Transmitting Oral Culture to the Page: the Emergence of Inuit Children's Books

Joanne Schwartz

Toronto Public Library

(joanne.f.schwartz@gmail.com)

Abstract: In the wake of the enormous shifts that have happened to Inuit society in the 20th century, the oral tradition has been dramatically undermined and the status of the book, still in its infancy, is rising as a conveyor of culture. How to transmit the oral culture to the page and retain its meaning and power is the fundamental challenge to Inuit writers. And then, how to create readers in a traditionally non-reading culture is the concurrent challenge that faces the Inuit in the contemporary reality of their altered society.
Keywords: inuit, children, oral, literature, culture.

In the wake of the enormous shifts that have happened to Inuit society in the 20th century, the oral tradition has been dramatically undermined and as a consequence, the status of the book, still in its infancy, is rising as a conveyor of culture. Not only is the transition to print inevitable at this point in time, as a result of these dramatic changes, but ironically the book is the vehicle which will preserve and pass on the traditional stories to future generations of Inuit children as well as opening windows to a non-Inuit audience. How to transmit the oral culture to the page and retain its meaning and power is the fundamental challenge to Inuit writers. And then, how to create readers in a traditionally non-reading culture is the concurrent challenge that faces the Inuit in the contemporary reality of their altered society. The unnatural, slow and somewhat clunky transition from an oral culture to print is a result of more than simply a transition from one vehicle of storytelling to another. It involves the legacy of a politically charged history that is still very much an active element in the current climate.

In Canada, Michael Kusugak is virtually the sole Inuit childrens' writer with a body of work published in the mainstream press. There have been a handful of other books published over the years such as Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter* or *Peter Pitseolak's Escape from Death* but they were not specifically children's books and although beautifully produced, have not remained visible. Kusugak has published eight picture books and more recently, a middle grade novel. Kusugak grew up on the land, steeped in the rich oral tradition of his culture. By the time he was bringing up his own children though, his entire life had changed. Looking for books about his own culture, he found they were written by outsiders, filled with misconceptions,

misrepresentations of traditions, and held a colonial view of the Inuit as a primitive culture. He was galvanized, as he says, “to set the record straight” (Schwartz, 2009: 70).

Kusugak's impulse to write served a two-fold purpose. One was to reclaim the stories and to supercede the tellings of white writers. To achieve this, Kusugak writes in English so he is able to reach a wide audience and one that until recently, had not heard an authentic voice from the North. He realized the tremendous need for Inuit stories, told by Inuit, to be part of the print world. Secondly, he wanted to begin the process of introducing books to Inuit children that reflected their culture and history. Simultaneously, Kusugak has been a force in reviving the oral tradition and recording the stories of his elders. By rejuvenating storytelling in the North, he is capturing valuable stories before they are lost forever and encouraging new voices to emerge; for these things are as important as embracing print and will ultimately foster it in turn.

For the Inuit though, the book must pale in comparison to the heady, almost sensual experience of oral storytelling. Compared to the power of a community gathering or an intimate telling while a blizzard rages outside, a book must seem like a static object that has little connection to the visceral experience. As Nancy Wachowich says of written, oral history accounts in her introduction to *Saqiyuq: Three Generations of Inuit Woman*, “while these accounts illustrate rich intricacies of Inuit life, their themes, their articulation, and their effects on audiences (both listeners and readers) are clearly not the same in the 1990's as they were in the igluvigait, tents and sod-huts of their ancestors” (Wachowich, 1999: 5). In the days of oral storytelling, the voice was like a wave, unique to each speaker, filled with the cadence of emotional nuance. The body was gesture, a palpable visual articulation of meaning, and the environment was all consuming, holding the teller and the listener in its fold.

If the voice is the vehicle, how does the story convey itself without it? If the relationship between storyteller and listener conveys meaning, how does the private act of reading affect the understanding of the story? If weather and time of day act to create atmosphere for the story, how can words on a page replace that context? These are the questions that oral cultures must struggle with as they move toward telling their stories in print.

Julius Lester, the renowned African American writer, spoke to the issue of voice in regard to his difficulties working with a white editor on his retelling of the Uncle Remus tales. As he

says:

> My editor did not think that the inconsistencies in grammatical usage would communicate to white readers. I told her they weren't supposed to. But there was no harm in asking whites to read stories written in a language with which they were not intimately familiar. The stories would communicate to anyone. That language carried nuances and evoked memories that would be primarily available to Blacks merely gave the stories an added dimension (Lester, 1988: 72).

In other words, voice on the page can be vibrant given its full range of cultural expression, rather than limiting it to conform to someone else's cultural expectations. Colloquialisms carry the richness and flavour of voice. And like the richness of colloquial voice, the "resistance of certain concepts to cross-cultural translations" only adds texture and depth to the reading (Wachowich, 1999: 7). It allows a more "inter-cultural" reading experience, one that defies a reductive reading of a another culture's stories.

Kusugak, although writing in English, strives to bring the oral storytelling voice to the page but he says, "The Inuktitut language is a wonderful storytelling language. It's very descriptive, it flows so well. It's very, very hard to write in English when you come from an Inuktitut background" (Schwartz, 2009: 67-68). Kusugak's method is to approach the writing as if he is preparing for an oral telling, incorporating the stylistic nuances and traits of his storytelling voice. In the following passage from *The Curse of the Shaman: A Marble Island Story* we can see Kusugak's unique style:

> The man-with-no-eyebrows had eyebrows, of course, just as Can't-see could actually see; that was just his name. It was a good name. It had been passed down from generation to generation until it came to him. The first The-man-with-no-eyebrows probably had no eyebrows at all, or maybe his eyebrows were so faint that people had started to call him "The-man-with-no-eyebrows." It had probably started as a nickname, finally becoming his name, when people forgot what his real name was (Kusugak, 2008: 5).

The pattern of the prose mimics the flow of the Inuktitut language. Peppering his stories with Inuktitut words, he is also using the language as an indicator of the culture.

Given how difficult it is not to narrow a reading with one's own cultural assumptions, it behooves the writers and editors to imprint a text with as many markers or signifiers, to the specific culture as possible, thereby highlighting the unique narrative qualities, particular language, and cultural landscape of the story. Even ethnologists, working with stories from

another culture for years, still recognize that they have to constantly question their interpretations as their own cultural mores continually impose themselves on the text. As an example of this, Robin Barker, an ethnologist interpreting a Yup'ik tale, found that the European stories she grew up with “cast a shadow on the Alaskan tale and outlined its meaning in my unconscious” (Barker, 1995: 85). Not only did she have to consciously cast aside her own deeply-rooted body of stories, she also had to eschew the learned story question, (i.e.) What is the moral of the story? Both the construction of the Yup'ik story and its meaning grew out of a different way of life and consequently, it embodied a fundamentally different narrative, one that did not reveal itself in the same linear mode, pose the same questions or hold the same worldview.

Some Aboriginal writers are beginning to bring language to the page as a visual document of its existence and equal validity to English. Claire Bradford in her book *Unsettling Narratives: Post-Colonial Readings of Children's Literature* calls this “interpolation.” Speaking about Tomson Highway's picture book *Caribou Song*, she describes the function of Cree words on the page:

> The Cree words in Highway's text perform a function characterized by installation of difference. The words stand metonymically for the language and culture from which they derive. Indigenous authors interpolate the dominant discourse by inserting into the texts they write words, modes of expression, syntactic arrangements and narrative forms that do not merely refer to cultural differences but embody it through language (Bradford, 2007: 54).

In a further development, *Alego*, by Inuit artist Ningeokuluk Teevee, published by Groundwood in 2009, is fully bilingual, with the Inuktitut at the top of the page, clearly positioning itself as the dominant language, the English translation below.

Another notable feature of the book *Alego* is the plain, unadorned telling of a family story, the clam-digging outing of Alego and her grandmother. The story is realistic and contemporary, part of the fabric of the larger world of stories that make up the country. As Edward and Saltman point out in *Picturing Canada: A History of Canadian Children's Books and Publishing*:

> It is only within the last two decades that stories about and by Canada's Aboriginal people's have begun to move beyond the past to show contemporary Aboriginal families living in the modern world. It was the advent of the first Aboriginal-owned and -operated publishing houses in the 1980's such as

> Pemmican Publications and Theytus Books that provided the initial space for Aboriginal people to disrupt the romanticized and sentimentalized narratives of a dying culture in circulation in children's books issued by the trade and educational publishers (Edwards and Saltman, 2010: 201).

The creation of Nunavut as an official territory has had a huge impact on this psychological shift. Its concrete existence catapults the non-Inuit audience into the present, creating along with it an ability for cultural outsiders to leave behind old stereotypes and conceptualize a contemporary Inuit story.

For the Inuit child, *Alego* is like a rare bird sighting. Surrounded by picture books in English, its existence is the beginning of a trend that cannot come a moment too soon. From a report published by the Nunavut Literacy Council in 2009, the lack of materials is a key issue in the preservation and use of Inuktitut in Inuit communities in the North.

> Some parents are overcoming the lack of materials creatively making their own, sharing with others, and accessing whatever is available in libraries, drawing on the resources of the Nunavut Literacy Council, etc. However, the plethora of English language materials, next to the dearth of Inuit language materials, makes it tempting to just use English. Again, some feel that children are receiving the subliminal message that English is more important than the Inuit language when so many high quality materials are available in English and so few are available in the Inuit language (Tulloch, 2009: 71).

One of the key elements in fostering literacy in Inuktitut, according to National Inuit leader Mary Simon, is the "development of Inuit-specific, linguistically and culturally appropriate teaching materials." The lack of both teaching materials and high quality children's books by Inuit authors, in Inuktitut, is a situation that must begin to move forward at a more urgent pace.

The most recent and exciting development on the Arctic literary scene that speaks to this pressing need is the establishment, in 2007, of the first Inuit-owned publishing company, Inhabit Media, out of Iqaluit. Their aim is to "promote and preserve the stories, knowledge and talent of Northern Canada." To date, they have published five books, mostly traditional stories and Inuit mythology, such as *Stories from the Amautalik: Fantastic Beings from Inuit Myths and Legends,* as well as publishing two children's magazine, *Pivut* and *Kaakuluk*. Although they are not exclusively a children's publisher, the look of their books, a graphic style of illustration, is clearly directed to the current generation of Nunavumiat children and teens.

Neil Christopher, one of the founders and editors of the press, speaks to the complicated

language landscape of the North. Inuktitut has many dialects and even a controversial writing standard, therefore publishing books is a challenging prospect. There is a pressing need for a standardized dialect but there is still no consensus on that issue. One of the ways that the press is meeting the challenge of the multi-linguistic audience is to record stories, translate them and make them available to teachers through the educational department as a print-on-demand document. In this way, the stories can be downloaded in any dialect to suit the language particularities of each community. This flexibility, in approach to form and distribution of the press's output, is what is allowing it to have an impact, to be relevant in the complex climate, and to be a vital force in grappling with the transition of bringing the Inuit oral culture to the page.

Speaking about cultural adaptation, Minnie Adloa Freeman, the Inuit writer and translator, says of her people, "I have not met any other culture that has adapted so suddenly to another, surviving all its shortcomings, its bad influences, and the misplaced good intentions of well-meaning people" (Adloa, 1994: 14). For so long, the stories of the Inuit have been imagined by cultural outsiders. It is time for the stories to be de-imagined and re-imagined from within. A people must tell its stories to itself, and in this globalized world, to everyone else. They must tell them in their own way, with their own voice and with an openness to sharing their stories with other cultures.

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