

# BOOK REVIEWS

ILHA DO DESTERRO



## REVIEWS/RESENHAS

**Evans, Robert Michael. *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2008.**

By Neide Garcia Pinheiro

"Just as Inuit art should take its place among the great arts of the world, Inuit videography should take its place among the great Inuit arts" (3). Thus Robert Michael Evans introduces his book *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*. Other scholars have already acknowledged the importance of Inuit videos in a broader context of film production. For instance, William Beard and Jerry White state that it is "some of the most dynamic, exciting work on the post-1980 North American media" (*North of Everything*, 2002, xx). Nevertheless, *Isuma* by Evans is not only the most recent study about Inuit film production, but also one of the most comprehensive views about the subject.

Evans explains that in Inuktitut, the Inuit language, 'isuma' means "thought" (20). Thus, from the very title of his book the author invites the reader 'to reflect' on the compelling film production in Igloolik, where he spent nine months doing research from the perspective of ethnographic studies. Igloolik, an Inuit hamlet located between mainland Canada and Baffin Island, has around

1200 inhabitants. Despite of its small demographic scope, the place is home for the amazing number of three film companies: an office of the Inuit Broadcast Corporation (IBC), Tariagsuk Film Company, and Igloolik Isuma Productions. *Isuma: Inuit Video Art* focuses on the latter, an independent film enterprise, which is one of the most well-known Indigenous film companies in the world. Covering the history of Isuma, the book explores various cultural and political stances of Inuit filmmaking, showing how the producers combine traditional Inuit culture and modern technologies to present stunning films both to local and international audiences.

The author begins his reflections with a short historical version of the development of Inuit art, which has two main connections. The first one is its link to the lifestyle in the Arctic. In nomadic times, habitual travels required that the Inuit kept only a few belongings. Given that, as it happens in a number of other cultures in the world, Inuit art was related to daily life routines, in the design of garments, igloos and tools for survival. However, this does not mean that Inuit art was 'merely' utilitarian. As Evans explains, it was "internally meaningful," combining the determination of survival with "the impassioned determination of celebrated existence" (3), in one of the harshest environments in the world.

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 56	p. 167- 173	jan./jun. 2009
------------------	---------------	-------	-------------	----------------

The second historical nexus was the encounter between the Inuit and the European societies. As Evans observes, starting around 1770, this encounter led to the “shifting [of Inuit art] from the internally meaningful toward the commercial” (4). Inuit peoples began to produce art to trade by Western goods. The commodification of Inuit art became more intense in the twentieth century, when the Inuit were forced to settle. As a result there was a change from a livelihood based on fishing, hunting and gathering to a cash-based economy highly dependent on government welfare. Thus, the trading of sculptures, carvings and printings became a form to implement the weak cashed-based economy in a region where few waged jobs were available.

According to Evans, the dependence on government assistance contributed to the emergence of Inuit art movement in the 1920s, when Canadian institutions began to market Inuit handicrafts. Within a few decades, Inuit printing and sculptures also became appreciated in art collections in Europe, Asia and North America. Indeed, as Hessel, quoted in Evans, states, only a “few contemporary art forms can claim such wide acceptance” (5).

Emerging in the latest decades of the twentieth century, Inuit filmmaking is the most recent Inuit artistic endeavour, and it has “thrust Inuit art into a broader political realm,” Evans remarks (5). In the early days of broadcast and filmmaking, Inuit peoples became concerned

with the influence of southern-Canadian programming on Inuit culture and language. Given that, they created the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), aiming at providing Inuit perspectives to Inuit audiences. However, considering the IBC as a bureaucratic office of southern-Canadian systems of control, a group of Inuit people created Igloodik Isuma, the first independent Inuit film company, which was incorporated officially in 1990.

*Isuma: Inuit Video Art* engages in the discussions of Indigenous filmmaking as a form of “embedded aesthetics,” a term Faye Ginsburg uses to “draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations” (368). In this way, Evans combines textual analysis of Isuma’s films with an in-depth discussion about the contexts of their creation. From this perspective, the films by Isuma reveal a number of important facets of Inuit traditional culture, including the value of community.

Evans proposes the thesis that Isuma’s films may be considered within the large realm of folklore studies. At the foreground of his hypothesis is the notion that folklore is “a lived activity, an interchange among people, carried out in a real setting and shaped by social understanding” (8). Aware that some folklorists would argue against the idea of electronic media as folklore, the author offers a number of arguments to sustain his hypothesis. One of them is Linda

Degh's notion that electronically reproduced folklore "retains all the criteria by which we judge what is folklore and what is not: it is socially relevant, based on tradition, and applied to current needs" (qtd. in Evans, 37).

Isuma's films convey Inuit traditions, rituals, and stories, contributing to the (re)imagination of the cultural past. In order to portray the traditional Inuit past, costumes are prepared, tents and Igloos are built, tools are made, make-up is applied, rituals and traditions are enacted. These activities are accomplished in a community-based work, highlighting the strong sense of locality and group identity at Isuma. In more practical terms, Isuma's film production contributes to increase the number of paying jobs in the region. Given that, as Evans maintains, Isuma reflects Inuit culture not only through film content, but also through the particular approach to work. Furthermore, the distinct working approach reinforces one fundamental aspect of the company's philosophy, its belief in authenticity.

The issue of authenticity revolves around the central question of who has the right to represent a group. Quoted in Evans, Zacharias Kunuk, one of the leading members of Isuma, says, "we are in the best position to tell our stories" (133). However, the struggle over the right to representation is by no means an easy task, especially when an independent film company has to face the challenges of the economic system. As Evans remarks, Isuma controls the pro-

cess of filmmaking. However, "while it [the film company] has its freedom" as an independent enterprise, it also faces "a fundamental irony of its own". The company is still dependent on Southern granting systems. As he concludes, "they [Isuma's team] fight vigorously against the foibles of this [granting] system, but ultimately they must adhere to it or perish" (136).

Although Evans focuses on the work of Igloolik Isuma Corporation, he also provides an in-depth discussion about the relationship between the three film companies at Igloolik. As he observes, Isuma and Tariagsuk Video Centre seek to work and offer a "'more Inuit' view of Arctic life, in both product and process." Both companies see in the IBC an appendage of Ottawa bureaucratic system. According to the author, the distinct agendas, working styles and interests of Isuma, Tariagsuk and IBC shows that "passing the camera to the Inuit did not result in a single, culturally pure form of self-expression" (203). Inuit cultural representation is filtered by the distinct perspectives of each of the three companies at Igloolik.

*Isuma: Inuit Video Art* has as its main focus the discussion of Inuit film production at Igloolik. However, the book ushers into an ongoing and overarching discussion about what happens when Indigenous peoples take over filmmaking as a means of self-representation. Among Evans's conclusions "the most profound, perhaps, is that the sought after (sic) pure transmission of culture

retreats like a rainbow, always just out of reach" (208). Given that, the great virtue of the book is to remind the reader that critical analyses of Indigenous filmmaking should take into account the power imbued in the process of representation rather than engaging in essentialist discussions about authentic portrayals of Native life and experience. This perspective allows for a better appreciation of the outstanding works such as the ones by the Inuit filmmakers at Igloodik.

#### References

- Beard, William, and Jerry White. *North of Everything*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2002.
- Ginsburg, Faye. "Embedded Aesthetics: Creating a Discursive Space for Indigenous Media." *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994): 365-382.

***Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Kate Eichhorn and Heather Milne. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009.**

by Taciê Coutinho Leal

Published in 2009, this anthology presents a selection of fifteen groundbreaking Canadian women writers. As in many aspects of this volume, a hybrid character composes the background from which they speak: the texts date from different periods, both poetry and prose

are intermingled, some writers work in collaboration, and, on top of that, each author speaks through varied, unique channels. Prior to the poems, the poets also engage in an interview with the editors who, in a sense, not only contextualize the reading, but also enrich their appreciation.

At first sight, the title may point to a somewhat identifiable direction – the words *Canadian* and *women* in a sense strongly modify the prose and poetics in question. Yet, this seems not to be the case here. As the editors have pointed out, though the question of gender and nation are to be found permeating many of the poems here, it is the word *innovative* which, in fact, directs the volume. In their own words, *innovative* would be "poetry and poetics as writing that, at the very least, approaches language as an inherent problematic and subject of inquiry rather than mere vehicle of representation" (9). Therefore, innovation and boldness is what join these writers. In fact, the anthology may be seen as an unparalleled collection in Canadian women writing precisely because of its emphasis on language experimentation. If in previous feminist discourses poets and activists advocated female bonding as a way to empowerment, *Prismatic Publics* seems to propose bonding through the crossing of genres and frontiers.

Nation and gender dialogue and overlap with utterly contemporary questions that are reshaping our *being* in the world, such as people's impossibility to really

communicate in the digital era, the all-encompassing presence of technology, and the constant avalanche of sources and references to which we are daily exposed. Old historical injustices that continue to haunt the world as they reappear – the Indian massacres and slavery, for instance – also highlight the paradoxes and gaps that underlie our present notion of “history.” Language experimentation enhances those themes and becomes the perfect vehicle for this multiplicity of voices. The reader, however, has to abandon any passive reception for this volume implies an active audience, one that is not afraid to engage in a challenging proposal that is well represented by the word *prismatic* on the title. Mirroring the fragmentation of information today, the reader is invited to rearrange the parts and bits of the shattered images and scenes to create his/her own version.

In one section from the poem “My Paris,” for instance, Gail Scott creates a fragmented narrative that, through a myriad of references, contrasts the “growing entrenchment of the Right” to the world of fashion and “hyper-female roles.” A couple talks in a café while the typical male/female roles are dissected with a sophisticated mixture of irony and wit. Meanwhile, she reminds us of the “Huge Western I. Casting unecological shadow. Over earth” (104). The punctuation and the lack of transitions among sentences enhance the confusion and the shattered logics that make up the world today. The “I” is highlighted in bold as if to both denounce

and disavow this huge Western subject who annihilates nature in the name of progress and vanity.

The same threat to ecosystems (including people) is explored by Margaret Christakos in “M1. UK Breast Milk Toxic: 13 July 99” – making reference to the debate raised in 1999 about the levels of toxins in breast milk (by WWF among others). Christakos invites the reader to puzzle over fragments of information and numbers that give the scope of the tragedy. Through a list fragments of scientific information grouped in a unique mode on the page the poet not only criticizes the high level of pollutants to which we are daily exposed, but also an unscrupulous food industry that make us impotent hostages. It is left to the reader the task of rearranging these bits of information, producing staggering stories about mothers who can leave a lethal heritage to their babies. In M2. Ada and Eva, a description about a breast transplant speaks of a contemporary body that can also be rearranged and modified. The references to liposuction, cancer, pollutants and surgeries in Christakos work create a highly technological and modified body that, similar to what one finds in a David Cronenberg movie, refers to a world in which technology has transformed even the way we are constituted.

In *Discourse on the Logic of Language*, published for the first time in the late 1980s, M. Nourbese Philip describes how English can go from a mother tongue to “a foreign anguish” (149). Playing with

the words “foreign,” “language” and “mother tongue”, the poet deconstructs their meaning to show how a language can become an instrument of oppression. Additional information – or different voices – arranged asymmetrically on the page “cut” and dialogue with the poem, as a story about a mother who “blows” words into the mouth of her newborn daughter and edicts recommending slave owners to “remove” the tongue of the slaves who were caught speaking their native language. Partly because of the poet’s Caribbean origins, English is rendered not as her mother tongue, but as an imperialist language which was imposed to most African Americans during colonization and slavery. In *Zong!* The poet creates a highly fragmented experimental visual poem to tell “a story that can’t be told, yet must be told” (138) – the story of colonialism and slavery. The gaps and silences among each fragment mimic all the silence and suffering of slaves, the broken language the fragments and remains left by the Western colonial presence. The story of slavery is somehow “locked” inside the poem, waiting to be (re)discovered. Just as Philip says in her interview, she feels somehow trapped by English – “This totally ruptured, fragmented, dissonant language that is my mother tongue” (140).

It is these blind spots in human history that Catriona Strang (in collaboration with Nancy Shaw) examines in the prose poem *Bulletin 1: History* – to the apparent advances and promises of “social redemption” there are “dissolutions and

withdrawals.” The speaker in the poem is “constituted – by a legacy of purges and upheavals.” One could think of so many moments in history where there seemed to be a “paved” way to a better society, and then a sudden event changed it all. The arrival of the AIDS epidemic, for instance, brought fundamentalism and prejudice to the preceding expansion of sexual freedom and diversity. Just like the contemporary surge of technology brings continuous damage to the environment. But in fact, the history being dealt here is the history of people’s private lives, of their “secret battles” (279), something that remains unnoticed by the historian eye.

The question of language is also tackled in Sina Queyra’s *Scrabbling* – To our belief that one can master language the speaker in the poem says she is “betrayed” by it. Experimenting with words and their sounds, the poet seems to imply that they can have a “life” of their own. In the meantime, she tries to unravel new possibilities for it: “word by word my undoing for anyone to read.” As if in a Babylon where clowns, street performers, children and gypsy music compose a surreal atmosphere, two women sit on a window, a scene that stands out in the midst of all: “The details insist themselves: two dykes from L’Androgyne, tongues in each other’s mouths.” As in an echo from Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems” where a couple of women sit among strangers on a ferryboat, barely allowed to touch each other, here two women kiss passionately. If in the former women scarcely



hold hands as opposed to the honeymoon couples who embrace during the journey, in the latter the two women are a "detail" that insists to be noticed. Language however fails them too. Just like in Rich's poem, where no one could have imagined them, here language is also provisional and even inadequate – fragment of words and memories compose the character's past and history, but this is always blurred. She scrabbles around without much control of language. Like in the game, the speaker tries to form words from other words, but the sense of inadequacy remains. As the dogs in the poem "tied to a meter outside do not stop whining" (330) she cannot also comprehend the world around her, nor even desire.

The relevance of this anthology lies in the manifold experimentations with language, as well as the contemporary approach to culture. These fifteen women writers have been captured at their best and put together for their innovative view of language and the world it is said to describe and mediate. Although experimentation here owes a lot to modernist and *avant-garde* techniques – word-plays, repetition and visual poetry, for instance – the requirements and possibilities of the computer era allow new prospects and grounds to cover. However, in a time when most innovations (whether textual or visual) are mainly ascribed to digital medias, *Prismatic Public* takes on a different (but familiar) route and brings innovation right to the center of the printed page, redefining the act of reading and challenging the public's imprinted mindsets.

## References

- Gelpi, Barbara C. and Albert Gelpi, ed.  
*Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose.*  
 London and New York: W. W. Norton  
 & Company, 1993.

