

Ipsivva (To Understand): Who is Inuit Reconciliation For?

Norma Dunning

My name is Norma Dunning and I am a first-year doctoral student in Indigenous Peoples Education. I am proud to say that I am a beneficiary of Nunavut. My home supporting community is Whale Cove, a community of fewer than 400 people. Whale Cove became the home of the Padlei Inuit through the forced relocations of the Inuit during the 1950s. I say forced because my peoples are Padlei, or the Caribou or Inland Inuit, from the Keewatin District of northern Manitoba. We were not coastal Inuit, but through one of the many forms of colonization that affected the Inuit, much later and much faster than other Aboriginal Canadians, my peoples were moved to a northern coastal community to act as, what is termed, *human flagpoles* (Campion-Smith, 2010) during the Cold War era.

I am also the child of a residential school survivor. My mother, along with my two Aunties, lived out eight full years with no summer break in another form of forced relocation in a residential school, located just outside of Winnipeg. My Mom was there from age 8 to 16. She, however, valued the importance of formal education and the completion of high school for each of her six children was of deep significance to her. Even though her own formal educational experience did not contain the best memories of her life, my Mom understood that education was a tool to be used, to provide a better chance at life for each of her children.

In Canada, Inuit continue early or forced exit from high school at a rate of about 75 percent (Davis, 2012), meaning only 25 percent of the Inuit population, which is less than 55,000 in Canada, complete high school. This is tragic. In this paper, I will explore a brief history of the relationship of the Canadian Inuit with the formally educated and discuss, from an Inuk epistemological context review, what *reconciliation* is.

Inuit are among the most studied Indigenous peoples globally. I once heard Susan Enuraq, the first female Inuit lawyer in Canada, state at a conference, "An Inuit family consists of a mother, father, three children, a bunch of dogs and an anthropologist" (Enuraq, 2012). Anthropologists have studied Inuit for many centuries. I recently read a 1901 report published by Dr. Aleš Hrdlička titled "An Eskimo Brain" (Hrdlička, 1901). Hrdlička was scientifically describing the brain of Kishu, an Inuit man who was one of six Inuit brought by Arctic explorer Robert Peary to be placed

on display at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. All but Kishu's son Menee died of tuberculosis (TB) while in New York. After Kishu's death, his brain was dissected; the resulting findings were unexpected. Kishu's brain was more developed than Hrdlička had presumed it would be. He concluded his report with these words: "the future acquisition of Eskimo brains is very desirable" (p. 500). A man of Hrdlička's influence would have shaped public perception of the Inuit globally and he was, in effect, placing a bounty on a specific human species while maintaining formally educated non-Inuit superiority.

In 1939, a Supreme Court of Canada case was brought forward by the Province of Quebec (Supreme Court of Canada, 1939). It must be remembered that Inuit Canadians never negotiated or were invited into Treaty in any form, excepting for the Labrador Inuit who treated in 1767. This case forced the issue of who was to assume responsibility for the Inuit: the federal government or the provincial government. The question being asked in this case was whether or not the Inuit were to fall under the Indian Act; basically, this question was: Are Eskimos Indians? The case was filed in 1937. In 1939, in a courtroom filled with Inuit skulls, photographs, and clothing, six Supreme Court justices were to decide the case. As the debate over the definition of an Indian as opposed to an Eskimo heated up, lawyer August Desilets famously stated that he was prepared to concede that *Eskimos* differed from *aborigines* in their clothing, food, fuel, winter dwellings, and hunting practices. However, if one scrutinized the main characteristics of their life, Desilets insisted, it was clear that *Eskimos* were exactly like Indians. Both groups, stated Desilets, exhibited "the same dependence upon fish and game for subsistence, the same lack of any organization for agricultural or industrial production, the same absence of exchange of wealth by way of money, the same poverty, the same ignorance, the same unhygienic mode of existence" (Backhouse, 2007, p. 41).

In this case, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that, indeed, the federal government of Canada was responsible for the well-being of the Inuit. However, in Canada Inuit remain governmentally undefined. Kiviaq is an Edmonton-based Inuk and the only Eskimo to have played for the Edmonton Eskimos. His Christian name was David Charles Ward. He was the first Inuk lawyer in Canada and honored for his achievement by then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He is also the only Inuk to have had to file a court case to have his named changed back to his birth name of Kiviaq, an Inuit traditional non-gendered, singular name, without a surname (McCluskey, 2002). A documentary titled *Kiviaq vs Canada* (Kunik & Soukup, 2006) tells his story.

When a small example of different points of Inuit history within Canada is reviewed, the question becomes, "How do an undefined group

of Indigenous Canadians define what reconciliation is?" From a personal perspective, I would like to state that I am not the Western concept of *other* until I walk onto the University of Alberta campus. In my everyday existence, the non-Inuit who move around me and with whom I interact are the *other*. I see them from my own understandings of power, and how I was taught that non-Inuit minds and peoples act. Once inside a Western-focused classroom, where life is based on meritocracy, I have to change my ways of thinking and behaving.

Basically, on campus, my power has several limits placed on it that are not present outside of this campus. In terms of a Western definition of failure, I am the person most likely to fail. I am Aboriginal. Worse yet, I am an Aboriginal woman. And to top it off, I am an Inuk female, working at putting forward Inuit innate understandings of Inuit Quajimajatuqangit (IQ) principles within a scholarly, Western-based educational institution. From all standpoints, theoretically, I will not and should not graduate with a PhD, especially when taking into consideration that currently in Canada there are only 40 Inuk holders of doctoral degrees (Statistics Canada, 2011). Even within the scale of the three Indigenous groups pursuing a Western-based education, as an Aboriginal Canadian, I and my peoples, the Inuit, lay at the low end of possible success.

In the Inuktitut language, there is no precise word for reconciliation. The closest word might be the word in the title of this paper, *Ipatsivva*, which broadly defined means *to understand*. Mary Simon, former National Inuit leader, will say that when one tells a story, after the story is told, we are to walk away from it, not to dwell on it. I believe we can look at Inuit Canadians today, and specifically in Nunavut, and ask: How do a small group of people who are first in all the statistics that nobody else wants, first in not completing high school, first in teenage suicide, first in having the highest rate of TB—how do we create *ipatsivva*? What would *ipatsivva* look like?

Ipatsivva, to me, would be filling up university classrooms with Inuk students. *Ipatsivva*, to me, would be taking on education as a form of personal reconciliation towards the Canadian state. Education is an area that each Inuk can pursue boldly and with success and, as Mary Simon tells us, we are not to dwell on our past history; we are to continue to move forward as Inuit Canadians. I don't believe reconciliation will result in an explosive Big Bang new theory of life for Inuit Canadians, but I do believe we owe it to ourselves to take care of our future generations of Inuk children by pursuing and completing education, and bringing voice to Inuit citizens throughout the halls of educational institutions. *Ma'na*.

Note

Norma Dunning's book, *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories*, was published by the University of Alberta Press in June 2017. The book has garnered several awards, including the Danuta Gleed Literary Award, the Howard O'Hagan Award for Short Story (for "Elipse") from the Writers' Guild of Alberta, and the U.S. INDIE Book of the Year Award for Short Stories.

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