

ALOOTOOK IPELLIE: THE VOICE OF AN INUK ARTIST

SCL/ELC Interview by Michael P.J. Kennedy

Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border

It is never easy
Walking with an invisible border
Separating my left and right foot

I feel like an illegitimate child
Forsaken by my parents
At least I can claim innocence
Since I did not ask to come
Into this world

Walking on both sides of this
Invisible border
Each and everyday
And for the rest of my life
Is like having been
Sentenced to a torture chamber
Without having committed a crime

Understanding the history of humanity
I am not the least surprised
This is happening to me
A non-entity
During this population explosion
In a minuscule world

I did not ask to be born an Inuk
Nor did I ask to be forced
To learn an alien culture
With an alien language
But I lucked out on fate
Which I am unable to undo

I have resorted to fancy dancing

In order to survive each day
 No wonder I have earned
 The dubious reputation of being
 The world's premiere choreographer
 Of distinctive dance steps
 That allow me to avoid
 Potential personal paranoia
 On both sides of this invisible border

Sometimes this border becomes so wide
 That I am unable to take another step
 My feet being too far apart
 When my crotch begins to tear apart
 I am forced to invent
 A brand new dance step
 The premiere choreographer
 Saving the day once more

Destiny acted itself out
 Deciding for me where I would come from
 And what I would become

So I am left to fend for myself
 Walking in two different worlds
 Trying my best to make sense
 Of two opposing cultures
 Which are unable to integrate
 Lest they swallow one another whole

Each and everyday
 Is a fighting day
 A war of raw nerves
 And to show for my efforts
 I have a fair share of wins and losses

When will all this end
 This senseless battle
 Between my left and right foot

When will the invisible border
 Cease to be

Alootook Ipellie

Alootook Ipellie was born in a hunting camp on Baffin Island among his semi-nomadic family in 1951. He received formal education at Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay), Yellowknife, and Ottawa. His pen and ink drawings became popular with his "Ice Box" cartoons in the former Inuit Today magazine and the current "Nuna & Vut" comic strip which appears in Nunatsiaq News. He worked as reporter-journalist with Inuit Monthly (later renamed Inuit Today) in the 1970s where he also served as editor from 1979 to 1982. Ipellie's poetry has appeared in North, Inuit Monthly, Inuit Today, Inuktitut, Tukisiviqsat, and Canadian Literature. His short stories and non-fiction articles have been published in the above periodicals as well as in The Beaver, Canadian Fiction Magazine, Inuit Art Quarterly, and Arctic Circle and in anthologies such as Moses and Goldie's An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English (1992), Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English edited by Penny Petrone (1988), and Robin Gedalof's Paper Stays Put (1980). He has been Project Co-ordinator of the Baffin Writers' Project (1989-1993) and edited two issues of Kivioq: Inuit Fiction Magazine (1990 and 1992). His art has been featured at exhibitions in Canada, Norway, and Greenland. Alootook Ipellie's Arctic Dreams and Nightmares (Theytus Books, 1993) combines his artistic pen and ink drawings with his imaginative prose fiction and is the first collection of its kind produced by an Inuk. Alootook Ipellie currently writes a regular column, "In Ipellie's Shadow," for the Iqaluit weekly newspaper Nunatsiaq News.

Alootook Ipellie was interviewed in his studio-home in Ottawa.

MK Although you received your formal education in Iqaluit and Ottawa, your writings often refer to your Inuit tradition and a closeness to the land. Since your family moved off the land and into Iqaluit when you were four, from where do these feelings emanate?

AI My uncle lived year round on the land and his children were still young, so he wanted me to live with him on the land. You always have that urge to go back on the land. It pulls you. Once you've been there before, you've lived it. And for all these years [since leaving the North], I've never lost that pull to the land. It's part of a people who are very connected to Nature, because they know that the land is very sacred to them and there is always that spiritual connection to the land and the animals in Nature. Because they know that they cannot go on without that special

connection to the land—the sacredness of the land. You have to have that spiritual connection with it, otherwise you're gone, you're not a people anymore.

MK Beyond respect for the land, another aspect of your Inuit tradition which has affected you is the art of story. Where did you learn storytelling?

AI Whenever my uncle and I went back to Iqaluit, I stayed with my grandfather and he would tell stories at night after he had stopped carving, because he would carve all day at the back of the house. I have always been fascinated by stories, ever since I used to hear my grandfather. I had the feeling that I wanted to do it for a lifetime, but I had no idea that I was going to get to do it.

MK How did your feelings for the land and Inuit traditions influence your poetry, for example?

AI In most of the early poetry that I did, I was trying to interpret some of the old ways of my people. Even though I was very young at the time when I did the [early] poems, I was influenced by my immediate family and the elders in Iqaluit. I was thinking about the culture that was dying, trying to remember some of the things that I knew from the land. I tried to write poems about what I knew then, because the South wasn't there yet. Even though I had been here [Ottawa] for a time, when I went back to Iqaluit, I wanted to write about the old ways in a dying culture.

MK After attending vocational high school in Ottawa, you did some drawings which started you off on your artistic career.

AI Actually when I went back to Iqaluit for summer holidays from Ottawa that first year and I had been doing some pen and ink drawings, I sold the seven pieces I had. That really inspired me to do more. I began to get more serious about drawing when I started working for *Inuit Monthly*.

MK You started as a translator for the Inuktitut section of the magazine. How did that turn into your work as a cartoonist, columnist, and ultimately as editor of the re-named *Inuit Today*?

AI I started doing fillers because they needed to cover space in the magazine. I did these very small little characters with no

MK In "My Story," an autobiographical piece you wrote for *North* in 1983, you refer to the admiration you had for Canadian political cartoonists like Aislin, Donato, MacPherson, and Peterson. Now you have mentioned how the land and traditions of your people and the storytelling of your grandfather influenced your work. Was your poetry also influenced by others?

AI I tried very hard not to be influenced by other poets and other poetry from anywhere. Any poetry that I wrote was inspired at the moment, not influenced by other poets. I don't know about my other writing. The audience and critics will tell me about that!

MK Your early stories dealt with serious subject matter but did so with a fairly gentle tone, using straightforward plots, with characters who were realistically drawn in the context of contemporary Inuit society. Your more recent tales, especially those contained in your *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* collection, are much more imaginative and at times very disturbing. To what do you attribute this change?

AI Some of the early stories were an attempt to tell reality of that time. I think in many ways I had that sense of the storyteller that I knew from my people. There had to be a reason why the story was being told. Very often the tone of the story was very serious. You think in tones because you think in voices even though the work is written, you are hearing it and trying to interpret it into words. There were messages that needed to be said and I would try to incorporate them into my stories. Later on when I started doing the [*Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*] drawings, it was after seeing so many changes, injustice that was happening, social change, having seen images of things that were happening all over the world. All these messages are related to our people, too. Just take a conflict in the world and the same thing is happening in the Arctic in a different way, the same conflict and suffering of the people. I attempt to focus on the problems of the world and the reality of events that are happening in the Arctic. By doing that I am speaking to both sides at the same time.

MK By speaking to "both sides" are the stories and drawings in the collection aimed at both Inuit and non-Inuit?

AI Very much so, because I'm living in between the two cultures. I always thought about both of them when I was working on the drawings. Some of the images came about because I was affected by events like Brigitte Bardot going to Newfoundland and protesting against the seal hunt. It affected our people, not only in Canada, but in Greenland. I went up to Greenland and visited a tannery after the European Community refused importation of seal pelts. It was sad for our people. I used that story ["After Brigitte Bardot"] to get the message across. I used clippings of the event in Newfoundland and took them up to the Arctic where the Inuit could be close to her, even though Brigitte Bardot wasn't up there. I wanted to tell her what we thought about what she did to our people.

MK In the introduction to *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, you state that the stories are the stories of "an Inuk who has been dead for a thousand years and who then recalls the events of his former life through the eyes of his living soul. It's also a story about a powerful shaman who learned his shamanic trade as an ordinary Inuk." What is the significance of the shaman for you?

AI My mother's side of the family, my grandfather's side, we were the shaman people. Our family has a background of shamans over generations. It has always been there. There are certain families all over the Arctic that keep the power of their forbears. I think it was that sense of having had the family heredity of shamanism that I wanted to have in the shaman in the book. Having heard stories about shamans from my own family, from the community in Iqaluit, it is a very large passion for me and I tried to keep that passion when I was writing the book to keep that spirit alive.

MK You have done so much as a journalist, editor, poet, fiction author, and artist. Do you see yourself as a role model for young Inuit?

AI I found out over the years that even though you are not trying to be a role model to the young people, somehow it just happens. I found out that young Inuit have copied my work. Sometimes, however, they put their own names under my poetry or they trace my drawings and use them for ads in the newspaper. I have also seen tapestries taken from my cartoons which I did for *Inuit Today* or other publications.

MK You have been involved directly in the mentor programme called the Baffin Writers' Project, but it currently has no funding. What opportunity is there for Inuit writers to be heard?

AI At the moment there are some opportunities like school materials where young Inuit are encouraged to contribute to their books, whether they are illustrating the work or writing the text.

MK When you went to school in Iqaluit in the 1950s and 1960s, there were no learning materials relating the Inuit experience.

AI At that time there were no Inuit teachers whatsoever, and everything we learned was about the South and the Qallunaat [white] culture, nothing else. We used the Alberta curriculum at that time. Now the Baffin Divisional Board of Education asks people from the communities of Baffin to help produce books. Some of them have been translated into English and I believe that some of them are being published and used in the South.

MK There is very little Inuit poetry and prose in the South. Yet your work has appeared in anthologies as well as in numerous periodicals. *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* is a breakthrough volume, because it is the first single author collection of stories published in the South by an Inuk writer. What is next for you?

AI I have a novel called *Akavik, The Manchurian David Bowie* about an old man in the modern Arctic who is living in a hut who refuses to move into a modern house. He is a 100-year-old veteran of the First World War. The book is a conversation between him and a Scottish fisherman from Aberdeen and a twenty-five year old Inuk man from the community. It goes in and out of reality. You see Charlie Chaplin, for instance, come into the hut. Hitler comes in as do the Pope, Elvis, Madonna, and David Bowie.

MK You have shown me a series of polar bear drawings that you are doing, and you also mentioned an autobiographical piece.

AI It's a story about growing up in Iqaluit just after we moved in from the land. It relates all the changes, social changes that happened, mostly because of alcohol abuse, my relationships with my own family members, my grandparents' place, my aunts

and uncles, important Inuit, the leaders of those times and what their role was within the community. It relates how the new culture was coming in and how our people tried out that culture for the first time.

MK For what do you hope in the future?

AI I have this story about how some years ago this Ottawa man won \$7.4 million from the 649. I clipped the photograph of him and re-did his face so that he looked like me. I wrote under the photograph "alias Alooook Ipellie" and then wrote a story about what I was going to do with the money. I was going to open a writers' foundation for Inuit writers all across the Arctic. I took the story and clipping to a copy shop downtown on Rideau Street where a woman looked at it. "Is that you?" It was funny because she thought it was me. I was sending the story to a friend in Toronto who was involved with the Baffin Writers' Project. This is my dream. This is what I want to do with that money. End of story.

NOTE

Cartoons and poem are reproduced with the permission of Alooook Ipellie.

"Ice Box." *Inuit Today* (March 1976)

"Ice Box." *Inuit Today* (no date available)

"Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border." *Canadian Native Literature in English*. Ed. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992.