



**HAL**  
open science

## **Review. Early Inuit Studies: Themes and Transitions, 1850s-1980s' edited by Igor Krupnik**

Julien Pongerard

### ► **To cite this version:**

Julien Pongerard. Review. Early Inuit Studies: Themes and Transitions, 1850s-1980s' edited by Igor Krupnik. 2018. <halshs-03332488>

**HAL Id: halshs-03332488**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03332488v1>**

Submitted on 16 Sep 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization



## ‘Early Inuit Studies: Themes and Transitions, 1850s-1980s’ edited by Igor Krupnik

AUGUST 27, 2018 / JULIEN PONGERARD / 0 COMMENTS

Igor Krupnik (Editor). *Early Inuit Studies: Themes and Transitions, 1850s-1980s*. xviii + 452pp., illus., maps, bibl., index. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2016.

Inuit studies today is an interdisciplinary and institutionalized field of research. The present book, edited by Arctic ethnologist Igor Krupnik, proceeds from a session organized at the [18th Inuit Studies Conference](#), and provides insightful elements on the history of the field. This collection of fourteen essays (plus a contextualizing introduction by Krupnik and a closing “Coda” by Béatrice Collignon) is a beautiful object, printed on glazed-paper, reproducing many maps, tables, and unique photographs from the collections of prominent social scientists of the Arctic. In the front endpapers readers encounter a nearly circumpolar map of the whole Inuit Arctic. This cartographic representation of the polar North fits well with the book’s pan-Inuit framework, dealing with research produced about all Inuit groups in Northern America, Russia, and Europe (Greenland). The book’s broad geographic scope is united with an ambitious historiographical agenda. Krupnik aims to fill a void in the “collective memory” of scholars of Inuit studies by portraying in broad strokes the early history of their research field. Most of the book’s chapters are devoted to portraying one important figure in Inuit studies, or studying a precise research project, or depicting a school of thought or a research tradition.

The essays gathered here reflect Krupnik’s intention to introduce readers to the

early stages of Inuit studies. Rather than offer an exhaustive account of the field's past, the book provides a "synopsis of the history of Eskimology" (Nelson H. H. Graburn, xv), limited to "the time considered classical in our research field" (xvi). That is the time of "Eskimology," when the academic discipline was institutionalized in Denmark, and which Krupnik interestingly defines as a "phase" in the history of Inuit studies in an opening chapter focused on establishing a chronology running "from Boas to Burch." In this essay, Krupnik focuses on shifts and transitions in the research field, and thus defines two fundamental transformations along the span of what he calls "early Inuit studies." First, in the 1880s, individuals transformed dispersed studies about Inuit peoples—often a byproduct of explorations led by natural scientists—into a more coherent scholarly community. This opened the era of Eskimology, which would end in the 1980s, when it was transformed into Inuit studies. The field's name change (following change of the name under which Inuit people are known, from "Eskimos" to "Inuit") reflects a shift in the status of the Inuit—being (tentatively) reversed from objects to subjects. Krupnik further divides the central era of Eskimology into three intellectual periods: first, early Eskimology, starting with the intensification of knowledge exchanges and the establishment of science forums and societies; second, the time of "the Eskimo problem," starting in the 1920s, a period when "Eskimo studies" were institutionalized, and the field structured around a limited number of problematics and disciplines (namely, prehistory and archaeology); and last, starting in the late 1950s, the period of Eskimology's climax, when a name for the discipline was acknowledged, and the number and variety of scientists and research approaches surged.

The whole book's organization roughly follows this chronology. The first part (1850s to 1920s) is that of "early science about the Inuit," that is, Inuit studies before Eskimology. Knowledge about Inuit peoples was first acquired "between science and politics" (chapter 2) by trained natural scientists and daring young men going North on behalf of empires, and then for more science-focused purposes. This part also puts forward how individuals took a genuine scientific interest in the study of indigenous peoples of the Arctic and began gathering their knowledge—pioneers such as colonial administrator Hinrich Johannes Rink (chapter 2), missionary Samuel Petrus Kleinschmidt (chapter 3), then of course geographer-turned-anthropologist Franz Boas (whose English publications on the Inuit are gathered by Ludger Müller-Wille in a thoughtful bibliography; see chapter 4), and "explorer, ethnographer, and narrator" Knud Rasmussen (chapter 5). The second part of the book focuses on the "concepts and methods in early Eskimology" (1920s to late 1950s), with a focus on the debate about the origins of the Eskimo culture and people—a debate that polarized the field and anchored prehistory and archaeology at the core of the discipline. There, William W. Fitzhugh pays a dense biographical homage to Frederica de Laguna, the last "four-field Boasian anthropologist" (232). The third and last part of the book focuses on the "maturity and changeover" of Eskimology. Søren Thuesen's opening chapter in this section goes back over the institutionalization of the discipline in Copenhagen (still the only place with a university department focused on Inuit studies) and its subsequent history, interlocked with contemporary political developments in Greenland. Other chapters give accounts of major trends in

methodologies and subjects through a focus on a figure or landmark research programs; Claudio Aporta and Krupnik both discuss mapping projects (the 1976 Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Project, and Ernest Burch's early 1980s circumpolar map of indigenous peoples) which lead them to epistemological reflections on the power of maps—and scientific projects in general—to help familiarize the general public with indigenous realities and to trigger political change.

At the core of the book are the constitution and evolution of a “scholarly community” (2) of researchers in the social sciences. Articles are written by established leading scholars in their respective fields—and this variety reflects the diversity of Inuit studies: anthropology, linguistics, geography, archaeology, etc. Authors often take good care to situate their object within wider contexts, thus turning articles into opportunities to discuss historically meaningful moments in Inuit studies—whether focusing on prominent scholarly figures (often the author's mentor), iconic projects, major sub-fields and schools of thought, typical methodologies, structuring debates, etc. Therefore, beyond its immediate object of offering an outline of the history of a specific scientific field, the book also provides examples which may contribute to general epistemological knowledge on the various processes through which a field of study emerges and evolves.

Throughout the book, readers gain insightful views of the process of doing social science, from the smallest personal encounters resulting in the production of knowledge (e.g., de Laguna's meeting with Therkel Mathiasen and Kaj Birket-Smith presented in Fitzhugh's chapter 9), to the wider dynamics of institutional rivalries structuring a field of studies (e.g., the competition between the Danish National Museum and the University of Copenhagen, which led to differential specialization of scientists affiliated with them, discussed in Krupnik's chapter 1), to the serendipity that sometimes caused people to become leading Arctic scholars (e.g., how Waldemar Bogoras became an ethnologist by chance when exiled to Siberia where he lived among indigenous people, as explained in Nikolai Vakhtin's chapter 8). These reflections on the making of Arctic social sciences show how the field gradually emerged and evolved, unplanned and unforeseen. Thus, Vakhtin's statement about the course of scientific disciplines fully applies to Inuit studies: they are “a series of bifurcations that can be seen as a coherent chain of cause and effect, but only in retrospect” (193).

The authors in this volume also thoroughly investigate the interpersonal relations and the constitution of networks on which the building of a scholarly community largely relies. Many chapters are themselves the product of collaborations between scientists gathering their memories. An outstanding piece in this respect is Krupnik's description of how Burch collected knowledge from many of his colleagues to write a comprehensive and state-of-the-art map entitled “Peoples of the Arctic.” Krupnik himself reiterated the interaction between Burch and Greenlandic scholar Robert Petersen, who was asked again to share his knowledge on territoriality and settlements in Greenland in order to review newly uncovered census data (389). Also running throughout the book and

providing food for thought is the plurality of partnerships involved in the process of doing science with indigenous peoples. The book displays a wide variety of relations between (mostly) Western scientists and Inuit people. They often consist of in-the-field encounters and observations, but also of prolonged distant discussions between scientists and non-indigenous local informants (e.g., Kenn Harper's contribution to chapter 4 on the collaboration between Boas and whalers James Mutch and George Comer), of encounters with Inuit gone "south" (e.g., Charles Campbell Hughes and Margaret Lantis encouraging a young Inuit man to write his memoirs, discussed in Carol Zane Jolles's chapter 13), and of course of the co-production of knowledge (Kenneth L. Pratt and Aporta explain that the development of ethnohistory and then the Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Project were landmarks in establishing and normalizing the practice of co-producing knowledge between indigenous peoples and Western scientists; see chapters 12 and 14).

Putting their subject in a wider perspective, the authors thoroughly explore the dynamic interactions between research, politics, historical events, and sociocultural frameworks, thus providing a second broad epistemological contribution of the book. Readers find insightful elements in the description of interactions between Inuit studies and the context within which they take place. Such multifaceted historical backgrounds are often brought forward, entangling economic incentives (Marquardt's chapter 2 on the era of Danish colonization in Greenland), political turmoil (Vakhtin's chapter 8 on the dramatic difficulties of being a scientist in Stalin's USSR), social and legal change (Pratt's chapter 12 on how ethnohistory emerged from new relations between the American government and Alaskan Inuit), technological progress (Aporta's chapter 14 on the Inuit Land Use and Occupation Project), internal scientific dynamics (Peter P. Schweitzer's chapter 11 on the demise of kinship studies in the late 1970s), and so on. The influences of Inuit studies on their historical contexts are not forgotten, since they have indeed triggered or participated in socio-economic or political change (see for instance Marquardt on how Rink pushed for new policies, or Pratt and Aporta on the legal incentive to collect indigenous knowledge). Inuit studies also brought about epistemological innovations which have been followed in other scientific fields. This is highlighted in the closing and thought-provoking essay by Collignon, cleverly categorized as a "coda" and offering a first-person account of the changes which have occurred since the last two decades of the twentieth century—a tremendous shift reflected in the new name "Inuit studies" which widely replaced that of "Eskimology." "Inuit have now fully integrated into Inuit studies" says Collignon (413); they are now acknowledged as co-producers of knowledge and as project initiators. In this dimension, now widely shared in the fields of anthropology and indigenous studies around the world, "Arctic research was a pioneer" establishing ethical principles and seeking methodological validation from the people directly involved in data collecting (413). However, while acknowledging the obvious ethical and heuristic benefits of such change, Collignon also raises three interesting concerns about the effects of such dynamics, which are widely at play in contemporary indigenous research. First, Inuit knowledge is taken into account, but hardly ever questioned in itself—how is it produced, how does it function? Second, if social scientists become more and

more “facilitators” of projects which emanate from communities’ social demand, it may affect their contributions to theoretical debate. And third, there is an inherent epistemological risk in relying more and more on only one type of scientific partnership, which are community-driven rather than academic-driven. Such concerns pave the way for further reflective research and are definitely worth taking into consideration by any social scientist involved in research with indigenous communities.

On the whole, the book may therefore be interesting not only to Inuit studies scholars and students, but also to anyone interested in learning more about how science is produced, especially in indigenous and/or colonial and postcolonial contexts. The collection of articles prove Inuit studies to be a good key to open the black box of the day-to-day production of anthropological knowledge since the late nineteenth century, mobilizing a wide range of actors and being inscribed in a plurality of contexts. Still, this seminal piece of work has to be understood for what it is, a collection of (sometimes unequally thoughtful) notes and insights into the evolutions of a specific and area-focused research field in the (Western) social sciences—and not a streamlined synthetical history of a discipline. Closing the book, I couldn’t help regretting that the chronology put forward by Krupnik in his first chapter was merely taken as a reference in a few articles, but hardly developed and not further strengthened by articles which would have adopted a historically more comprehensive view. In this regard, *Early Inuit Studies* prepares the ground for later analyses, which could confirm or contradict the chronological categorization. Quantitative analysis (e.g. bibliometrics) of the intellectual productions and/or positions in Inuit studies may help validate Krupnik’s chronological sequence of main approaches and dominant methodologies in the field throughout the twentieth century. One could also deplore the fact that intercultural relations are hardly approached as such; articles rarely focus on how racial categorizations (e.g., Inuit/ White) have shaped or been shaped by Eskimology itself, helping define collective identities which have an effect on micro-social interactions as well as wider political grounds. These limitations, largely due to the genesis of the book, have left me eager to read future works which may build on the data and framework delivered here in order to further analyze and deepen Arctic social scientists’ collective memory about the history of their field.

---

Share this:



---

#### Related

[Rites of Passage](#)

August 15, 2017

In "Field Notes"

[‘Collecting Mesoamerica’](#)

[Exhibition Review](#)

September 12, 2017

In "Participant

Observations"

[Upcoming History of](#)

[Anthropology Talks at the](#)

[HSS/SHOT Virtual Forum](#)

September 29, 2020

In "Announcements"

## Authors

Julien Pongerard: [contributions](#) / [julien.pongerard@ens-cachan.fr](mailto:julien.pongerard@ens-cachan.fr) / École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay

## Leave a Comment

Enter your comment here...

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

## PUBLICATION INFORMATION

The *History of Anthropology Review* became an online publication with volume 40 in 2016, and changed its title from *History of Anthropology Newsletter* to *History of Anthropology Review* on October 18, 2019. Content is updated continually, and subscribers receive weekly emails with links to new content.

HAR is based at the Department of History and Sociology of Science, 303 Claudia Cohen Hall, 249 S. 36th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6304. Fax: 215-573-2231.

ISSN 2572-2220

[Volume 45 \(2021\)](#)

[Volume 44 \(2020\)](#)

[Volume 43 \(2019\)](#)

[Volume 42 \(2018\)](#)

[Volume 41 \(2017\)](#)

[Volume 40 \(2016\)](#)

[Prior Volumes](#)

© 2021 HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY REVIEW – UP ↑