

Is an Inuit Literary History Possible?
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In 1977, Inuit representatives from Alaska, Arctic Canada, and Greenland gathered in Barrow, Alaska, for the inaugural meeting of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC). In order to create a unified position from which to deal with southern administrations, they drafted a resolution that declared the “oneness of [their] culture, environment and land, and the wholeness of the homeland.” This assertion echoes earlier ethnographic accounts of Inuit intellectual culture, which likewise celebrate consistencies in storytelling traditions across the vastness of the Inuit homeland. Drawing on the recent theoretical work of the Indigenous literary nationalists, I argue that articulations of peoplehood are a central feature of classic and contemporary Inuit literature. Although nationalist literary history projects risk downplaying the diversity internal to the group and its literature, they also function strategically to draw attention to the presence, significance, and rhetorical sovereignty of under-recognized literary traditions. Specifically, this article considers stories of the now-extinct Tuniit, or Sivullirmiut (‘First People’)—a prominent feature of the Inuit oral tradition of the Central and Eastern Arctic. It places Rachel Qitsualik’s contemporary fictional account in dialogue with a sampling of classic stories in order to reveal the way in which such texts delineate a sense of Inuit nationhood—and open the door for an Inuit literary history.

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