . . . a wine-coloured coat, draped with a huge fur collar. On her feet were ladies fur trimmed velvet overshoes. In her ears were ear-rings, and her lips and finger-tips were daubed with bright red. . . . It was all I could do to keep the smile from becoming a shout of laughter. Kowtah imagined herself a fashion plate straight out of one of the magazines she had seen at Jimmy’s. Her fifth avenue costume had no doubt come out of some missionary bale.” Reviewers of these books clearly found such accounts amusing. Could these descriptions of Native women ‘dressed up as whites’ be characterized as colonial mimicry? Perhaps they were for Inuit women, though those with the discursive power in this case were white women whose texts reinforced mocking colonialist images, rather than subverting them with ‘hybridity.’

Women offered detailed descriptions of Christmas celebrations as they tried to recreate ‘home’ in an alien environment. Christmas also became a means of establishing new modes of consumption and cultural practice. Women transported Christmas trees, candles, decorations, serviettes, and other paraphernalia to celebrate properly amidst the ‘natives.’ At their celebration for the Inuit, the Tolbooms offered up “party
favours” (unsold HBC items from the trading post), games, and refreshments: “What a party we had. . . . into the office and waiting room porch crowded 87 men, women and children. Never since have I seen so many joyful, perspiring Eskimo faces.” The HBC couple distributing the party favours were impeccably dressed ‘parents,’ imperial in image: “I felt gala in my red woolen dress, high heels and nylon stockings. Perfume, nail polish and a little corsage of evergreen and holly berries provided special touches. [Wulf] wore his good suit. Oh, but we did feel like the Lord and Lady of the Manor.”

The fact that Inuit women’s bodies were objects of merriment in these descriptions bore some similarity — but also difference — to earlier accounts of southern First Nations women. The fact that whiteness was equated with cleanliness, while Indigenous women were “dirty, greasy,” and unkempt was found in both sets of racist discourses. However, Inuit women were not sexualized as degenerate or promiscuous temptresses in the same manner as Native women, perhaps because nudity was equated with sexuality, and Inuit women’s layers of dress precluded this. Inuit women were rendered more childlike than voluptuous, with Inuit men cast in the ‘cave man’ role of sexual possessors — a stereotype, argues Brody, reflecting white sexual desires/anxieties more than anything else. Nonetheless, Inuit women’s sexual availability was implied, with references to their easy liaisons with whalers, their acceptance of past polygamy, their lack of inhibitions concerning privacy in one-room homes, and their supposedly seasonal sexual coupling. “In early summer in every Eskimo encampment,” wrote Tolboom, “Sex rears its head. But here it is not an ugly one. It is looked on as . . . the changing of the seasons. It is accepted as simply as the matings of all wild things in this Land.”

Inuit women’s domestic labour, especially their provision of food and dress, however, was vigorously extolled as readers were offered many examples of Inuit aid without which whites would have perished. Writers nonetheless absorbed the reigning anthropological and popular images of a patriarchal Inuit culture, with male hunting at the pinnacle of prestige and power. Since many sojourners saw men trapping, trading furs, and acting as guides, and women doing ‘inside’ labour such as sewing and child care (deemed feminine and valued less in their own culture), it was assumed that the gendered division of labour reflected the power
of men. This assumption was not necessarily shared by a few writers who spent more time immersed in Inuit culture, speaking the language; one HBC fur trader stressed the co-operative partnerships of Inuit husbands and wives, as well as women’s crucial role in directing decisions about extramarital liaisons. Though women sojourners were sometimes critical of the sexual status of Inuit women, they easily accepted the gendered division of labour; some even recommended more and better domestic training for Inuit girls.

Some women’s narratives also became tales of increased respect for the Inuit over time. In one small incident, Tolboom’s favourite dog had to be shot, and her husband warned her that the skin had to be used by locals, who were in desperate straits, for warm mitts. Initially upset, she came to understand that the careful use of all resources for daily life was a positive part of Inuit life. When Gillis first saw her maid polishing the glasses by spitting on them, she recounts, “I was just sick with disgust.” But after a discussion with her husband, she admitted that in a culture where so much of women’s work involved chewing, this was simply a logical use of a “tool.”

Discussions of child rearing were used, most notably, to symbolize Mena Orford’s transformation from critic to acolyte of Inuit culture. Many accounts lamented the lack of discipline for Inuit children, but then lauded the good behaviour of children and the intense love of parents for their offspring. Mena Orford’s first impression of her Inuit helper, Nukinga, literally betrayed physical disgust, yet this was followed by a quick revelation of her children’s different response: “A churning started in the pit of my stomach. . . . as I watched this gross woman with the dark-skinned perspiring face encircle my two in her wide arms and in turn, rub each of their noses with her own. . . . but as [the children] left, their faces shone with a contentment and happiness I hadn’t seen for some time.” More dramatic was her realization that the Inuit aversion to the physical discipline of children was perhaps more compassionate than her own belief in spanking. When she hit one of her children in front of her two Inuit helpers, she encountered pure horror in their eyes. She began to question her superior knowledge, acknowledging that the Inuit make “a pretty good job” of child rearing.
Inuit women were often portrayed as docile in descriptions of the Arctic, but the reactions of Orford’s helpers, and their refusal to accept her methods of child rearing, indicate that they were not. If they disagreed with the white women they worked for, they might simply stop coming or indicate, without words, their disapproval. White women often took silence for approval, yet Inuit women were likely showing “ilira,” a show of deference to intimidating individuals that “reflected the subtle but pervasive result of inequality.” Scherman, among others, also noted instances where Inuit women and men seemed to simply disregard advice or orders; clearly, even those Inuit working for whites maintained a strong sense of their own needs, values, and judgments. Hines was more likely than some authors to endow her Inuit neighbours with complex reactions and agency, and she too noted instances in which Inuit would simply not do things that they were ordered to, if they judged them to be unsafe or unwise, no matter how insistent whites were.

In some instances, then, travel narratives might be read against the grain, indicating not the ‘jolly, docile’ Eskimo woman but a far more complex human being, one coping with rapid social change, and sometimes less enamoured with Euro-Canadian incursion than whites understood. However, assessing the dominant messages behind these sojourning narratives is still important. How would the Inuit have been imagined by readers in postwar Canada? On one level, there were messages of tolerance, respect for Inuit skills, and compassion for other human beings. One night as Mena Orford went to have tea and chat with her Inuit neighbour, she saw her neighbour’s boy mauled by a dog; there is no doubt that she felt compassion for his devastated mother, a woman she did come to call a friend.

But tolerance and compassion can coexist with paternalism, also a theme in many narratives. The image of a primitive and fatalistic culture, facing the painful fact of inevitable adaptation, appeared repeatedly, along with the notion that whites were well placed to oversee the difficult, uphill path to modernization. Rhetorical and discursive strategies of colonial representation — superior surveillance, scientific classification, modernist idealization, and eroticization — were all woven into
sojourners’ accounts. As a result, the non-Indigenous south was portrayed, in the light of modernization theories of the time, as more progressive, modern, urban, and industrial, the repository of knowledge that might allow the Inuit to develop socially and economically.87

These images were also deeply political, especially in an era when the North was an increasingly important economic frontier and military concern, and as government intervention in Inuit lives was increasing. The fate of northern Indigenous residents was being debated by popular writers, some of whom extolled the North for its resource potential, while others offered exposées of starving Indigenous peoples, abandoned by a callous government.88 Whether the racism and poverty that engulfed the lives of southern Aboriginals would be replicated in the North was also a point for concerned debate.

On one hand, sojourners’ respect for Inuit environmental survival skills and their hopes for positive Inuit adaption to ‘modern’ ways endowed the women’s narratives with a tone of liberal tolerance and relativism. Writing on the Arctic Inuit did not simply replicate earlier writing on southern Aboriginal peoples; within colonialist discourse, there was some distinction between a language of northern Inuit ‘primitivism’ and the language of Indian ‘savagism,’ with the latter arguably even more pessimistic and negative in character. Nonetheless, both perspectives ultimately reflected broader patterns of colonialist thinking on history, white settlement, and ‘modern’ development: both were part of a long tradition of colonialism within Canada.

As cultural producers of sojourning narratives that juxtaposed ‘primitive’ Inuit peoples with the encroachment of more progressive, modern Canada, women authors played an active constitutive role in the creation of colonial texts. The cultural images created by white sojourners with direct experience or scientific ‘knowledge’ of Inuit life were undoubtedly endowed with the weight of a certain veracity, authenticity, and memorability: it was assumed that actual experience of living in the ‘wild’ gave them more immediate insight into their Indigenous neighbours. The tone of superior surveillance of Inuit life assumed by many women writers thus had much in common with works authored by men, although women’s less confident relation to the ‘wild’ North — particularly if they came as helpmates — and their more detailed descriptions of women’s
Constructing the ‘Eskimo’ Wife

lives, domesticity, and consumption also made their narratives distinct. Perhaps most important, sojourners’ admissions that Inuit women and men retained different views and values than whites, and sometimes disagreed with them, also suggested that paternalist traditions were not unchallenged in the North. Inuit efforts to sustain their culture and organize to defend their lands indicated that the culture of colonialism was never monolithic or unassailable.

Notes

I wish to thank Shelagh Grant, Janet McGrath, and Caroline Langill for their comments and suggestions on this research.


Some had precise descriptions of northern flora and birds (Manning), others offer more direct opinions (Hines), while some attempt a more ‘light-hearted’ description of northern life (Gillis). Differences were also apparent in men’s accounts, with one unusual one written by an English author, Gordon Langley Hall, *Me Papoose Sitter* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1955). Despite the terrible title, his portraits of his northern neighbours often appear less essentialized ‘racial’ stereotypes than a collection of stock characters reminiscent of some eccentric British village.
18 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 84.
20 Godsell, *I Was No Lady*. Manning refers briefly to such conflicts in *A Summer*, 53.
22 Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), Hudson’s Bay Company Papers (HBC), Wolstoneholme Post Journal, B 397/a/9, Jan. 1940.
25 Again, Godsell was different, discussing attempts to teach the servants “who was master”: *I Was No Lady*, 45.
28 Scherman, *Spring on an Arctic Island*, 105.
29 Ibid., 188.
38 Scherman, *Spring on an Arctic Island*.
39 Ibid., 180.
40 Ibid., 138.
41 MacMillan, *Green Seas*.
Constructing the ‘Eskimo’ Wife

Manning, A Summer, 26.

Ibid., 127.

Gillis, North Pole Boarding House, 184.

Hines, School House, 161.


Tolboom, Arctic Bride, 173.

Gillis, North Pole Boarding House; Scherman, Spring on an Arctic Island, 192.

Timothy Kadloo and Sam Arnakallak (Pond Inlet), quoted in Shelagh Grant, Arctic Justice, 232.

Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 84.

Scherman, Spring on an Arctic Island, 117.

Ibid., 138.

Orford, Journey North, 95.

Manning, A Summer, 140.


This would echo some of Homi Bhabha’s characterizations. The Native might be “anglicized but could never be ‘English’”: Bart Moore-Gilbert, Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics (London: Verso, 1997), 120.

Scherman, Spring on an Arctic Island, 189.

Notably Duncan Pryde’s description of his own participation in spouse swapping in Nunaga.

Notions of the proper domesticity were central to many other colonial projects. See Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination; K. Hansen, ed., African Encounters with Domesticity (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).


Judith Bender Zelmanovits, “Midwife Preferred: Maternity Care in Outport Nursing Stations in Northern Canada,” in Women, Health and Nation: Canada and
64 Manning, *Igloo*, 55.
65 My thanks to Janet McGrath for this information.

67 Tolboom, *Arctic Bride*, 102. Since these women did not discuss their own sexuality, one can only infer from other vague references to their premarital ‘shyness,’ their belief in sex only after marriage. The fact that their sexuality was not mentioned, but that of Inuit women was, again placed the latter in the category of more sexualized ‘other.’

68 Ibid., 62.
69 Gillis, *North Pole Boarding House*, 57, 75.
70 Ibid., 151.

71 This may not have been in response to their proximity to less affluent Inuit, but because, after a radio message home, he worried that everyone knew their business: “If you ever mention food again . . . I’ll kill you.” Was the author aware how negative a view she presented of her husband? Gillis, *North Pole Boarding House*, 62, 75.

74 Gillis, *North Pole Boarding House*, 95.
75 Ibid., 137.


77 As Grace points out, “mimicry is unstable and uncontrollable; it can also backfire on the mimics”: *Canada and the Idea of North*, 100. See also Diana Fuss for discussion of differences between feminist characterizations of mimicry as ‘dissent’ and the different characterization of Homi Bhabha: “Interior Colonies: Franz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” *Diacritics* 24 (1994): 20–42.

78 Tolboom, *Arctic Bride*, 93.

82 Pryde, *Nunaga*.
83 Gillis, *North Pole Boarding House*, 90.
85 Ibid., 70–72.
86 Brody, quoted in Grant, *Arctic Murder*, 17.