Kenojuak: Intentional Narratives as Interpretive Strategies

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Kenojuak: internationally renowned Canadian Inuit artist. Former nomadic camp dweller of the Arctic. A founding female member of the Cape Dorset printmaking co-operative. Famous for her 1959 drawing, *The Enchanted Owl*, which was reprinted eleven years later on a postage stamp. Star of the 1962 National Film Board documentary *Eskimo Artist—Kenojuak*. Member of the Royal Canadian Academy. Companion of the Order of Canada.

Who or what do we speak of when this name is invoked? Can we speak directly of the artist and the work of that artist? Or do we speak of Kenojuak only through mediating narratives of interpretation that evolve from within our own culture? In other words: how is an Inuk artist, as a member of a culture distinct from and unfamiliar to our own culture, understood by us? Moreover, how much influence does Kenojuak, as a subject in her own right, have over the development of southern narratives attempting to define *her*?

Questions such as these are critical to the general consideration of north-south relationships: North meaning here the Arctic and Inuit culture, and South meaning what is other than North. It is useful to consider these issues according to the philosophical theories of intentionality and narratology, which focus on how subjects choose to receive, interpret and express information about their world of experience, always within the limitations imposed by the culture to which they belong. The study of narrative, in particular, reveals how we place ourselves in relation to others through the manipulation of our own story to include/explain these others relationally.

In this particular case, that other is Kenojuak, who has been re-defined by southern narratives as a symbol of such inter-relationality. When we speak of Kenojuak, we tell many stories, but none of these are directly representative of Kenojuak or her art. Indeed, they cannot be. Instead, these narratives attempt to place her within recognizable, southern narrative contexts. Unfortunately, these contexts are often reductive to stereotypical representations: Kenojuak as the Primitive Artist; the Artist of the Spiritual World; the Mediator Between the Old Ways and the New; the Feminist; and the Commodity, to cite a few of the more prominent examples. The dependence of southern critics upon clichés prevents the artist from participating actively

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in the production of such defining narratives. Moreover, it reveals our reluctance to stretch the narrative conventions of our own culture by experimenting with those belonging to other cultures, resulting in an inability, ultimately, to explore the other meanings of Kenojuak and her culture.

Philosopher John Searle asserts that "there are... no actions without corresponding intentions" (*Intentionality* 82). Such motivations, or intentional states, as Philip Petit refers to them in *The Common Mind*, spring from our need as subjects to make sense of the objects—including other individuals and cultures—within our range of experience, and to confirm our position within a recognizable paradigm. Petit argues that

> [i]ntentional states..., like perception and belief,... serve to connect an agent with its world, letting it have a representation of what there is and of what opportunities there are for action. They give it the bearings that it needs to intervene successfully in the external order. (3)

Thus the way in which the agent chooses to represent "what there is" becomes critical in determining the form and nature of their interaction with this world and its objects. Such representational choices are obviously subjective, or interpretive, even when applied to other agents within their range of experience. Interpretation is therefore an ongoing and necessary process of subjective recognition, requiring the creation of narratives as mediating representations of inter-relationality.

Mediating narratives are fundamental to the process of inter-cultural exchange. Stories become attempts to identify/characterize / compare / contextualize / conflate the familiar with the unfamiliar: in this particular case, southern culture with northern culture and vice versa. Historically in Arctic-Other relations, narratives have taken the form of explorers' journals, Inuit oral tradition, anthropological studies, fiction, poetry, government policy, song, rumour, photography. Today, and with particular reference to Kenojuak, they take the form of newspaper articles, documentary films, exhibition catalogues and reviews, all of which attempt to reconcile international art criticism with Inuit art, and an art-buying public with Kenojuak as artist.

These stories, however, do not comprise a resonant whole; rather, they present divergent and often conflicting fields of interpretive representation. Searle posits that all interpretation is intentionally biased: the subject seeks to fulfil certain socially defined and motivated "conditions of satisfaction" (or "horizon[s] of expectation," according to Ricoeur (26) and Davis (90)) by creating an explanation that is both derived from and favours their own cultural precepts and practices (*Intentionality* 19). He also observes that "[t]he same intentional content can determine different conditions of satisfaction (such as truth conditions) relative to different Background..." (Searle *The*

Rediscovery of the Mind 177). Thus the interpretation of Kenojuak and/or her art as "intentional content" can be manipulated/appropriated to meet very divergent and sometimes even oppositional "conditions of satisfaction," depending upon the "Background" or culture of the narrator(s) concerned—whether as historians and curators; feminists; politicians and bureaucrats; the Inuit; art dealers and buyers; Kenojuak herself. The inability of those belonging to one culture (i.e., southern) to recognize / comprehend the narratives of another culture (i.e., northern) is often due to the dissimilarity of their Backgrounds. Whether or not these other / unfamiliar narratives remain obscure or become lucid depends upon the openness of the agent to alternative forms of interpretation/representation. Interpretive stagnation, or "sedimentation," as Paul Ricoeur refers to it, can result if narratives fall too often within the parameters of established stereotypes or clichés, recognizable genres, etc., of a particular Background. Fortunately, through the creative interplay of "innovation" with "sedimentation"—the interaction of imagination with tradition—subjects can move beyond the parameters of their known narratives into a shared awareness of those originating from within other cultures. As Ricoeur expresses this, the subject "belongs at once to the work's horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his or her own real action. The horizon of expectation and the horizon of experience continually confront one another and fuse together" (24-26). Ideally, through such confrontations and fusions, changes in dominant narrative patterns evolve, heightening our inter-cultural awareness and sensitivity, and enabling the subject to broaden his or her own background references.

Narrative is thus always relationally determined, defining both the subject and the object of interpretation in a continuous process of reception, interpretation and expression. Curator Ann Davis sees Kenojuak as one subject who employs artistic innovation to move beyond cultural sedimentation. She identifies Kenojuak as an agent who employs allegory to re-shape traditional narrative forms: "The allegorist does not restore an original meaning, but rather adds another meaning to the image. Kenojuak, working with popular Inuit subjects, . . . reinterprets these images" (90). In this way, Kenojuak appears to positively reinforce Ricoeur's theory of narrative evolution. Unfortunately, southern audiences refuse to acknowledge the innovative shift in form intended by the artist, preferring instead to interpret her work according to the restrictive stereotypical models usually applied to Inuit art. Davis writes: "the southern viewer's 'horizon of expectation' is such that often the original meaning, rather than Kenojuak's new meaning, is perceived. Wanting to read Inuit works in a romantic, primitive light, southern viewers pass over her new meaning, her formal concerns" (90). By doing so, southern audiences cling to known narratives and to sedimentation,

denying the innovative potential of Kenojuak's work. Moreover, they also restrict the interpretive potential of Kenojuak-as-artist by narrowly defining her as the Primitive Artist, and failing to give her the credit as an artist experimenting beyond her own tradition / culture.

Indeed, most southern critics shape their interpretations of Kenojuak to fit the role that meets the needs of their particular thesis, conditions of satisfaction, or horizon of expectation. Thus she becomes not only the Primitive Artist, but also an Artist of the Spiritual World; Mediator Between the Old Ways and the New; Feminist; and Commodity. Such manipulation is evidence of a deep reluctance on the part of southern narrativists to move outside of their own horizons of expectation and adapt more fluid / equitable forms of expression.

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> . . .her life, like her art, owes much to a simpler age. This may explain why Kenojuak's primitive icons give a sense of instinctively re-creating the life that has now vanished. To this day, she is still as skilled with a fish spear as she is with the tools of lithography. (O'Hara)

Unlike the majority of contemporary non-Native artists, Kenojuak's art has invariably been linked to/prefaced by her lifestyle. Throughout her almost forty-year career, media coverage and academic criticism alike have often refused to consider the merit of her art apart from her status as an Inuk wife and mother who began her life in the nomadic camps of the Arctic prior to settlement in government towns. Her ability with a fish spear has become inseparable from her ability with an artist's tools, yet the two could hardly be more distant terms of comparison. Davis believes such representations are popular because "non-natives have a certain vicarious longing for a more elemental existence, for a life based on and derived from the land. . ." (89). This longing, in turn, colours the narrated view of Kenojuak: she becomes the Primitive Artist, the arbiter of a romanticized mythical past existence that southerners lack and desire.

The southern desire for mythology becomes even more pronounced when Kenojuak is represented as the Artist of the Spiritual World. Repeatedly, critics tie the interpretation of her artwork to shamanism in spite of the disavowals made by Kenojuak herself. Dorothy Eber is particularly adamant in this respect. She writes about an interview with Kenojuak in a 18 June 1969 article:

> . . .there are many exciting glimpses of the spirits, and Kenojuak herself has provided some of the most lyrical and best. I pointed out that in the 1967 collection of Dorset graphics some of her prints bear titles like *Two Spirits, Hawk*

> *Combatting Spirit, Bird with Spirit.*
>
> "She is make them out of her mind," [the translator] emphasized. "She doesn't know why the white man is giving them these names. But she knows the white man likes to hear about such things." ("Art Centre. . .For How Long?)

Through her translator, Kenojuak shows her awareness of the white people's desire to interpret her work to their own conditions of satisfaction.[1] Eber, however, continues to tell her own story of Kenojuak's work in a 5 July 1969 article, "'It's not magic, it's from my mind'," despite the artist's previous refutation:

> The Eskimo prints, especially the early ones, show many exciting glimpses of the spirits and Kenojuak has provided some of the most lyrical and the best. Kenojuak's own grandfather was a Shaman, a man with mystical powers to achieve communication with the spirits, but she herself is not anxious to talk about the spirits. . . .

Perhaps Eber deserves credit for printing Kenojuak's side of the story as a headline, but the nudge-and-wink tone of its use and the highlighted shamanistic associations provided by Eber make light of the artist's credibility. Note also the repetition of the first line in both articles. Thus, Kenojuak is represented as an evasive Inuk spiritualist despite her protests to the contrary.

A variation on the stereotype of Kenojuak as Artist of the Spiritual World is that of Kenojuak as Mediator Between the Old and the New Ways of the North. The interpretation of the term "mediator" can take a variety of meanings, one of the more popular versions being as Feminist. The rhetoric ranges from extreme claims of female autonomy, such as the following: "Without knowing a tittle about emancipation of Women's Liberation, this gentle woman, living in the harshest climate in the world[,] made effortless strides of transition possible for her whole race, struggling between a hunting economy and obliteration ("Kenojuak, an Eskimo artist without artifice"), to statistical representation of the importance and prolific nature of women artists, such as Kenojuak, within a feminist framework (Berlo, "The Power of the Pencil: Inuit Women in the Graphic Arts"). Kenojuak is also labelled as Feminist because she frequently draws pictures of women, even though the artist says she simply likes women and is "crazy about baby girls" ("Inuit artist Kenojuak in 275-copy edition"). With reference to Kenojuak's art and career, these writers insinuate a political intention that they fail to prove exists. The author's own subjective point-of-view is imposed upon the object of interpretation (Kenojuak) to meet the requirements of a popular southern agenda.

Representatives of the Canadian government have also been anxious

to interpret the Inuk artist as Mediator Between the Old and the New Ways of the North, or, more specifically, between the pre- and post-government regulation of the Arctic and its inhabitants that has had such devastating effects. As Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs in 1974, Jean Chrétien remarked in the preface to *Arts of the Eskimo: Prints*: "A great deal can be learned about the dreams as well as the activities of a culture long rooted in its environment, now being influenced by our technological society. May the record left by these prints serve as a bridge between the old and new for future generations. (Roch 7). This bridge was, in reality, an income-generating scheme the bureaucrats hoped would effect a transition among the Inuit from a life of hunting on the land to employment in the capitalist market system of the technological society quickly overtaking them. It was built, apparently, using southern expertise and "underdeveloped" Inuit resources; in other words, the art could not exist until revealed through southern forms of narrative to southern audiences willing to purchase it. The rhetoric of the following quotation, also from *Arts of the Eskimo: Prints*, reveals this somewhat imperialist subtext of South-North cooperation:

> ...Eskimo printmaking, *inseminated* by western technological methods, revealed itself as an authentic manifestation of the creative spirit of a people *reawakened* to its cultural heritage .... *[D]ormant* native values and concepts of the Eskimo *were brought back to life*, the printshop acting as a *catalyst* for their *resurrection*. (emphasis added; "The Eskimo print, an appreciation" by Leo Rosshandler, Roch 17)

Note the active, even sexual, connotations of the language referring to the role of western experts and the passive, sleep associations drawn by the references to Inuit involvement in this bridging project. Thus, even though the metaphorical representation of a bridge might suggest a cooperative venture, the nature of the relationship is really more control-based than one would suspect.

James Houston represented the Canadian government in this bridging venture in Cape Dorset during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and his relationship with Kenojuak has been centrally identified with this process. Kenojuak's *Rabbit Eating Seaweed* is frequently mentioned in art catalogues as an original source of Inuit graphic art because it tied Inuit appliqué practices to western printmaking techniques. To make this print, Houston borrowed a sealskin stencil used by Kenojuak for sewing appliqués and rubbed blue dye in the open space. He reminisces in his recent autobiography: "Here was a new, ancient art form emerging, the main component already created by Kenojuak, one of Canada's best artists, who is now a distinguished Companion of the Order of Canada" (*Confessions* 268). With this comment, Houston

links the "new" with the "ancient," and names Kenojuak a successful mediator between the old (Inuit) and new (southern) technologies. In this way, she is symbolic of the co-operative North-South bridging venture.

During the developmental stages of the contemporary Inuit art movement, the relationship between Houston and Kenojuak, as well as between other Inuit artists and the southern experts, was represented as one of mutual influence and cooperation. Statements were made by both sides to stress the equal standing of each as mediators/translators of culture. Kenojuak herself gives this impression when she talks about how Houston first encouraged her to draw: "The first time Saumik [Houston] gave me a piece of paper and asked me to start drawing, I asked him what kind of drawing I am going to make. And then he just told me to draw anything that comes into my mind—it could be anything" (*Dorset 79* 37). This position is reinforced by statements made by official bodies: "the Canadian Eskimo Art Committee believes that every effort must be made to encourage Eskimo artists to do exactly what they wish to do and all outside pressures to encourage the Eskimoes to create what will sell must be removed" (Turner 228). This stance of non-interference is often contradicted, however, in other sources. Leo Rosshandler states that the Eskimo Art Committee was formed "to ensure that the prints would be kept within the bounds of taste acceptable to the white art-buying public" (Roch 17). In *From Drawing to Print: Perceptions and Process in Cape Dorset,* Dorothy LaBarge writes: "From the beginning, Houston, and then Ryan were responsible for most aesthetic decisions in the print studio, including the introduction of textures, all in consultation with the printers" (26). Note that the printers are consulted concerning the final product, but that the artists, such as Kenojuak, apparently were not. In other words, Kenojuak remained free to draw what she wished, but the interpretation of that drawing in its transfer to the printing stage was determined according to the priorities of the white advisers and the printers under their direction. LaBarge goes on to show how Houston deliberately changed Kenojuak's drawings in the printmaking stage to increase their commercial potential; in other words, he doctored original artwork and interfered with artistic intention / action in order to make her representations accord with his and the white buyers' "horizon of expectation":

> In Kenojuak's *Geese Frightened by Fox* the image was enlarged and the following changes made: a negative oval was inserted in the breast of the lower-right bird; the two birds in the lower right were separated; the legs of the large bird on the left became the wings of the bird below it; the necks of three birds were given greater elegance; and the groundline was removed. As a result, the print is lighted, sharper and more elegant than the drawing, with forms floating in free and balanced relation to each other. . . . (35-6)

The use of the passive voice in the quotation de-emphasizes the role of the agent, who is later identified as Houston. It also does not consider how the original intention of the artist may have been altered by the changes made. For example, Joan M. Vastokas comments on the use of groundlines in Inuit art as functions of narrative unity that "link otherwise separated actors into a common sphere of activity" (78). If Houston, for example, erased the groundline, did he also delete a more structured context to emphasize free-floating form? Did this influence Kenojuak's artistic development by favouring the de-contextualized, graphic form over a more traditional representation? Quite possibly it did, for, as printer Iyola Kingwatsiak observes: "Kenojuak. . . knows enough now that she can't make a drawing that's just going to sit around, not getting anywhere. . . .so she makes her drawings have the sorts of things that you can make into a print" (as quoted in Speak 42). From LaBarge's comments, we can infer that Houston's horizon of expectation had to be met before a drawing became the basis for a print. Hence, despite the occasional public relations disclaimer issued by the Canadian Eskimo Art Committee, southern standards of aesthetic form, expression and commercial value were imposed on Inuit artists in accordance with popular southern narrative conceptions of what their art should be. As a result, "artists such as Kenojuak, whose work provided ready graphic material, were immediately recognized. Others, such as Kiakshuk, who was a gifted and passionate artist, have gone largely unnoticed by art historians and critics because their work did not lend itself readily to these printmaking media" (LaBarge 39). To be seen as a symbolic Mediator, Kenojuak has had to accept the leadership and influence of figures such as Houston, adopting / adapting her forms of expression to meet the expectations of the culture that has cast her in this role. In this way, she becomes a willing participant in the re-creation of herself as southern narrative.

As her fame grew, the narrative of Kenojuak as Commodity developed. This capitalist success story was and is based on the financial appreciation of both her reputation and her work. The selling of Kenojuak is perhaps best illustrated by the production and limited edition release of 275 caribou hide-bound volumes entitled *Graphic Masterworks of the Inuit: Kenojuak,* by Jean Blodgett. This book originally sold for $1,800 to $2,100 (Kritzwiser); it was a collector's item that touted the primitive, romanticized version of the artist's reputation through its physical presentation, but a large part of its attraction was its fairly steep price. As with most major artists, Kenojuak's name also came to signify her work and "a Kenojuak" to represent an investment, a speculative art market venture. Media coverage, particularly during the heyday of the 1970s, obsessed about financial appreciation and art auction sales records. Much of the publicity centred around the sharply increasing value

of *The Enchanted Owl*, Kenojuak's most recognizable work: articles inevitably stress how little the artist or the Cape Dorset Cooperative originally made from the sale of the drawing or print, and how much it is currently worth in international art circles (Edmonstone, Kritzwiser, Cansino, Swinton).[2] This deliberate separation of the South and the North into experiential and financial worlds excludes the artist from the speculative loop, and the focus remains on the print—not the artist—as having primary significance.

Southern narratives of value intentionally exclude the economic realities of the Inuit artists. Through this deliberate emphasis upon the object over the artist-as-agent, these articles imply that the artist belongs to a simpler world where money is of little relative importance. Such discussions neglect the fact that the contemporary Inuit art movement began as an income generation scheme. Even when the financial status of the artist is acknowledged, it is usually done in a general and patronizing manner, as in the 1981 *Maclean's* article by Jane O'Hara: "Kenojuak now earns about $30,000 yearly, still rolls her own cigarettes and lives in a modern frame house in Cape Dorset. . ." and Houston's *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller*: "In the 1990s, some of the best-known artists earn as much as one hundred thousand dollars a year and pay their taxes" (288). Why Houston should feel the need to comment on the taxpaying ability of Inuit artists is beyond comprehension. Both of these comments go against a statement made by Kenojuak in 1977: "the pay is very low. It is difficult to be willing today. . . ." (*Dorset 77* 48). By keeping the true financial circumstances of the artist subordinate to narratives of commodification, reviewers avoid having to address issues of accountability and blame for the discrepancies in profit made from the sales and promotion of Inuit art by the south as opposed to the North.

Stereotypical narrative representation can easily be seen as a way to control the object, person or culture being considered. By critically examining the southern narrative representations of Kenojuak and her art, we can see that this largely negative practice embraces sedimentation over innovation in a way that Ricoeur would undoubtedly have found discouraging to his ideas of narrative potential for inter-cultural exchange. Perhaps the challenge now is to heighten our awareness of the negative uses of narrative as interpretive strategies and correct this imbalance. Only then can we claim equality between cultures and establish a basis for inter-relational growth.

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Notes

1. Indeed, she was likely accustomed to white cooperative mangers naming her work. Jimmy Manning, manager of the Cape Dorset Cooperative, admitted in a 1989 interview: "I'm responsible for titling the carvings.... With more complex carvings, I talk to the artist and discuss the subject. I ask 'What is it? What is going on?' Sometimes they say 'I don't know!' So I look at it and I see a bird's head around a fish and, *to my eyes, it's a bird spirit*" (emphasis added; Cook 23).
2. Ironically, the amounts quoted often vary greatly in each case.

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