The following article by the novelist William T. Vollmann is a personal and informative essay on the emergence of the new territory of Nunavut in the Spring of 1999.*^

On the first of April, 1999, I had the privilege of watching as a new territory came into being, for most of the right reasons. The birth happened at midnight, in Canada’s far north, with fireworks instead of bloodshed. I had just returned from Kosovo, and while I was watching the bright detonations over Iqaluit, the new capital of the new Nunavut, NATO bombers were busy over Yugoslavia. I could not help thinking of the faraway blossoms of those incendiary shells as I stood at the edge of the sea-ice that night when Nunavut became real, with Inuit children calling and roaring with happiness at each explosion. The fireworks hung like palm fronds around the full moon, offering green comets instead of leaves, and the silhouettes of gloved and parkaed people standing in the snow took on noonday life for a moment, until the light faded. Snow scattered like gravel underfoot. There came more and more bursts, celebrated by fur-ruffled kids sitting on a high hillock of snow that had gone glassy with ice. With the windchill it was 40 below; my face was numb; my pen froze. I’ll never forget the dark figures on the pale snow, the rapturous cries, the fireworks’ remarkable purity and clarity in that cold air. Every fiery star seemed as solid as a shard of glass in a kaleidoscope, and

"The Very Short History of Nunavut"

kamliks; "Our clothing is like a living history book. It reflects the people and events that influence us. After almost 20 years of negotiations we have re-established our land 'Nunavut.' I spelt out 'Nunavut' and Okiutaqtuq (our land freezes) on these boots and duffle stockings."
–Cecilia Naleopa Kudluk, Coral Harbour

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we could see its slowly dimming fall to the ice. Witnessing all around me the joy of the Nunavummiut, who had regained some control over their nation at last after all, Nunavut means "our land" and I was moved almost to tears.

If you look at a map and take in the vastness of that balsamic paradise called Canada, you will quickly see why Nunavut, huge as it is, remains outside the ken of so many Canadians, let alone the rest of the world. "Nunavut? What's that?" said a taxi driver in Montreal when I passed through on my way north to Iqaluit. "Le Grand Nord," I tried to explain. "ôle de Baffin, ôle d'Ellesmere, ôle de..."

He shrugged. He didn't really care. Because Nunavut lies so far away from almost everything! We're speaking of one-fifth of Canada's landmass, it's true- 730,000 square miles with one paved road, only 25,000 people, and 27 times that many caribou. But Canada, like Russia, can scarcely see and count herself in her entirety. Two square miles or two million, it's all the same to Canada. And so until now the conception, the idea, of Nunavut has lain neglected, misunderstood. But the actual ground of Nunavut itself? Well, for centuries explorers, whalers, merchants, politicians, and soldiers have been coming here to the frozen edge of the world first only to where the ice began as they crept and surveyed, clinging to the safety of water, the safety of summer's final channels, dark blue and corduroyed with sunlight, with the white cloud-puzzles overhead, past overhung ice-puzzles and then the white people calculated, gambled, stepped onto the ice.

Pretty soon some were doing well, like a Quebecker taxi driver I know in Iqaluit who stops by the Navigator Inn late at night when Inuit carvers sell their greenstone animal figures cheap because they crave drunkenness; my acquaintance pays $60 per piece and sends them to his sister down south, who sells them for $400, keeps a ten percent commission, and returns him the rest, so he clears a tax-free ten grand a year from that racket alone. Decades of cigarette smoking have awarded him the voice of an Inuit throat-singer, and in those ragged tones he always promises to lead me to the best carvers or, if I don't go for that, he can score me drugs, or anoint me a member of a top-secret club whose purpose is to help me get really close to Inuit girls.

I rarely stay in Arctic towns on my visits north. I come with my shelter on my back; I get off the plane and I start walking. Two or three miles outside of town I pitch my tent. I come in a few times and try to make friends. I go to church on Sundays and listen to the Inuit pray for the Queen of England in Inuktitut. But mostly I leave them alone. I am here to listen to wind and water.

What does Nunavut look like? This is difficult for me to say, not only because deep down I don't want you to go to the Arctic, and I feel guilty about going myself. Nunavut should be left to the Nunavummiutùbut also because so many happy images and memories swirl behind my eyes whenever I think about this land. I wrote a novel set in the Canadian Arctic landscape, and I could write many
more: pods of whales, polar bears, caribou running on ridge tops, summer moss, summer berries, mosquito crowds dense enough to blacken your face, cold that hurts, a sun that goes round and round in the sky like a clock without ever setting, long days and nights of winter moonlight bright enough to read a newspaper by (if you could stop shivering), the low elongations of the land, the blues and purples of the frozen sea, the sulphur-smelling crags of Baffin Island, waist- and shoulder-high rivers to ford, herds of musk oxen gathered (their spiked horns pointing out) in circles like immense wagon wheels, fossilized ferns and pine needles in valleys of icy shale, light, closeness to the sky, and above all, solitude.

I love that land, but it is not mine. It can never belong to me. When I was younger I once thought about settling here, in which case I would have become a member of the 15 percent of the Nunavummiut who aren't of Inuit extraction. Few of those people stay for long. So the land is truly not even mine to describe. To do so is to describe the Inuit themselves, because the Inuit are the land and the land belongs to them.

An Inuit woman named Elisapi has been my translator on several visits to the far northern settlement of Resolute; she is gentle, quiet, and plain, a serious, fortyish woman to whom I have always felt I could say anything. What word can describe her better than pure? But then I am always saying this about Inuit. To borrow from some idiot's remark about pornography, I can't define purity, but I know it when I see it. In Elisapi's case I think of kindness and patience and an unassuming spirituality. I hate even to write this much; I don't want to invade her soul with my conjectures and blundering definitions. Once, when I asked her what she thought was the most beautiful place in the Arctic, Elisapi looked at me in surprise and said, "Why, the land, of course. All the land."

What Elisapi loves above all else is to be "out on the land" a phrase of almost mystic significance to Nunavummiut. Out on the land! On one of my trips to Iqaluit I met the wife of a carver, a slender woman who engraves brooches of walrus ivory. "I love to hunt anything," she said the same words I'd already heard uttered by so many. "I've killed caribou, seal, walrus. I never killed a whale or a polar bear but my niece killed both already." She spoke with immense pride.

Elisapi, her husband, Joe, and their children have spent many a summer in a hunting camp on the ice. Even non-Inuit get infected. I've heard a Quebecker schoolteacher here use the same words: She was going to take her children out on the land for Easter, if the wind didn't prove too cold for the little ones. A young Anglo man I met in Apex, a little offshoot of Iqaluit, was always saying, "Man, I wish I were out on the land. Man, I wish I had a machine."

I remember the day Elisapi told me about the way she feels about the land. There was a strange light upon the hills and hollows, the armpits and throats of the white country, with the snow-covered sea pale blue like open water, and when
Elisapi spoke, a feeling between love and sadness came over me, the same feeling I have year after year in the Arctic when I'm alone with mountains or musk oxen, far away beneath the sky.

Do I have your permission to compress the history of the Canadian Arctic into nine paragraphs? In 1576 Martin Frobisher sailed from England to seek the Northwest Passage. He anchored off Baffin Island, which now forms the eastern boundary of Nunavut, and loaded up his ship with tons of fool's gold while kidnapping other cargo: a man and an Inuit woman holding a small child by the hand. Frobisher's men carried them away from an elder, perhaps the child's grandmother, who "howled horribly." Perhaps it is no wonder that the capital, the only town of any size (population 4,500), which stands upon the site of the mariner's landing and which for years and years was called Frobisher Bay, changed its name to Iqaluit—"the place of many big fish." The locals would rather not remember him.

In Frobisher's time, Inuit families were self-sufficient, or else they starved. But then whalers from England and Scotland and elsewhere began to trade knives, needles, tea, rifles, and bullets for furs, meat, and ivory. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, subsistence hunting lost ground to the fur trade—although even now, as much as half of what some Nunavummiut eat remains "country food": caribou, seal, whale, ptarmigan, and the like, killed by relatives or friends. It was only in the second half of this century, when Canadian and American World War II air bases and then English-language schools mushroomed in the high Arctic, that the Inuit began to live in towns, 28 little government-created settlements scattered over the snow and ice.

The growing dependence on trading with outsiders proved sometimes beneficial, sometimes pernicious. What happens if, instead of killing caribou to feed my family, I hunt Arctic foxes to sell their skins for bullets? Then we earn a lot of bullets, provided that the price of fox skins stays high in the south and my caribou hunting is easy. But if the price falls, we just might starve, which dozens did in the 1934-35 central Arctic famine. We might also starve, or simply become idle and despondent, if hunting seals or whales were no longer acceptable, as happened in the 1970s and '80s when Greenpeace and other environmental and animal-rights groups crippled the international sealskin trade. These do-gooders are accordingly hated throughout the Arctic; with varying degrees of justification, unemployment and suicides have been blamed on them. Many's the time in Nunavut and Greenland that I've been asked, "Are you a spy from Greenpeace?"

It was in part to protect the Inuit from a drastic boom-and-bust cycle that, in the 1960s, Canada's federal politicians began to encourage the construction of hamlets where people could enjoy medical care, education, warm beds, and an uninterrupted food supply. An old lady who'd been born in an igloo once told me, "In old days we had a very hard time. Government came, and it got easier." We sat on the sofa in her house in Iqaluit's tumble of old military hangars and prefab
housing and unnamed gravel roads. I asked her, "If people wanted to live on the land again, would you go with them or would you stay in your house?" Sitting with her hands clasped in her lap, her head trembling, perhaps from Parkinson's disease, she peered at me through her huge and rimless spectacles, and then replied in high-pitched, glottal Inuktitut, "I can't stay in a remote outpost now. From the hospital they're giving me medicine, so I must stay in town."

And so, on southern Nunavut's green-mossed rock, painted oil drums, painted wood-and-metal houses, and garbage dumps rose up in the summer rain. In northern Nunavut, the colored houses appeared upon tan gravel banks. Of course, this new way of life further accelerated the very dependence which had already caused so much harm. I wonder if by then the future was already as evident as a yellow light bulb in Iqaluit glaring down on rock-hard snow. That future was mass welfare. Animal populations declined near the towns, making hunting less practical and more occasional. Dog teams sickened in the close quarters. More than one hunter came home in those days only to find that the Mounties had shot all his dogs in the interest of public health—for the white people, it seemed, always knew best. Could this have anything to do with the fact that Nunavut has six times the national suicide rate?

The most famous of these resettlement efforts took place between 1953 and 1955, when the government forcibly relocated some 17 extended Inuit families from Inukjuak to new settlements at Resolute and Grise Fiord. Inukjuak lies way down in northern Quebec, nearly 400 miles south of Nunavut as the Arctic raven flies. To me it is almost paradise. It is green, not white. In summer the tundra hangs thick with crowberries and caribou run everywhere. In winter the sun never disappears entirely. Elisapi's mother, Old Annie, who sewed my kamiks, the sealskin boots I wear on my feet, was born in a camp there. She never wanted to leave. But they shipped her north.

Some Inuit believe that the Canadian government wanted to assert sovereignty over the high Arctic islands in the face of the American air bases strategically placed there in World War II, and therefore settled them with the indigenous people most likely to survive. But it should also be said that Inukjuak was not so edenic in the late 1940s: The caribou herds were dwindling, the price of fur had fallen, the people were falling deeper into welfare addiction. The government figured, paternalistically, why not just move some Inuit to the northern ice and let them become the self-sufficient hunters of old. For good measure, they also relocated some families from Ellesmere Island's Pond Inlet—northerners to help the southerners settle in. But the relocations were accomplished against people's wills, with misinformation, and with appalling results. The people from Inukjuak were unfamiliar with the hunting strategies they needed to succeed on the Arctic pack ice; they didn't even get along with the Pond Inlet Inuit, who didn't even speak the same dialect. Look at a map of Canada to see how far away from home these people were taken. See Inukjuak on the northeastern shore of Hudson Bay? Now let your eyes sail north as the Canadian Navy sealift-supply ship C.D. Howe
did, carrying those Inuit families: first 300 miles into what is now Nunavut (we’re out of Hudson Bay at last) and then perhaps 1,000 miles farther north and 200 miles west, almost to the magnetic North Pole.

The first time I went to Resolute, it was mid-August, around the same time the settlers had arrived, and it was snowing. By the time I left six weeks later, I had to chop up my drinking water with an ax. "When we arrived it was dark and cold," an old woman told me. "My child was really skinny from starving." The Inukjuak Inuit, who had never built igloos, constructed houses out of old packing crates and foraged for food in the garbage dumps of the whites, a sparse scattering of whom were stationed there with the Mounties, who oversaw a trading post in Resolute. For high prices, payable in furs, an Inuit hunter could obtain a scant few supplies, but sometimes there was an additional price—the sexual services of his wife. The results of the relocations: hunger, tuberculosis, lifelong bitterness.

The communities in Resolute and Grise Fiord survived, because Inuit are pretty damned tough. And in the more than 20-year-long tale of the land-claims negotiations that created Nunavut, one reads a similar tenacity. What Nunavut gained—besides more than a billion Canadian dollars over the next 14 years and valuable mineral rights—was a measure of self-governance. Nunavut is now a territory, exactly like the Yukon, exactly like the Northwest Territories it had been part of. What the Inuit gave up was the land. One of the only native North American groups who had never entered into a land treaty, many Inuit were anxious about extinguishing aboriginal title, and when the matter first came up for election in 1982, only 56 percent voted in favor of division. But what ultimately passed in 1993—the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act—was the biggest land deal between a government and an aboriginal people in North American history. Suffice it to say that in the face of federal skepticism and infighting and bureaucratic foot-dragging and worse, a partition line was at long last drawn through the Northwest Territories. What lay east became Nunavut.

To me it was a kind of miracle that this good thing was about to happen. And Iqaluit, which like so many Arctic towns is saturated with militaryspeak from the air-base days, seemed filled instead with joyspeak. Late in the evening on that last night of Northwest Territoriality, the bunkerlike elementary school filled with crowds come to hear the Anglican service in honor of Nunavut’s birth. The stage was bedecked with figures in red and white robes, and the minister said, "We must remember that what we call Nunavut, our land, is in fact God’s gift to us." In front of me was a little girl, half asleep in her mother's amauni, a parka with a hooded pouch in back for carrying babies. "We pray for our new commissioner," the minister went on, "for our new premier, for their families, for our new justices, who will be sworn in in a few moments, and most of all we pray for ourselves." In that cavernous, windowless gymnasium, built on concrete like a shop floor, they rose and prayed in English, French, and Inuktitut. "Now may the blessing of God Almighty be with us, both now and indeed forevermore. Amen." Then the minister smiled, checked his watch, and said, "Twenty-two minutes," and
everyone laughed. In Inuktitut they sang "Now Thank We All Our God" in sweet and steady voices. A woman in a crimson vest embroidered with a white polar bear leaned her head upon her husband's shoulder as she sang.

A Nunavut for Nunavummiut—only some of the white cab drivers were sullen about it. Their taxi lights shone slow on the glassy night snow between the still, cold lights of the settlement.

The new territory purports to represent the interests of all residents, but the ultimate goal is to create a de facto self-governing Inuit homeland—not now, of course, but in 20 or 50 years. Today the non-Inuit 15 percent of the population holds a disproportionate number of the government, medical, and teaching jobs. Few Inuit are trained. Only a third of Nunavut's teachers are Inuit; there are no Inuit doctors; there is only one Inuit lawyer in all of Nunavut, 34-year-old Paul Okalik, and he has been elected its first premier. A high-school dropout from Pangnirtung, a little village on the eastern shore of Baffin Island, Okalik wrestled with alcohol problems, jail, and his brother's suicide before going back to school on student loans. Despite his involvement in the Nunavut negotiations, he is as freshly minted a politician as Nunavut is a territory: He passed the bar and became premier within six weeks. The new territory's elder statesman—the father of Nunavut—is John Amagoalik, the journalist-politician who negotiated the land-claims settlement that created it and ran the Nunavut Implementation Commission that shaped its government. Sixteen of Nunavut's 19 legislators are Inuit, too—a few former mayors, some businessmen, a snowplow operator. Starting on Nunavut Day, when a white person in the territorial government wrote a memo to his superiors, the reply might well come back in Inuktitut.

"They cannot just want to throw white people away," a Quebecker teacher named Thérèse, who works at the elementary school in Iqaluit, told me. "Not all of the Inuit are qualified." But then she added quietly, "I know some white people are afraid of losing their jobs, but gradually they should be replaced."

Plenty of Caucasians do fine in Nunavut: Elisapi's husband, Joe, for one, is white and as northern an individual as I have ever met. But many find living in Nunavut difficult. The language daunts them; the mores are so different. Thérèse had spent four years in Iqaluit, but she planned to return south. She had a few Inuit friends, acquaintances really, from work. But Nunavut was not hers.

Meanwhile, in northern Quebec, the Inuit region known as Nunavik (from which the relocations to Resolute and Grise Fiord were carried out) harbors similar, half-concealed aspirations to autonomy. And down in Ottawa, even as Nunavut set off its fireworks, Cree Indians were drumming and singing on Parliament Hill in protest of the new territory, on the grounds that 31,000 square miles of their land have been stolen to create it. And of course, many Quebecers long to secede from Canada and form their own Francophone nation. The white taxi drivers I
talked with in Iqaluit are among this number: They told me that this whole Nunavut business was all shit. The Inuit weren’t ready, one of them opined. Quebec should secede, but not Nunavut. Quebec pays too much in taxes, and Canada just called Quebecers fucking frogs. The Prime Minister was an asshole. This last cabbie was an angry, stupid man, but, like the Inuit themselves, all he really wanted was some kind of recognition.

Finally, from what now remains of the Northwest Territories comes talk of further partitions and ethnic homelands. There was a move to rename this region Denedeh because so much of it was Dene Indian land, but the whites (who’d become the majority after the partition of Nunavut) voted down the measure, after which a bitter joke went around the Northwest Territories that the only real way to satisfy them would be to call the territory by the Anglo name of Bob.

Given the desire of so many places to un-Canada themselves to varying degrees, I was all the more impressed when the prime minster of Canada, Jean Chrétien, who had flown up to Iqaluit for the Nunavut Day festivities, rated justice over expediency in his speech that night. "We have come to recognize the right of the people of the north to take control of their own destiny," he proclaimed. And everyone stood up and cheered, and I cheered.

It would be as pleasing as it would be false to end our tale with the close of that inaugural ceremony in one of the concrete military hangar bays, as tiny old Helen Mamyaoj Maksagak, first commissioner of Nunavut, hugged to her heart the flag of her territory, presented to her by Inuit boys from Canada's Boy Scouts, the Junior Rangers. Or to conclude on Nunavut Night, the evening after the fireworks, where a heavy-metal band from Kuujuaq was entertaining one crowd with noise and dry-ice vapor while two hangars down the little kids were jigging to banjo and fiddle, and the old ladies in parkas were nodding, smiling, clapping, and everyone was applauding, and Premier Okalik was wandering around in his sealskin vest, floating in a shyly happy dream.

The air grew hot with the fragrance of bubble gum, wet fur, human sweat. Dancers came out, circling and snaking to the repetitive melody; an old man in a red cap and a collar of wolverine skins with the claws still on jogged happily up and down, watching. So many people with Nunavut hats and T-shirts, so many with the new Nunavut sweatshirts! But finally it was time to go back out among the gray snowdrifts and glaring streetlights of April, back to the steep-roofed houses to sleep. And the next morning and forever the tale of Nunavut must continue, this time without miraculous ceremonies.

"I've already given you enough beer," the white waiter in Iqaluit's Komatik Restaurant told the Inuit grandmother and her toothless boyfriend. "So I'll just put your next beer in the fridge and give it to you next time."
At this, the boyfriend started crying out in Inuktitut, and the grandmother joined in, wailing, "How come you? How come?"

"You cannot drink them tonight because you don't need the beer," the waiter insisted. "You've had too much. That's the end of the conversation."

"Where's my beer?" the grandmother demanded. "Where's my goddamned beer?" She wore a T-shirt printed in memory of a friend who'd died. Her eyes were lights glaring on ice; her words were breath-steam in the night. She was 44 years old.

"If you keep this up," the waiter said, "there'll be trouble."

It was two nights after Nunavut Day. I’d seen her earlier that afternoon before she was drunk, a big, squat woman with cropped hair, upslanted eyes, and a downpouted mouth. She was pale and old; her arms were covered with cooking burns. One of her sisters had died of cancer, another of alcoholism, a brother in a car accident (the car ran over his head). The last brother had hanged himself "because he was crazy," she said.

Now, as the waiter refused to serve her and her boyfriend, I invited them back to my hotel, which stood almost within sight of the restaurant. The grandmother's boyfriend didn't want to come. He stayed on at the Komatik, wiggling his fingers, feebly bewildered.

So the grandmother and I walked and she whined and wept, because she was very cold. Her ancient parka didn't zip anymore, and the alcohol had only pretended to warm her, in much the same fashion that the low sun can gild a house's siding so that it glows and shines against the blue snow with spurious preciousness. I offered to let her wear my parka but she wouldn't. She kept crying: "Too cold! Ikkii!" She touched my hand and said: "You cold. Cold! You too cold! Ikkii! Better you eat like Inuk. Eat meat. Eat caribou, walrus, seal..."

Anytime I wanted her to smile, I only had to ask her what animals she liked to hunt. She'd reply: "Any kind!" and would commence counting off the different animals on her fingers, uttering the Inuktitut names. Earlier that evening, with the beer not yet raging in her, she remained a wise old huntress. Just as caribou are sometimes silhouetted against snow, especially on ridges and when they crouch down to graze, snowy-white-on-white, so her memories stood out or hid, browsing and drowsing within her, living their own life. She could scarcely read or write, but (or perhaps therefore) she could remember. And for her, animals were the most vividly numinous entities.

I said that I wanted to go hunting sometime with her or her family, at which she began to check me out very seriously and soberly, saying, "OK, Bill, you got the
mitts, you got the coat; you can come hunting. Your pants gonna be cold, though." Not having planned on hunting again this trip, I'd left my windpants back in America.

We were outside then. It was 20 below zero. Later that night, I wandered wearily through one of Iqaluit's arcade malls, my hood thrown back, my parka unzipped, wearing my kamiks since I had no other shoes, my mitts dangling conveniently from strings at my sleeves. A slender young Inuit girl, high or crazed, began mocking me and eventually came running down the hall and punched me and kicked me, shrieking: "Where are you from, Daddy-o? What are you doing with all that fuckin' stupid gear?"

She herself was dressed like a southern California girl, and I wondered whether she had been among those serenely happy crowds on Nunavut Day, those people clapping grimy work gloves and sealskin mitts, while the fur ruffs of their parkas swirled in the wind. So angry and sad, did she care about Nunavut?

For her, the beauties of utility had given way to the beauties of fashion. Moreover, in so many young people's eyes, utility and fashion married one another in synthetic apparel. On a walk in Apex, I found myself promenading beside a young Anglo guy with dyed hair along the community's frozen shore, past rocks and trash cans protruding from the snow. He wore camouflage pants and a brand-name American parka. As we approached the frozen drifts on the frozen sea, with the wide, low domes of snow-islands ahead, he was telling me about one of his adventures over the winter. "We were fuckin' set up, man. We had fuckin' beer and the whole fuckin' nine yards. Then we got slammed with a 120-kilometer wind and, well, we lay down between our snowmobiles and we made it." He had no use for caribou-skin clothing, and neither did I.

In that mall, to be sure, I was ludicrously overdressed. My old huntress did not find me so. She was charitable and practical; she was gentle, open, giving. But later that night she was drunk; now she was crazy, too. A hundred years ago, she might have been better off—unless, of course, she'd starved to death. Now she could drink herself to death.

For her, perhaps, Nunavut had arrived too late; it would differ too painfully from her code of life. This new thing, Nunavut, is as beautiful as a woman's parka trimmed with strips of fur and strips of patterned cloth, as ugly as scraps of plastic dancing in an Arctic wind.

But who can foresee Nunavut's future even five years ahead? It's an experiment, full of vigor and nobility, the government resolutely, democratically local, with its ten departments housed in ten widely spread Arctic towns. And Premier Okalik is an Inuit leader, as bright and optimistic as the territory. No doubt he and the other young politicians will grow old; perhaps they'll fall into nepotism and
inertia until the political landscape freezes like the laundry on a clothesline covered with Easter snow. But for now he seems committed.

On Nunavut Day, the elders gathered in the hangar bays cheered Okalik—he was *their* young man, homegrown. But precisely because he was theirs, they didn’t have to stand on ceremony, and so their kids ran loudly in and out. Perhaps Okalik won the election because he exemplified the pragmatic modesty and moderation that has always served Inuit so well, the genial humility that had his colleagues in the territorial negotiations introducing one another’s speeches with aw-shucks humor, insisting that at the beginning they didn’t even know what a land claim was. Now, when Okalik came to the podium, he declared, "We have achieved our goal through negotiations without civil disobedience....We hope we can contribute to the prosperity and diversity of Canada."

Here was no separatist poison, no threat to the sovereignty of the country at large. Nunavut remained Canadian—with a difference, of course. At the conclusion of the inaugural ceremony, they sang the national anthem, but this rendition of "O Canada" must have startled Prime Minister Chrétien and the other federal politicians, for the Inuit decorated its melody at beginning and end with an ancient *ayah* song, performed by three women.

Nunavut remains her own place, an extended family even after all the decades of damage, the community a superorganism that tries to warm all in its bosom. But can the fresh new super-superorganism truly give itself to all Inuit? Almost 60 percent of the Nunavummiut are under 25 years of age. And the alteration of almost every aspect of material culture has occurred so rapidly that the elders and the kids riding their bikes in the April snow almost constitute two separate societies. Sometimes I think that the old huntress and the girl who kicked me had more in common with me than with one another.

At her house in resolute, Elisapi’s mother, Annie, takes a hunk of frozen raw caribou or seal from the freezer, sets it down on cardboard on the kitchen floor, and chops off splinters of meat with a hatchet. Annie says her favorite boarders are those who eat her "country food," and she always smiles at me because I fall to with relish. At community feasts, the Inuit drag in whole animal carcasses, and tear out raw intestines with their teeth; so the fact that I’ll eat almost anything helped endear me to Annie, one linchpin of her culture being the sharing of home-killed meat. When by happy chance I found Annie and Elisapi living in Iqaluit not long after Nunavut Day, my hair was long and Annie liked that too, because she cannot speak English.

For the people of Annie’s generation, Nunavut is above all a vindication, a gift, a balm to wounded pride. Annie is entering her second childhood. Elisapi and the other sisters will take care of her. She’s too frail to sew kamiks anymore. She’ll
never use a computer. She's already home. She'll die safe from the unimaginable changes now looming over Nunavut.

For Annie, and for so many Inuit, men and women alike, to be oneself is to hunt. Everybody hunts for survival: People raised on that basis know how to share, how to kill, and how to handle firearms responsibly. I once went out on a walrus hunt and watched a seven-year-old boy instructing his five-year-old brother in gun safety, with no adults in attendance except me. On that same hunt, I saw a seal killed with three shots and a walrus with one.

Many tourists from down south simply don't possess such attributes, but if the new territory of Nunavut gets what it wants, there will be more white hunters, more white visitors out on the land. The outfitters in Nunavut will soon be swimming in business, I imagine. They will take birdwatchers and whale-lovers out to stalk their prey with binoculars, telephoto lenses, and watercolor brushes. They'll learn to pamper the ones who forgot their warm clothes. They'll learn that legal liability hangs over them at all times. They'll be treated to cries of amazed disgust when somebody from a city sees a hunter butchering a bloody seal on an icy gravel beach. It's all for the good, I suppose, as long as local people make money. Over time, Nunavut will be receiving a diminishing income from the federal government, so why shouldn't tourism make up the shortfall?

Today only about 8,000 tourists a year come to Nunavut, most of them dogsledders, hunters, and wildlife watchers bound for the remote interior or for Baffin Island, and its belugas and killer whales. The adventurous few climb Mount Thor or Mount Asgard, or sea kayak the fjords of Baffin Island. But if it weren't for the shiny glints of increased tourism and development, why were corporate Canada's congratulations on the birth of Nunavut so loud?

Elisapi and Joe were hoping to rent out their house to the rich tourists who undertake expeditions to the North Pole. Elisapi had come to Iqaluit, in fact, to enroll as a communications student. She wanted to go into public relations or journalism. Since public relations is generally employed by businesses and governments rather than by aboriginal hunters, her new career seemed fairly certain, however indirectly, to further "develop" the land.

In that sense Elisapi reminded me of the carver's wife I met in Apex; the woman liked Nunavut, she said, because there would soon be more jobs. According to recent national census and provincial labor figures, 40 percent of the Inuit residents of Nunavut, and 9 percent of the other residents, do not "participate in the labor force (wage economy)." Moreover, the remote Nunavummiut must pay between two and three times more for basic goods and services than southern Canadians do. So the carver's wife was worried about being left out in the economic cold. But she also hungered for solitude, preferring Apex to Iqaluit because it was quieter. Like Annie, she'd been born in a hunting camp.
There was a term for these new Nunavummiut: weekend hunters. Their philosophy was to let the new life come and to benefit from it while living the old life as long as they could. But as new careers and tourism push the caribou back, where will their land be? It made me worry about the next 20 years. I said as much to Elisapi's sister Laila, but she cut me off. "Don't worry about us," she said with an angry smile. "We'll survive."

And why shouldn't Elisapi learn to shape the world's understanding of Inuit? Other people have. One sardonic old Inuit joke used to run that the average Inuit family comprises 6.5 individuals: a husband, a wife, 3.5 children, and a nosy anthropologist from down south.

"Objectivity" may be lost, but much else will be gained, when Elisapi replaces the anthropologist. And if her public relations contribute to the development of Nunavut, who am I to say that's a bad thing? And as Nunavut increasingly caters to tourists, wouldn't it be excellent, given that many of those caterers will doubtless be capital-rich entrepreneurs from Toronto or Sydney or Los Angeles, if Elisapi could make her percentage? As Inuit culture becomes a commodity, can't Elisapi sell it better than I can?

But what is Inuit culture? Endless hunting for the sake of prowess, the sharing of killed food, a knowledge of Inuktitut, sexual easiness and earthiness, old stories, a reserved smile, tenderness with children and confidence in them, respect for family, cheerfulness in the face of physical discomfort, ayah songs and throat-songs, animal-skin clothes? I can buy the garments; can I buy the rest?

If in the future they open resorts in Nunavut, remember solitude, and let someone else patronize them. If you must go, expect discomfort, inconvenience, and high prices. If you possess less experience than you will need to survive on your own, by all means find a local outfitter who can help you, and be guided by his advice. Above all, if you visit Nunavut, take care that your actions don't transform the region into a mirror image of the place you left.

For the next three months, Elisapi, with her two sons and Annie, was going to be staying at her daughter Eunice's place, an immaculate house (too much so for Elisapi's taste) with snow-white wall-to-wall carpet. In a corner niche I saw a group photograph, taken by a social worker back in 1955, of Annie and her family waiting to be relocated to Resolute, sitting forlornly on the rocks of Inukjuak.

I'd met Eunice once or twice in Resolute, the first time when she was about 13. She drew for me a picture of a polar bear stalking a baby seal on an Arctic midnight. When I got home I mailed her some colored pencils. She moved down to Iqaluit a few years later, and now, at 24, she has two daughters and is a famous throat-singer whose albums are sold to strangers across the Atlantic. She had performed in traditional dress at the Nunavut gala. She'd already been to Hawaii
Fifteen minutes after I arrived, Eunice said she'd see me around. Her husband had just bought a new snowmobile; they were going for a ride out on the land. This was not rudeness on her part, but the habitual casualness of the Nunavummiut, who come and go as they wish. Eunice told me what I already knew, that I was welcome to stay for as long as I pleased, and indeed I visited with her relatives for another two hours before I went on my way.

Getting ready for their ride, Eunice had slipped her younger daughter into the *amauti*, because it was one of those cold days when breath-steam rose high above everybody's hoods. I had asked Eunice what kind of fur she used for her hood's unfamiliar ruff, and she made a face: "I don't know," she had replied. "Some ugly kind. I should get it replaced." But Elisapi and Annie both knew what kind of animal it came from, and they immediately told her—or told me, I should say, because Eunice wasn't interested. The ruff was coyote, from way down south, like her carpet and her snowmobile.

I never got the chance to ask Eunice if she still hunted, and in a way it doesn't matter. Her strain of Inuitness, like her mother's, will survive even after that hypothetical day when all the shores of Baffin Island have reared up their apartment forests in mocking imitation of the trees that could never have lived here. Fluent in both English and Inuktitut, and deriving both recognition and cold cash from her culture, Eunice seems likely to thrive. Maybe someday she'll be the Voice of Nunavut, emerging from radios and loudspeakers like the muezzins of Pakistan calling people to prayer.

What Nunavut will Eunice live in then? Perhaps the land will be changed, developed. Perhaps she and Elisapi and their family will live in a city of skyscrapers. Perhaps every seal will be tagged by then, transmitting its location and vital signs to wildlife officials, and Eunice's throat-songs will comprise their own signals in a realm of signal, human and animal equal. Why not? Which is to say, who knows? This spring, Nunavut was a promise. Now Nunavut will become a mystery as socioeconomic forces weave their half-blind ravelings.

On the last night of my trip, I stood on a snow-ridge between Iqaluit and Apex, gazing up at the aurora borealis sprinkling itself across the sky like confectioner's
sugar, mingling with the city's steam-trails and smoke-trails. After a while it began to ooze slowly downward like white fists and frozen white winds swirling between stars. Far away, the lonely headlight of a snowmobile rushed across the land.

*This essay was published in Outside Magazine, July 1999. Vollmann is a novelist, journalist, short story writer, and essayist. His novels include "The Rainbow Stories" (1989), "The Atlas" (1996), "Europe Central" (2005), and a series of novels he has written in part titled "Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes" that addresses how North America was settled and the disputes between natives and European pioneers who took over native lands. Only four of these have been published and one of the most interesting novels, "The Dying Grass," which was to be published in 2013, appears to be postponed at this point. The novel deals with the destruction of the Plains Indian Tribes during the 18th and 19th centuries.

^Images added for clarification of the Inuit words kamiks and amauti. More images are available here.