

David Borish, director and producer. Herd: Inuit Voices on Caribou

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FILM REVIEW

David Borish, director and producer. *Herd: Inuit Voices on Caribou*. Documentary film. Nunatsiavut Government, NunatuKavut Community Council, and Torngat Secretariat, 2022.

Herd: Inuit Voices on Caribou, which is described by its creators as a “community-led, research-based documentary film,” was directed and produced by settler filmmaker David Borish, and led by a steering committee comprised of Inuit community members, university researchers, the Torngat Secretariat, and representatives from both the Nunatsiavut Government, representing Inuit of northern Labrador, and NunatuKavut Community Council, representing Inuit of southern Labrador (<https://www.inuitvoicesherd.com/about>). With its collaborative and cooperative approach, this documentary stands out in the divided political landscape of Labrador. In recent years, the Nunatsiavut Government has publicly challenged the NunatuKavut Community Council’s land claim, which overlaps with Nunatsiavut territory. These political disagreements have been painful to many, as the Inuit of both regions are deeply interconnected and inter-related. Inuit “have a long history of migrating and living throughout Labrador” (Procter, Felt, and Natcher, 2012, 7), and the historical process that has since divided the Inuit into two competing political organizations has been largely shaped by colonial forces, including missionaries, trading companies, and outside governments (Kennedy, 2014, 5–13). Because of this political division, research projects involving Labrador Inuit are now generally affiliated with one organization or the other, with the result that this divide “has permeated the literature and greatly influenced our research questions” (Fay, 2016, 260). *Herd* offers an alternative to this

narrative of division by making visible the similarities and connections between Labrador Inuit experiences and showing the generative potential of Inuit collaboration across political boundaries.

Herd tells the story of the dramatic decline of the George River caribou herd, which historically ranged from the shores of Hudson Bay to the Atlantic coast, and the total ban on caribou hunting in Labrador since 2013. It does not dwell on scientific questions about why the caribou have seen such decline or policy questions about how governments should respond, questions that have usually been publicly answered by those from outside Labrador. Rather, this documentary takes as its starting point that, as one unnamed voice says in the opening minutes, “People have to be *heard*.” The title thus takes on a double meaning, highlighting how the film seeks to hear and amplify Labrador Inuit voices. The film narrates the impact of the caribou decline and hunting ban on Inuit lives across Labrador entirely through Inuit voices, voices of deep expertise on the land and the animals that, as Inuk hunter Joey Angnatok says, have too often “gone to deaf ears.” The film’s narrative is composed of clips from interviews carried out as part of the research for the film, interspersed with scenes of the Labrador landscape and archival footage of caribou herds at their peak and of caribou hunts. While occasional graphics provide facts about the caribou population, no authoritative voiceover explains or mediates the voices.

Through this collective narration, *Herd* tells a story that is widely shared by Labrador Inuit. It begins with a series of brief moments in which interviewees individually struggle to articulate the significance of the caribou to their people, as if each one of them can’t on their own express the depth and complexity of this relationship. Inuk hunter Derrick Pottle explains to the interviewer, “See, you ask these questions and it’s very difficult to. . . . Unless you know the whole story.” To know the “whole story,” *Herd* suggests, requires hearing from many Inuit voices — from different regions, communities, genders, ages, and experiences. Through subtitles, these many Inuit contributors are identified by their name, home community, and Inuit organization, but the film doesn’t divide the speakers into groups, rather focusing on the connec-

tions between their experiences and the throughlines between their narratives. By drawing on and layering a multitude of voices, *Herd* traces the intimate and multi-faceted relationship between the Inuit and the caribou in Labrador, and the far-reaching impact of the loss of the caribou hunt. It shows how the caribou was not only important as a food source, but was also vitally connected to Inuit identity, gender identity, health and well-being, culture, traditional skills, financial security, and relationships to the land and to one another. Joey Angnatok explains that the caribou was foundational to Inuit lives: “It was almost like the caribou was the reason, and everything else happened after.”

Part of this “everything else” is the way in which the caribou hunts shaped and enriched Inuit social relationships. The hunts were necessarily highly collaborative, since it required a group effort to hunt and transport such a large animal. In one sequence in the documentary, caribou hunters from both Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut describe their memories of travelling in groups over long distances, going from community to community, and visiting with friends or family. Derrick Pottle reflects that the caribou “not only played a significant role in filling bellies. There’s that social, respectful aspect.” As the hunters speak, a map of Labrador appears and is gradually criss-crossed by lines representing their remembered travels, lines that cross and recross current land claim boundaries. Seneca literary scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013, 29) argues that we need to “complicate our conceptual maps in Native nation-building,” looking beyond hard political boundaries to “(re)map” our understanding of Indigenous lands based on Indigenous ways of knowing. *Herd* offers us an example of such (re)mapping, suggesting that the traditional caribou hunt offers a shared, expansive, and deeply Inuit way of looking at Labrador. This sequence also implicitly raises the question of how the loss of the caribou may be damaging these “social, respectful connections” that have historically connected Labrador Inuit. *Herd* can be seen as reclaiming the teachings of the caribou hunt by focusing on the relationships of the Inuit to each other, to the caribou, and to the land, and by treating all of its participants’ voices with respect.

Because it emphasizes relationships, *Herd* is an emotionally evocative work. It begins by expressing the joy and pleasure that Inuit have taken in the caribou. One lively sequence moves quickly from speaker to speaker, their eyes lighting up as they describe how they most enjoyed eating caribou, while in the background the Jerry Cans' rollicking tune, "Mamaqtuq" — Inuktitut for delicious — plays. The film then moves to an elegiac tone, turning to the people's grief at the loss of the caribou. Greg Flowers says that it is like "losing a friend"; Richard Michelin struggles to contain his emotions as he says, "It's hard to really talk about it"; Ocean Lane describes "the pain that you see in elders' eyes"; and Judy Voisey describes it as an "enduring sadness" that "impacts our well-being" but that people often "fail to recognize." Voisey's insight that the caribou ban impacts Inuit in often imperceptible ways, especially for the younger generation, is one to which the film returns. Andrea Andersen explains how she thinks that younger Inuit men are impacted: "That loss is affecting them in a way that they don't really know because they haven't experienced it." Sarah Baikie speaks emotionally about her grandchildren: "It's just that you can't even sort of imagine what it's going to be like if, say, the generations coming up isn't going to be able to enjoy that, and not only not enjoy it but not know anything about it." This notion of a traditional relationship that is in danger of being forgotten and rendered invisible resonates with the loss of relationship between regions of Labrador caused by current political conflicts, and the pain caused by this loss.

In its final moments, the film is comprised of a collage of voices, not all identified by name, describing the possibility of the return of the caribou and the caribou hunt, and the people's hopes for future generations. An elder explains, "Everything, it's all connected, eh?" George Morris Jr. envisions a communal hunt where the meat is shared, and Greg Flowers muses, "My hope is that people wake up and realize that we all have to work together." *Herd: Inuit Voices on Caribou* is an example of such connectedness, pointing towards what a powerful and far-reaching story can be created through Inuit working together and focusing on shared experiences.

The film has been shown and honoured at countless film festivals and screened on CBC television, bringing Inuit voices to large national and international audiences. And, thus far, the *Herd* team has co-created and published six academic articles based on the research for the documentary, thus bringing Labrador Inuit voices to scholarly audiences as well. *Herd*, in drawing on Inuit traditions of collaboration and sharing, reminds us of the rich potential of such collaboration and models the shared sustenance that it can bring.

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