

Uumasuusivissuaq: Spirit and Indigenous Writing

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Abstract

The scholarship on Indigenous peoples is deeply steeped in colonization and often assumes a Western perspective. I start this article with my poetry as a female *kalaaleq* (Inuk from Greenland) poet. I contextualize my writing through discussions on praxis and new knowledge creation through poetry. In this article, I argue for a process of decolonization of written, academic knowledge on Indigenous peoples by inviting Indigenous writers to consider writing in poetry form, which comes from giftedness of inner soul—namely the spirit.

Keywords: epistemology; narrative; Inuit worldview; decolonization; praxis



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The scholarship on Indigenous peoples is deeply steeped in colonization and often assumes positionality that comes from a Western point of view. This is problematic and much needs to be done to decolonize written, academic knowledge on Indigenous peoples. I argue for a process of decolonization and invite Indigenous writers to consider poetry that comes from giftedness of the inner soul—namely, the spirit. I am a female *kalaaleq* (Inuk from Greenland). I begin this article with my poetry. I provide a narrative of the poem, and I contextualize my writing into discussions on praxis and new knowledge creation through poetry.

Taalliaq

Uumasuusivissuaq

Sassuma Arnarsua
ileranavissorsuaq
ersinalaaveqisoq.

Uumasuusivissuit
isorartog, takoranneq.
Sunaaffami
naatsivissuaateqartutit
qilalugaasivissuarmik.

Aarrit piaqqisarfi
tigaagulliillu pinnguarterfi
illit kisivit
minguerlugit salittarpatit.

Arferit ungilleerartut
pukiisigut kumiassalaarlugit
toqqissisartarpatit.

Timmissat aqgarlutik
ammut inorsisoortut
qummut supoorsinernik
nerlersortarpatit.

Anernippit imarsuaq
inuunissaqalertittarpaa
imungarsuaq immersorlugu
immap inussua
qaarsilaartillugu.

Maligissat nooqutsertapatit
qaqqorinnik qaartussanik
qoqernartulertarlugit.

The Poem

The Great Animal Farm (1)

The feared Lady Down Under (2)
how worrisome
how very frightening.

Your orchard (1)
is limitless, and legendary. (3)
I am now realizing that (3)
indeed you have a great garden (1)
full of whales and belugas.

The birth cradles (4) of walruses,
the playgrounds of the minke whales
you, alone look after
to replenish.

The restless big whales, itchy
you calm them down
gently, scratching their bellies. (5)

The hungry birds, diving too deep
sucked out of air (6)
you feed, blowing them your breath.

Your supreme spirit (7)
enlivens the oceans
creating immense lives
nourishing and feeding
the essence of oceans. (8)

You decorate the tips
of waves intended for
deafening blasts. (9)

*Sunaaffami imarsuaq
toqqissisartarit orsuersillugu (10)
imungarsuaq,
qaqqarsuit qilassuarlu
alianaassusersuartik
kusanassusersuartillu
tarramikku takulaassammasuk.*

You caress
the restless sea to serenity (11)
allowing the mountains
and the sky to see themselves
in your mirror
adoring
their own immense beauty.

*Sunaaffami naasuutitit
supoornikkut imungarsuaq
pujoralliisarputit
soorluli aalisakkat
suaannik immuinillu
imarsuaq isortittarit.*

I have come to realize that
it is your creative breath that allows
the plants to blow their seeds,
the fish to spawn
and your blowing is what makes
the oceans murky in creation.

*Iliveqarfissuatit tupinnaqaat
uumasorsuarnut mikisunullu
tulluat! Nalissaqanngillat
asuuna ornigarneqat!*

The burial grounds of the magnificent
and the insignificant that you have created
befits them all and are remarkable,
beyond words!
No wonder these are well attended! (12)

*Pinnngortitannit isumaginninnerit
nalissaqanngilaq
tarniginnaq, anersaaginnaq.*

Your ordinance in your own creation
is magnificent, nothing to compare it with
so enriching in soul and spirit.

*Arnakattak
inukuluinnaasugut
itummanniitippatsigut
nukissuatit tupinnaqaat,
tukkunersuit ingalluni.*

You, the square lady
we are mere human beings and yet
you hold us in your palms
your strength immeasurable
Even more so is your generosity. (13)

*Atsaat ataqqinartumik
aatsaalli naassaangitsumik
atajuarit! Naalagaaffiillu
tikijuttuarli isuaqanngitsumut. (15)*

In reverence
may your rule last forever
Thy Queendom (14)
be welcomed, over and over.

*Aatsaalli arnarsuaq
ileranavissorsuaq
ersinalaaveqisoq.*

You, ugly Lady Down Under
that evokes in us
so much fear and worry. (16)

Indigenous Negotiation of Decolonization and Paradigm Shift

I am a *kalaaleq* (an Inuk from Greenland) and consider myself an Indigenous person. Much like Wilson (2008), I question how Indigenous thought is delivered in academic writing. I am mindful that Indigenous scholars become instrumental in the processes of decolonization of their communities (Smith, 1999) and cognizant that our non-Indigenous colleagues also need to recognize that they themselves are in need of decolonization (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall,

Phillips, & Jessen Williamson, 2011) and ignite these processes. For these reasons, my intention is to keep the attention of these seemingly disparate communities sustained and nourished from my own writing. I am mindful of Wilson's (2008) statement, "If Indigenous scholars are to be freed from the need to constantly justify [Indigenous] research and knowledge systems from a dominant system perspectives, it may be necessary for us to be clearer in our articulation of exactly what our paradigm entails" (p. 12).

While Wilson (2008) turned his writing into a series of letters to his sons, I have used Inuit story telling (Jessen Williamson, 2012) to ground my own writing. I have employed scholarly methods such as deconstruction, which according to Ghosh (1996) "is a method of decoding—for example, reversing binary opposites (good and bad), discussing them, then generating new values...in attempt to explain the function of specific social practices that sustain unequal power relations, such as in patriarchy" (pp. 111–112). In case of the poem *Umasuusivissuaq*, I question patriarchy to reposition Inuk female in her rightful status, namely goddess. In my writing, I often use *kalaallit* (plural of *kalaaleq*) terms and concepts to convey *kalaallit* paradigms. According to Wilson (2008), the latter,

[is] a set of underlying beliefs that guide our actions...[including] the way that we view reality (ontology), how we think about or know this reality (epistemology), our ethics and morals (axiology) and how we go about gaining more knowledge about the reality (methodology). (p. 13)

Applying these principles to my own endeavours resulted in my research becoming a book on how *kalaallit* philosophy on equality between men and woman unfolds in present day gender relations (Jessen Williamson, 2011b).

I argue that academic writing entails a specific form of communication that involves rituals of thinking, processes that involve measured and conscious deliberation, deeply grounded in re-examination of readings and data, highlighting specific cultural insights. Academic writing is labour- and thought-intensive, while poetry writing can be likened to a release of stored energy. To me poetry writing comes like a strong wave, welling up from inside. I become the means through which a poem is expressed and I literally stop doing anything else until the emerging poetry is fully expressed in words and meaning. It is in that context that I claim that poetry writing materializes a spiritual dimension that I call inner giftedness, as it entails all the sets of underlying beliefs of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology that Wilson (2008) wants us to apply. Poetry writing is an unexpected augmentation of my writing. I use the term "giftedness" because I have very little control over the processes involved in producing poems.

I wrote poetry in the 1970s when I was undergoing tremendous pressure, being assimilated into becoming a Dane, while holding desperately on to the little *kalaallit* identity afforded by the Greenlandic education system. Poetry back then came to me in heavy waves of darkness and I pushed it away since the content would be devastating for my well-being. I repressed it then, but 40 years later it came back to me in truly generous and uplifting ways. I feel much indebted to this gift, particularly as it is wrapped in *kalaallisut* language, the Inuktitut dialect in Greenland and my mother tongue. I am also delighted that it came in the English language as one sees in the above poem titled "*Umasuusivissuaq*/The Great Animal Farm." I

want to explain the poem as a narrative contextualized and explain it using sources of information.

The Narrative of the “*Uumasuusivissuaq*/The Great Animal Farm”

(1) The title of this poem came from a discussion I had with Dr. David Natcher (<http://ilmi.usask.ca/people/david-natcher/index.php>). He is the Director of Indigenous Land and Resource Management at the University of Saskatchewan. During 2011 and 2012, we were developing an application to establish a partnership on resource management to be supported by Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We named the application “*Angerlartoq*,” the home comer/returner. The program was to compare the *kalaallit* and Inuit (Nunavut) practices on resource management. We intended to highlight the sharp differences between scientific and Indigenous knowledge. It is well-known that Inuit and scientific perceptions of the Arctic environment and its wildlife are grounded in different knowledge systems, relationships, and interactions (Sejersen, 2004), and during one of our conversations Dr. Natcher and I addressed the differences in thinking on ownership and management of resources.

We knew that polar bears are tagged or tattooed by wildlife biologists in an effort to manage wildlife in Nunavut and elsewhere. When Inuit catch such animals, there is a genuine feeling of loss; the so-called “wildlife” has been “manhandled.” The feelings that Inuit have in finding man-handled goods, I explained to Dr. Natcher, must be the same as the feeling of encroachment people experience when vegetable gardens are raided in the South. I imagine great disappointment when potatoes or carrots are dug up by people not known to the grower, and the thought of the produce being manhandled in one’s own garden by a total stranger must leave one with the same feeling as Inuit have when they find wildlife manhandled. In my thinking *Uumasuusivissuaq*/The Great Animal Farm—frames our conversation.

The Arctic seas or massive land masses are not “wildernesses” for the Inuit. They are the homeland for the Inuit (Nuttall, 1992). Some waters are extensive production centres for many different kinds of sea mammals, sea birds, and fish. Inuit have been hunting in these areas for centuries and know the location of the production centre and when to hunt. Since the Inuit have occupied the Arctic for thousands of years, Inuit experiences, observations, and indeed extensive knowledge can startle even the most respected scientists (Huntington, 2011). I compare the Inuit sense of various environments of creatures of the Arctic to what an agrarian person in the South knows: A good grower knows where best to grow vegetables, fruit trees, grass, and flowers, knows when to sow the seeds and when to harvest. Inuit on the other hand know where and when to get walrus, seals, fish, and birds.

(2) *Uumasuusivissuaq*/The Great Animal Farm exists only because of a creator—a female goddess. Inuit believe strongly in the “lady down under” (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). She was an ordinary Inuk girl who grew up and had an affair with a dog (Stuckenberger, 2007). Her father found out and in punishment banned her to an island. In her attempt to gain her father’s forgiveness, she tried to cling to the railing of her father’s boat as he was rowing away, only to have her fingers chopped off. While sinking slowly, her fingers became the whales, the walrus, the seals, the birds, the fish, and any other being that Inuit needed for their livelihood. She sank to the bottom of the sea and became the goddess of all living beings in the sea. She controls the animals and the sea birds, protecting them against human frailty and abuse. Among the Canadian Inuit, she is variously named Sedna, Nuliaajuk, and Takannaaluk. In Greenland she is known as

Sassuma Arnaa—the Lady Down Under. She holds power so great that only the greatest, most sensitive and courageous shaman can reach her when she gets angry. Many oral tales exist about her and have nourished the Inuit imagination over centuries.

Today, she is still greatly celebrated as can be seen throughout the Inuit art world in music, prints, paintings, sculpture, and poetry. In Canada, she is represented sometimes with the tail of a fish and, in recent years, a whale. Much rock music being produced in Greenland uses imagery of her. Aka Høgh, the famous *kalaaleq* artist, commemorated her in many of her paintings, sculptures, and other creations (Lyng, 1998), while Christian Rosing made a stunning cast of her that decorates the old colonial harbour of Nuuk where many delight in the mysterious powers of Sassuma Arnaa and her relationship with the animals in her realm.

(3) As a *kalaaleq*, I was baptized, confirmed, and married in a Lutheran church and, like many *kalaallit*, I enjoy the associated church traditions. Over the years, many prayers were said to the Christian God. When I was doing my doctoral studies focused on gender relations, I realized that many *kalaallit* men made a point of avoiding church (Jessen Williamson, 2011b). I surmised that the prayers offered to the Christian God took away the gratitude that should have gone to the Lady Down Under. As Christian Inuit, we have collectively done a disservice to our earthy (be it salty) provider. She is the one that created all the goods from the ocean that Inuit depend upon. I was guilty of praying to a God that does not look after the wildlife and animals for whom the Lady Down Under provides. I remembered John Newton (1779), the poet who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” and how he turned away from the slave trade that he had been engaged in for years (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing_Grace). Maybe something similar could be achieved with Sassuma Arnaa.

(4) If ever one has given birth to a child or witnessed a birth, one realizes how much bodily fluid and blood is involved, and the accompanying odour is overwhelming. This can be witnessed in hospitals where women give birth today. The cleanup of bodies and surroundings is extensive and the event is exhausting and at the same time exhilarating. Big whales and walrus are bigger than female human beings, and give birth to beings much greater in weight and size. I can only imagine the processes involved in cleaning up after a birth. As far as I know, female walrus and whales give birth on their own, and I imagine that the Lady Down Under would clean up the afterbirth, and heal the animals.

(5) Some of the great whales get infested by small crustaceans, which stick to the upper layer of the skin of some whales. It must be really itchy at times. Likewise, I have witnessed caribou bothered by ticks, and though land mammals have access to rocks and sand, the great whales have nothing but liquid in the form of the ocean to rely on for relief. Surely, she would scratch the itchiness.

(6) As a child I enjoyed observing black murre (*appat*) coming up from the sea gasping desperately for air. I am certain that some of these birds would get exhausted and die diving too deep. When the birds come up, it is as if something pushed them up.

(7) *Anerneq* is breath in *kalaallisut* and is also spirit. I described in my book (Jessen Williamson, 2011b) that any physical being is composed of *anersaaq* and *tarneq*. Spirit in that understanding comes from the time of creation. It comes as an incipient energy given to each creation.

(8) Inuit talk about *Inua* as being the essence of creation (Fitzhugh & Kaplan, 1982). It has its own energy. Though *Sassuma Arnaa* is goddess of the sea, and the sea itself has its own intelligence, she is also the one that creates high seas when her animals are mistreated. This makes me wonder how the Lady Down Under is involved in creating tsunamis, hurricanes, and dreadful weather systems currently being experienced around the world. Should she be credited for Sandy that came with so much destruction to the Eastern United States during 2012? What was her involvement in the recent Japanese tsunami and the dreadful one that killed so many in Far Eastern countries? What would provoke her to cause such tragedy? What would we as human beings need to do to appease her?

(9) As children, we played on rocky outcrops during the storms and we were amazed by the white, frothy blasts as they literally exploded against the rocks of the west coast of Greenland. The strength of the blasts is something one never forgets.

(10) I chose to use the Canadian Inuktitut word “*orsuertoq*” for “absolutely still water”. In Greenland the word would have been “*qatsungasoaq*.” I find the Canadian Inuktitut descriptor much more poetic, and the term “*orsoq*” refers to oil/fat/blubber.

(11) Many travellers in the Arctic would have noticed that once the ocean is absolutely still it creates a calm, sleek mirror of the surroundings. Sometimes it is difficult to see what is land and what is sea. I know that moment when even a single caribou’s hair’s reflection can be seen on the smooth mirror of the ocean. Knowing the Inuit animalist approach, surely the essence of the mountain and the sky could adore themselves every now and then? Inuit across the Arctic adore and greatly admire the immense beauty of their lands. The state of the sky is a daily conversation to be engaged in for hunting and planning purposes. There is nothing like the promise of seeing a good, calm sky and sea.

(12) When fish, birds, crustaceans, seals, or whales die, their remains sink to the bottom of the sea. Every year, thousands and thousands of tons of dead bodies sink. While most human beings enjoy burial grounds next to churches, land mammals die and lie in the ground. Most of the beings of the oceans simply sink to the bottom of the sea. As human beings it is exceedingly difficult to imagine the amount of decaying bodies in the sea. Imagine the great mammals weighing 30 tons sinking. Imagine, then, the burial grounds in the thousands. Thinking along these lines, I recall, as a child attending Lutheran church services, I was greatly impressed by a Greenlandic song “*Malissuit ataannani, iliviqarfiga*” (“My grave under the great waves...”), which Isak Lund wrote in commemoration of individuals lost at sea (Larsen, 1980).

(13) Inuit, like many Indigenous populations around the world, see their relationship with the environment as a reciprocal relationship. The land, the sea, the sky and air are all sentient beings, and when one is generous these sentient beings also become generous. As human beings we are merely one in millions of creations. Why would we in any way be favoured by a goddess? The sea mammals, fish, and birds are in her domain, but why would *Sassuma Arnaa* want to give human beings any consideration? In my thinking, only generosity explains her actions.

(14) As mentioned earlier my mindset has been greatly influenced by the Christian belief system, which is patriarchal. In our Christian prayer it was always “Thy Kingdom.” I am now realizing that in regard to *Sassuma Arnaa* there is indeed a need to say “Thy Queendom.” As I was reading Ghosh (1996), she asked if it were not time for us to explore gods that are female.

After all, in her mind, as Christians we have become cognizant of how male god(s) have had devastating effects on female empowerment and cared little for female emancipation.

(15) Here, I use the Canadian Inuktitut word for forever that is found in the Lord's Prayer "*isuaqanngittumut*." The *kalaallisut* version is "*naassaanngitsumik*." Again, I find the Canadian Inuktitut more poetic.

(16) I do not know why the supreme spirits are depicted as beautiful and benign. Recently, I have witnessed idealized notions of the Indigenous relationship with the land. Many think that because we have a deep-seated respect for the land that our relationship is in equilibrium. This could not be further from the truth. Being out on *nuna* (the Inuit lands) is hard work. Our thinking as human beings has to be aligned in equilibrium first for animals to give themselves up, which takes a fair amount of physical and mental exertion—let alone social. Inuit thinking is that physical beauty is one thing but the deepest beauty is in the mind, which must be intent on goodness to ensure good relationship with the animals, to be allowed on the land. According to Bodenhorn (1990), Inuit women are much more attuned to animals than their husbands.

Negotiating Praxis

Freire's (1970) work galvanized the academic discourse in social justice education. He writes:

Education...becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (p. 58)

Indeed those of us in academia today, Indigenous or not, received an education that resembles Freire's banking concept. We invested our energy and thoughts to receiving, filing, and storing the deposits while receiving education in elementary school and post-secondary systems. For the Indigenous learners, this education was nothing short of annihilation of Indigenous knowledge, leading toward assimilation into Western knowledge systems. Earlier, I urged that processes of decolonization become a reality for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholar communities. We need to engage ourselves in unravelling the knowledge associated with Indigenous populations around the world in ways that make sense to our varying communities. For my part, I attempt to represent Inuit knowledge for its own sake and to represent the consumers of such knowledge by offering my insights through poetry.

Freire (1970) also promoted praxis based on liberated education. His thinking and reasoning have occupied my thought since I came across his writing, which helped me to realize that material written on the Inuit is modelled after his banking concept. Many of the concepts on Inuit are based on non-Inuit scholars filing and reorganizing old deposits, including the assumptions and worldview of those scholars. The theories in anthropology, sociology, education and other disciplines in academia are internal devices to gaze (Ermine, 2007) at Inuit and are not necessarily in line with Inuit/*kalaallit* abstractions. Scholars' claims about Inuit knowledge may not always be true to Inuit perceptions. According to Brant Castellano (2004), "Scientific research is dominated by positivist thinking that assumes only observable phenomena matter..."

[and] missed deeper significance” (p. 103). She quotes Little Bear who claims that scholars “have done a fairly decent job of describing the customs themselves, but they have failed miserably in finding and interpreting the meanings behind the customs. The function of Aboriginal values and customs is to maintain the relationships that hold creation together” (Brant Castellano, 2004, p. 103). Like Freire, I recommend that we develop theories that include human beings as being part of the creation process—not extracted from it.

In *Redefining Multicultural Education*, Ghosh (1996) argues that much of the academic writing is informed by perspectives that are predominantly Christian, male, and upper class. I add that these perspectives are also seen through a heterosexual lens, and that little thought has been given to the perspectives of disabled individuals. Because language is social construction that reflects and carries the dominant beliefs named above (Ghosh, 1996; Egbo, 2009), I suggest that we employ poetry in deconstructive and reconstructive ways to contribute to new ways of thinking and being.

Poetry and Knowledge Creation

It is only recently that Indigenous scholars are welcomed and accepted in academia and have become cultural brokers for both the Indigenous and academic communities. As mentioned earlier, most of us are strongly influenced by the stringent assimilatory measures experienced while growing up in our various communities. My own education taught me two non-Indigenous languages and if it were not for the effort exerted by my close family and myself, my mother tongue could easily have been replaced. Today, many Indigenous learners come to university lacking cultural traditions in use of language, processes of thoughts, and spirituality. These are met by equally assimilated Euro-Canadian learners and indeed instructors. When one considers Freire’s (1970) banking concept in addition to these, one can then imagine the challenges associated with the creation of Indigenous knowledge. Carefully measured thoughts and actions are needed to engender robust understanding in such settings and I intend my poetry to be one of the cultural brokers in such an environment.

Academic writing is labour intensive, eating up energy, time, resources, and effort. In Indigenous communities, scholarly text has been accused of being reductionist and static in presenting Indigenous knowledge. My poetry writing is dynamic, emerging from deep energy, out of a creation process that indeed lifts my spirit up. I feel nourished and my soul feels the dance consisting of words that come with no warning, urging me to express the notion in the two languages that best describe my being. I feel deep wonderment at what emerges. I feel liberated and free when writing poetry. This sense of wonder goes on for years and pushes me through difficult times in wondrous ways.

Piirto (2002) thought of poetry as an ancient verbal art, and Prendergast (2009) thought of poetry as being an oral form “deeply rooted in the sense of voice” (p. 547). Faulkner (2007) writes that,

Hirshfield (1997) believes poetry has an ability to clarify and magnify our human existence. She wrote that “each time we enter its word-woven and musical invocation, we give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing: to poetry’s knowing, and to the increase of existence it brings, unlike any other (p. vii).” (p. 218)

Consider then Kawagley (1993), who claims that Indigenous knowledge comes about as interplay between the soul/spirit and the body. I have shown some aspects of that in my published work (Jessen Williamson 2011a; Jessen Williamson 2011b). In these publications, I materialized Wilson's (2008) wish that as Indigenous writers, we are to "be clearer in our articulation of exactly what our paradigm entails" (p. 12). As *kalaallit*, we have a notion that a whole human being has to be respected. In my academic work, I describe how we are physical beings who are driven by the interplay between the name/soul entity of our human consciousness and that of the spirit. I believe that the innate energy that comes from my spiritual being is the very essence that allows me to write poetry. I have very little control over this creativity. This lack of control gives me the praxis that Freire (1970) recommends, and along with it a renewed sense of wonder.

Inuit and *kalaallit* are great consumers of poetry and I intend to study the published poetry, analyzing in-depth the transformational potentials of peoples deeply involved in cultural transition. My hope is that such study corresponds to Freire's liberation of education, and the deconstruction that Ghosh (1996) and Egbo (2009) suggest, offering us the gift of a good, healing gaze that Ermine (2007) eloquently addressed. After all, scholars such as Faulkner (2007), Cahnmann (2003), Piirto (2002), and Prendergast (2009) urge social scientists to use poetry for scientific endeavours.

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