

# Inuvialuit Critical Autobiography and the Carceral Writing of Anthony Apakark Thrasher

*I am an alcoholic far from my home,  
Far from my loved ones, my heart suffers.  
My body is weak but my Eskimo spirit is strong  
So I go to sleep happy. My dreams are of you.  
My people. My Home. My land. God bless you all.*  
(TS 433-434)

**A**nthony Apakark Thrasher, an Inuvialuk<sup>1</sup> from the Western Arctic, wrote these lines during his incarceration in an Alberta prison. Thrasher's exile had been voluntary at first; he initially came to the South as part of a training program aimed at preparing Indigenous men of the Mackenzie Delta region to support industrial development in the North. "[L]ured by the books and picture[s] of beautiful city lights" but "not adequately equipped to compete with what [he] met in city life" (TS 291),<sup>2</sup> Thrasher became mired in alcoholism and street life, part of a network of marginalized people attempting to navigate the addictions, poverty, and violence engendered, in part, by other government initiatives designed to assimilate Indigenous peoples into mainstream society.<sup>3</sup> In November of 1969, while en route from Edmonton to Lethbridge, Thrasher was arrested in Calgary on the charge of non-capital murder. With no recollection of having ever seen the victim, an elderly man named Charles Ratkovitch, Thrasher awaited trial at Spy Hill Penitentiary, Calgary, and began recording his story on "literally thousands of scraps of paper" (Deagle and Mettrick viii). He was encouraged in this activity by his lawyer, William Stilwell, who had Thrasher's handwritten narrative typed up to form part of his legal defence. Six

months after his arrest, however, Thrasher was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Over the next five years, Thrasher's writing grew to provide material for a typescript of more than five-hundred pages; it was eventually edited, pared down, reordered, and supplemented by two Calgary journalists, Gerard Deagle and Alan Mettrick, who oversaw its publication in 1976 as a 164-page "collaborative autobiography" entitled *Thrasher . . . Skid Row Eskimo*. This book has been out of print for thirty-five years.

In 2003, Sam McKegney acquired a typewritten version of Thrasher's original typescript from Stilwell; thus began a lengthy and ongoing process—in collaboration with Keavy Martin and with Thrasher's relations in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region—of preparing a new publication which will differ significantly from *Skid Row Eskimo*.<sup>4</sup> Restricted by market demands and by dominant representations of Indigenous peoples in the 1970s, Deagle and Mettrick narrowed the scope of their published version to focus predominantly on Thrasher's chronicling of his more harrowing experiences, while omitting most of the author's extensive critical and artistic commentary on the socio-cultural circumstances that accounted for these events. As a result, *Skid Row Eskimo* generates an image of Indigenous alienation and victimization in urban settings, and thus firmly locates itself within the marketable colonial metanarrative of the "Vanishing Indian." Deagle and Mettrick were constrained in their editing choices during a period when there was scarcely a market for Inuit autobiography at all. Their edited version of *Skid Row Eskimo* remains an important literary and cultural resource that would likely never have reached Inuvialuit or any other audiences without their intervention. Also, it would be misleading to posit that the editors imposed the Vanishing Indian/Inuk trope on Thrasher's prisons writings, since it is at play in the typescript as well.<sup>5</sup> For example, the epigraph selected to introduce *Skid Row Eskimo*, written by Thrasher, reads: "*Listen to the North Wind. It has come to take us away. The name, Inuvialuit, will only be heard in the wind. The land will still be there, the moon will still shine, the Northern Lights will still be bright, and the Midnight Sun will still be seen. But we will be gone forever . . .*" (iii, ellipses and italics in original). This passage—excerpted from the latter half of the typescript, but the first thing that readers encounter in the published text—not only announces the seemingly inevitable demise of the Inuvialuit, but also naturalizes this disappearance as somehow connected to the "North Wind," eliding how colonial interventions created the social conditions that threaten Inuvialuit individuals, families, and communities.

Although Thrasher's writing at times gestures toward the trope of the

Vanishing Inuk,<sup>6</sup> it also works to complicate notions of *inevitable* demise by emphasizing the economic, political, and religious motivations behind colonial incursions that continue to plague the Inuvialuit. For example, Thrasher notes perceptively that “if the Arctic coast was made of solid mineral of economical value, the Eskimo people would be pushed right into the ocean to get what is under his feet” (TS 480). The destruction of traditional Inuvialuit lifeways and the fragmentation of Inuvialuit kinship structures are consequences not of fate, but of decisions made by European settlers in positions of political, legal, economic, and spiritual authority.

In fact, the typescript’s documentation of Thrasher’s early childhood, years in residential school, and experiences in southern urban centres is punctuated throughout by broader reflections about the changes that alcohol, disease, Christianization, and southern systems of law and education have brought to his people—*critical* reflections that are largely omitted from the published version, but which complicate and alter the decolonizing interventions that Thrasher, as a carceral Inuvialuit writer, can perform in radical ways. What Thrasher produced, we contend, was not the standard autobiography to which *Skid Row Eskimo* ultimately conforms, but a much more generically complex document we are provisionally calling an Inuvialuk “critical autobiography.”

Our editing of Thrasher’s prison writings provides an occasion here for considering the intellectual and ethical complexities involved in engaging with Inuvialuit critical autobiography and with carceral composition. Thrasher’s prison writings provide an instructive case study for both bodies of literature due to the author’s vacillation between what might appear to be mutually exclusive claims of inevitable victimhood and of emancipatory authorial power. Though victimized by the colonial institutions of residential school, church, and prison, Thrasher performs a kind of agency in his repeated assertion that his writing can effect change in the extra-textual world. “This world is strange,” he writes. “I hope the younger generation of my people could read of what I know so they could keep out of trouble. They will be easy targets like me if they are not warned before time” (TS 162). As we have worked on the typescript, it has been this transcendent and self-sacrificing Thrasher whom we have found most compelling: the writer who, despite his incarceration, yearns to serve his people and who offers a kind of hope that something useful will be born out of his struggles.

Yet although it is tempting to applaud the author’s invocation of Inuvialuit kinship ties and his claims to power in defiance of the limitations placed

upon him by the state, we remain suspicious of the emancipatory potential of prison writing; we worry that such reification might divert attention from the state's ongoing tyranny toward prisoner populations and toward Indigenous populations more broadly. Here we will consider the ethical challenges and possibilities with which Thrasher confronts his readers through his complex authorial self-positioning in his prison writings. After examining some of the material omitted from *Skid Row Eskimo*, we will consider how the model of Inuk elder Ivaluardjuk might act as cultural forebear for Thrasher in his assertions of pedagogical agency within the prison setting. We then focus our attention on a dream narrative from Thrasher's prison writings that operates according to the conflicting logic of both inevitable demise and empowered emancipation. Although invoking nostalgia for an apparently unattainable 'traditional' past<sup>7</sup>—according to the mythos of tragically but inevitably fading Indigenous cultures—Thrasher's dream narrative simultaneously affords its author an imaginative vehicle for transcending the punitive logic of the carceral space by which his body is confined. We then consider how Thrasher's imaginative identification with a mythic Inuvialuk hunter who bears witness to the colonial containment of his people might offer a means of accounting for authorial agency without allowing that agency to become unmoored from unjust power relations that restrict both prison inmates and the Inuvialuit community. We argue that by tempering his narrative escapes with the realities of colonial oppression, Thrasher reminds readers of carceral literature that, as Dylan Rodriguez puts it, “[t]he writer in prison is never simply *free to write*” (409). Furthermore, the author's actual imprisonment militates against the Vanishing Inuk trope invoked in the typescript by forcing readers to acknowledge not the *inevitability* of Inuvialuit demise, but rather the implicatedness of cultural erasure and economic dispossession in ongoing colonial incursions that continue to make Inuvialuit cultural persistence difficult, incursions which readers are therefore encouraged to recognize, to name, and to resist.

### **Toward an Inuvialuk Critical Autobiography**

In their foreword to the 1976 publication, Deagle and Mettrick explain their position vis-à-vis the text as follows: “Our role was to collate what was essentially a loose-leaf diary into narrative form, authenticate that narrative as thoroughly as possible and expand it” (x). The editorial interventions implied by terms like “collate” and “authenticate” are not specified within the text; the audience is thus left not knowing which

parts of the narrative represent Thrasher's own words and which have been emplotted or "expand[ed]" by the editors. The "narrative form" that was created, furthermore, is likely to trouble readers today with its preference for decidedly "un-modern" Indigenous characters: the story depicts the Inuvialuk in the city as comically and tragically helpless, "slick[ing] his hair down with Noxzema, brush[ing] his teeth with shaving lather, and wash[ing] his face with mouthwash" ("Editors' Foreword," *Skid Row Eskimo* ix). Thrasher's tale unfolds predictably, then, as its narrator sinks further into the vortex of the city: accompanied by addicts and prostitutes, he clashes with police, drifts from place to place, suffers from beatings and blackouts, and eventually finds himself in jail—robbed even of the agency of remembering his crime. The editors' foreword to *Skid Row Eskimo* begins with the admission that "to wait for a happy ending [for Thrasher] is to wait for the musk-ox and the white fox to return to a white and simple north" (viii). Here, extinction provides the metaphor for Thrasher's seemingly inevitable failure to "rehabilitate"—the author's demise in the city apparently mirroring the decimation of animals that form traditional sources of Inuvialuit sustenance. "He has written an honest and true book," the editors continue, "and to hold out hope is to cheat on him" (viii).

On one hand, the published text bears unflinching witness to the brutality experienced by Thrasher during his time in the South; on the other, we worry about its reliance on constructions of Thrasher as doomed victim without the capacity to create change. As editors, we are concerned about the tendency within *Skid Row Eskimo* toward nostalgia and victimization, as well as the wide divide it seems to posit between the "traditional" and the "modern." What kind of story does this tell? What kind of message does this send to contemporary readers, whether in southern universities or northern communities? Recent scholarship in the field of Indigenous literary studies, after all, emphasizes resistance and continuance over victimization and despair; in 2004, Choctaw scholar Devon Mihesuah asked of Indigenous writers, "[D]o we want to use our personal experiences, combined with our imagination, to create empowering, dynamic stories that lift us up and inspire us to better ourselves, or do we want to write the same stories about alcoholism, depression, alienation, and tribal destruction that bog us down in sadness? Do we only want to study the same and wallow in helplessness and hopelessness?" (101). In *Magic Weapons*, McKegney argues along these lines that

Although they depict historical disparities in power and often traumatic personal events, [Indigenous survival narratives] render these imaginatively, affording the

Indigenous author interpretive autonomy and discursive agency while transcending the structural imperatives of proof and evidence embedded in historical paradigms. They invoke . . . history as a creative element in provocative visions of growth, healing, and change. The [colonial] experience does not generate the survival narrative beyond the creative agency of the Indigenous author, which immediately locates the survivor outside standard fallback positions of victimhood implied by much historical and psychoanalytic discourse. (6)

Certainly, Thrasher's unpublished prison writings offer a different set of interpretive possibilities than does *Skid Row Eskimo*. Granted the luxury of envisioning this typescript as a publication that will be read by those in a field that did not even exist when *Skid Row Eskimo* appeared, we still realize that our textual interventions will—like Deagle and Mettrick's—inevitably involve a re-emplotting of Thrasher's story that will require impositions on (and perhaps figurative violence toward) the text. However, given the greater consultative voice of members of the Thrasher family throughout the editing process, the greater resources we can bring to bear on the project due to our positions within universities and changes in the market for Indigenous writing, and the capacity to track editorial interventions made possible by internet-based archival data, we hope that our limitations and failures in the editing process will be acknowledged rather than obscured. Most importantly, we hope that the addition of more of Thrasher's critical and contextual commentary will provide readers with more frequent interpretive cues to catalyze the text's decolonizing force. In the typescript, Thrasher spends pages upon pages critiquing the institutions—the residential schools, the churches, the courtrooms, and the prisons—that have sought to recreate him as a subservient yet palatably exotic Canadian subject of lesser status. Yet rather than being a mere victim of “progress,” Thrasher speaks out strongly against the forces that work so relentlessly to make the Vanishing Inuk myth a reality. He speaks candidly about the impact of alcohol on his life and his community; he attests to the racism and brutality of the police and the justice system; and he voices his concern for the environmental degradation caused by northern “development.” Above all, he maintains a commitment to sharing his experiences in an unsentimental and frank fashion, both for the sake of his people in the North and for southerners whose ignorance continually exhausts him. Writing from within the prison cell, he finds a new purpose for his existence: “I will humble my self for my people who might come south,” he says, “at least they will know what kind of society to keep away from to be safe” (TS 218).

Again, this community-oriented Thrasher aligns with contemporary trends in Indigenous literary criticism, embodying what Cherokee scholar

Jace Weaver would call a “communitist” vision through a “proactive commitment to Native community” (43). The challenge for us as editors, however, is respecting Thrasher’s decolonizing vision while resisting the urge to evade or ignore those elements of his writing that refuse to conform to contemporary critical values. Faced with the terrible reality of his life and of what colonization has done to his people, Thrasher at times gives way to nostalgia and despair and succumbs to the dominant discourse: “Now they are dying,” he writes, “[t]he inuit are dying” (333):

Some body anybody bring us the answer to our problems. Some body anybody bring back our dreams. Some body anybody bring back our happy live. Some body anybody listen to our plea. Before we became a memory of the past. Before the north wind blizzard buries us all. Before the name Eskimo is gone. (336)

Given his enforced segregation from Inuvialuit community and the physical and psychological burdens he bears in the wake of alcoholism, street life, and horrific violence, the idea of the “dying” Inuk undoubtedly bore particular resonance for Thrasher. Furthermore, viewed in the context of Inuvialuit history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involving rampant disease, enforced settlement, and extension of colonial control, Thrasher’s despair is understandable. The social changes and epidemics brought by the fur trade and American whaling industry caused the Inuvialuit population to fall, by 1905, “to about 250 people, or about ten percent of its level two or three generations earlier. By 1910 the number was further reduced to 150” (Alunik et al. 89). A few decades later, the Canadian government began to take a more hands-on approach to managing the Inuvialuit population, providing monetary support so long as children were attending school. As Eddie D. Kolausok writes, this policy “pushed many Inuvialuit off the land and into villages like Aklavik, Tuktoyaktuk and Holman” (as told to Alunik et al. 163).

With the disruption of Inuvialuit culture and lifeways and the relocation of the majority of Inuvialuit to towns by the 1960s, the RCMP—who had long maintained a presence in the Arctic to control the activities of fur traders and whalers—turned their attention toward the management of Indigenous locals. Although Inuit communities across the North already possessed systems of justice, these were not recognized by the Canadian government, and the Inuvialuit were soon subject to a foreign law (see Eber; Grant). Like the church and school, the courtroom, and ultimately the prison, became forums in which Inuvialuit were conditioned to consent to their own confinement. As Thrasher recalls:

Some of my people get drunk just to see what it's like in a jail because the white men do it too. I remember 17 of us Eskimo boys picked up to put up our jail cells at Inuvik the first time I ever seen one. We were only too happy to help. I and many boys used to get drunk and every body was always guilty. We used to plead guilty because every one else did. (TS 216-217)

In view of this history, the fact that Thrasher should find himself incarcerated in a southern prison is unsurprising. The series of institutions erected by the state to ostensibly “assist” the Inuvialuit in adapting to radically altered social and environmental conditions functioned to enforce and normalize the restriction of Inuvialuit movement, a process that finds its most heightened expression in the confined space of the prison cell. Yet, containment, dispossession, and deterioration are not the whole story, as Thrasher’s eloquent defiance and startling claims to power throughout the typescript make clear.

### **Freedom in Captivity**

Before he was arrested, Thrasher had been travelling to Lethbridge to collect a paycheque; from there, he says, he planned to return home to the North. Once in custody, Thrasher often seeks to complete this homeward journey symbolically, through his writing. He recalls his childhood, his family, the people that he knew; he tells hunting stories, accounts of being lost out on the land, and the older tales—the *unipkat*—that were passed down to him. He describes the features of the landscape and the rhythms of the seasons; he speaks the names of the Arctic animals with a reverence bordering on incantation. Exiled from this homeland and isolated from his family and community, Thrasher journeys into an imagined past—a time before the arrival of the fur traders, the whalers, and the priests—dreaming of a life as a hunter of seal and polar bear, and as a provider for a wife and children, whom he supplies not only with meat but also with songs and stories. Thrasher explicitly refers to this mythic setting as the “legendary dream” of the “Eskimo past” (TS 324). This should not suggest, however, that pre-contact life offered the only true expression of Inuvialuit traditionalism, but rather that Thrasher’s brutal experiences with the colonial apparatus engendered an understandable nostalgia for a time prior to the imposition of southern rule.

In singing the stories of the times “when the Eskimo were happy” (TS 329), Thrasher could be echoing his grandfather, a gifted singer and storyteller, who also used to “tell of the days when the days were good” and was reportedly “a very good singer for an old man” (TS 340-341). Although Thrasher is only thirty-two years old at the time of his sentencing, he is



already beginning to emulate his elders as he seeks to nurture his connection with a community from which he is physically exiled. Unable to fulfill his traditional masculine role as hunter and provider, Thrasher seeks alternative ways to be of use to his people, even at this remote distance. Like his grandfather, then, Thrasher attempts to become a hunter of stories and a keeper of knowledge for the next generation. Yet because Thrasher has not been rendered impotent by age but rather by the shackles of the colonial justice system, his offering of intellectual or spiritual sustenance departs significantly from traditional models provided for him by his elders. Not only does he replicate and recast his ancestors' tales of survival on the land, but he also pledges the secrets of survival in the urban landscape:

I am just hoping by what I am writing some day some where some Eskimo will be helped by my writing. My people should be told not only of the good side of city civilized living. They should be also warned of the other part. The part that was hidden from me. To protect society the innocent have to be forewarned of many things that is why I am putting every thing of my experiences in the south country. (TS 218)

Here, Thrasher casts himself as a kind of urban elder—one who has learned the contours of the city and who can warn the next generation of its dangers. As such, he seeks to salvage something useful from his life and to transform his humbled state into a purposeful act. Through this transformation, Thrasher joins generations of Inuit men who have likewise stepped into the role of lore-keepers once they were too old or too ill to hunt any longer.

In December of 1921, for example, in a region far to the east of Thrasher's home territory, an Inuk elder named Ivaluardjuk recalled for ethnographer Knud Rasmussen the old days "when all meat was juicy and tender, and no game too swift for a hunter" (qtd. in Rasmussen 17). "Now," Ivaluardjuk claimed, "I have only the old stories and songs to fall back upon" (17). With the encouragement of the people, he sang:

Cold and mosquitoes,  
These two pests  
Come never together.  
I lay me down on the ice,  
Lay me down on the snow and ice,  
Till my teeth fall chattering.  
It is I,  
Aja—aja—ja.<sup>8</sup>

Displaying a theme common to the Inuit poetic tradition, Ivaluardjuk's singer is lying prone on the ice because he is hunting. The singer's quest for

game is paired cleverly with the other central feature of the traditional songs: a reflection on the process—and the difficulties—of song-making. Both are occupations that “call for strength,” and both are heavy with the possibility of failure (Rasmussen 18). The two come together later in the performance: “Ai! I seek and spy / Something to sing of / The caribou with the spreading antlers!” As the hunter acquires his target, the singer acquires the subject of the song. In 1921, the elderly Ivaluardjuk is too weak to pursue caribou, having become instead a hunter of songs. “Memories are they / from those days,” he sings. “The cold is bitter, / The mind grows dizzy / As I stretch my limbs / Out on the ice.” Even in this recollection, the hunter’s body is becoming still, supine, perhaps stiffening with the cold—almost anticipating, or reflecting, the coming limitations of age. With his body in this weakened state, however, his mind “grows dizzy”—swarms even, mosquito-like, as he seeks after the memory, and for the song to convey it. Now, when his limbs seem permanently stiff and he can no longer leap up to hurl his spear, the songs are his prize—the sustenance that he brings to the community.

As in the case of elders like Ivaluardjuk, the restraining of the body seems to work in opposition to—or even, perhaps, to enable—the expansion of the mind. Indeed, the ability of some shamans to fly (either physically or in spirit) is enabled by a ritual binding of the body. As Rose Iqallijuq of Igloodik explains,

The *angakkuq* [shaman] was stripped of all his clothing, except for his pants. His thighs were bound with an *aliq*, a rope made from bearded seal hide. Then his head was tied to his thighs, and his arms were tied behind his back at the wrists and above his elbows. He was not able to move an inch of his body. He was carried to the rear of the dwelling on a sealskin mat. The man was now ready to *ilimmaqtuqtuq* [fly; rise] behind the blind, invisible to us. (qtd. in Aupilaarjuk et al. 158)

Though Thrasher does not align himself directly with this tradition—he does not seem to conceive of himself as a shaman, even an urban one—he reflects often, understandably, on the state of being restrained. The limitations of his body, however, are almost always contrasted with the vigour of his spirit. “My broken bones may heal up crooked,” he says, “but my spirit is always healed up straight” (TS 445).

While Thrasher may find temporary relief in the idea that his experience in the city, thus recorded, will be of service to his people, his hunger for his homeland cannot be satisfied by stories of the South. Thus, Thrasher uses his self-defined role as holder of experiential knowledge not only to warn youth of southern dangers but also to affect a mode of imaginative return to social

conditions and landscapes from which he is temporally and geographically separated in his Calgary jail cell. Thrasher sporadically invokes tales of what he calls “the legendary . . . Eskimo past” (TS 323) as forms of imaginative release that resonate with Ivaluardjuk’s song. In their use of reminiscence about traditional lifeways in which they can no longer participate, both Thrasher and Ivaluardjuk transform the speaker’s social role from hunter to teacher. One such section commences with a poetic tribute to the time in which “the Inuvialuit first came with the wind” and “[t]he game was plenty and the land was great” (TS 323); the thirty-three line poem—one of only a handful in Thrasher’s 500-page prison writings—catalogues the various forms of animal life “brought” to the Inuvialuit hunter by the “land,” the “sea,” the “ice,” and the “rivers,” while explaining how each animal is used for the community’s survival. Watched over by the “midnight sun,” the “northern lights,” and the “full moon,” the speaker acknowledges how all the elements of the northern environment come together in a delicate and dynamic balance that sustains the Inuvialuit family, who can slumber in comfort, confident that their knowledge of the land- and seascapes will keep them safe. “Look at my family,” Thrasher’s speaker entreats his reader, “sleeping and not afraid” (TS 324).

Like the song of Ivaluardjuk, Thrasher’s ensuing tale focuses on the vaunted memories of the virile hunter-hero who demonstrates patience, skill, and courage in fulfilling his social role of providing for the family. Told in the first person, Thrasher’s tale follows the hunter’s pursuit of *nanook* (polar bear), a difficult and dangerous process that begins with moving the family to an appropriate location on the sea-ice, building an igloo for shelter, and killing a seal to act as bait. With the repetition of both the Inuvialuktun word “*nikpuk*” and its English equivalent “wait,” Thrasher draws attention to the artful stillness required of the hunter as he anticipates the seal’s arrival at the “good . . . breathing hole”—an anticipatory and mentally active stillness that resonates with Thrasher’s creative activity while figuratively contained in prison and with Ivaluardjuk’s “dizzy” mind as he recalls “stretch[ing] [his] limbs / Out on the ice.” “In the moon light,” Thrasher writes, “I will get nanook by this bait. . . . My fathers tell me the nanook is strong and dangerous. But inuit are more dangerous with a weapon” (TS 326). The identity of the hunter-narrator in this tale is thus affirmed by his ability to ensure his sleeping family’s survival through the mutually dependent acts of patient waiting and aggressive pursuit that conspire to conquer the bear, thereby binding Thrasher’s narrator to an Inuvialuit masculine tradition.

Thrasher delineates the importance of this inheritance through reference to the “fathers” who provide the hunter-narrator with knowledge of the great bear, the invocation of “my atatak grandfather” about whom the hunter-narrator recites a story after the bear has been killed (TS 326), and the acknowledgement of the succeeding generation embodied by “my son [who] will be a great hunter some day soon” (TS 324).

Like Ivaluardjuk, Thrasher’s narrator is not only a hunter of beasts but also of words. After documenting the defeat of the bear, Thrasher depicts his hunter-protagonist telling three stories about which his sleeping children dream. The persistence of these tales in their dreaming minds gestures toward the political potential of the mythic narrative and Thrasher’s typescript as a whole. In a section of the typescript preoccupied with continuance of the Inuvialuit as a people,<sup>9</sup> the children seem to refer not only to the mythic hunter’s imagined offspring but also to the younger generation of Inuvialuit whom Thrasher seeks consistently to reach with his writing. The “songs” and “stories” with which Thrasher addresses these two imagined audiences are therefore not simply entertainment, but also function as cultural teachings designed to keep those youth strong as kin and as Inuvialuit. In the face of assimilationist policies, which ensure that Inuvialuit children who “go to some thing called a school” return home and “can’t hunt” (TS 331), Thrasher provides cultural knowledge to restore some of what Eurocentric education seeks to take away. Thrasher explains the various tools, implements, and strategies involved in the hunting process, while translating key terms into the Inuvialuktun language; he also demonstrates the hunt’s cultural significance by integrating the harvesting of the bear into kinship systems of social organization and building it into ceremony through song and story. Thus, Thrasher’s narrative adoption of the role of a mythic Inuvialuk hunter appears neither individualist nor escapist, but rather communal, pedagogical, and what Weaver might call “communitist.” It seeks to “participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities”—here the Inuvialuit community—“and the pained individuals in them” (Weaver xiii).

### **The Limits of Imaginative Emancipation**

The dynamic interaction between physical contraction and imaginative expansion throughout Thrasher’s prison writings is undoubtedly seductive. In fact, Thrasher insists on transforming physical containment into conditions of possibility for intergenerational empowerment. Yet although recognition of enduring agency remains important to ethically engaged

critical methodologies for dealing with carceral composition, it comes at a cost if not tempered by an awareness of ongoing transgressions against the minds and bodies of prison writers by instruments of state captivity.

Although Thrasher, in adopting the role of elder, mobilizes elements of tradition in the service of a kind of intellectual emancipation from his carceral surroundings, we worry about possible dangers attendant on the critical reification of prison writing's emancipatory potential. As Rodriguez suggests, the assumption that prison writing is, by its very nature, resistant, risks obscuring the complex ways in which prison writing "is both *enabled* and *coerced* by state captivity, a dynamic condition that preempts and punishes some forms of writing, while encouraging and even forcing others" (410).<sup>10</sup> In other words, the celebration of the carceral writer's intellectual resistance and/or liberation—for example, the framing of Thrasher's adoption of the mythic hunter persona in an unqualified manner *as emancipatory*—has the potential to obscure the ways in which the act of writing in prison is qualified and circumscribed by the power of the state. A critical focus on individual resistance and transcendence, furthermore, risks reinscribing the individualizing logic of the Canadian justice system itself, which seeks to decontextualize the experiences of accused individuals in order to treat particular actions as discrete, punishable transgressions rather than as forms of social suffering interwoven with colonial histories of cultural and material dispossession.

Inuvialuit elder Ishmael Alunik tells a story about the time when the great shaman Kublualuk was arrested by the North West Mounted Police for shooting a cross fox when not permitted by the newly imposed hunting laws (recounted, as told to Eddie D. Kolausok, in Alunik et al. 101-102). Kublualuk was jailed at Herschel Island, but he was no ordinary prisoner: after waiting until the fireplace had cooled, the shaman transformed into a feather, floated up the chimney, and went home. Three times he was arrested, and three times he escaped. Eventually, the police gave up, opting instead to respect Kublualuk's governance of the land and its animals. Though metaphorically resonant with Thrasher's apparent tendency toward imaginative escape, this story is not Thrasher's; he is not a shaman, and the story of his relationship with the law has no happy ending. Yet it is this failure to transcend and to triumph, we argue, that transforms Thrasher's prison writings from memoir to critical intervention. The pertinent critical consideration here seems to be the need to weigh recognition (and perhaps even celebration) of the prison writer's ongoing authorial agency against the need to account for,

and indeed to react against, the systemic violence of the state. What we seek through analysis of Thrasher's work is a critical stance nuanced enough to treat Thrasher as more than simply the product of the coercive powers of the Canadian state, yet not so radically autonomous as to obscure the state violence that continues to work unevenly in racialized and economically stratified populations and to be exerted upon the bodies and minds of prisoners like Thrasher. We find critical direction toward such a balanced critical approach in the latter half of Thrasher's imaginative embodiment of the role of mythic hunter.

Although Thrasher often experiments with a nostalgic narrative mode in his dream-visits to the remote Arctic, his imaginative wanderings are consistently tethered to the reality of judicial iniquity and police brutality. Throughout his prison writings, Thrasher documents incidents of violence endured at the hands of "young constables" dispatched to Aklavik and Inuvik by the RCMP and of policemen on the beat of skid rows in Edmonton, Calgary, and Lethbridge. These catalogues of wounds often descend into vivid depictions of sadistic abuse:

I met 2 police men on the street. I was drunk yes. . . . They were young cops. They put the hand cuffs on me and threw me hard head first into a paddy wagon. One got in with me. My arms were behind my back with irons hand cuffs on. He put his foot on my hands and forced my arms up to my neck. I howled with pain but the police men were laughing. Some thing snapped in my right arm also in my head. I blacked out. I lost track of time and feeling. . . . I came to my mind my leg and right arm well my right arm was real big. I was not really in my mind my whole right arm was blood poisoned. The pain was too bad when Doctor Mulvanno took me in I tore my elbow open with my left hand. I was half out of my mind white puss filled a basin mixed with pink blood. It was rotten green yellow. The puss had reached my shoulder and my wrist. I could remember the police man with his foot on my handcuffed wrist. I heard some thing snap my arm. I don't know I am sure I lost my mind. (TS 155-56)

Such graphic depictions of dehumanization, intimidation, and violence require the reader to remain aware of how the prisoner's body is acted upon by individuals armed by the state. At the same time, Thrasher's portrayals trouble the transparency, neutrality, and supposed benevolence of the law by betraying the arbitrariness of its application, while exposing its excesses and abuses.

Bound to the political reality of extra-textual injustice by accounts of police brutality and abuses of judicial and legislative authority, Thrasher's autobiographical narrative is difficult to read as transcendent in a manner uncontaminated by the residue of systemic violence. This perhaps purposeful failure to escape from the realities of incarceration is also reflected symbolically

in Thrasher's dream-visions of the Inuvialuit past. In one incarnation, the vision turns nightmarish; the family is hungry, and "[i]n the wind," the narrator says, "I listen I can hear (torko) death" (TS 339). The wind makes good on this promise; when it shifts unfavourably, the family loses its dogs and then their lives to the folding ice (TS 340). Even in the somewhat happier vision discussed earlier in this article, the mythic narrative is invaded by various elements of colonial policy. Shortly after killing the polar bear, the hunter-narrator explains,

Some white men with red clothes came. They say they are the men of the queen. . . . [and] bring a book called law. . . . The minister carries [sic] his book the good book. The man with the red clothes carries a gun and a stick. The people called the government . . . put some thing up on a pole called a flag the Union Jack. They claim our land in the name of the queen. We don't know what it means but the queen mother . . . must be great. We learned also of King George. We saw his picture on a piece of paper called money. (TS 330-31)

For Thrasher, these colonial impositions function not as benign supplements to Inuvialuit culture but rather as instruments of cultural erasure and individual alienation. The balanced relationships among the Inuvialuit and the land, sea, wind, and wildlife depicted earlier are *disintegrated* in both form and content as the "legendary dream" of the "Eskimo past" gives way to the "Eskimo nightmare of the 1970s" (TS 332): the finely crafted poetic celebration of natural harmony with which Thrasher began this section is perverted by colonial forces to become, by that section's end, disjointed prose statements about absence and loss: "The land that was great has little game. The land that had caribou can't feed my family. The musk ox our pride is almost gone. . . . The great nanook is nearly gone from the ice" (TS 331). Now the hunter-narrator's "family is awake and cannot sleep. The lonesome wolf still calls to the full moon," but the hunter-narrator's "dogs . . . don't answer the wolf call" (TS 332). With this poignant final image of a failure of communication between animals presented formerly in dialogue—"From outside my igloo the dogs answer the lonesome wolf" (TS 324)—Thrasher signals the extent of the damage: the intimate relationships that sustained and brought peace to the Inuvialuit have been destroyed by colonial interventions. "The Eskimo society before the white man established theirs in the Arctic," Thrasher writes, was one in which "[k]inship and relationship systems" bore "a lot of meaning . . . We used to keep them unbroken . . . like a law" (TS 238-39). Given the reader's awareness of Thrasher's conditions of composition behind prison walls, the coercive instruments that engaged in this destruction don't appear to have gone anywhere.

In this way, Thrasher's donning of the mythic hunter persona resists being read as an act of imaginative emancipation for the individual carceral subject because Thrasher refuses to disentangle his personal claims to power from the colonial circumstances that inform his incarceration. Although the Euro-Canadian justice system functions under the (mis)apprehension that individual actions can be radically separated from the trajectory of an unjust history of colonial dispossession and treated as discrete, punishable crimes, Thrasher steadfastly refuses the pull of individualization, choosing even here in this "legendary" tale of "the Eskimo past" to shed light on the role of colonialism in rendering "the old life . . . *only* a dream" (TS 324)—a dream accessible to the Inuvialuk prisoner solely through story and no longer through lived experience. By attending to the role of colonialism in decimating the lifeways celebrated in the hunter-narrator's story, Thrasher ensures that his own conditional imaginative escape will not be perceived as sufficient; the autonomy, power, and freedom of the mythic hunter is, in Thrasher's telling, ultimately circumscribed by the four intertwined colonial systems of containment symbolized by the "red clothes," the "good book," "the flag," and the "paper called money." According to Thrasher, law, religion, government, and economics conspire to undermine traditional Inuvialuit lifeways and physically contain the Inuvialuit people in a manner that resonates with Thrasher's own captivity. Furthermore, through his attentiveness to the role of colonial decision-making in Inuvialuit dispossession, Thrasher exposes the fallacy of notions of inevitability embedded within the Vanishing Inuk myth, even as he acknowledges the very real crises the Inuvialuit face. The product not of "fate" but of human choices being made within oppressive systems of economic and political power, these crises—exposed and named—can be faced, reacted against, and potentially overturned in the service of the continuance of the People.

What we mean to suggest is that Thrasher's use of the mythic narrative is far from empty nostalgia; it isn't imaginative escapism, and it isn't diversionary. Rather, Thrasher invokes the cultural trope of the elder hunter of words in order to critique the ways in which colonial interventions in the lives of the Inuvialuit inform not only the historical context of Thrasher's exile to southern cities, his alcoholism, and his eventual incarceration, but also the contemporary context for his writing and its potential reception. Indeed, such interventions inform the ongoing economic, legal, and political oppression of the Inuvialuit, all of which have persisted long after Thrasher's writing and even after his death in 1989, and which constitute the untenable



and unjust conditions against which readers of Thrasher's words are encouraged to react. In this way, Thrasher struggles simultaneously *against* the totalizing force of Canadian state rule and *in the service of* Inuvialuit cultural, political, and physical continuance. "I am not a broken man," he writes. "The experience I have had will be valuable to my people in the future. . . . We were a real people once. We will come up again" (TS 292-93).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank members of the Thrasher family for their support, editorial assistance, and valuable criticisms throughout this process. As well we would like to thank William Stilwell for his role in enabling the creation of a new edition. Gerard Deagle and Alan Mettrick also warrant sincere thanks; without their diligent work on the original typescript, Thrasher's writings would likely never have reached public audiences.

#### NOTES

- 1 Inuvialuk (plural: Inuvialuit) is the current name for the Inuit people of the Western Arctic coast. Known to early anthropologists as the Mackenzie Eskimos, they were originally comprised of regional groups like the Qikiqtaryungmiut, Kuukpangmiut, Kitigaaryungmiut, Inuktuyuut, Avvarmiut and Igluyaryungmiut (Alunik et al. 13-17). Inuvialuit means "the real people" (Alunik et al. 1). Thrasher frequently uses the term "Eskimo," and also, occasionally, "Inuit"; the latter is a more general term for Arctic coastal peoples and is more commonly used in the Eastern Arctic.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Thrasher are from his unpublished typescript (rather than his published collaborative autobiography). The published version will be referred to as *Skid Row Eskimo* and the typescript will be referred to as the prison writings, or the typescript, and cited as TS.
- 3 The causal relationship between governmental instruments of social engineering and addiction, poverty, and violence in Indigenous communities and among urban Indigenous peoples is well documented. For discussions of social dysfunction as part of the legacy of residential schooling, see Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Miller, and Milloy. For discussions of the role of the Indian Act in regulating Indigenous identities, forcing Indigenous peoples off reserve, and creating the Indigenous diaspora see Lawrence. Governmental efforts to transform Inuvialuit identities and socio-economic conditions have included the withholding of federal funding from Inuvialuit who did not register their children in federally recognized schools, a strategic plan to force traditionally nomadic families to settle in urban communities (see Alunik et al.).
- 4 Given the cost of travel to and from the Inuvialuit Settlement Region and the need to consult extensively with members of the Thrasher family—the author died in 1989—the editing process has been and will continue to be lengthy. We nonetheless hope to see a re-edited critical version of Thrasher's collected prison writings to press within the next three years.
- 5 For a more detailed discussion of the complex conditions of editing and publication for this work, see McKegney 59-75.

- 6 Given that Inuit are not “Indians”—they do not have Status under the Indian Act—they adapt this term to “Inuk” (the singular of Inuit) throughout the paper.
- 7 It must be noted here that like all traditions, those of the Inuvialuit are adaptive and ever-evolving. In other words, we wish to trouble the colonially constructed binary between “authentic” pre-contact cultural purity and “assimilated” post-contact contamination; this deficit model demands cultural stasis *only* of Indigenous populations in order to conclude from alterations over time that Indigenous nations are no longer “traditional” and therefore no longer “own” the lands of their forebears and no longer constitute barriers to settlement and resource exploitation (See Konkle, “Indian Literacy, U.S. Colonialism, and Literary Criticism” in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States*). Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr.’s comments about Indigenous spiritual systems are instructive here with regard to Indigenous traditionalism: “Unlike many other religious traditions, tribal religions . . . have not been authoritatively set “once and for always.” Truth is in the ever-changing experiences of the community. For the traditional Indian to fail to appreciate this aspect of his heritage is the saddest of heresies. It means the Indian has unwittingly fallen into the trap of Western religion, which seeks to freeze history in an unchanging and authoritative past” (15). Although living in the context of conditions largely created by colonial impositions and bearing the marks—indeed, the scars—of various instruments of social engineering from the residential school to the evangelical church to the prison, Thrasher remains in many ways a traditional Inuvialuit thinker.
- 8 Rasmussen was a Greenlander, and was thus able to speak to and understand Ivaluardjuk. He did not record the original Inuktitut version of this song, but rather wrote it down from memory in Danish. As such, it is no doubt only an approximation of the original, particularly after having been rendered into this English version.
- 9 The poem, with which this section of the manuscript begins, concludes with the lines, “The north wind who brought the Inuvialuit here / Listen to the north wind and look at the northern lights / The north wind brought us it will take me away. / The name Inuvialuit will be only in the wind. / Tima oblacontaok tupakupta. / That all tomorrow too if we awake” (TS 324).
- 10 In Thrasher’s case, “the conditions that make possible his autobiography include not only the time, isolation, and sobriety forced upon him, but also the utilitarian potential of writing for a judicial audience,” whom both Thrasher and his lawyer William Stilwell hoped to influence with the manuscript and who “could quite literally ‘punish’ [Thrasher’s] narrative inclusion of certain ideas and incidents” (McKegney 71).

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