

“We ate things not worth eating”: The Botanical Enigma in Inuit Art¹

My interest in this topic relates to my first and only time crossing the Arctic Circle. I was awarded a scholarship with the Students On Ice program to participate on an environmental expedition to west Greenland and east Baffin Island in 2013. Under the midnight summer sun, I remember fields of lush tundra and barren rock dotted with Arctic cotton grass (*suputaujalik*)² and river beauty flowers (*paunnak*)³, eating tart sorrel leaves (*kungulik*)⁴, and drying Labrador tea flowers (*mamaittuqutik*)⁵ on my bed to take home. This crucial part of the land and landscape was the most memorable for me, but it is not a prominent feature in Inuit art production. As a *Qallunaat* Settler who has only toured the arctic region, my perspective of the land is obviously skewed.⁶ I must recognize that across the diverse Inuit regions the names for the same species may differ and be a place of contention. In the absence of lengthy methods of oral interviews, I have sought out sources where the knowledge is gathered from elders, communities or oral history archives. Through examining the rare botanical subjects in Inuit art, and researching the

¹ I know it is uncommon in a paper of this length to offer acknowledgements, but I must thank the Avataq Cultural Institute for opening their doors to me, PhD candidate Erika Oberndofer at Carleton's Department of Geography and Environmental Studies for sharing some findings and lastly Professor Igloliorte who's guidance I wrote this paper under.

² *The Botanical Knowledge of the Inuit of Kangiqsualujjuaq*, Nunavik, Avataq Cultural Insititute 2011, 55.; Throughout this text possible, I aim to use the Inuktitut terminology for the plants I am describing. I see this as a crucial element to “decolonizing” not only academia, but creating a crucial unease for Settlers in their relationships and conceptions with the land. This is in alignment with Linda Tuhiai Smith's theory of naming in *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

³ Ashleigh Downing, Alain Cuerrier, Luise Hermanutz, Courtney Clark, Anita Fells and Laura Siegwart Collier, *Community of Nain Labrador: Plant Uses Booklet*, (Department of Biology, Memorial Univeristy, St. Jonh's, 2013) 96.

⁴ Downing, *Community of Nain Labrador*, 76.

⁵ Marcel Blondeau, Claude Roy, Alain Cuerrier, *Plants of the Villages and Parks of Nunavut*, Avataq Cultural Institute, 2010. 549.

⁶ *Qallunaat* is the Inuktitut term referring to non-Inuit and Settler, in this context, refers to someone not of Indigenous descent complicit in ongoing colonial occupation of North America.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (traditional knowledge) around plants I hope to provide an explanation, or at least an exploration of this vacancy of flora in Inuit art.⁷

In this era of anthropogenic climate change, Inuit knowledge about the land, including both plants and animals, should be consulted, if not foregrounded. For example, elder Julius Ikkisek has noted an ecological change in Nain, Nunatsiavut, in that *paunnaluk* (fireweed) “are growing and eating soil in town. There is less and less soil.”⁸ Because Inuit conceptions of the plant kingdom differ from “objective” Western scientific classifications (Fig 1), it is important that we see *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* as a legitimate source of knowledge especially in reference to the land and changes. Some important aspects of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* related to this are *papattiniq*: the central belief that nature is not a commodity; and *avatimik kamattiarniq*: the treatment of nature with respect, in recognition that what is done to something has implications—good or bad—for something else.⁹ However, pillaging and incorporating *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* into ecological and biological discourses can simplify its meanings negating knowledge on politics, social formation, and alternative economies from neo-liberal capitalism.¹⁰

Constructing “Inuit-ness”:

Is it possible that Inuit artists producing for the *Qallunaat* market focused their art on depicting Arctic animals rather than Arctic plants, knowing that in the eyes of the South the Arctic was a vast, empty snowscape? “Authentic” Inuit were imagined as nomadic, living in

⁷ *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* is understood as “Inuit traditional knowledge” or more simply “the Inuit way of doing things”

⁸ Downing, ... *Community of Nain Labrador*, 67.

⁹ Frank Tester, and Peter Irniq. "Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: Social History, Politics, and the Practices of Resistance," Arctic, Vol. 61, Supplement 1: Arctic Change and Coastal Communities (2008): 48 - 61.

¹⁰ Tester, "Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: Social History, Politics, and the Practices of Resistance,".

igloos, and surviving exclusively from hunting, and very little gathering. When the Inuit art market was exported by *Qallunaat*, artists were catering to “southern tastes” of what it means to be Inuit.¹¹ Here I am referring to, as John Steckley describes in *White Lies About the Inuit* that European and Canadian ideas about who the Inuit were, were largely created by such “ethnographic” films as 1922’s *Nanook of the North* that constructed what “authentic” Inuit did or ate.¹² Exemplary, is how an Alaskan Explorer John Murdoch, claims Inuit ate only raw meat and fish persisting in the term “Eskimo.”¹³ *Qallunaat* constructed Inuit identity in their relationship to animals as nomadic hunters, negating their practices as gatherers. Consequently, in 1951 when James Houston distributed his manual—*Eskimo Handicrafts*—to Inuit sculptors with examples of what *he* thought the *Qallunaat* market wanted, it included things like polar bears, kayaks, totem poles, and masks.¹⁴ If *Qallunaat* conceive of the arctic as an inhospitable wasteland, surely there is not a single bloom or bud in sight, so why should that be reflected in the cultural production? What *Qallunaat* think of Inuit life excludes the existence of flora, but historical and contemporary knowledge would prove otherwise.

¹¹ Heather Igloliorte, “Inuit Artistic Expression as Cultural Resilience.” In *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*. Eds. Gregory Younging, Jonathan Dewar and Mike DeGagne. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009. 123-136.

¹² John Steckley, “Chapter 1: Imagining the Inuit,” *White Lies About the Inuit*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. 10-18; Shari M. Huhndorf, “Nanook and His Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimos in American Culture, 1897-1922,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 122-148; Robert Joseph Flaherty, Frances Hubbard Flaherty, Timothy Brock. *Nanook of the North: A Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic*. [Irvington, N.Y.]: DVD Criterion Collection. 1998,

¹³ Steckley, “Chapter 1: Imagining the Inuit,” *White Lies About the Inuit*. 9.

¹⁴ James Houston, *Eskimo Handicrafts* (Montreal, Canadian Handicrafts Guild, 1951).

Inuit Uses for Plants:

While the Arctic may lack relative plant diversity and have a considerably shorter growing season than even southern Canada, the Inuit botanical knowledge is still well preserved.¹⁵ The “preferred plants” of the Inuit are the most mineral rich, high in Vitamin C and preservation methods maintain these nutrients.¹⁶ “We were very rarely sick before we moved into settlements. I was taught to eat some plant from the land so I was not sick” one anonymous interview stated in a report by the Carleton Institute of Biology.¹⁷ Two other oral histories portray different experiences with subsistence from gathering. Paulossie Shauk reflects “there was plenty to eat in summer” picking *quajautik* (lichen)¹⁸, sweet *airaq* (beach grass), *malissuagaq* (sandwort), and *ivik* (sea lime grass).¹⁹ She contrasts this wealth with memories of people eating their *kamik* (sealskin boots) to prevent starvation in the winter.²⁰ Contradictorily, Inuk Peter Stone recalls surviving solely on the same vegetation as Shauk in the summer months: “I remember so well how we ate things not worth eating... These plants we depended on don’t seem like anything to me these days... Sometimes we didn’t have anything else to eat.”²¹ Both elders have vastly different conceptions of eating vegetation either as plenty, or as sub-par to meat: only when necessary. Subsistence off of sea flora is noted across time and geography. Kelp and algae

¹⁵ Paleah L. Black, John T. Arnason and Alain Cuerrier, “Medicinal Plants Used by the Inuit of Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island, Nunavut)” (Carleton Institute of Biology, Ottawa, 2008) 157-161.

¹⁶ A.E. Porslid, *Edible Plants of the Arctic*, 1953. 15-16.

¹⁷ Black, “Medicinal Plants Used by the Inuit of Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island, Nunavut)”, 161.

¹⁸ The Botanical Knowledge of the Inuit of Kangiqsujaq, Nunavik, Avataq Cultural Institute 2011

¹⁹ Avataq Cultural Institute Archives, Oral History Project, ACI01/A01,003 Paulossie Shauk, May 1985, Kuujjuaraapik.

²⁰ ACI01/A01,003 Paulossie Shauk, May 1985, Kuujjuaraapik.

²¹ Avataq Cultural Institute Archives, Oral History Project, ACI01/A01, 004 Peter Stone, May 1985, Umiujaq

were sought after in May and June by Alaskan Inuit when covered in herring eggs.²² *Kuannik* (kelp) is a known food source according to an interview source in Pangniqtuuq, and both of these sources shed light on this rare print of a woman collecting kelp, presumably for food (Fig 2).²³

The Western division between plants as food or medicine becomes blurred for Inuit. *Mamaittuqutik* tea is commonly cited as a medicine, some sources note the tea could treat *nuvak* (tuberculosis).²⁴ Berries like cranberries and *arpik* (cloudberry/bakeapple) besides being nutritious fruits, can treat a range of ailments from sore throats to blindness.²⁵ Most *Qallunaat* perceptions of Inuit life probably negate the consumption of sweet seasonal fruits, but the act of gathering berries is memorialized in this 2014 Pitseolak Qimirpiq sculpture (Fig 3).

While the absence of vegetation in Inuit diets is therefore not entirely true, at least some edible plants, such as *pujuit* (fungi), appear to have been taboo (Fig 1). Supposedly, Shamans made *pujuit* deplorable and the Alaskan Yupik word for mushrooms is “that which cause your hand to come off”.²⁶ While not eaten, some *pujuit* are used for their healing properties to dry cuts and wounds.²⁷ Other plants not consumed have utilitarian uses. For example, moss soaked in rancid seal oil will become sticky and help to seal the stitching on kayaks to make them

²² Thoma A. Ager and Lynn Price Ager “Ethnobotany of the Eskimos of Neslon Island, Alaska” in *Arctic Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 1 1980, 26-48

²³ Becky Mearns, Facebook message to author, April 15, 2015

²⁴ Downing, ... *Community of Nain Labrador*, 84.; The Botanical Knowledge of the Inuit of Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik, Avataq Cultural Institute 2011. 28.

²⁵ The Botanical Knowledge of the Inuit of Umiujaq and Kuujjuarapik, Nunavik, Avataq Cultural Institute 2011.; Christopher Fletcher, *Traditional Inuit First Aid: Based on Interview with Nunavik Elders* (Avataq Cultural Institute: Montreal, 2011); Blondeau, *Plants of the Villages and Parks of Nunavut*, 55.

²⁶ “Traditional Plant Foods of Canadian Indigenous Peoples, Nutrition, Botany and Use” Agriculture and consumer Protection, <http://www.fao.org/wairdocs/other/ai215e/ai215e06.htm> (date of last access April 17 2015)

²⁷ The Botanical Knowledge of the Inuit of Kangiqsujuaq, Nunavik, Avataq Cultural Institute 2011.

watertight.²⁸ Willow, moss, and *suputaujalik* have also commonly been used as fuel to start fires.²⁹ One oral history accounts how *suputaujalik* can indicate when pelts are at their peak: “when the downy tufts leave the plant, it is a sign that the caribou’s skin is perfect for making parkas.”³⁰ Additionally, *ivitsukait* (dune grass) and *avaalaqiaq* (dwarf birch) can insulate bedding, which helps shed light on both this historic photograph and sculpture which features twigs being woven together by a woman (Fig 4 and 5).³¹ Another plant used for bedding, *kakillanaqutik*, could also be used to numb dog’s paw pads to prevent injury running on sharp ice.³² Utilitarian knowledge around plants proves Inuit consumed and sought after flora as a part of their lifestyle.

Inuit Art, Decorative Crafts and Botany:

One noteworthy practice that challenges the absence of flora in Inuit art is grass weaving and basketry. Particularly in the marshy salt water of Nuntasivaut, *ivik*, *ivitsukak*, and *senngailik* (beach grass, basket grass, dunegrass) can be made into beautiful baskets (Fig. 6).³³ The root and low stems of weaving grasses are edible, and as elder Mary Andersen pointed out “I still see kids

²⁸ Thoma A. Ager and Lynn Price Ager “Ethnobotany of the Eskimos of Neslon Island, Alaska” in *Arctic Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 1 1980, 26-48.

²⁹ Blondeau, *Plants of the Villages and Parks of Nunavut*, 549-554;

³⁰ The Botanical Knowledge of the Inuit of Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik, Avataq Cultural Institute 2011, 55.

³¹ Blondeau, *Plants of the Villages and Parks of Nunavut*, 556.

³² Blondeau, *Plants of the Villages and Parks of Nunavut*, 556;

³³ Downing, ... *Community of Nain Labrador*, 74; Baskets of Grass, “Land and Sea”, CBC Newfoundland and Labrador, uploaded October 3, 2010 <http://www.cbc.ca/landandseanl/2010/10/archival-special.html>, (date of last access April 16 2015)

³⁴ Downing, ... *Community of Nain Labrador*, 74.

(eating) this.”³⁴ As well, different plants can be used to create a different range of dyes for cotton, wool, and embroidery thread (Fig 7).³⁵

In “high” Inuit art, plants appear the most absent in comparison to utilitarian decorative craft. But in everyday textile traditions like the understudied embroidery, flowers have been a staple of parka adornment since before and after beads were available (Fig. 8). Similarly in early prints, plants can be seen as unspecific background decoration such as in Ulayu’s *Springtime* with perhaps *kungulik* and *aupaluktunnguat* (purple saxifrage)³⁶ adorning the top left corner (Fig. 9). For Ulayu, growing up nomadic meant springtime was a joyous season and these sentiments were carried into sedentary life.³⁷ A contemporary print features exclusively *suputaujalik* as its subject matter, and the artists describes the associations she has with cottongrass signalling hot summers, plump animals, and juicy berries (Fig 10).³⁸ In one particular Kenojuak Ashevak print, the ecological knowledge from *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* is showcased in animals relationships to the land. The contour of the abstracted seaweed dominates the print and differs drastically from the large repertoire of prints and drawings with the primary subject matter being animals or people (Fig 11). Similarly, this 1985 print shows geese feeding on grasses, another instance

³⁵ “Making plant dyes: Craft Centre Workshop” Makkovik Labrador; Makkovik - People and Plants Facebook Community, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.579043625489054.1073741855.390594181000667&type=3> (date of last access April 16 2015)

³⁶ “Plant Life” Arctic Watch Wild Lodge, nd, Web, accessed March 17 2015, <http://www.arcticwatch.ca/whale-watching/plant-life>.

³⁷ Ulayu, *Springtime*, stone cut, “Dorset 76: Cape Dorset Annual Graphics Collection 1976”, (MF Fehley Publishers Limited, Toronto, 1976).

³⁸ “Cotton Grass by Samayualie, Nicotye”, Inuit Art Zone, print, http://www.inuitartzone.com/Cotton_Grass_by_Nicotye_Samayualie_p/cd13-09.htm (date of last access April 17).

where plants enter Inuit art not through their relationship to people, but to animals and larger ecosystems (Fig 12).

In more contemporary art, Ruth Qallauryuk's wall hangings counter the "popular perception of the Canadian Arctic as a barren region devoid of growth and fecundity."³⁹ Her abstract renderings of the land throughout the seasons are devoid of any human or animal presence. The stitches she uses to create her motifs are inspired from the shapes and colours of the tundra foliage she is capturing (Fig 13 a-d).⁴⁰ The last two works I wish to discuss truly seem to be anomalies in the body of Inuit art. Pitseolak Oshutsiaq and Arnaquaq Ashevak both sculpted beautiful white flowers out of stone (Fig 14 and 15). As one dealer notes, it is a "very interesting and rare subject in Inuit art".⁴¹ One is identified as a rose, the other resembles more a tulip, but no doubt both seem strangely "foreign" subject matter for Inuit to produce. This "strangeness" is coded as "inauthentic" in that the Inuk artist must only create "Inuit" art, while white-*Qallunaat* do not confront these same restrictions or expectations. I also think it is noteworthy that works depicting flora in Inuit art are mostly seen in the contemporary period. In a movement when Indigenous scholars are taking aim at "authenticity", fostering political self determination and rebuking ongoing Canadian colonialism, I see it as no coincidence that contemporary Inuit art is reflecting more diverse experiences that include flora. This drastically broadens what Inuit art is allowed to be beyond polar bears carvings and drawings of Shamans.

³⁹ "Ruth Qaulluaryuk", Marion Scott Gallery, <http://www.marionscottgallery.com/ARTISTS/QaulluaryukR-1.asp> (date of last access April 17 2015).

⁴⁰ "A Woman's Vision: Inuit Textile Art from Arctic Canada" by Bernadette Driscoll-Engelstad, in *Inuit Art Quarterly* Vol. 9 No. 2 Summer 1994, http://inuitartfoundation.org/wp-content/themes/u-design/images/Archives/1994_02.pdf

⁴¹ "7.5" White Arctic Rose by Pitseolak Oshutsiaq" Fine Inuit Carvings, <http://www.inuitsculptures.com/products/rose-by-pitseolak-oshutsiaq> (date of last access April 16 2015).

Even though it is rarely evidenced in Inuit art work today, *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* on botany is not lost. Plants continue to play a critical role in Inuit life for food, medicine, fuel and other utilitarian purposes, and this is why we do – at least sometimes- see this represented in the various art practices of Inuit. In contemporary art, a wider diversity of subjects is being shown that includes flora and allows for Inuit to represent their life without the limitations of making “authentic” Inuit art. While the *Qallunaat* art market will always have expectations about the art they want, at least the contemporary period is offering a bit more than reductive inukshuk carvings and hunting prints.

Plate List



Fig 1

Ethnobiological classification of the plant Kingdom

Marcel Blondeau, Claude ROy, Alain Cuerrier, *Plants of the Villages and Parks of Nunavut*, Avataq Cultural Institute, 2010. 555.



Fig. 2

Mary Pudlat, *Woman Gathering Kelp*, lithograph, 1997.

<https://www.eskimoart.com/sculptures/APDC35.html>

Fig. 3

Pitseolak Qimirpiq, *Woman Picking Berries*, serpentine Sculpture, 2014.

<http://www.eskimoart.com/sculptures/D3939.html>



Fig. 4

“Richmond Gulf: A woman carrying boughs for bedding on her back” L.T. Burwash, 1927, Umiujaq, Library and Archives Canada/L.T. Burwash/PA-096680, <http://www.avataq.qc.ca/en/Les-Collections/Bibliotheque-et-archives/Photos-historiques/detail/?id=1019>

Fig. 5

Mary Kiinalik Kumak, *Mother wish Child Making a Mat*, soapstone sculpture and twigs, 1956-1957.

Celine Saucier, *Guardian of Memory: Sculpture-Women of Nunavik*, (Les Editions de L’instant Même, 1998)





Fig. 6

Author's screenshot, Baskets of Grass, "Land and Sea", CBC Newfoundland and Labrador, uploaded October 3, 2010 <http://www.cbc.ca/landandseanl/2010/10/archival-special.html>, (date of last access April 16 2015)

Fig. 7

Author's screenshot, prepared plant dyes, "Making plant dyes: Craft Centre Workshop" Makkovik Labrador; Makkovik - People and Plants Facebook Community, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.579043625489054.1073741855.390594181000667&type=3> (date of last access April 16 2015)



Makkovik - People and Plants

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We also had some plant dyes for the workshop made beforehand. We put various plants and lichens on the simmer for up to two days, but some were only simmering for a few hours. Plants will give very different colours depending on how long you simmer them, what season they're picked in, or what treatment the fabric gets before it's dyed.

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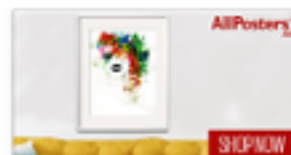


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Fig. 10

Nicotye Samayualie, *Cotton Grass*, print, 2013

http://www.inuitartzone.com/Cotton_Grass_by_Nicotye_Samayualie_p/cd13-09.htm.

Fig. 11

Kenojuak Ashevak, *Rabbit Eating Seaweed*, print, 1959.

"Uuturautiit: Celebratin 50 Years of PrintmkaingCape Dorset", Christine Lalonde, Vol. 25, No 1 and 2, Spring/Summer 2010, http://inuitartfoundation.org/wp-content/themes/u-design/images/Archives/2010_01_02.pdf



Fig. 12

Paukosie Sivuak, Thomassie Irqumia, Eliassie Aupaluk, *Two Geese Eating Grass*, print, 1985.

Povungnituk 1985: Print Collection, ed May M. Craig, La Federation des Cooperatives du Nouveau-Quebecz, 1985

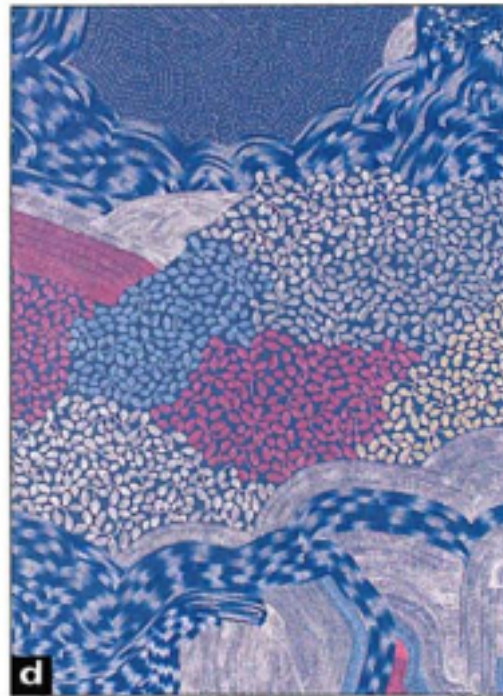


Fig 13 a,b,c,d

Ruth Qaulluaryuk, *Four Seasons on the Tundra*: a) *Spring*, b) *Summer*, c) *Fall*, d) *Winter*; stroud, embroidery thread 1991-1992

“A Woman’s Vision: Inuit Textile Art from Arctic Canada” by Bernadette Driscoll-Engelstad, in *Inuit Art Quarterly* Vol. 9 No. 2 Summer 1994, http://inuitartfoundation.org/wp-content/themes/u-design/images/Archives/1994_02.pdf

Fig. 14 and 15

Arnaquaq Ashevak, “Inuit Flower Sculpture”, iCollector.com, http://www.icollector.com/Arnaquaq-Ashevak-Inuit-Flower-Sculpture-Cape_i5240719 (date of last access April 16 2015)

Pitseolak Oshutsiaq, *White Rose*, serpentine and antler, 2014 <http://www.inuitsculptures.com/products/rose-by-pitseolak-oshutsiaq> (date of last access April 16 2015)



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