

P.O.V.

Discussion Guide

Season 20

Arctic Son

A film by Andrew Walton



www.pbs.org/pov



Letter from the Filmmaker

New York, June 2007

Dear Colleague,

Arctic Son is the result of 10 years of hard work and was inspired by my chance encounter with a former Gwitchin Chief named Johnny Abel. Johnny felt that a film about the Gwitchin lifestyle could be a valuable tool in preserving the culture. I didn't plan to tell this story through a father and son that had been estranged for most of their lives, but this story emerged as one of the strongest cultural lessons I witnessed. That is the nature of vérité filmmaking—you begin with an idea, but the final film is defined by the twists and turns the characters' lives take and how it all unfolds

before the camera. I've learned that it's a discipline that requires a ton of patience—especially when you are working in an environment in which you are an outsider. I'm fortunate in that I also direct documentary-style commercials and Internet content that have helped me hone my skills to build trust, gain access, and tell intimate, personal stories about a range of subjects.

I'm tremendously lucky to have met "The Stans." They were incredibly generous with their time and open with their stories and experiences. The personal perspectives of the characters in **Arctic Son** are what make this film unique, what set it apart. During festival screenings I was told over and over by audiences how much they felt involved in this story. People told me they were rooting for the characters—through confrontations, skidoo breakdowns, struggles with the Arctic environment and ultimately their acceptance of one another. That's what I'm really the most proud of—that I had the ability to disappear with my cameraman and gain access to some very private moments that revealed how the relationship between "The Stans" developed over time. Beyond the words exchanged between the two, it's often the nuances of their actions and interactions that resonated with the audience on a very human level.

Arctic Son has been called a "quiet" film, and I take that as a great compliment in a media environment that often resorts to shock to reach audiences. My hope is that viewers will tune into these subtleties to see the similarities between this story of modern Gwitchin life and their own stories. By recognizing these parallels, audiences might then realize the importance of family and culture in their own lives. On a larger scale, I think this film should also help people realize the necessity of cultural preservation no matter where they live.

Andrew Walton

Filmmaker, **Arctic Son**



Filmmaker Andrew Walton

Photo courtesy of Andrew Walton



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Introduction



Arctic Son, a feature-length (75-minute) documentary, is a story about bridging distances between father and son—cultural, geographical, and emotional. Stanley Sr. keeps the ways of his Gwitchin ancestors alive by hunting, fishing, and living by his wits in the harsh environment of a remote Arctic village. Stan Jr., raised by his mother outside of Seattle, is drifting deeper into drinking and partying. After more than 20 years apart, the two are reunited in the wilderness of the Canadian Yukon. For Stan Jr., the reunion is an unwitting quest for identity and a sense of belonging. For Stanley Sr., it is driven by a need to make up for past mistakes and pass on the heritage of his people.

*Stanley Njootli Sr. and Stanley Grafton Njootli, Jr.
at home, Old Crow, Yukon Territory, Canada.*

Photo Jonathan Furmanski

As an engagement tool, **Arctic Son** provides viewers with a rich palette of contrasts to explore. The film reveals tensions and intersections between tradition and modernity, elders and youth, rural and urban, ancient and pop culture, addiction and independence. All these are presented against a backdrop of global warming, highlighting that some threats to tradition are beyond our control while others are within our grasp.



Background Information



Yukon Territory, Canada.

Photo Elizabeth Mandel

Arctic Region

Comprising one sixth of the earth's landmass, the Arctic covers 11.5 million square miles and 24 time zones. Its population of about four million includes citizens of Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States, as well as 30 different indigenous peoples.

Traditionally, the area's only significant economic activity was limited to the extraction of resources including petroleum, natural gas, fish and seals. Recently, however, as global warming has begun to thaw out portions of the icy region, economic developers are seeing new opportunities for the drilling of oil and gas and the mining of gold, diamonds and other minerals.

Sources:

www.arctic-council.org

Encyclopedia of the Arctic. Mark Nuttall, Ed. New York: Routledge, 2004.

www.routledge-ny.com/ref/arctic/preface.html



Background Information

Old Crow

Old Crow is a small village 80 miles north of the Arctic Circle at the confluence of the Porcupine and Crow Rivers. Home to the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, the remote town has a population of about 300 aboriginal people and is accessible only by air, water or an arduous journey via skidoo or dogsled. The only Yukon Territory community located north of the Arctic Circle, Old Crow has just one general store and no high school. The handful of adolescents from the town must move to White Horse, the nearest community with a high school.

Sources:

www.artsengine.net/arcticson
www.oldcrow.ca



Streets of Old Crow, Yukon Territory, Canada.

Photo Dallas Brennan Rexer

Vuntut Gwitchin

According to tradition, Gwitchin life and culture goes back 20,000 years. Gwitchin—the word is translated as “people of the lake”—live in a vast area extending from northeast Alaska in the U.S. to the northern Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada. They are united by language (Gwitchin Athapaskan) and a culture based on the Porcupine caribou, the people’s main source of food, tools, medicines, and clothing. “Vuntut” refers specifically to the Gwitchin living in the Yukon Territory.

The Gwitchin practiced a nomadic lifestyle until the 1870s, when fur traders came into the area to establish forts and trading posts that later became settlements. Approximately 9,000 Gwitchin currently make their home in communities in Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

The *vutzui* (“caribou”) are central to the lifestyle and identity of Old Crow’s people. Each May, the town celebrates the animal during Caribou Days, a three-day festival offering traditional games and activities as well as education on safe hunting

practices and gun safety. During this time, the caribou swim across the Porcupine River during their annual migration northward to the arctic coastal plain.

Sources:

“‘Caribou People’ wage last stand in the Arctic.” Paul Salopek. *Chicago Tribune*. October 7, 2005.

www.gwichin.org

www.oldcrow.ca

www.vgfn.ca



Background Information

The Gwitchin and Global Warming

The calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd lie primarily in the 1.5-million-acre coastal plain of the 19.3-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) located in the northeastern corner of Alaska. Not only is this coastal plain the birthplace of the Porcupine caribou and the culture of the Gwitchin, but it is home to denning polar bears, wolves, grizzly bears, and, in the summer months, over 135 different species of migratory birds.

According to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, today's Arctic temperatures are the highest in 400 years. As temperatures have risen, the Porcupine caribou population has dwindled from an estimated 180,000 to approximately 123,000. Researchers believe that erratic thaws and freezes in the wintering grounds have created an icy armor on the snow that prevents the caribou from foraging for food beneath.



Arctic scenery.
Photo courtesy of "Arctic Son"

Protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Meanwhile, the Gwitchin and other Native peoples are fighting U.S. government efforts to begin drilling for oil in ANWR. The Bush administration has supported drilling, arguing that 5 to 11 billion barrels of oil, believed to lie under the tundra, could bolster U.S. supplies, decrease reliance on oil from the Middle East, and reduce high costs.

While some Natives support the endeavor because of the jobs it could bring to their financially strapped tribes, the Gwitchin are ardently fighting the proposal because the drilling would occur in the middle of the Porcupine caribou's sensitive calving grounds, further endangering the herd.

Sources:

"'Caribou People' Wage Last Stand in the Arctic." Paul Salopek. *Chicago Tribune*. October 7, 2005.

"CRS Report for Congress: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR): New Directions in the 110th Congress." February 8, 2007.

<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/80677.pdf>

www.arctic-council.org

www.oldcrow.ca



Caribou migration.
Photo courtesy of "Arctic Son"



Background Information

Selected People Featured in *Arctic Son*



Stanley Sr. still lives in Old Crow. He spends his time hunting, fishing, and working with the Renewable Resources Council in Old Crow, which manages the region's fish and game.



Stanley Jr. divides his time between Old Crow and Whitehorse, where he is taking several different courses. He is also working for the Renewable Resources Council. He continues to draw and paint with the hope of someday bringing his artwork to a larger audience.

Both Stan Sr. and Stan Jr. seasonally travel outside of Old Crow for work.



General Discussion Questions

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, consider posing a general question and giving people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can't engage until they have had a break, don't encourage them to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question, such as:

- **If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?**
- **If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you tell them?**
- **Did anything in this film surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?**
- **What insights or inspiration did you gain from this film? What did you learn about the film's subjects and/or about yourself?**

Media Literacy Analysis Questions

AUTHORSHIP & PURPOSE(S)

- Who made this film? What was their purpose and how do you know?
- Who paid for this film and what might their interest be in supporting a film on this particular topic from this particular perspective?
- Who is the target audience and how do you know?
- Who might benefit from this film? Who might be harmed by it?

CONTENT

- What is this film about (and what makes you think that)?
- What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied?
- What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

TECHNIQUES

- What specific techniques does the filmmaker use?
- Why might they have chosen those specific techniques?

INTERPRETATION

- How might different people understand this film differently?
- What is my interpretation of this film, and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to this film?

CREDIBILITY

- When was this film made and what contemporaneous events might have influenced its content or approach?
- How credible is this film (and what makes you think that)?
- How fair and accurate is this film?
- What are the sources of the film's information, ideas, or assertions?

Source:

Adapted from the AMLA's Core Principles for Media Literacy Education:
www.AMLAinfo.org/CorePrinciples



Discussion Prompts



Stanley Njootli, Sr. greets his son, Stan, Jr. at the Old Crow airport.

Photo courtesy of "Arctic Son"

Fathers and Sons

- In your view, what are the essential responsibilities of a father? In what ways did Stanley Sr. meet those responsibilities?
- What did Stanley Jr. miss out on by not having his father as a regular presence in his life while he was growing up?
- Contrast the relationship between father and son when Junior first arrives in Old Crow and when he is about to return to Seattle. How has each of these men changed? How has their relationship changed? What do you think caused those changes?
- What traits do Junior and his father have in common?
- What traits or experiences does Junior have in common with other people his age around the world?
- What does Junior learn from his father's lifestyle about the gender roles men assume in society? Do you think Junior has matured and, if so, how?
- Does the relationship between the Stans remind you of any relationships in your own life? What kinds of challenges exist in these relationships and how could you address them?



Discussion Prompts

Culture and the Environment

- Junior observes, "Here in Old Crow it feels like everyone's your cousin almost." Later he says, "It was a great feeling to come to Old Crow, and know where you're from and stuff, where your heritage is..." What do people gain from knowing about and feeling connected to their heritage? What do you do to pass down your heritage to children in your family or community? What is the purpose of learning something that may not be valued by modern society?
- Commenting on the use of dog sleds, Stanley Sr. says, "Only Hollywood people say 'mush.'" Prior to viewing the film, what was your image of First Nation people living in extremely rural, cold areas? In what ways did the film challenge or confirm your ideas?
- When Junior's snowmobile breaks down, Stanley Sr. comments on the importance of self-sufficiency. What are the benefits and drawbacks of self-sufficiency? How has modern life lessened the value we place on self-sufficiency? How has technology been a part of this change?
- In our technology-savvy society, remote villages like Old Crow now have their own Web sites, and snowmobiles have replaced dogsleds as the primary mode of transportation. How does technology impinge on traditional life and how does it help to improve people's lives in isolated areas?
- Why is a detail like the thickness of ice on the river important to the people in Old Crow? What would the people of Old Crow lose if global warming changed their natural surroundings? What would the rest of the world lose if global warming made the traditional cultural practices of the Gwitchin unsustainable?
- As Stanley Sr. is skinning a rabbit, he scoffs at student animal-rights activists. He dismisses their concerns, saying,



Welcome to Old Crow.
Photo Elizabeth Mandel

"It's part of my culture [to hunt and eat animals]." Imagine a dialogue between the activists and elders in Old Crow. What do you think they would say to one another? Which side do you think you would find more persuasive and why? How might you help the two sides find common ground?

- What effect do your everyday choices have on global warming (and therefore, on the lives of people living in places like Old Crow)? What can you do to help protect the environment?
- The Vuntut Gwitchin believe that drilling for oil in the Porcupine caribou calving grounds would seriously threaten their way of life. Others favor drilling because it would provide jobs for people in northeastern Alaska. How would you mediate a debate between a conservationist and an advocate for bringing more jobs to the region through drilling?
- Would you want to live in Old Crow? Why or why not? What would you miss about your hometown if you were to live in Old Crow?



Discussion Prompts



Stanley Grafton Njootli, Jr. walking around town after a night out.

Photo courtesy of "Arctic Son"

Substance Abuse

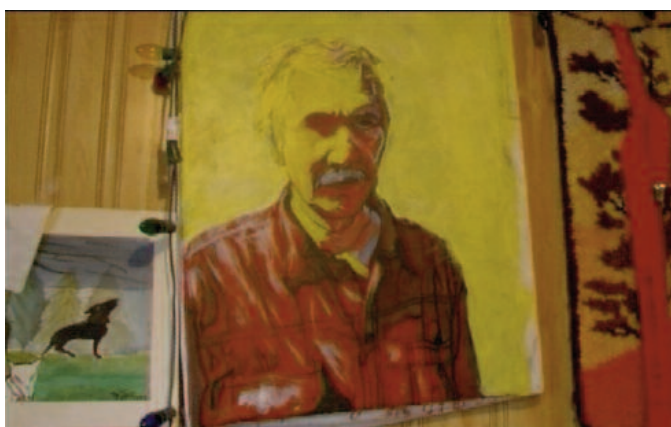
- In the beginning of the film, Stan Jr. is walking around town after spending the night drinking in a bar. A group of people he knows drives by and yells out to him, "Stan, go to treatment." What did you think about this reaction to Stan's problem? What are ways of helping a friend or family member with an addiction without being condescending or judgmental? What are the challenges of having a friend or family member with a substance-abuse problem?
- At first, Junior continues to drink when he arrives in Old Crow. At one point his father contemplates kicking him out of the house. If you had been Stanley Sr., what would you have done and why?
- Junior says, "Go anywhere in the world and there's drugs and alcohol." In your view, why are mood- or mind-altering substances so common?
- Stan Jr. could have continued to drink in Old Crow. Why didn't he? What were the distinctions between life in Seattle and life in Old Crow that allowed Junior to be enveloped by alcohol in one place and eventually remain sober in the other? How can changing one's environment and lifestyle have an impact on a dependency? In what ways do we see this in the film?



Discussion Prompts



Stanley Grafton Njootli, Jr. operating the radio dj set.
Photo courtesy of "Arctic Son"



Stanley Jr.'s portrait of Stanley Sr.
Photo courtesy of "Arctic Son"

Art and Expression

- What would Stan Jr.'s life be like if he didn't have his art? How can art, music, writing, and other forms of expression serve as a therapeutic means of working through problems? How have you used an art form to express a feeling or frustration that couldn't be conveyed through discussion?
- What did the style of Stan Jr.'s portrait of Stanley Sr. convey about his father and about their relationship?



Taking Action



Northern Lights over Njootli cabin, Yukon Territory, Canada.

Photo Jonathan Furmanski

- Work to support local agencies involved in substance-abuse prevention initiatives targeted at young people.
- Facilitate a dialogue for unrelated parents and teens to meet, ask questions of one another, and improve communication skills.
- Conduct further research to investigate the importance of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the Gwitchin and the potential impact of drilling in ANWR on the lives of the people in Old Crow. Telephone, e-mail, or meet with legislators and other policy makers to share what you learned.
- Hold a teach-in on global warming with special emphasis on the impact of climate change on the cultures of indigenous peoples.



Resources

FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s Arctic Son Web site
www.pbs.org/pov/arcticson

The *Arctic Son* companion Web site offers a streaming video trailer of the film, an interview with filmmaker Andrew Walton (video, podcast and text); a list of related Web sites, organizations and books; a discussion guide and classroom activity; and the following special feature:

ADDITIONAL SCENES

Watch edited videos of footage not included in the film, including a history of the Gwitchin Tribe and Old Crow, an expanded look at Stan Jr.'s artwork, an explanation of the Gwitchin people's 20-year campaign to protect the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd, and a look at the "zen" and art of skidoo maintenance.

ARTS ENGINE

www.artsendine.net

Arts Engine, Inc. supports, produces, and distributes independent media of consequence and promotes the use of independent media by advocates, educators, and the general public.

What's Your P.O.V.?

P.O.V.'s online Talking Back Tapestry is a colorful, interactive representation of your feelings about Arctic Son.

Listen to other P.O.V. viewers talk about the film and add your thoughts by calling 1-800-688-4768. www.pbs.org/pov/talkingback.html

OLD CROW AND THE VUNTUT GWITCHIN

OLD CROW'S OFFICIAL WEB SITE

www.oldcrow.ca

Old Crow's own Web site is rich with information about the town as well as Gwitchin culture and history.

YUKON FIRST NATION'S PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS UNIT

www.yesnet.yk.ca/firstnations/vuntut_gwitchin.html

The Yukon Education Student Network site includes a helpful set of links to Web sites with information on the Gwitchin and Old Crow.

YUKON GOVERNMENT

www.eco.gov.yk.ca/landclaims/index.html

This link explains Canada's Land Claim settlements, which grant Native peoples with self-government. See www.eco.gov.yk.ca/stats/social/fnprofiles/vuntut_gwitchin.pdf for a Yukon government genealogical report on the Vuntut.



Resources

THE ARCTIC CIRCLE AND GLOBAL WARMING

INTERNATIONAL ARCTIC RESEARCH CENTER

www.iarc.uaf.edu

The International Arctic Research Center (IARC) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks specializes in climate research in the Arctic Circle. The Web site describes several research projects related to weather patterns that would affect Old Crow.

YUKON GOVERNMENT

www.environmentyukon.gov.yk.ca/caribou.html

This link to the Yukon government Web site provides detailed information about caribou, their feeding and breeding habits, and their importance for the Vuntut Gwitchin.

GLOBAL WARMING: EARLY WARMING SIGNS

www.climatehotmap.org/index.html

This global map, developed by members of the Union of Concerned Scientists, reports on the impact of climate change in specific regions around the world. The homepage also includes a helpful set of links to environmental organizations working on climate-change issues.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

<http://epa.gov/climatechange/index.html>

The Web site of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency includes a wide range of information on climate change, primarily from the point of view of the government.

NATIVE MOVEMENT ALASKA

www.nativemovement.org/

This Web site for an indigenous youth collective provides information on their activities that focus on sustainability, leadership development, community building, and movement building.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND PREVENTION

SEATTLE INDIAN HEALTH BOARD

www.sihb.org

The Seattle Indian Health Board (SIHB) is a nonprofit, multiservice community health center chartered in 1970 to serve the healthcare needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives living in the greater Seattle/King County region of western Washington State.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

www.samhsa.gov

The Web site for the Department of Health & Human Service's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is a helpful gateway to information related to substance abuse. It includes searchable databases of effective prevention programs nationwide as well as research on substance-abuse treatment and prevention.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Alcoholics Anonymous® is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. You can locate a meeting in your area at their Web site.

AL-ANON

www.al-anon.alateen.org

Al-Anon's sole purpose is to help families of alcoholics. They do this by practicing the Twelve Steps, by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics, and by giving understanding and encouragement to the alcoholic. You can locate a meeting in your area at their Web site.



How to Buy the Film

To order *Arctic Son*,
go to www.artsengine.net/store

POV 20

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and entering its 20th season on PBS, the award-

winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought over 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, P.O.V.'s Borders. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V. is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Ford Foundation, the Educational Foundation of America, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with additional support from JPMorgan Chase Foundation, the official sponsor of P.O.V.'s 20th Anniversary Campaign. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/WNET New York. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.



The P.O.V. 20th Anniversary Collection is a limited-edition DVD collection produced in partnership with Docurama. The collection contains 15 titles reflecting the range and diversity of P.O.V. films, including the series' inaugural broadcast, *American Tongues*, by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker.

Available at www.amdoc.org/shop.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public-television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films.

P.O.V. Interactive

www.pbs.org/pov

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces a Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.'s Borders. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique Talking Back feature, filmmaker interviews, viewer resources and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

American Documentary, Inc.

www.americandocumentary.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream-media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

Front cover: Stanley Njootli Sr, and Stanley Grafton Njootli, Jr at cabin out on the land, Yukon Territory, Canada.

Photo: Jonathan Furmanski

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