

Grasping the Power of Language: Name and Song in Inuit Culture

TINA PYLVAINEN

"Me Tarzan, you Jane" must be one of the most memorable cross-cultural exchanges of name ever recorded. This pop culture depiction of initial contact between people of different languages and backgrounds can provide an interesting, if unusual, comparison to the situation faced by the Inuit in Canada.¹ Like the jungle, the Arctic has long been considered an exotic locale, drawing foreign explorers who view both land and people as objects of fascination. Unfortunately, this very tendency to objectify seems to coincide with a distinct lack of awareness of potential cultural disruption caused by sudden external contact. From such a perspective, the moment that Tarzan utters these words marks the supposed success of the encounter, not only indicating his acquisition of the master language but also representing a meaningful exchange of information. The exchange of names does indicate an important level of interaction between individuals, but the degree of meaning conveyed by such an utterance across cultures is questionable. Naming is both the first and most personal connection one can make to any individual, but other than being an obvious means of identification, the extent of meaning associated with name varies by culture and so the extent of knowledge a name conveys varies accordingly. Such insights, however, are easily overlooked if one is not accustomed to associating any deeper significance to name. Consequently, Inuit emphasis on the importance of name is not necessarily recognized by someone unfamiliar with their culture.

This significance attributed to name has largely to do with the Inuit recognition of the power of language. Their belief in language means that the association of a specific word with an individual can be neither random nor accidental; rather, the name not only distinguishes the individual but also connects her/him with the community by both granting and reflecting certain personal attributes. Similarly, this belief in the power of language extends to the significance of song which the Inuit strongly value on both an individual and a communal level. That is, songs are composed by and associated with individuals, but they also serve to unify the community. The songs remembered in solitude provide a communal connection, as they do more explicitly through participation in the song or dance festivals, wherein this

duality of individual and community is manifested by the co-operative effort of the performing soloist and the accompanying chorus. The significance of name and song, then, goes far beyond a mere means of identification to being a key feature of the Inuit community, exemplifying their belief in the power of language and the interdependent structure of their culture.

It is this very interdependence, a concept so unfamiliar to cultures driven by strong individualism and belief in self-sufficiency, that immediately strikes one when viewing the Inuit from an external perspective. Though this initial recognition is by no means an indication of true understanding, it does provide a fundamental awareness which, in turn, should alert one to the probabilities of further differences in perspective. Unfortunately, this latter sensitivity is often lacking with the result that potential cultural insights remain not only unexamined but even completely unnoticed by the observer. Such has largely been the fate of name and song in the Inuit community; their cultural significance cannot be appreciated fully if viewed merely as peripheral features. For the Inuit, name and song seem to embody linguistically the spiritual, communal, and physical aspects of existence; they are integral to survival. By attempting to comprehend such a radical conception of the power of language one becomes quickly aware of the need for guidance to move beyond the limitations of an external perspective. In this respect, the work of Inuit authors is a necessary resource, Peter Pitseolak's (auto)-biographical work, *People from Our Side*, offers a revealing glimpse of the slim differentiation between individual and community life for the Inuit. On this basis, he regretfully remembers the serious repercussions on the spiritual connections of name and song caused by external influence, and also discusses the communal and physical aspects of name.

Acknowledging a limitation of understanding and perception is a necessary degree of self-awareness for approaching, rather than encroaching on, any culture from an external position. Here, the work of non-Inuit authors about the Inuit, perhaps unintentionally, can prove to be useful. As such, James Houston's novel, *The White Dawn: An Eskimo Saga*, suggests that an external position will always be problematic. Ironically, considering the extent of Houston's own involvement with the Inuit in marketing their art, his fictional portrayal of non-Inuit involvement with an Inuit community also suggests that since understanding is always limited, complete integration is impossible. This external position is particularly evident in Houston's depiction of the non-Inuit characters' difficulty with appreciating the spiritual, communal, and physical aspects of song. If one is doomed to remain ever without understanding, it may seem futile to discuss this Inuit belief in the power of language from an external perspective.

However, the tripartite manifestation of name and song is the enabling

factor. Moving from spiritual to communal to physical characteristics, one moves from the intangible to the tangible realm. Even if Inuit spirituality and community seem too far removed from the familiar for the non-Inuit to provide a common base, grasping the real power of language means relating on a human level to the most elemental aspect of existence, the physical. Physical existence necessarily takes on a greater intensity for the Inuit, who do not take survival for granted, but it is impossible for anyone to escape the depth of their reverence for language when it is described as essential for existence. One simply cannot dismiss the body.

There is an inherent danger in not being aware of one's limitations of perspective when interacting with another culture, which is particularly threatening as it can be unintentionally destructive in so many different ways. In the Inuit community, this danger has realized itself in the form of a significant disruption in the crucial cultural link to the power of language. External influence has attempted—both overtly and covertly—to dissociate name and song from their spiritual association. The dual importance of name as personal and simultaneously communal was neither acknowledged nor valued by non-Inuit in the past. Rather, what were perceived as foreign, difficult names were simply substituted for convenience with randomly chosen replacements.³ As Keith J. Crowe remarks, "Europeans who dealt with native people could rarely pronounce or remember the Indian and Inuit names, and gave the people European names" (158). Despite the difficulty posed by the linguistic barrier, one wonders just how much effort was made to "master" the use of these names before displacing them with a master language. Moreover, such substitution indicates an off-handed dismissal of the significance of name that was not limited to a temporary result of ignorance; it has created a duality that still exists: "Many Indians and Inuit still use two sets of names—a European one at school or at work, and a native one at home" (Crowe 158). That one individual has two separate names of identification suggests a fragmentation of identity determined by environment. Peter Pitseolak documents this splitting of identity with an air of resigned observation: "Joe had two names. The white people didn't like to call him his Eskimo name, Tooeemee, so they called him Joe. Tooeemee was the first person I knew in my lifetime to speak English" (56). Such reasoning for renaming someone on the basis of personal preference seems ludicrous in retrospect, but clearly emphasizes the blind arrogance which could so thoughtlessly rob an individual of name. Even if the name were regarded as strictly a means of identification, it seems that such substitution erases one identity in order to replace it with another. That this renaming was not an attempt to translate the words from Inuktitut to English, French, or German demonstrates an ignorance of the deeper significance of language through

an arbitrary replacement.

Similarly, the missionary influence affected Inuit naming both directly and indirectly. Not only were the Inuit given new European names when they were baptized, but they began to adopt Biblical names randomly for themselves. As Pitseolak records:

When I was growing up I knew people who changed names as often as they felt like it—without being baptized. They were always looking for better names. When we started to be able to read the Bible, people would pick names from the Bible and say, 'Maybe, if I have this name, God will save me.' If people could not read the Bible, someone who could would pick a name for them. (61)

Ironically, Pitseolak's remarks reveal the disparity between Inuit and European perceptions of name. Despite their apparent imitation of casual European-influenced renaming, these Inuit still retain the traditional spiritual connection of name to existence. Since they regard name as a fundamental indication of spiritual state, the Inuit transfer this perception to Christianity. That is, "better names" should result in spiritual fulfilment even in Christian terms and, suggestively, the means of securing existence is through name. Not surprisingly then, those Biblical names with unwelcome associations were swiftly abandoned. Pitseolak remarks of one woman, Alashua, who unwittingly chose the name of Eve: "When she had finished reading the Bible she realized Evie [sic] turned her husband Adam into a sinner, so she went back to Alashua. She didn't want to have so many sins" (67). This woman incorporated her spiritual association of name with the Christian doctrine which, ironically, caused her to revert to her Inuit name, thereby appearing to strengthen her traditional belief in the power of language expressed in name through her failed interaction with Christianity.

The distinction between Christianity and the Inuit spiritual conception of name is not as great as one might assume. Knud Rasmussen seems to perpetuate a radical distinction by portraying the Inuit understanding as something shrouded in mystery: "To every name is attached a certain store of power that is transferred to those who bear the name. It is a kind of magic power, difficult to explain" (*Netsilik* 219). However, the significance of his explanation is not its mysterious evasiveness but that it underlines the need to recognize the limits of external perception. In a more reconciliatory vein, Rasmussen describes the Inuit concept of human trinity in a way which strongly resembles a Christian understanding:

Every person consists of a soul, a name, and a body. The body is perishable and is only there as a case for the soul while man is alive on earth. But the soul represents real life and it is a manifestation of the force that makes a man a man. . . . The name, too, is a kind of soul that unites man with a certain power. . . . The

name soul assists in maintaining life and also gives its bearer a particular power of resistance. (*Netsilik* 214)

That Rasmussen, even unintentionally, could be imposing a Christianized perspective on Inuit understanding must be recognized. Yet the idea of name being associated with the spirit—that is, body, soul, and name in comparison to the Christian trinity of body, soul, and spirit—seems consistent with the Inuit behaviour described by Pitseolak. Moreover, the Inuit method of naming children suggests that name is directly equated with the human spirit. By naming newborns after deceased relatives, regardless of sex, the Inuit believe that “the individual(s) who had borne this name before [are able] to live again through him or her, thus ensuring the continuation of generations” (Dorais 200). That is, the spirit is not God-breathed, but the spirit name is eternal and does have life-giving power. The fundamental similarity is a focus on existence, though spiritual existence seems to have closer ties to physical representation in the Inuit tradition.

This mysterious power of name seems to combine spiritual and communal aspects of Inuit culture. It is supernatural in the sense that, inexplicably, through name, a person may live again, and an explanation of this phenomenon is not demanded as it is taken on faith in the power of language. Non-Inuit would likely classify this spiritual belief as a type of reincarnation, wherein rebirth is limited to the human species. James Houston portrays it as such in *The White Dawn*, where his Inuit narrator asserts, “We knew we had been born in this land, were now living out our lives and someday would die, only to reappear all fresh and unknowing within the body of some newborn child.” Houston focuses on the aspects of this belief that suggest a generalized understanding of reincarnation:

Was this dancing boy not the very image of his grandfather? At birth he had been given his dead grandfather’s face. He also seemed to possess his grandfather’s sureness and his dancing skill. So the spirit leaves the dead body for a little while and then returns to live a new life again among us. (175-76)

However, Houston’s description limits this reincarnation to a rebirth of the same individual whose spirit “returns to live a new life again.” The significant role of name is diminished in such a presentation by the failure to acknowledge that the shared name creates an amalgamation of the deceased and the newborn. That is, he does not emphasize that it is through the power of name that such a spirit transfer has occurred, and the identity of the living individual is not subsumed by the deceased. Since the names are continually renewed in conjunction with the life cycle of the community, naming creates a strong spiritual and communal connection. This cycle of renaming “forms a long chain of protectors which, unseen, follow the one that bears the name,

are with him, work inside him, keep danger away and become his guardian spirits (Rasmussen, *Netsilik* 220). By inheriting a name, an individual becomes closely associated to those in the community who shared the name before in a mysterious spiritual manner. Yet this mystery is familiar in form as it relates to supernatural guardians, a tradition shared by Christian perception.

In the Inuit community, the value of naming seems to move beyond a strictly spiritual understanding to having a very real physical connection to previous generations. Pitseolak describes his own experience with traditional naming as a physical manifestation of the past in the present; he recalls, "I remember wanting to eat meat. I kept crying and crying but, of course, I was only a baby. Probably I wanted to eat meat because I was named after someone who starved to death" (51). One could argue that this association of the self to his ancestor is sheer speculation on Pitseolak's part, but the significance of his claim is that it reveals what the Inuit believe. His explanation suggests that the past is recreated in the physical present. As his inclusion of the term "probably" indicates, Pitseolak's claim is not offered as proof of this phenomenon, for the belief is not being challenged. He is not attempting to convince anyone, certainly not himself, but is merely stating in traditional terms what is so. Significantly, the recognition of this power of name to (re-)create existence depends upon—but does not insist on—the individual's willingness to believe. This application of the power of language directly involves preservation of physical existence in the present, and the connection to previous generations also includes the power of the name-spirit to protect. Since the name carries with it certain powers, Rasmussen concludes that "[m]en must have as many names as possible, as every name will presumably protect them and hold them up." For women, he attributes the value of multiple names only to motherhood of male children, viewing women as a medium for whom names are valuable "not for their own sakes but rather that their sons to be may be born of the strongest possible mother" (*Netsilik* 200). However, the limitations of Rasmussen's interpretation are exposed in his own document. The physical significance of naming is far more than speculated protection and is by no means limited by gender. In the same document, Rasmussen records an Inuit woman listing her many names, but it is her explanation of these names that is striking: "I was held up solely by names. It is because of the names that we breathe, and it is also because of them that we can walk on our legs. Through all these names I have grown old [i.e., have lived long, have survived]" (*Netsilik* 221). In other words, names equal life in a very real physical sense, and physical existence is embodied in one's name(s). The name seems to be both an assertion of existence and an assurance of its continuance, first in the physical realm, then in the spiritual, and always as part of communal being, which is both physical and

spiritual in nature.

The significance of name, then, is much more than a means of identifying an individual from others and connects her/him to the community. Drawing on Inuit mythology and cosmology in which the use of language is a force of creation, Louis-Jacques Dorais observes that “for the Inuit, language cannot be divorced from the cosmic order. Without it, there would be no life and death, no day and night, and even no difference between men and women. . . . [O]nly language has permitted people to live a normal existence” (186). Such strong cultural connections indicate that the Inuit revere the power of language. Yet language does not seem to remain on a macrocosmic level, for each person is directly associated to the power of language through naming; this connection is neither incidental nor negligible. In *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*, Rudy Wiebe insightfully observes that “the most minimal and therefore most powerful word, spoken or written, about any human being is *name*. . .” (67). It seems likely that the Inuit would concur with Wiebe’s assessment of name—perhaps more on the basis of the richness of name than its minimalism, through these are not necessarily mutually exclusive terms. Elsewhere, in a discussion of Inuit song, Wiebe further observes that the structure of Inuktitut itself reinforces the belief in the power of language. The minimalism of these poems or songs demonstrates “absolute faith in the power of the word (Eskimo is an agglutinative language and most of the lines consist of only one word, despite the necessary translation length)” and their efficacy hinges on human belief in this power (Wiebe, “Songs” 60). That is, without belief, one will neither see nor recognize the power of language in physical existence.

In traditional Inuit culture, the power of language is uncontested, and so it not only manifests itself in various in various forms in life, but one’s very existence is a manifestation of its power. Spiritual, communal, and physical existence are funnelled into language as both name and song; thus name and song are equally vital to survival. Much more than being what Diamond Jenness terms “the main distractions of the Eskimos” (222), songs are directly connected to the existence of the Inuit. Certainly “the art of using language well [is] highly valued” (Crowe 31), but it is more significant to note that this regard is not mere aesthetic appreciation. Just as name has a direct impact on the life of an individual and demonstrates the close connection to community, so Inuit song contains this same duality. Moreover, as Robin McGrath points out, song has a “practical application” for the Inuit, who believe it can determine physical conditions essential to survival, such as, weather (27). Attributing this degree of power to song is impossible if song is treated as peripheral, or strictly as a form of entertainment; for the Inuit it appears to be indispensable. Indeed, spiritual, communal, and physical

existence are actually contained in song, and so its importance cannot be overestimated.

The spiritual connection of song is a more familiar concept to which non-Inuit should be able to relate; however, the extent of this recognition remains limited by external perspective. The influence of missionaries in the not-so-distant past demonstrates a partial recognition of the value of song and also its short-sighted application. In an anthropological study, Thomas C. Correll notes that “[s]ongs and hymns were translated and memorized” (307), which suggests that the missionaries certainly were aware of the seemingly natural connection between spirituality and song. Yet upon closer examination Correll observes that transferring the song from the festival house to the church service involved a distinct selection process. He lists several descriptive terms used by the Inuit to characterize song, and then remarks that the church adopted the single term referring to singing done in unison but overlooked the other aspects of Inuit song which “implied power in words. . . [and] referred to the voice of the appropriate spirit” (Correll 328). In other words, the missionaries acknowledged the communal aspect of song while disregarding both the power of language to effect physical change and Inuit spiritual understanding. The communal, spiritual, and physical aspects of song are not separable. In fact, it seems contradictory to attempt to do so while still embracing a communal and specifically Christian spiritual value of song.

With song as with name, being unaware of one’s limitations is potentially dangerous in cross-cultural encounters. The connection of spiritual existence to song coincides particularly closely with Inuit belief, and so external influence has been especially disruptive in this area. Pitseolak relates the story of Keegak, a man who attempts to incorporate Christianity within his traditional understanding of the practical and immediate power of song. He composes a song and dances naked in the firm belief that he is going to heaven. Pitseolak summarily dismisses the outcome of this incident: “Of course nobody got up [to heaven]. Finally Keegak had to go home because he got too cold. His penis had goose pimples” (41). In this instance mixed spirituality results in absurdity and ignominy. Because Christianity could not be combined with the Inuit understanding of song as an embodiment of communal, spiritual, and physical existence, this seems to suggest a weakness in the power of language. However, since Keegak did not lack the belief necessary to recognize the efficacy of the words, the real problem is that he expected an external perception to abide by his understanding of song and spirituality. More importantly, this incident seems to reinforce the significance of the tripartite structure of language as communal, spiritual, and physical. The song ultimately returns to the body, and physical existence determines the viability of placing belief in this particular song.

The spiritual aspect of song is more than an uplifting emotional response for the Inuit. The shaman, Orpingalik, who is known for his startling equation of singing to breathing, describes song as something beyond speech, a spiritual utterance: "Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices" (Rasmussen, *Netsilik* 320). In fact, song is so powerful for spiritual existence that it can disturb the spirits of the air; consequently, "it is considered dangerous to hold song festivals under the open sky" (Rasmussen, *Netsilik* 508). In this case, the spiritual disturbance would have direct impact on physical existence as, Rasmussen explains, the punishment for such an offense is the imminent death of one participant. Song has an even more intense spiritual connection in the form of spirit hymns; these songs are treated with great reverence as the words contain a secret power understood by no living member of the Inuit community. Significantly, this mystery of meaning serves only to emphasize the power of these songs; as a shaman explains: "the spirit hymns have to do with supernatural and unreal things, so ordinary people do not need to understand them. The wisdom in them is often concealed, and one must simply utter the words, which have a special power" (Rasmussen, *Copper* 183). Such a blind faith in the power of language manifest in song to determine spiritual, physical, and communal being seems difficult to understand from a non-Inuit perspective. Though a belief in the power of language in connection to spirituality bears a strong similarity to the underlying premise of prayer, it is suggestion of hidden power which seems so unfamiliar. Even in prayer, the words one utters are controlled, perhaps repetitious and ritualistic, but clearly intelligible. To simply abandon oneself to the power of language per se seems to be another matter altogether; this calls for such strong faith that it is not surprising for Wiebe to have observed that the efficacy of song hinges on human belief in the power of the word.

In addition to this spiritual value, song performs valuable social functions in the Inuit community. Song regulates communal activity by directing the power of language into beneficial avenues of interaction. Other than the spirit hymns, songs can be broadly differentiated into those composed in the present and those passed down from earlier generations. Through song, "language play[s] a primordial part in expressing traditional philosophy and preserving social order" (Dorais 202). Language seems to be a vital connection to the past and a defining characteristic of present physical existence. The song festivals, where in all present gather both to offer songs of their own composition and to join in the traditional songs, are a key feature of the Inuit community upon which anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, early explorers, and the like all have remarked. The event itself seems to emphasize the fundamental connection of the body to the power of language, a connection

beyond speech and reason as suggested by the similarity between the shaman's view of spirit hymns and Rasmussen's description of the song festival. Rasmussen finds it impossible to capture in words "some account of the inexplicable manner in which words and tones and dance merged together into one single wave of joy," and he is forced to concede that "such a night must be lived in its own atmosphere" (*Copper* 131).

In addition to the experience, memories of these festivals are equally important to the Inuit, Rasmussen notes, for they serve as a form of antidepressant during those times that make such jubilation impossible (*Netsilik* 324). Moreover, repeating the remembered songs and composing new ones in anticipation of such a festival are both actions that link the individual to the community through language. The strength of this connection to the community is evident in the way the Inuit use mystery in new songs:

In many of the songs it is considered to be an art to sing in riddles, in order to keep the audience in a state of tension, and only giving hints, without stating clearly what it really is one means. But as everybody's business is public property, both hunting experience and gallant adventures, it is seldom difficult to fill up the blanks. (*Netsilik* 351)

Unlike the shrouded mystery of the spirit songs, this mystery is playful and is meant to be uncovered, which emphasizes the shared physical existence of the community and the people's sheer pleasure in using language. Like the spirit songs, the mystery of these new songs demonstrates the communal belief in the power of language expressed through the words of song.

The very nature of song unifies the community since it is part of the oral tradition and relies on the power of language to draw people together. Of this tradition, Edmund Carpenter remarks, "Speech and song are addressed to all; they unite the group: 'Let me be known only as the man who wrote the songs of my people.' . . . [T]he oral tradition doesn't favour individualism" (np). Through song does seem to unify the people through participation and by making them the subject of their own discourse, it does not always do so in an obvious manner. To the non-Inuit, the tradition of song duels would seem to be the least likely means of uniting a group. In this linguistic duel, two men, at least one of whom possessed some form of bitterness toward the other, "would take turns at singing ironical songs of their composition in order to make fun of their opponent. The loser was the one who finally abandoned the contest when he was no longer capable of ridiculing the other" (Dorais 202). Such a match seems destined to foster anger which would drive a community apart, but the actual result is quite the opposite. Wiebe notes that the participants' reckless exaggeration before an attentive audience creates a form of social release for tension: "Everyone laughs as the abuse piles

higher, and in the laughter hard feelings vanish." Which is to say, he ironically adds, that "they work out their hatred in songs, not, like 'civilized' peoples, by mass killings" (Wiebe, "Songs" 62). Such a form of retaining social order underlines the Inuit belief in the power of language; words alone possess the power both to govern and to unite the people. In a very real way, songs form communal existence.

The difficulty of understanding this concept of language from a non-Inuit perspective is not easily surmounted, and the difficulty suggests a fundamental difference in cultural concepts of language. Achieving social control through language without issuing aggressive commands simply seems illogical. In his novel, Houston portrays this difficulty of perception by creating a confrontation between Sarkak, who is in charge of the Inuit community, and Kakuktak, one of the stranded sailors. While the situation is still unresolved, Avinga, the narrator, muses:

If Kakuktak had known our customs, Sarkak would have given a party and sung a song of ridicule against him and the other foreigners, and that would have driven them out of the camp into exile and shame forever. But they were not our people. They did not use our language, which could be subtly twisted and turned into expressive songs. They were still too ignorant of our ways. Because he could not sing them down, Sarkak had lost." (219)

By voicing the perception of outsiders through a fictional member of the Inuit community, Houston is able to portray ironically the superiority one attributes to one's native tongue and to indicate a recognition of cultural ignorance. Even if Kakuktak had been aware of the use of song duels in Inuit culture, it seems unlikely that he would understand such a custom or that he would acknowledge the significance role of language as a determining factor of physical existence. Nevertheless, by making a clash of words the cause of this rebellion, Houston is careful to suggest that Kakuktak has some awareness of the power of language. Sarkak's disparaging tone and choice of words in addressing the foreigners is what angers Kakuktak, and by uttering the rarely pronounced word, no, Kakuktak reverts to his cultural use of language as a means of defence. This aggressive use of language is so unfamiliar to the Inuit that they have no way to respond, except through physical means: "Could you imagine that one small word would destroy such a powerful man? . . . Now he [Sarkak] would have to kill them or leave the camp" (Houston 219). Once the option of song is removed, communal order can only be preserved by physical change; that is, Houston's work reinforces the link between language and the body. The elimination of song is the elimination of communal existence.

It may seem questionable, in light of such radical perceptions, whether

one can even begin to appreciate the power of song from a position outside of Inuit culture. Houston himself indirectly suggests the degree of disparity between non-Inuit and Inuit perceptions of language by portraying the cacophonous effect of combined song: "Pilee [one of the sailors] sat down with his arm around Mia's shoulder and he, too, began singing, but it was another song in a different language, with a different rhythm. The two songs did not blend together at all. It sounded terrible" (238-39). To accept with ease such a sharp, irreconcilable differentiation between cultures is, however, to fall into an even graver error than does Pitseolak's dancing Keegak. It is important to distinguish between presuming fully to understand another culture's concept of song and appreciating the song itself while being conscious of possible unrecognized, significant associations. Though one may be confined to an external perspective, that position does not limit one to a single predetermined perception, but it does require thoughtful consideration in place of comfortable reliance on being excused by cultural barriers. Even a cursory glance at the degree of variance among non-Inuit responses to Inuit song demonstrates the multiplicity of possible reactions. For example, from Rudy Webs perspective, Inuit song can be most effective: "For us, then, appreciation of Eskimo song must be based on its rhythmic line and its repetition of word and refrain . . . [which] work for immediate rhythmic and sound effects" ("Songs" 58). Conversely, Diamond Jenness interprets this same use of rhythm and repetition in a negative manner: "wherever he [the singer] was at a loss for any word he simply filled up the gap with the meaningless syllables *ai ye yanga*" (224). As Jenness is describing a singer's improvisation of song, this repetition likely does serve as a necessary pause in which to compose. Yet it seems rather harsh to dismiss these syllables—even if they are not words with definable meanings—as contributing nothing to the song. This quick dismissal overlooks the rhythmic effect of these syllables, a stylistic device comparable to "la la la" refrains in English songs. In contrast to Jenness, Robin McGrath goes to the opposite extreme, emphasizing the musical rhythm of the songs to such an extent that she claims, "when it is removed or lost, what is left [i.e., the lyrics] is sparse and repetitive" (20). The words became subsidiary to the rhythmic music and, unlike Wiebe, McGrath cannot appreciate the songs as poems which retain rhythm in word without musical accompaniment.

Finally, Knud Rasmussen's response is mildly to compliment the chorus by claiming that the combination of "deep male voices and high, shrill sopranos, is sometimes exceedingly effective." He makes a much stronger comment, however, on the overall soothing effect of Inuit song in general: "Listening to these songs is like hearing breakers beating against the cliffs" (*Copper* 130). This image is one of a distinct, rich, repetitive but not mono-

tonous sound, something pleasant to the ear and mind. Yet this is also an image of erosion, which perhaps suggests the need to wear away rigidly conventional aesthetic expectations to discover appreciation in cross-cultural encounters. Rather than being liberating, such a plethora of responses could make one even more uncertain about approaching Inuit song. This may be particularly true if one also recalls the use of mystery in the songs, knowing that these “riddles” can only be solved from inside the community. As Rasmussen conceded, even if one understands the language, without receiving an explanation of brief cultural and communal references, “the text [is] incoherent as it stands” (*Caribou* 77). How, then, can one possibly hope to gain comprehension of an inside phenomenon when always looking from the outside? Perhaps seeking to appreciate rather than to conquer or to master another culture would reorient one’s goals. Though this sense of distance does problematize an external approach to spiritual and communal aspects of song, its third aspect, the body, is necessarily immediate, regardless of one’s position.

Song is a manifestation of the physical aspect of existence, and so it must be viewed from and can be understood on the most fundamental level of being. Song is directly linked to physical existence, and the Inuit belief in the power of language means that song is put to practical use. “Singing was an ordinary hunting method,” claims Pitseolak. “The Inuit used to make up lots of songs—all kinds of different songs to make it easier to hunt the animals. They sang to get the animals used to the hunters. These early people were very clever. We people now have guns; in the old days people just used their voices” (38). That is, the voice was a weapon; words had the power to entice animals and thereby language had a direct impact on existence. Since physical existence was possible only with successful hunting, song was integral to survival. Indeed, to sing is to live; the connection is that simple and that crucial: “It is said that a woman whom the spirits allow to sing, will have a long life” (Rasmussen, *Caribou* 70). Like the woman who reveals that her name is life, so physical existence also depends on the preservation of song. The most striking example of the physical aspect of Inuit song must be the throat song. Houston includes a description of the phenomenon in his novel:

She [young Inuit woman, Evaloo] laid her hand on her sister’s shoulders and placed her mouth against Mia’s half-open lips. Gently she began to blow into her sister’s mouth, the rush of air caused the cords in Mia’s throat tremble like tightly drawn sinews. From her throat came a high-pitched inhuman noise like no other sound on this earth. Evaloo blew and played on her sister’s throat cords and set up a haunting rhythm that once heard could never be forgotten. (169)

This amazing combination of body and song, though completely outside a

non-Inuit sphere of reference, strongly conveys both their reverence for song and its elemental nature. Just as song is beyond speech in its spiritual connection, so it moves beyond words in its physical connection. This physical manifestation of song exemplifies the interdependence of the individual and community. Throat song cannot be performed alone; it requires the cooperative effort of two women. However, its physical nature makes one simultaneously very aware of the physical self—not only for those involved but for the spectators as well. In this instance, most clearly, physical existence is song.

It is impossible not to respect the reverence with which the Inuit regard language when one realizes it is essential to their existence. Name and song exemplify the connection of language to both the individual and the community, but, more significantly, they embody spiritual, communal, and physical aspects of being. For the Inuit, external influence either has overlooked or has attempted to replace the spiritual connections of name and song, resulting in serious consequences. Their spiritual significance, however, remains vital to the communal understanding and belief in the power of language. Most importantly, name and song come down to the most elemental aspect of human existence, the physical. It is this connection to physical existence which ultimately demonstrates how essential name and song are to the Inuit. With a regard for the limitations of an external perspective, through the recorded writings about Inuit, and most of all with a desire to learn rather than to demonstrate learning, one can hope to gain some awareness of the power of language through their conception of naming and song. Name and song: these are not just marks of identity; they are marks of survival.

Tina Pylvainen is a graduate of Lakehead University, currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Ottawa. A lifetime resident of Northwestern Ontario, she has a special interest in cross-cultural studies of Canadian literature.

Notes

1. This paper in no way attempts to reconcile the obvious major discrepancies between this fictionalized representation and the conditions of an actual people, nor is the comparison to pop culture meant to trivialize the situation of the Inuit. Conversely, the image is presented strictly to establish a common recognition of how cross-cultural contact is portrayed in contemporary terms in order to question the easy acceptance of such interaction without considering possible negative consequences.
2. The more recent (failed) attempt by the Canadian government to organize and to classify the Inuit by issuing identification numbers introduces a movement

outside of language with complex theoretical implications. The discussion of such a radical and frighteningly Hitleresque action is beyond the scope of the present paper. It is mentioned here, however, to suggest the serious lack of awareness that often characterizes the actions of well-meaning but misdirected outside agencies in their contact with the Inuit.

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