Brandon Kerfoot

Beyond Symbolism
Polar Bear Characters and Inuit Kinship in Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter*

Markoosie's 1970 novella *Harpoon of the Hunter* is the coming-of-age story turned survival narrative of Kamik, a young Inuk whose community is attacked by a rabid polar bear. Though the polar bear surfaces in a potentially symbolic manner, I argue in this paper that the increasingly literal depiction of a sequence of bear attacks strips away such symbolic resonance, indicating that the bear ought to be read as a sentient character. By complicating such symbolism with a relationship between Kamik and polar bears, *Harpoon of the Hunter* invites readers to shift from symbolic to material models of relationality. I extend this invitation to a reading of the final scene, Kamik's suicide, to suggest that scholarly readings of the text have tended towards symbolic interpretation in ways that flatten Kamik's complexity and ignore kinship relations. I reflect on the limitations of symbolic readings of Kamik's suicide, ultimately proposing that literary scholars have a responsibility to revisit Inuit and Indigenous texts to flesh out symbolic interpretations with fuller investigations of material relationships.

My approach draws on a kinship model of literary analysis that emphasizes such relationships. According to Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) in "'Go Away, Water!': Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative," kinship is a deliberate and ongoing maintenance of relationships "best thought of as a verb rather than a noun" (150); kinship, he continues, constitutes a "delicate web of rights and responsibilities" (154). While Justice celebrates Indigenous literary nationalism for its ability to explore and maintain kinship relations, he also warns of the danger of reading such rich texts: "As a literary critic studying literature in which metaphor and symbolism are so powerfully evocative, I too easily fall back upon uncritical language, assume an easy,

uncomplicated certainty that so rarely exists in the messy realities of life" (153-54). In *Animal Capital*, Nicole Shukin similarly critiques reductive symbolism with regard to animals. Analyzing the intersection of animal signs, colonialism, and capital, she argues,

> What makes animal signs unusually potent discursive alibis of power is not only that particularist political ideologies, by ventriloquizing them, appear to speak from the universal and disinterested place of nature. It is also that "the animal," arguably more than any other signifier by virtue of its singular mimetic capaciousness . . . functions as a hinge allowing powerful discourses to flip or vacillate between literal and figurative economies of sense. (5)

Shukin thus complicates Justice's concerns about symbolism by suggesting that literary critics of animal signs must be careful not only to avoid generalizations, but to avoid analyzing animals exclusively in a symbolic register as well, for to do so erases the kinship networks in which animals participate. Such erasure is not incidental. Shukin continues, "the animal sign, not unlike the racial stereotype theorized by Homi Bhabha, is a site of '*productive* ambivalence' enabling vacillations between economic and symbolic logics of power" (5). If the animal sign is an ambivalent site that strategically codes select relationships as material and others as symbolic, then flipping the switch of the animal sign makes visible a different set of relationships. I contend that scholarly treatment of *Harpoon* to date has emphasized symbolism in a way that obscures material relationships between human and other animal characters, and I seek to bring kinship back into focus by reading the polar bear as a character possessing isuma.

In *Never in Anger*, anthropologist Jean Briggs defines isuma[1] as "all functions that we think of as cerebral: mind, thought, memory, reason, sense, ideas, will" (359). Though Briggs discusses isuma in its human manifestation, Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten show that polar bears also possess isuma. In *Hunters, Predators and Prey: Inuit Perceptions of Animals*, Laugrand and Oosten compile interviews about Inuit relationships with animals, illuminating that "the bear was considered the most intelligent of the animals . . . said to have *isuma* (the capacity to think like humans)" (184), and that they "taught Inuit many hunting skills" (201). Such similarities are more than coincidental: in an interview with Darren Keith, Mary Kamookak (Gjoa Haven) attests, "the first polar bear was a human that turned into a polar bear. That is where we believe they came from" (*Inuit* 73). Scholarship surrounding Inuit relationships with polar bears, such as Bernard Saladin D'Anglure's article "Nanook, super-male: the polar bear in the imaginary space and social time

of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic," engages with a complex network of material and symbolic relationships including hunting, shamanism, and gender identity, each interacting around established protocols of respect. Such studies indicate that polar bears are complex beings whose appearance in Inuit literature cannot be explained adequately by way of symbolic gestures. Since polar bears, like humans, possess isuma, I read them as fully developed, psychologically complex characters: though they carry symbolic meaning, they are also beings whose experience of the world must be taken into account and whose participation within webs of kinship must be respected.

Reading Relationships in Literature and Scholarship

Harpoon of the Hunter begins when a rabid polar bear attacks Kamik's community. A hunting party initiated by his father Suluk sets out to kill the bear, and they succeed, but Kamik is the expedition's sole survivor. Without dogs or hunting companions, he survives alone until he is found by a rescue party initiated by his mother, Ooramik. Kamik is saved, and he becomes engaged to Putootkee, a young woman from a neighbouring camp, Kikitajoak. While the two groups are returning to Kikitajoak to live together, Ooramik and Putootkee die as they attempt to cross a dangerous channel that never freezes over. Kamik decides that he has nothing left to live for, and he kills himself with his harpoon.

Markoosie Patsauq is a writer and pilot who was born in Inukjuak and relocated to Resolute Bay in 1953, at the age of twelve.[2] In addition to a series of six short stories in *North* magazine, he has published two serials in *Inuktitut* magazine, *Harpoon of the Hunter* and *Wings of Mercy*, both of which were written in Inuktitut syllabics (McGrath 82). Markoosie translated *Harpoon of the Hunter* into English and published it as a book, complete with illustrations by Germaine Arnaktauyok that depict vast tundra, Inuit camps, and battles with polar bears.[3] Thus far, scholarly treatment of the text has followed two main trends: ethnographic readings and symbolic analysis.

Ethnographic reading seeks primarily to assess a text or author's ethnographic reliability. In his essay "In Search of the True Hunter: Inuit Folktales Adapted for Children," Jon C. Stott advocates teaching cross-cultural narratives to students, arguing that one of his priorities as a teacher is to locate sources that are "true reflections of a culture which is vastly different from any most of them have experienced"(430). Stott contrasts *Harpoon* and Maurice Metayer's translation of stories, *Tales from the Igloo*, with widely taught yet what he considers culturally inaccurate Arctic

narratives, in order to map out the ethnographic errors within non-Inuit texts and to advocate for literature written from the perspectives of insider (438). This advocacy for Inuit literature is important in the context of a settler colonial nation that has spent centuries dismissing or undermining Indigenous literature, art, religion, and intellectual histories. It is worth stating explicitly that Inuit life narratives exceed the impoverished imaginings of settler Canadian ones about what it might be like to live in the Arctic. There is a danger, though, in relying on authors to function as "Native informants" and expecting literature to offer glimpses into other cultures, for such an approach obscures the artistry of literature, conflating fiction with cultural authenticity.

Such conflation is pervasive in criticism of *Harpoon*, as scholars debate the accuracy with which Markoosie reflects the lived experience of Inuit. In another essay, "Form, Content, and Cultural Values in Three Inuit (Eskimo) Survival Stories," Stott compares three stories to determine their degree of what he calls "cultural accuracy" (*Harpoon* falls in the middle as mostly accurate), and he reveals his two guiding questions when interpreting Arctic survival literature featuring an Inuk protagonist: "to what extent is the story an accurate portrayal of the culture, and to what extent is it shaped or distorted by the conventions of the Robinsonade?" (216). Robin McGrath similarly points out Markoosie's adherence to and deviation from Inuit literary traditions. In *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition*, McGrath writes that Kamik's engagement to Putootkee is a European love motif added to a traditional Inuit story about the bear hunt and the tragedy on the ice (81). Listing the inaccuracies noted by reviewers of *Harpoon*,[4] McGrath suggests that Markoosie's education at a EuroCanadian high school in Yellowknife accounts for textual inaccuracies regarding hunting and animals (82). Though she notes that informed readers may be dissatisfied with such inaccuracies, she speculates that "most non-Inuit and many Inuit would not notice such mistakes" (82). Margaret Harry responds to this claim in "Literature in English by Native Canadians (Indians and Inuit)," where she critiques McGrath for deciding what counts as traditional on behalf of Inuit and for presuming that Inuit are unaware of their own traditions (n. pag.). Harry notes that Indigenous peoples are frequently held up to ethnographic scrutiny in a way that white settler communities are not, with problematic consequences: "one of the effects is to focus attention on the traditional culture as if it were the only valid one. In addition, since white anthropologists, ethnologists, and folklorists conduct most of the research,

what is identified as traditional, and therefore valid, is what they select, not necessarily what is meaningful to the native peoples themselves" (n. pag.). The danger of reading a text with an expectation for cultural authenticity is that it serves ultimately to support dominant, external narratives about Indigenous traditions.

I would add to Harry's criticism that McGrath's analysis becomes preoccupied with ethnographic accuracy in a way that overshadows literary interpretation. Literary analysis trains us to suspend our disbelief and to engage with a text on its own terms. In this framework, deviations from the author's cultural norms are celebrated as the workings of imagination and as roadmaps to alternative modes of critical thought and social organization. Yet McGrath implies that Inuit writers do not enjoy the same artistic freedom. If they deploy configurations that fall outside of what she defines as Inuit tradition, then it is a shortcoming: Markoosie is seen as a limited writer because he is a partially assimilated Inuk who attended school in Yellowknife. McGrath seems to have dismissed in advance the possibility that Markoosie's choices are deliberate and meaningful. This essentialist style of literary analysis has historically accumulated around Indigenous-authored texts, and it is one of the analytical frameworks that has dominated scholarly treatment of *Harpoon*.[5]

Just as there is a danger in overreliance on ethnographic literary approaches, there is a danger in depending on Canadian-bred symbolism to interpret Inuit literature. Seth Bovey analyzes *Harpoon* in relation to naturalism and the quest narrative in "Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter*: A Story of Cultural Survival." Explicitly identifying the story as a piece of fiction that cannot be reduced to an expression of Inuit tradition, Bovey turns to Northrop Frye's delineation of the romantic quest narrative to make sense of Kamik's ordeals. Bovey's reading of *Harpoon* indeed treats it as fiction, yet it complements McGrath's and Stott's analyses with an inverse problem by avoiding Inuit literary history, relying instead on the frameworks of prominent settler critics like Frye. Scholarship on *Harpoon* has historically fallen into these categories, either reading the text ethnographically without accounting for its fictional elements, or reading it as fiction but contextualizing it within settler Canadian literary traditions.

Both of these approaches nonetheless engage in political work. Readers need to acknowledge Inuit literature as a distinct tradition, and they should do so with the realization that Inuit writers are artists rather than strictly Native informants. I am concerned, however, with the cumulative

effect of multiple analyses that foreground ethnography as the preferred relationship between settler scholars and Inuit writers, and that champion settler symbolism as the preferred lens for interpreting texts. Read in terms of kinship, this treatment of *Harpoon* celebrates settler relationships, as settler scholars position themselves as the holders of knowledge and literary decryption codes, and imagine Inuit as symbolic projections or ethnographic fantasies.[6] This essay attempts to scale back such approaches by foregrounding the relationships modelled in the text.

Reading Polar Bear Characters

Unsurprisingly, the rabid polar bear and the battle scenes in Markoosie's novella have attracted scholarly attention for their symbolic vitality. Stott, for example, interprets the abrupt phrasing of Ooramik's plummet through the ice, "then without warning disaster struck" (Markoosie 80), as harkening back to the other catastrophes in *Harpoon*, including the polar bear attacks: "The bear appears without warning in the village; the second bear crashes into the igloo of the unwary hunters, and the final destruction of the hunting party takes place when the men are caught off guard" (Stott, "Form" 220). While Stott considers the polar bear attacks sudden, I argue conversely that all of the polar bear attacks are predicted either by narrative techniques or by the characters directly.

The first attack is foreshadowed by Kamik and Suluk's carelessness, and it is forewarned by Suluk's dogs' vigilance. The story opens with Kamik, Suluk, and Ooramik waiting out a blizzard at home. As Kamik and Suluk sharpen their harpoons, Kamik advertises his ambition: "'I hope we will get polar bear the next time we go hunting, Father,' Kamik said hopefully. 'I hope so, too,' Suluk said. 'Polar bear meat lasts a long time and the skin is good for clothing'" (12). This exchange determines their fate. According to many Inuit hunters and elders, polar bears are omniscient: they know when they are being belittled, and they retaliate. In *Inuit Qaujimaningit Nanurnut*: *Inuit Knowledge of Polar Bears*, Mary Kamookak from Gjoa Haven tells interviewer Darren Keith, "There was also a saying—even if you want to see a polar bear you were not to say 'I wish I could see a polar bear' or 'I wish I could kill a bear this way or that way,' because the polar bear will probably end up killing you before you get a chance to kill [it]" (76, brackets in original). Settler scholar George Wenzel also reports, "on the 42 polar bear hunts I observed while in the eastern Baffin area, virtually every hunter reminded me never to joke about bears because to do so would bring

misfortune in polar bear hunting" (75). In this way, when Kamik and Suluk speak of killing a bear as though it were a simple task, they are committing an offence that summons the bear. This foreshadowing is the first warning of a polar bear attack. The second warning comes from the dogs, who bark as the bear approaches at night. Suluk knows immediately that this alarm signals a polar bear attack, and he is dressed and armed by the time the bear reaches them (13). The phrasing of this warning is significant because it draws on the motif of abruptness, as Stott notes, "That night, as Kamik lay awake, tragedy struck. Suddenly the silence was disturbed by the sound of dogs howling" (13). Though tragedy and suddenness correlate in this passage, their relationship is not causal: it is not the tragic polar bear attack that is sudden but the sound of dogs howling. It is the warning that punctures the silence rather than the attack itself. This first polar bear attack is not as sudden as Stott suggests; it is foreshadowed and forewarned.

The second polar bear attack is sudden but anticipated by the community. Suluk had wounded the polar bear that attacked the settlement, but the bear survived. The night before the hunters set out to track it, Soonah, the eldest man in the settlement, explains what precautions the community must take:

> 'We will have to be very careful from now on, and here is what I want everyone of you to do. Don't go out alone at night, and if you must go out, be sure to look around. Don't go far from the settlement during the day. And in case we are under attack, we must fight together. Anyone who spots a bear must send out an alarm. If attacked, we must fight the bear from all sides. And, most important of all, don't panic. I hope we don't have to fight any battle, but we must be prepared.' (17)

The narrative continues with the hunters being awoken by the "barking of dogs . . . all of a sudden. Before anyone realized what was happening, the igloo came down on top of them. A great roar followed. Kamik knew what was happening. He had heard stories. This had happened too often. They were under attack by the bear" (17). This passage is rife with anticipation. As with the earlier attack, the sudden action comes not from the bear but from the dogs, though this warning is not ultimately helpful to Kamik, Suluk, and Ooramik, as the igloo collapses on them immediately after. Also paralleling the first attack, the dogs are not the only ones to warn the settlement about the bear: Soonah offers his extensive knowledge, telling the community what precautions they should take to avoid being ambushed and instructing them on how to proceed if they fall under attack. The section break between the two paragraphs quoted above intensifies the warning of the approaching bear by placing the dogs' howling sequentially after Soonah's instructions.

Furthermore, Kamik does not express any surprise at this attack. Though the igloo collapses before he has found his bearings, he knows immediately what is happening because it corresponds to stories he has heard about polar bear attacks, which occur frequently in this region. These stories are perhaps the most significant indication that the polar bear attack is not a shock, for they show that the community does not brace itself only when an attack seems imminent; Kamik has been mentally preparing for a polar bear attack throughout his childhood.

The third polar bear attack is the most unambiguously foreshadowed. Though the community kills the bear that attacks their settlement the second time, a victory that comes at the cost of Suluk's life, they discover that he is not the same bear who attacked the first time: he does not bear the wound that Suluk had inflicted (19). The hunting party then tracks the first bear and promptly loses their dogs (23-24). Unable to travel and track effectively, the group begins the return trip. On the way, they are ambushed by the polar bear that attacked their settlement, and all but Kamik are killed (33-36). This third attack is the only true ambush that Kamik and the hunters face, since there are no dogs to warn them, but it is also the only attack explicitly revealed in advance by the narrative, for it comes at the conclusion of a lengthy stalking sequence that features the polar bear's thoughts. In effect, *Harpoon* deploys a wandering third-person narrator that attaches itself to various characters throughout the story. This shifting narrative focus is one of the ways that *Harpoon* emphasizes a network of community relationships, a network in which the polar bear is included:

> Close by, the big animal lies waiting for the right time to strike. That time will come; he must wait and be sure. Eight hunters can kill him, he must be careful. He wants to live and eight hunters will fill his stomach for many nights. Surprise is his best weapon. He must strike when they are at their weakest. He must not slip. Another few miles and he will have a chance to kill. (33)

This passage demonstrates that the polar bear's motives are the same as the other characters': he wants to live, and hunting is the only way he can survive. Though the polar bear is a killer, he is not malicious: he is simply hungry. Markoosie's inclusion of such narrative focalization establishes the polar bear as a sentient character, thus making it difficult to read *Harpoon*'s polar bear as primarily symbolic.[7] During the stalking scene, the narrative shifts back and forth between the polar bear and Kamik, slowly building suspense toward the attack (31-36). Though the hunting party is ambushed, the reader is not. We, like the polar bear, know it is coming.

Though the first polar bear attack may appear sudden when read symbolically, there is no room for such a reading of the third attack, for the polar bear has been identified as a thinking character by this point. Although Markoosie introduces the polar bear with a potentially symbolic significance as a natural danger, he then slowly strips away the symbolism to reveal the character that has been there all along. In other words, he shifts the polar bear trope from a symbolic to a literal register, effectively undermining symbolic readings of animals while affirming that polar bears possess isuma. The significance of this shifting register is not restricted to the polar bear, for once the text is resituated to focus on material relationships rather than symbols, the vast network of relationships celebrated in the text comes into focus. Nowhere is this articulated more powerfully than in the pairing of animal characters with the suicide motif, which culminates when Kamik stabs himself with his harpoon.

Reading Kamik's Suicide

Though thoughts and discussions of suicide are repeated throughout *Harpoon*, I focus on two major moments: first, when Naoolak, a member of the hunting party, attempts to kill himself after an unsuccessful seal hunt, and second, the conclusion, when Kamik commits suicide. In each of these moments, community ties direct Kamik's actions. In effect, the suicide motif is paired with community investments when Kamik prevents Naoolak from killing himself. As Kamik and Naoolak hunt for seals at their breathing holes, Naoolak becomes frustrated:

> Naoolak fought against the cold wind. His feet wanted to move, but he fought to keep still. Finally his mind began to go.
>
> 'Come on, you dumb animal,' he whispered. 'You better come up. If you don't come up, I'll kill you!' At that moment he lost his temper. He broke his harpoon in half as he yelled and went down in the snow, beating his head against the ice and crying. (21)

Naoolak's outburst suggests an infantile temperament, for emotional control marks maturity in Inuit communities. Jean Briggs relates her experience living with Utkuhikhalingmiut (Inuit from the mouth of Black River), writing that anger is one of the most damning traits among Inuit (*Never* 195). Community members who were prone to anger were dismissed as childish and lacking good sense (196), as Briggs discovered when her adopted father, Inuttiaq, scolded and lectured her when she acted in anger (257, 272). By "letting his mind go" and succumbing to anger, Naoolak becomes child-like, and it falls on Kamik to intervene and return him to his senses. When Naoolak breaks his harpoon in half and holds the tip to his throat, Kamik wrestles him

to the ground, retrieves the weapon, and lectures him (22). With this action, Kamik, the youngest member of the hunting party, behaves as an adult should even when his older companions falter. He scolds Naoolak for losing his temper, demands that he regain control, and, more importantly, appeals to the needs of the community, which has seen enough death already (22).[8]

Immediately after Kamik prevents Naoolak from killing himself, he catches a seal (22-23). Peter Aninga (Paallirmiut) relates that seals do not present themselves to lazy or selfish people: "All animals are like that. They don't like going to lazy, selfish people whose only concern is to survive alone. An animal will refuse to go to a person who is only concerned with his own survival" (qtd. in Bennett and Rowley 45). It is no surprise, then, that Naoolak fails to catch seals while calling them "dumb animal[s]." In contrast, a seal presents itself to Kamik at precisely the moment he proves he is able to act maturely and responsibly in the service of others. This moment marks Kamik's full integration into a community of hunters: he is accepted not only by the other hunters but by the animals as well. The scene marks a powerful point of departure between symbolic and material interpretations of animals and their bonds of kinship. Read materially, it invites us to consider the relations between Naoolak, Kamik, and the seal, emphasizing the needs of the community and the impact Naoolak's suicide would have on it. A symbolic reading of animals, on the other hand, does not account for the seal's gift and therefore ignores the validation that Kamik receives in this moment, artificially isolating him in the story.

Kamik's success in dissuading Naoolak from suicide makes the narrative's closing scene, when Kamik kills himself with his harpoon, all the more potent. While crossing a channel that never freezes over completely, Kamik watches Ooramik and Putootkee disappear beneath the currents. He allows himself to drift out to sea on an ice floe, and there he kills himself:

> He was carried out to sea and soon disappeared from the rest. He had waited until he was out of sight to do what he had to do. 'Before my father died, he said only dead people find everlasting peace. He said he was going where there was peace. And he said he would wait for me.' Kamik looked at the harpoon in his hands. Now the time had come. Now was the time to find peace, and to find the family and people he loved. He kneeled and put the tip of the harpoon to his throat. Suddenly he pushed it in. And, for the last time, the harpoon of the hunter made its kill. (81)

Bovey argues that Kamik's suicide is a rational decision that contrasts Naoolak's emotional outburst and that it comes from the calculated realization that life without family is not worth living (221-22). Critically responding to a naturalist reading of *Harpoon*, Bovey concludes that Kamik's rationalism is

"paradoxically an assertion of his will over the conditions of his life. . . . Kamik's suicide, therefore, shows that his will is more powerful than natural forces" (222). Though I agree that Kamik's suicide enacts his desire to be with his family, I find Bovey's reading of Kamik unpersuasive at the level of both character and narrative. Whereas Naoolak's suicide attempt stemmed from a moment of despair at the prospect of imminent starvation, Kamik's suicide follows the deaths of his last remaining family members and, with them, his hope for a future worth living. What Bovey calls a rational exertion of will strikes me as crushing despair long in the making: Kamik watches his father killed before his eyes, collects and buries the slashed and broken bodies of his friends, and witnesses his mother and fiancée disappear into the currents as they are on their way to what they hoped would be a better life. These deaths are not merely symbolic; they are graphic reminders of the hardships and heartbreaks of Kamik's life and of the ubiquity of death that he encounters. Kamik ultimately kills himself not to exert his will over nature but rather because he has slowly, over the course of the text, been battered over and over until finally he breaks. Bovey's slip into symbolism at the level of character serves to dismiss the hardships that Kamik faces, demonstrating how easy it can be for literary scholars to eclipse depictions of suffering in their haste to position analyses within established interpretive frameworks.

At the level of narrative, Bovey's reading betrays his reliance on a symbolic register as the standard for literary analysis. Reading Kamik's suicide as willful, he suggests that the ending shows how the community of Kikitajoak will continue even without Kamik and his family, and he concludes that "Kamik's story, though relentlessly grim, is not the entire story; it is the backbone of a larger narrative that gives Kamik's story meaning and a purpose for being" (222). Such a reading seems almost to revive the happy ending teased at when Kamik reunites with his mother and becomes engaged. Though the deaths of Ooramik and Putootkee mean that Kamik can no longer live *happily ever after*, Bovey implies that Kamik's final act is not a true suicide but an expression of will that immortalizes him within the pages of *Harpoon* and positions him as the "backbone of a larger narrative" about Kikitajoak. It is not unusual, however, for Inuit literature to end with sudden violence. McGrath argues in *Canadian Inuit Literature* that Markoosie plays with the Western heteronormative ending by killing off almost all of the main characters in "a rather unexpected [Inuit] twist which was appreciated by most reviewers" (82). Such violent endings indeed are abundant in Inuit literature: for example, celebrated short story collections

like Alootook Ipellie's *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* and *Ajjiit: Dark Dreams of the Ancient Arctic* by Sean Tinsley and Rachel Qitsualik brim with violent and horrifying endings. I would suggest that the impulse to read Kamik's suicide as a happy ending is a decontextualizing gesture that undermines longstanding trends in Inuit literature and imposes upon it an external expectation for a happy ending. Kamik's suicide is not a willful gesture that shows his triumph over nature, nor does it ensure the survival of Kikitajoak. He dies, literally, to be with his family. This ending does not lend itself to symbolic insights as much as it invites a compassionate understanding of Kamik and the importance of his bonds to loved ones. If there is a lesson to be found in this violent ending, it is that material relations are a matter of life and death for Kamik; without them, he perishes.

Conclusion

Harpoon of the Hunter flips the switch of the animal sign from its symbolic to literal register, reorienting the text toward a rich engagement with webs of kinship. This flip occurs gradually over a sequence of polar bear attacks, as the symbolic resonance of polar bears slowly dissolves to expose their psychological complexity. Analytical approaches that lean towards the symbolic have therefore failed to account adequately for the polar bear characters and the kinship network in which they participate. This tendency to see only symbols in depictions of material relations has extended to interpretations of *Harpoon*'s human characters, undermining Kamik's ties to family and community and romanticizing his death. Though scholars should not discard such interpretations, the overabundance of symbolic readings of *Harpoon* compared to the dearth of interpretations of kinship betrays a history of settler scholars engaging with each other in material ways while reducing their relationships with Indigenous writers and texts to a set of symbolic interactions. In such analyses, the relationships with a strong foundation are the relationships between scholars, whereas Kamik, the polar bears, and, at times, Markoosie himself, become symbols to be assimilated into established frameworks. Such a pattern implies that settler scholars value primarily their relationships with one another, shrinking away from difficult and necessary reflections about the Indigenous kinship networks into which they intervene. The field of Indigenous literary studies has taken great strides to strengthen these relationships and to repair the damage caused by settler-centred analyses, but one could read through the interpretations of *Harpoon* published to date without guessing that such

changes are well underway. Part of our work as literary scholars, then, is to revisit our archives and flesh out symbolic readings of Indigenous texts with interpretations of the material relations they portray.

NOTES

1 Briggs uses the term "ihuma," as expressed in Western dialects. I use "isuma," as expressed in Eastern dialects, to remain consistent with the majority of research regarding the isuma of polar bears.
2 Markoosie Patsauq's family is one of many relocated by the federal government from Inukjuak to Resolute Bay in what is now infamously termed the High Arctic relocations. He has shared his story on iqqaumavara.com, an online repository of Inuit testimonies about the relocation.
3 Germaine Arnaktauyok is an artist from Igloolik whose work includes drawings, paintings, prints, and the polar bears on Canada's two-dollar coin.
4 Fred Bruemmer notes that harpoons have detachable heads and cannot be used to strike a bear multiple times in succession, as they do in *Harpoon*, and that musk-oxen are herbivores who do not eat meat, as the story implies ("Harpoon" 288).
5 Craig S. Womack criticizes the conflation of essentialism with bad scholarship when he defends Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* against critics who dismiss her work as essentialist because she deploys pan-Indigenous figurations of tribalism placed in contrast to a monolithic settler state. In "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997," Womack historicizes Allen's project, clarifying that *The Sacred Hoop* was published when Native Studies departments were establishing themselves and benefited institutionally from strong claims that define how Native Studies differs from other disciplines (23). McGrath adheres to a similar form of strategic essentialism when, in 1984, she broadly distinguished Inuit literature from the English canon. Though this style of essentialism does important work, I worry that in the contemporary moment it reads more as ethnocentric than strategic when it emphasizes Inuit authors as Native informants at the expense of their status as writers.
6 Contemporary settler scholars of Inuit literature have criticized such approaches while addressing material and symbolic kinship in their analyses. In *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic*, Emilie Cameron argues that stories are "material, relational practices through which we order our relations with each other and with the land," and she brings this framework to her analysis of Samuel Hearne's infamous account of a massacre at Kugluk (Bloody Falls) (11). Keavy Martin's *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature* has also been influential in undermining settler-focused methodologies by centring Inuit literary and intellectual traditions and the relationships strengthened by them. The approaches for which I advocate are therefore not new, but neither have they been applied fully to an analysis of *Harpoon*.
7 The attempt has nevertheless been made. R. W. Noble writes in her review "The Way to the True North" that the polar bear is "suggestive of evil," though he falls short of becoming an "allegorical emblem" (79). Noble does not deploy a reductive reading of the polar bear as an emblem, but her claim that the bear is "suggestive of evil" merely scales back such a reading without offering an alternative. I find this moment intriguing and indicative of the way that many scholars are hesitant to read animals as characters. Noble

offers little explanation for the polar bear's evil status: she cites a passage where two polar bears fight for a seal carcass that will sustain them, and she declares without qualification that this "amoral nature" contrasts with the "loyalty, love, and mutual responsibility" of the human characters (80). Noble assumes that readers will see the bear as amoral and somewhat evil and that they will champion the human hunters as virtuous. Though deep analysis is not the work of a review, Noble qualifies other statements with careful interpretation, and as a result this moment stands out. It is telling that Noble commits to a symbolic reading of polar bears as dangerous villains when in the same review she champions *Harpoon* for exceeding the parameters of such "popular frontier mythology" (79).

8 Kamik's actions redeem his earlier cowardice. When the first polar bear attacks the settlement, Kamik is paralyzed with fear and does nothing to help (13). When Suluk seeks volunteers for the hunting party, "Kamik wanted to say that maybe he was not fit to be called a hunter yet; he had acted in a cowardly way while his father fought the bear alone. But he couldn't find his voice" (14). Unable to withdraw himself from the hunting party, Kamik consents through paralysis, signalling his fear to readers even as he appears bold in the eyes of the community. When Kamik tackles Naoolak and lectures him, he conquers this paralysis and "finds his voice" to protect the community from losing another valued life.

WORKS CITED

Bennett, John, and Susan Rowley, eds. *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2004. Print.

Bovey, Seth. "Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter*: A Story of Cultural Survival." *American Indian Quarterly* 15.2 (1991): 217-23. Web. 23 May 2014.

Bruemmer, Fred. "Harpoon of the Hunter." Rev. of *Harpoon of the Hunter*, by Markoosie. *Arctic* 23.4 (1970): 288. Web. 23 May 2014.

Briggs, Jean L. *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970. Print.

Cameron, Emilie. *Far Off Metal River*: *Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2015. Print.

D'Anglure, Bernard Saladin. "Nanook, super-male: the polar bear in the imaginary space and social time of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic." Trans. Roy Willis. *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*. Ed. Roy Willis. New York: Routledge, 2005. 169-85. Print.

Harry, Margaret. "Literature in English by Native Canadians (Indians and Inuit)." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 10.1 (1985): n. pag. Web. 23 May 2014.

Ipellie, Alootook. *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*. Penticton: Theytus Books, 1993. Print.

Justice, Daniel Heath. "'Go Away, Water!': Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative." *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*. Ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008. 147-68. Print.

Keith, Darren, with Jerry Arqviq, Louie Kamookak, Jackie Ameralik, and the Gjoa Haven Hunters' and Trappers' Organization. *Inuit Qaujimaningit Nanurnut*: *Inuit Knowledge of Polar Bears.* Edmonton: Gjoa Haven Hunters' and Trappers' Organization and CCI P, 2005. Print.

Laugrand, Frédéric, and Jarich Oosten. *Hunters, Predators and Prey*: *Inuit Perceptions of Animals*. New York: Berghahn, 2015. Print.

Markoosie. *Harpoon of the Hunter*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1974. Print.
Martin, Keavy. *Stories in a New Skin*: *Approaches to Inuit Literature*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2012. Print.
McGrath, Robin. *Canadian Inuit Literature*: *The Development of a Tradition*. Gatineau: National Museum of Man, 1984. Print.
Noble, R. W. "The Way to the True North." Rev. of *Harpoon of the Hunter*, by Markoosie. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 9 (1975): 79-81. Web. 23 June 2014.
Patsauq, Markoosie. "Markoosie Patsauq—His Story." *Iqqaumavara*. Productions du Cerf-Volant, 2011. Web. 29 June 2016.
Shukin, Nicole. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. Print.
Stott, Jon C. "Form, Content, and Cultural Values in Three Inuit (Eskimo) Survival Stories." *American Indian Quarterly* 10.3 (1986): 213-26. Web. 23 May 2014.
—. "In Search of the True Hunter: Inuit Folktales Adapted for Children." *Language Arts* 60.4 (1983): 430-38. Web. 23 May 2014.
Tinsley, Sean A. and Rachel A. Qitsualik. *Ajjiit: Dark Dreams of the Ancient Arctic*. Illus. Andrew Trabbold. Iqaluit: Inhabit Media, 2011. Print.
Womack, Craig S. "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997." *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*. Ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008. 3-104. Print.