

Nándori, Rita

**Arctic Songs: a journey towards a new tradition from pre-Contact to contemporary Inuit poetry**

*The Central European journal of Canadian studies*. 2020, vol. 15, iss. [1], pp. 17-34

ISBN 978-80-210-9815-2

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143954>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

---



# Arctic Songs: A Journey Towards a New Tradition from Pre-Contact to Contemporary Inuit Poetry

## Chants arctiques : un voyage vers une nouvelle tradition du pré-contact dans la poésie inuite contemporaine

Rita Nándori

### Abstract

Inuit poetry has an inherently concrete nature, whether evinced in song-poems collected in the oral tradition era, or in modern-day poetry written from the twentieth century onward. I propose, however, that the tangible observational poetry of the past has slowly been transforming into a new tradition. Novel ways of expression such as figurative language and philosophical thinking have been employed by contemporary Inuit poets. The transitions from literal to figurative language and from straight-forward to philosophical thinking are manifestations of the change in Inuit life and writing. Contemporary Inuit poetry is not abstract in the strictest sense of the word, but abstraction is there in the poems: in the metaphysical questions they pose, in their modern atmosphere and diction. This shift in artistic expression results in an emerging poetic tradition that is more accessible to a worldwide readership.

**Keywords:** Inuit poetry, Inuit oral tradition, contemporary Inuit poetry, Inuit intellectual culture

### Résumé

La poésie inuite a une nature concrète, qu'il s'agisse de chants-poèmes recueillis à l'époque de la tradition orale ou de poésie moderne écrite à partir du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Toutefois, nous soutenons ici l'hypothèse selon laquelle la poésie observationnelle tangible du passé se serait lentement transformée en une nouvelle tradition. Des modes d'expression novateurs, tels que le langage figuratif et la pensée philosophique, ont été employés par les poètes inuits contemporains. Les transitions du langage littéral vers le langage figuratif et de la pensée directe vers la pensée philosophique sont des manifestations du changement dans la vie et l'écriture inuites. La poésie inuite contemporaine n'est pas abstraite au sens strict du terme, mais l'abstraction est là dans les poèmes : dans les questions métaphysiques qu'ils posent, dans leur atmosphère et leur diction modernes. Ce changement d'expression artistique se traduit par une tradition poétique émergente plus accessible à un lectorat mondial.

**Mot-clés :** Poésie inuit, tradition orale inuit, poésie inuit contemporaine, culture intellectuelle inuit



## First songs: Inuit poetry in the era of the oral tradition

Inuit poetry is deeply rooted in the landscape and lifestyle of the Arctic. The folklore-based, pre-contact literary wealth was primarily transmitted through oral tradition. The vast majority of Inuit poetry at this time was composed in Inuktitut, and later transcribed either in syllabics or Roman letters, then translated into English or – in the case of those collected during Danish-Greenlandic ethnographer Knud Rasmussen's Fifth Thule Expedition (1921–1924) – from Inuktitut into Danish and then into English. Inuit poems were first published when Rasmussen's own Danish translations of Inuktitut song-poems<sup>1</sup> were translated into English in the massive ten-volume report on the dog-sled expedition Rasmussen took across the Arctic between 1921 and 1924, collecting material of great literary and ethnographic importance. *Intellectual Culture of the Iglood Eskimos* detailed Rasmussen's contact with the people living on the Igloodik Island area; other volumes discussed different Inuit tribes in the North, such as the Netsilik, Copper, and Caribou people. While those poems chanced upon by Rasmussen existed purely in an oral form, the past century highlighted a shift to writing down composed poems, largely due to Moravian, Church of England and Roman Catholic missionaries who hoped to convert the native people of the Arctic to Christianity. As a first step to reading the Bible, literacy was fostered in some Northern communities, such as those in Greenland, as early as in the eighteenth century. In Nunavut, the de facto beginnings of literacy started in the early twentieth century. Whether from ancient times or more modern renderings, Inuit poetry is largely written in a singularly simple language representative of the monochromatic landscape it is coming from.

Songs and poems composed by the Inuit were first collected by Rasmussen, introducing them to a worldwide readership for the first time. In his research, Rasmussen focused on songs performed by locals in Inuit communities. As he notes in *Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland*, there is great variety in the kind of song-poems people would make up, whether they are joyful or filled with sorrow, whether they welcome spring or celebrate a successful hunt (123). These ancient songs are primarily understood as highly individual song-poems, as each person would have their own song performed by themselves only, unless giving permission to someone else to borrow their song in order to perform it in a slightly changed fashion. Unlike in the Canadian south, no Inuit person would devote their lives entirely to poetry (Rasmussen, *Eskimo Poems*, 127). Anybody could become a poet for a few minutes in the *qaggiq* or song house. These song-poems collected in the early twentieth century were authored by the men and women, hunters and mothers of the North. They tell the tales from the pre-contact and early contact

1) Traditional songs of the Inuit with a literary merit, performed to the rhythm of a caribou skin drum.



periods and are markedly different from those in the written tradition, mainly penned after the Second World War.

While oral tradition song-poems were given a second life by Rasmussen's collection, contemporary Inuit poetry, though sparsely, has been published mainly in local Inuit papers such as the *Keewatin Echo*, *Inukshuk* and *Inuit Today*, and less often in anthologies. Many of the poems collected during the Fifth Thule Expedition are without an author and resemble contemporary slam poetry in the sense that – according to Igloolik elder Ivaluardjuk, as Rasmussen recounts in his *Intellectual Culture of the Igloolik Eskimos* – their delivery is almost as important as the poems themselves. Although song-poems greatly predate and are not related to slam, their function and effect show similarity. These traditional song-poems slightly changed based on the occasion at which they were recited. Before the Thule expeditions, no written form of these song-poems had existed, and especially not in English translation. Rasmussen believed that one is more likely to appreciate the simple depth and clarity of these song-poems not on the page but sung in Inuktitut accompanied by drums while being provided with a rough translation of the words; he acknowledged that “[songs] must be heard to produce the full effect” (233). However, in my view, an understanding of the song-poems and their context is also necessary to fully appreciate these delicate early ventures into poetry. While from time to time the delivery and even wording of the very same poem might be different, as explained by Rasmussen, the effect they have on listeners could vary (227).

Another interesting trait is the often haiku-like briefness of the song-poems' frequent addressing of one's surroundings, observation of the tundra, the game and the simple reflections of the hunter's state of mind. Even though haiku and song-poems are not related, the examination of one's existence is present in both. One such example is a song by the Igloolik elder Ivaluardjuk, “Cold and Mosquitoes,” encountered and collected by Rasmussen during his time among the Igloolik-area Inuit, the Iglulingmiut in the 1920s. His recital of the *ayaya*<sup>2</sup> song-poem is as follows:

[...]

The cold is bitter,  
The mind grows dizzy  
As I stretch my limbs  
Out on the ice.

It is I,  
Aja-aja-ja.

2) *Ayaya* song-poems are traditional Inuit songs that used to be accompanied by a drum and performed at feasts.



Ai! but songs  
Call for strength  
And I seek after words,  
I, aja-aja-ja.  
Ai! I seek and spy  
Something to sing of  
The caribou with the spreading antlers!  
And strongly I threw  
The spear with my throwing stick  
And my weapon fixed the bull  
In the hollow of the groin  
And it quivered with the wound  
Till it dropped  
And was still.  
Ai! but songs  
Call for strength,  
And I seek after words. It is I,

Aja, aja – haja, haja! (18–19)

*Ayaya* song-poems tell about Inuit daily life and are reflections upon their experiences such as hunting “the caribou with the spreading antlers” (*Intellectual Culture* 18); they are personal stories put into song form. In pre-contact and early contact times, every Inuk had a personal song, something they had memorized for a time of celebration when the community would get together to feast on a fresh kill and, with full stomachs, be merry together. Since hunting is the essential sustaining activity and occupation of the Inuit, it is of no surprise that the skill one needs to hunt is often paralleled with that of song-making. The above song-poem recalls a successful *tuktu* or caribou hunt. The difficulty of the hunt is likened to the talent one needs to conjure up words that truly reflect upon the events one recounts. The two come together in the last stanza whereupon big game hunt is compared to hunting for words as the poet expresses that he “seek[s] after words” as he earlier in the poem is seen seeking after caribou.

Rasmussen notes that this song-poem was translated by him as best as he could and written down after he had listened to it. He could only partially capture the meaning of the song-poem, he writes, as Northern life and thinking as well as the language the poet operates in is significantly different from Danish (and English). Also noted is the reverence with which the audience accepted the delivery of this song-poem, most likely accompanied by the music of Inuit caribou skin drums called the *qilaut* (*Intellectual*



*Culture* 18). Despite the focus on the individual singer, all the immediate listeners would relate to and understand this poem as a first-hand experience, close to life as they know it. The true depth of meaning only surfaces for those in Ivaluarjuk's audience. As Rasmussen confirms, "When sung, it produced an altogether extraordinary effect on those present. And anyone who understands the Eskimo tongue will be able to appreciate the great power of expression and the elegance of form in its original text" (*Intellectual Culture* 232). A translated poem in a text form is rather different from a song performance heard in one's native language; however, the elemental force of this song-poem cannot be denied as it addresses an earlier collective us that (if our masks forged in the industrialized world are cast aside) we can all recognize. As Rasmussen observes in his *Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland*:

These poems don't arrive like fragile orchids from the hothouses of professional poets; they have flowered like rough, weather-beaten saxifrage which has taken root on rock. And they ought to matter to us. For do we not hear through them something that reminds us of the original features of our own old songs – the same life-giving warmth – the same teasing humor, the same quiet melancholia – and sometimes in glimpses a simple, but grandiose pathos that grips us by virtue of its immediacy. (109)

It seems to me that immediacy can best be manifested in the unadorned linguistic environment that ancient song-poems perfectly deliver. Even in such a mediated form as translation, the urgency of these song-poems is present. The reader can almost smell the hunt, the chasing of the caribou and the excitement of the hunter: the very flesh and bone of Arctic life.

In the same manner as Ivaluarjuk's "Cold and Mosquitoes," Akjartok's traditional song-poem from the beginning of the past century, found in John Robert Colombo's 1981 collection *Poems of the Inuit* (44), also compares hunting to song-making in "When I Call to My Mind":

When I call to my mind the olden days  
 When I had strength enough  
 To cut up might bulls  
 I call forth the song  
 While the sun was on its upward way

Here, not only the olden days are portrayed as better, the hunter stronger and younger, but the image of the sun, the symbol of new beginnings, pops up as the representation of the times of plenty. The coming spring opens up ocean hunting grounds and the journey into midnight sun begins.



An early and non-typical example featuring metaphysical thoughts pondering about the basic questions of life and going beyond the observation of one's immediate environment is an anonymous poem entitled "The Old Man's Song" collected by Rasmussen in the early twentieth century, accessible in the delightful little book *Songs Are Thoughts* (Philip 26):

I have grown old,  
I have lived much,  
Many things I understand,  
But four riddles I cannot solve.  
Ha-ya-ya-ya.  
The sun's origin,  
The moon's nature,  
The minds of women,  
And why people have so many lice.  
Ha-ya-ya-ya.

While the first stanza does remain in the realm of the concrete, the second one poses profound ontological questions, such as the origin and nature of the universe, and the quintessential question of the workings of the minds of the other sex. Surprisingly, these serious questions are never addressed, rather they are finished off with a mundane remark about lice infestation in the community, achieving a humorous tone. The pairing of the deep and serene with the everyday and hilarious has a dichotomic effect. The poem reveals that, however rarely, oral tradition poetry does contain individual song-poems that are elevated, slightly diverging from the concrete, and to a certain extent express a yearning to know.

What the Inuit themselves think of these poems might be a good starting point from which to venture upon the path of understanding these old song-poems and see what concreteness means for the early Inuit poets and their listeners and to what extent abstract ideas and images can surface in oral tradition poetry and how a change towards abstraction might appear in the work of modern-day poets. Orpingalik, the Netsilik<sup>3</sup> shaman Rasmussen befriended a hundred years ago, explains Inuit song-poems as follows:

Songs are thoughts sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices.

---

3) Inuit living in today's Gjoa Haven and Kugaartuk hamlets in the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut.



And then it will happen that we who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves – we get a new song. (Philip 8)

Words had special power in the ancient world where revered shamans or *angakoqs*, hunters and elders sang to the beat of the caribou drum. People believed in the magic of words; this includes singers and listeners alike. At the time of the Fifth Thule Expedition, the Inuit lived in small nomadic groups and the songs they composed were about their daily lives. The members of such groups would understand the songs based on their shared context, whereas an outsider – whether Inuit or Southerner – would fail to realize the message of the very same songs. Some believe that, whether understood or not, Inuit poetry can be enjoyed purely based on its rhythm and music. As observed by such Arctic ethnographers as Franz Boas in *The Central Eskimo*, the musical element in Inuit poetry is at least as important as the words themselves (649). However, this feature diminishes abstraction in a verbal sense and the use of poetic devices. It allows listeners not fluent in Inuktitut to connect with the poem at an elemental level as a song filled with rhythm, melody and cadence. If poems are essentially musical songs, then they would be accompanied by dance performed in a song house and enjoyed by the whole community. Inuit oral poets were not only wordsmiths, musicians, but great dancers as well: “The person reciting the ditty jumps up and down, to the right and to the left, with bent knees, the hands hanging down, the palms touching each other. When crying *âx, âx!* He jumps high up” (Boas 1894, 49).

Keavy Martin observes in her *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*, published in 2012, that both Boas and Rasmussen identify Inuit song-making as poetry, albeit not one that is bound by the same rules as most Southern poetry from the same time period would be (165). Early twentieth-century literature in Canada often employs a special diction that is different from expressions in common speech and a set of poetic devices, such as metaphors and similes, based on the European tradition. As Inuit song-making has developed separately from these influences, it is vastly different from anthologized poetry from the South, so we should examine these ancient treasures in a different light. If we measure Inuit poetry against Western standards of the printed word, we will fall short of understanding the depth and significance that might be hidden in Inuit Arctic songs. I agree with Martin that likening Inuit poetry too much to how literature is received by Southern – and, in a larger context, Western audiences, while removing the circumstances under which and for what these song-poems were made – eliminates chances to relate to and enjoy these song-poems. Oral tradition poems celebrate and narrate the life of the arctic hunter and thus they should be judged and categorized – if at all – as such.





Thus, I cannot whole-heartedly agree with Rasmussen's hypothesis, namely, that knowing the language is not necessary to appreciate Inuit poetry (Rasmussen, *Eskimo Poems*, 102). Such an approach by Rasmussen implies that without knowing the meaning of Inuktitut words, it is possible to appreciate poetry – which cannot be entirely valid for their representative quality of the realities of Inuit life. However, I agree that the rhythm and music of these song-poems can be fully enjoyed. Yet it is exactly the auditory nature of the Inuit song-poems that is missing from printed collections. While, as Rasmussen asserts, Inuit poems are such that “a Westerner only comprehends [them] with extreme difficulty” (Rasmussen, *Eskimo Poems* 108), they are available to readers on the level opera can be enjoyed even though the words are in Italian.

## A changing landscape: Written tradition in the light of the ancestral songs

The singer-poets of the nomadic past drew inspiration from the spirit songs, the first songs of the world; in return, contemporary poets would look upon poems collected in the early twentieth century for inspiration. An analogy to the classic *ayaya* songs is the modern mood poem. These poems can observe traditional activities as well as more modern ones and reflect upon them from a personal point of view, a characteristic feature of the *ayaya* songs too. Mood poems bring to surface Inuit inner landscapes as much as the tundra itself. The following poem by Lucy Evaluardjuk, “In the Spring When the Sun Never Sets” (1969), appeared in Robin McGrath's *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition*:

In the spring when the sun never sets  
And the calm glassy waters roam the morning seas  
Oh, those were the happy times.  
When the birds and seals,  
Lived only for playing,  
Oh, those were the happy times.  
When we would stay up all night,  
Looking for birds' nests,  
Oh, those were the happy times.  
When the sun began to warm the morning air,  
And my sister could no longer keep her eyes open,  
Oh, those were the happy times.  
When I, too fought the coming of sleep,



But my dreams would win in the end,  
Oh, those were the happy times. (59)

I disagree with McGrath's identification of the theme as the generation gap between the old and the new, because such a gap is never addressed in the poem; rather it is a soulful recollection of memories from the warm days of spring. The very title of the poem references the fact that from spring onwards (from mid-May to late July) there is twenty-four-hour daylight in the Arctic. Spring and summer are also called the time of the "midnight sun" as the sun never sets. This natural phenomenon occurs north of the Arctic and south of the Antarctic Circle. This, as the poem describes, is a time for joyful rejuvenation both in the animal kingdom and in the closely-knit Inuit hamlets. Girls who would typically babysit their younger siblings are known to struggle to put the little ones to bed. Everyone is reluctant to sleep when the sun is up all night. This time is well-known for low attendance in schools due to lack of sleep and general festive spirits in Northern communities.<sup>4</sup>

Like Evaluardjuk's contemporary take, Ulivfak's Spring poem found during the Thule expeditions almost a hundred years ago indeed recalls the olden days "in the thaw of younger days." Here too instead of collective history – "the old ways of the people versus the new" – the poet Ulivfak reminisces about his own younger days in "The Spring of Youth":

Sadly, I recall  
the early spring of my youth...

hunting in the wake  
of swimming bulls,  
I had no match.

Thus, I still re-live  
the early spring of youth.  
Old men seek strength  
in the thaw of younger days. (37)

The poem exemplifies one's own reflection on their younger selves, acknowledging the passage of time, the relative weakness of the old Inuk as opposed to the young one. This poem, saved for posterity during the Fifth Thule Expedition, is effortlessly reflective, although listeners separated by time and space might construe different

4) Based on personal conversations with the Iglulingmiut while working as an English Language Arts teacher in Igloodik, Nunavut, Canada.



meanings to the very same poem. Furthermore, unless we are bilingual in both Inuktitut and English, all we can do is rely on translations. We can but wonder to what extent song-poems in English reflect the artistry of the translator. The English translations by Tom Lowenstein via Rasmussen's own Danish transliterations have been enjoyed by generations, so even though we are not privy to all the secrets of Inuit life and perhaps some expressions get lost on us, they appear to transmit the original intention of the poet effectively.

The image of the last line, a rare poetic device in the oral tradition, elevates the poem and its message stays with the reader long after recital. Ulivfak's poem is an example that evocative depth did exist in pre- and early-contact poetry as well, at least as far as we can judge solely relying on English translations. In this rare case, the modern 1960s spring poem by Lucy Evaluardjuk is far more literal. In Evaluardjuk's poem, spring signifies the season itself, while Ulivfak's hundred-year-old song-poem tells about a different spring, that of one's youth.

A closer match to Evaluardjuk modern spring poem would be an anonymous Greenlandic song-poem, "I Was Out in My Kayak," emphasizing the majesty of the coming spring. The note by Rasmussen accompanying the poem provides a cultural context and is something of a contradiction given that he believed that Inuit song-poems need no translation or context for one's enjoyment. I maintain that the removal of the context might make it hard for these poems to reach a non-Inuit reader, leaving traditional and contemporary poems alike open to misinterpretations.

Winter has been long and hard, and the people of the village have suffered privation. Everyone is exhausted and many believe that they're not going to live until spring. Then a man goes out along the coast in a kayak, where the first open water is beginning to appear. He comes to a hillside, which he climbs, so as to have a view of the opening in the ice where he can hunt seal. Weak and faint with hunger, he labours up the hill, until he discovers a snowdrift which the warmth of the sun is loosening from the mountain. He feels such happiness that he bursts out in song. (*Eskimo Poems* 47)

Aja-ha aja-ha  
I was out in my kayak  
Making towards land.  
Aja-ha aja-ha  
I came to a snowdrift  
That had just begun to melt.  
Aja-hai-ja aja-hai-ja  
And I knew that it was spring:  
We'd lived through winter!



Aja-haj-ja aja-hai-ja  
 And I was frightened  
 I would be too weak,  
 Too weak  
 To take in all the beauty!  
 Aja hai-ja  
 Aja-hai-ja  
 Aja-ha. (47)

The poet is overjoyed that he is not too weak to appreciate the coming spring. In harsh winters even with frozen foodstuff, such as *muktaaq* (raw bowhead whale blubber), or fermented food stock hidden underground, like *igunaq* (fermented walrus or seal) and *kiviaq* (fermented auk), towards the end of winter emaciated families were too weak from being famished. In fact, we know from Farley Mowat's *People of the Deer*, which was published in 1952 and described the starvation of the Ihalmiut in what was then called the District of Keewatin, how entire hamlets could die of hunger (in their case not because of the emergence of the pack ice, hence limited hunting grounds, but because of Southern overhunting of the *tuktu*, the caribou).

Similarly, the anonymous traditional song-poem "Winter's Exodus" from the era of the oral tradition, translated by Rose Pamack in 1982 and anthologized by Penny Petrone in 1988, expresses happiness over the passing of winter. The song-poem riffs on the familiar spring theme: winter must be done away with and thawing brings hope:

Winter, let's get divorced  
 Your parting, truly,  
 Holds little sorrow  
 I don't care if you distance  
 Far, far away  
 If you don't leave,  
 The spring thaw shall destroy you  
 You winter,  
 Let's be parted. (50)

Contemporary poetry further weaves the theme of the arrival of spring as an important time for the Inuit, and a cause for celebration. In "The Dancing Sun," Alooook Ipellie, the renowned Inuit artist of the late twentieth century from the capital, Iqaluit, addresses the topic as such:



The Inuit would sit and admire the smiling sun.  
The animals too, it's been known, would do the same [...]  
All the Inuit would join hands and dance [...] (272)

Ipellie's "One of Those Wonderful Nights," published on the website *Inuit Art of Canada*, recalls the atmosphere of gatherings in the song house, the traditional place for Inuit song contest and dance. The last two lines epitomize the very popularity of these song houses as places for survival and spiritual renewal. Ipellie's visual art is abstract, but his poetry is reminiscent of old times; it is a tribute to Inuit life, customs and ancestors.

[...] everyone laughed and danced [...]  
The great drums were booming,  
Hands were clapping [...]  
The hazards of the land were  
Forgotten

Spring and its ultimate sister-theme love has been an emerging topic and is the subject of yet another contemporary poem, "I See Your Face" by Luke Issaluk, anthologized by Petrone in *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English*:

I will see your face.  
Only wait. When spring birds fly  
Home to nest and mate, so shall I  
And I will see your face (35)

I argue that Issaluk's poem demonstrates that contemporary poets tend to venture onto novel paths, creating a new tradition while building upon ancestral ways, even though, as Petrone observes, love poetry is not a typical choice of genre for Inuit poets (35). Contemporary poets enrich their poetic expression not only by writing these poems down on paper but by addressing topics that were not openly talked about, either because they were taboo in early contact poetry or because they were discouraged by missionaries, as was the case in such topics as intimacy and sexuality. However open pre-contact peoples of the North were about the physical manifestations of love, romance was yet another matter.

Among the Rasmussen-collected traditional song-poems, there are few that are as passionate as the straight-forwardly entitled song-poem "Love-Making" (found in the Umanatsiaq region in the 1920s and published in *Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland*):



Ajaija-ja  
 my playmate  
 ja-ja-jai-ja  
 fingers me  
 between the legs  
 hajaijaja  
 she gives her body  
 haijaijaja-jaija  
 and tears the leather bracelets  
 from my wrists (53)

Establishing a thematic pattern that Issaluk's poem follows in the second half of the twentieth century, this passionate song-poem has nothing to hide. Similarly, in Issaluk's love poem, the people of the land, as part of nature, mate just like the other animals of the Arctic. The arrival of missionaries and with them Southern morals have sufficiently changed this approach. Inuit literature hasn't been left untouched by contact either. Since contemporary Inuit poetry is markedly shyer about discussing physical love, one can but marvel at the directness of such early poems as "Love-Making."

The most accessible pre-contact poems for readers not familiar with how the Inuit live are probably those expressing pure joy over the beauty of nature, such as the "Song of Joy" by Uvavnuk, collected in the 1920s:

The great sea  
 Has set me adrift,  
 It moves me as the weed in a great river,  
 Earth and the great weather  
 Moved me,  
 Have carried me away  
 And move my inward parts with joy. (22)

The wonder we feel over the stark beauty of nature is one notion most readers can relate to. As is implied by "Song of Joy," Inuit life is far more difficult than Southern Canadian life, which seeks to bring comfort to people. However, at the same time it is simpler as well; far less removed from the world people inhabit. Nature is where the Inuit exist, not separate from it but as part of it, and they celebrate this coexistence, being a part of the great whole. Riding the waves of the calm summer sea, as one would experience it from a kayak, is a magical experience. The songster lets herself be carried away by the beauty of her surroundings, with the same freedom causing



unbounded joy, marvelling at her very existence. It is no wonder then, as noted in *Eskimo Poems*, that reciting “Song of Joy” had always sent the singer (a shaman woman by the name of Uvavnuk) into a trance (Rasmussen 27). The poem works like a haiku, delivering simple words in a few short lines to a great effect with global appeal. Here, Rasmussen’s observation about not needing prior knowledge of the Inuit or their language, Inuktitut, to be able to enjoy their poetry finally becomes valid.

Building upon hundreds of years of tradition in song-making, recycling songs helps them, even without pen and paper, to survive. Song-poems at the time Rasmussen’s expedition reached the Arctic communities of Canada were often borrowed with the knowledge of the author and repurposed much like samplings of old songs in hip-hop music.

A little song,  
Someone else’s worn little song,  
But I sing it as if it were my own,  
My own dear little song.  
In this way, I play  
With a second-hand song  
And give it life again. (*Eskimo Poems* 54)

In this case, by borrowing the melody, someone had already taken the song and given it a new purpose, even if the new lyrics just say exactly that in a very direct manner. It is curious how forward-thinking this approach to poetry is, and surprising to think that hundreds of years ago a technique similar to today’s sampling of old songs in hip hop music was used. I propose that, while Inuit folklore is rich with imagination, traditional song-poems (with a few exceptions) remain in the realm of straightforward expression. If the given audience has Arctic knowledge and is familiar with the community the song-poem is coming from, understanding of it is guaranteed.

In the same vein, pondering about one’s future, like in Ivaluardjuk’s *ayaya* song from a century ago, is still a topic revisited by contemporary Inuit poets (with a modern spin) such as Jimmy Naumelauk in his 1974 poem “Wondering in Silence”:

A seagull is flying high in the summer breeze,  
A seal is swimming the calm, cool sea,  
A caribou feeds on the mossy tundra,  
And I’m sitting here wondering about yesterday.  
A jet plane flies high in the winter breeze,  
A ship travels the stormy sea,



A snowmobile crosses the stormy tundra  
And I'm sitting here wondering about today. (Petronie 11)

Naumelauk juxtaposes the glorious summer day, abundant with Arctic life signifying the past, with the stormy, snowy winter landscape of the present. The nostalgic feelings conjured up by the past clash with the hardships of the present, even if this is not always the case as modern jet planes and sealifts bring food for the cold, dark winter and starvation is a matter of the past. Overall, the poem presents a poet wondering about the nature of things, stuck between two worlds, the old and the new.

A topic that connects ancient *ayaya* songs to modern poetry is aging. Dorothy's "Old Woman's Song" first appeared in 1974 and is mentioned by McGrath in *Canadian Inuit Literature*. The poet discusses the everyday tragedy of growing old. The simple wording and gruesome topic harken back to times when ancestors went by one name only:

I am old, I must die  
[...] death is waiting for me outside  
Old I am, old, I am  
Death is here (59)

This contemporary poem is a modern version of the traditional *ayaya* song-poems that are (if not about hunting) filled with longing. As the poet laments her inevitable loss of youth, the reader is moved, even without contextual knowledge of Inuit poetry.

I agree with McCall that Inuit poetry of both the oral and the written tradition is open to misconceptions, just like Arctic life itself (*First Person Plural* 18). Without being familiar with how the Inuit live, one can easily misconstrue words and intended meanings. First-hand knowledge helps a tremendous amount in avoiding the trap of categorizing poems that look as if they would fit in a neat box, such as in the case of "old and new," a veritable and valid category of poetic themes. However, one must carefully examine the context in which a poem appears so as to decide whether the shape fits the box or whether it is a question of false equivalency, such as in the case of some interpretations of Lucy Evaluardjuk's spring poem. All in all, the most profound value of these poems is our ability to connect with them, even if our understanding is stunted.

The concreteness of traditional Inuit poetry makes meaning clear, especially for those with even a superficial knowledge of the Arctic and its inhabitants. Many of the old song-poems must be understood in a certain context, such as that of a successful hunt, which is there if the listener is within the tribe, familiar with the trials and joys of life in their part of the Arctic. To some extent, all readers can





relate to song-poems at a musical level. The abstractness in modern Inuit poetry is not understood as one would expect in a poem coming from the South, rather it is manifested in the topics that invade the concerns of contemporary Inuit life: all that is brought to the North from the South, whether a physical thing, such as a snowmobile, or wood for building houses instead of igloos, or notions that were of course foreign to the Inuit in pre-contact times, such as pop culture and all that goes with it. Southern readers are familiar with these borrowed topics, and one can but marvel at how technology affects the unharmed intellectual culture of the Inuit, an inescapable process all cultures have gone through at some point.

Metaphysical questions, modern topics and vocabulary have been introduced in contemporary Inuit poetry to a degree. However, the unadorned style representative of both Rasmussen-collected and contemporary poems adds to the clarity and brings readers closer to the poets' experiences, whether the poems are traditional and concrete or contemporary and showing abstraction. In ancient song-poems, the poet would retell the story of a hunt or observe the coming of spring, but in modern poems a certain mood besets the poems and new images and vocabulary enter the register, for example, jet planes and skidoos. And one has to wonder along with the Inuit what to do with it all. Incorporating modernity as Ipellie does, not only in Inuit daily life but in poetry, certainly shows the extraordinary level of adaptability of the Inuit.

Most modern poems address the seasons and the elements, going back to the animist past of the Inuit, or ponder about the glorious times gone by while capturing a certain mood in the present. Just as seen in Ipellie's poetry written in the seventies, the nostalgic reflection back at times gone by and the land – that is, Nunavut, “our land” – is a driving force behind much of the literature emerging from the Canadian Arctic today. Structurally, most poems having emerged from the region in the past few decades are fresh, similar to free verse representative of the southern provinces. The unequivocal nature of the song-poems collected by Rasmussen is still there in recently published poems, but the observational style of the past is, albeit slowly, transforming into the domain of abstraction, by means of imagery and concerns modern times bring upon the Inuit. The realities of modern Inuit life, such as practicing the hunting style of the ancestors, but with modern tools, or living in an environment cut off from the rest of the world, but with access to the internet, give contemporary poems a certain ethereal quality that belongs both to the past and the present. Whereas in the oral tradition there was more focus on the assessment of one's immediate surroundings and description of daily activities typical to one's camp, contemporary artists bring forth dormant ideas and moods representative of our times. This change towards modernity and abstraction expressed in contemporary Inuit poetry represents a link between the ancestors' way of thinking and the modern Inuit and brings their poetry closer to readers from around the world.



The young semi-sovereign nationhood of Nunavut certainly helps a distinct polar identity to emerge in recently published poems and establish its respectful place both separately from and within Canadian and world literature. To find a voice is probably the most important outcome of contemporary poems from the North. To attempt to understand what being Inuit is and what Nunavut means to the Inuit may be the first step in being able to relate to and appreciate both the people and their poetry. As David Riesman observes in *Abundance for What?*: “In the beginning – a beginning now so remote from our own experiences that we have a hard time grasping it – the only word was the spoken word” (419). Words were magical, and when recited by a skilful shaman, they could win battles and charm game into prey. In the olden days, the storyteller had a voice and the people would listen to it through seemingly eternal winter nights. Poems were more than just that, and the new poetry rising from the North might achieve a renaissance of that voice.

## Works cited

### Primary

- Akjartok. “When I Call to My Mind” in Colombo, 44.
- “A Little Song,” in Rasmussen, *Eskimo* 54.
- Dorothy, “Old Woman’s Song,” in McGrath 59.
- Evaluardjuk, Lucy. “In the Spring When the Sun Never Sets,” in McGrath 59.
- Ipellie, Alootok. “One of Those Wonderful Nights.” *Inuit Today*. April 1974. Inuit Art of Canada. Access: 13 Feb. 2020. <http://www.inuitartofcanada.com/english/legends/poemone.htm>
- . “The Dancing Sun,” in New 272.
- Issaluk, Luke. “I See Your Face,” in Petrone 35.
- Ivaluardjuk. “Cold and Mosquitoes,” in Rasmussen, *Intellectual* 18–19.
- “I Was Out in My Kayak, in” Rasmussen, *Eskimo* 47.
- “Love-Making.” Rasmussen, in *Eskimo* 53.
- Naumelauk, Jimmy. “Wondering in Silence,” *Inukshuk* 2.16 (1973): 11.
- “The Old Man’s Song,” in Philip 26.
- Ulivfak. “The Spring of Youth,” in Rasmussen, *Eskimo* 37.
- Uvavunk. “Song of Joy,” in Philip 22.
- “Winter’s Exodus,” in Petrone 50.



## Secondary

Boas, Franz. *The Central Eskimo*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1888.

———. “Eskimo Tales and Songs,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 7.24 (1894): 45–50.

Colombo, John Robert (ed.). *Poems of the Inuit*. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1981

Martin, Keavy. *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012.

McCall, Sophie. *First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012.

McGrath, Robin. *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1984.

Mowat, Farley. *People of the Deer*. 1952. Boston: Little Brown, 1975.

New, W.H. *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990.

Petrone, Penny. *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English*. 1988. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Philip, Neil (ed.). *Songs Are Thoughts: Poems of the Inuit*. Illus. Maryclare Foa. New York: Orchard Books, 1995.

Rasmussen, Knud. *Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland*. Trans. Tom Lowenstein, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973.

———. *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*. Trans. W. Worster, 1929. London: Forgotten Books, 2018.

Riesman, David. *Abundance for What?* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1964.

---

**RITA NÁNDORI** / is a Hungarian-Canadian scholar currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Debrecen. Her research focuses on Inuit intellectual culture in Canada. She is a member of such academic associations as the Central European Association for Canadian Studies, the European Society for the Study of English, and the Hungarian Society for the Study of English.