Dreaming an identity between Two Cultures: The Works of Alootook Ipellie

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Abstract

In Arctic Dreams and Nightmares Alootook Ipellie argues that the harsh reality of life in the Arctic landscape has been a deciding factor in the development of Inuit literature, for Inuit 'live in the remote Arctic, relatively isolated from the rest of the world' (xiv), and have therefore been able to retain much of their language and culture. He goes on to suggest that the resilience of the Inuit and a pride in their tradition have helped them to retain their traditional mythology and preserve it for future generations.
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In *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* Alootook Ipellie argues that the harsh reality of life in the Arctic landscape has been a deciding factor in the development of Inuit literature, for Inuit ‘live in the remote Arctic, relatively isolated from the rest of the world’ (xiv), and have therefore been able to retain much of their language and culture. He goes on to suggest that the resilience of the Inuit and a pride in their tradition have helped them to retain their traditional mythology and preserve it for future generations.

Ipellie’s own writing is a literature of cultural pride and of resistance to dispossession and artistic regulation. His work crosses a range of genres and his use of magic realism in his writing, and of often graphic violence in his pen-and-ink drawings, are in stark contrast to the most common examples of commercially available Inuit art and literature, namely soapstone carvings, prints and memoir. In the context of a half-century of European intervention and dispossession, it is little wonder that Ipellie has chosen to focus his work on shamanic figures who mediate complex and conflicting worlds. Ipellie’s work deals with the conflicts and confluences between traditional spirituality and Christianity. His work typically fuses figures from the traditional belief system with those from the mainstream literature, culture and religion. Ipellie primarily negotiates this space between worlds through the use of shamanistic trickster figures. As a writer and activist, Ipellie is primarily concerned with presenting his culture as a living, developing entity; not a quaint and archaic culture which needs to be partially preserved or relegated to museums of anthropology. He is effectively writing *himself* as a modern-day shaman; he is like his grandfather, a wordsmith and composer of powerful messages. The characters he creates have
access to, and power from, both the body of wisdom necessary for survival in the Arctic, as well as those of the imported hegemonic culture.

The shaman is a figure of superior intellect with an extraordinary ability to negotiate complex power struggles, a being that gains his or her supernatural powers through the crucible of extreme initiation. Joseph Campbell notes that the shamanistic crisis ‘yields an adult of greater physical stamina and vitality of spirit than is normal to the members of his group’ (Campbell 253). This observation is true of the narrator of Arctic Dreams and Nightmares, who gains his powers through extraordinary means. This particular shaman, however, draws still more power from a second crisis — that of colonisation.

ARCTIC DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES: THE LIFE

Alootook Ipellie was born in a hunting camp called Nuvuquq on Baffin Island, then known as Frobisher Bay, in 1951. He was born prematurely and, in the absence of medical attention, remained a frail infant. The small family’s troubles were further compounded by his father’s death in a hunting accident later that year (Ipellie 1992 25).

When Ipellie was four, he and his mother and stepfather abandoned their semi-nomadic lifestyle and moved into the township of Iqaluit. The establishment of this township was part of a federal government initiative to create permanent Inuit settlements in the North, as a means of both educating children and stopping the spread of introduced diseases. Transplantation as a result of colonial practices has been a key feature of Inuit life over the past sixty years, and has been a significant influence in the life of Ipellie.

Shortly after his fifth birthday, Ipellie was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Separated from his family for the duration of his illness, he was expected to learn and use English as his primary mode of communication whilst staying at the Mountain Sanitorium in Hamilton. Ipellie notes that he was ‘one of the lucky ones’ because he returned home ‘when many of [his] fellow Inuit ended up buried in Hamilton’. In a cruel irony, his mother was diagnosed with the disease after Ipellie’s return, and ‘was gone for several years, but not more than three’ (Ipellie 1974a 48). His stepfather, Alivutak also succumbed to the illness during Ipellie’s childhood years. So began a pattern of familial separation and movements between the North and South. Historically, there has been a far greater incidence of alcohol abuse in the arctic per capita than elsewhere in Canada, and this impacted directly on the young Ipellie. As he explains:

My stepfather was someone who could be good and treat me like a son when he was sober, but he was a drunkard. When he got drunk he physically abused me. And very often I don’t think he realised what he was doing when he was drunk. When he was sober he was one of the nicest men around. And for that reason, I had to run away from home, my real home, with my Mum and my half-brother, his real son. And my stepfather used to say, ‘Why is this boy, who’s not my real son, staying with us?’ when he was drunk (Mcmahon-Coleman, 2005 1)
Many of Ipellie’s cartoons and, to a lesser extent, his writing, deal with the introduction of alcohol and alcoholism to the Arctic. His stepfather, Alivuktak often became violent under the influence of alcohol. This led to Ipellie’s decision to move out of home and stay with various friends and relatives. When he was ten, an uncle took him onto the land to go hunting. In a 1995 interview with Canadian academic, Michael Kennedy, he noted the importance of this time spent establishing a relationship with his environment, arguing that it is the defining characteristic of the Inuit people: ‘You have to have that spiritual connection with [the land], otherwise you’re gone, you’re not a people anymore’ (Kennedy 158). When the group returned to Frobisher for supplies, his grandparents offered Ipellie a home. He notes that he ‘felt peace’ when he had the security of a place to sleep, regular meals, and ‘people who cared enough about me to accept me to their home and look after me’ (1974b 82).

The stability he found in his grandparents’ home was to be short-lived, however. When he was fifteen he was once again removed from Iqaluit, this time under the auspices of a billeted secondary schooling system. Ipellie was enrolled in a school in Ottawa in 1967, and required to board with an English-speaking Canadian family. He describes himself as ‘no longer an Innumarik’ — a real Inuk (1993 vii) — as a result of this experience. The culture shock he experienced was acute and Ipellie used his creativity as an outlet to combat his shyness and feelings of dislocation. Following the academic success of his first year in Ottawa, he asked to be enrolled in a Vocational Arts course. His state-appointed counsellor did not view art as an appropriate career choice, and attempted to dissuade Ipellie from pursuing it. After eighteen months, his homesickness became overpowering and Ipellie insisted on returning to Iqaluit. Unfortunately Iqaluit did not have a buoyant economy in the early seventies, and Ipellie was unable to find employment (1993 viii). He enrolled in upgrading classes at the Adult Education Centre with a view to returning to Ottawa and Art School. Instead, he was relocated to Yellowknife to continue his secondary studies. As he recalls, he ‘hated living in the student hostel there and asked to go back to Ottawa. Miraculously, they listened’ (1992 27). This time, his guidance counsellor was adamant that Art was an impractical means of making a living in the Arctic. Ipellie was enrolled in an academic high school program, which he quickly abandoned and he returned once more to Iqaluit.

Ipellie battled depression, and was unable to find employment, other than a three-month stint for CBC radio. He did, however, manage to sell three pen-and-ink drawings, and had some poetry, stories and drawings accepted in North/Nord, a publication of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and Inuktitut, the journal of the Inuit Tapirisat, before returning to Ottawa in 1972, in search of more reliable work. He began to spend time in the offices of the Inuit Tapirisat. The editor of Inuit Monthly, Peter Itinnuar — who would later become the first Inuk Member of Parliament — commissioned Ipellie to complete some drawings for the magazine. Ipellie’s role at the magazine gradually expanded,
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with a regular cartoon strip, ‘Ice Box’, beginning in 1974. He worked for the magazine for some six years, as a writer, designer, photographer, translator and cartoonist, and served as editor from 1979 to 1983. During this time he also collaborated with Robin Gedalof on an anthology of Inuit writing, Paper Stays Put, contributing illustrations, poetry and stories. From 1984 to 1986, he edited Inuit magazine, which was published by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference; and from 1991 to 1993 he was the managing editor of Nunavut Newsletter, which was published by the Tugavik Federation of Nunavut, the organisation responsible for the creation of the Nunavut territory and government on April 1, 1999. He later authored a column called ‘Ipellie’s Shadow’ for Nunatsiaq News, a Nunavut weekly newspaper.

Ipellie’s drawings and cartoons have been exhibited in Canada, the United States, Norway, Croatia and Greenland. He continues to contribute to Inuktitut magazine on a freelance basis, providing illustrations and, occasionally, poetry and essays. He has recently been a visiting speaker at the Sydney Writers’ Festival, is a founding member of an Inuit Writers’ Association, and is currently working on a children’s book, Inuit Inventions; but perhaps his most significant achievement to date is his first book — the first single-authored collection of stories by an Inuk. Published to critical acclaim in 1993, Arctic Dreams and Nightmares fused verbal and visual images from Euro-Canadian ‘pop’ culture, traditional Inuit folklore, and Ipellie’s own dreams. Ultimately the shamanic narrator of the stories explores the clash of cultures in the era since arctic colonisation.

ARCTIC DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES: THE TEXT

Christianity has traditionally been one of the key tools of Western colonisation, and the experiences of the Inuit in the Arctic are no exception. Literacy was introduced to the Inuit by Christian missionaries, and consequently almost all reading material available to the Inuit in the early years of colonisation was religious in nature, and many of the earliest written accounts by Inuit authors were testimonials of their conversions to Christianity. Indeed, Ipellie recently illustrated an English-language translation of what is believed to be the first example of Inuit autobiography, The Diary of Abraham Ulrikab, which recounts the ill-fated journey of a neophyte Christian Inuit to Europe in 1880. Christianity has remained an enormous influence on the writings of Inuit, and the conversion of Ipellie’s family to Christianity had an incalculable affect on the course of his life. His works demonstrate an ongoing suspicion of Christianity and evangelism that is reflected in the opening sequence of stories in Arctic Dreams and Nightmares.

The Christian missionary influence is explicitly critiqued in three of the first four stories of the collection: ‘Self-Portrait: Inverse Ten Commandments’, ‘Ascension of My Soul in Death’, and ‘I, Crucified’. The other story, ‘Nanuq, the White Ghost, Repents’ explains the circumstances that led to the narrator’s death and rebirth as a shaman, and provide a counterpoint to the Christian trinity of tales in which it is embedded. Seen as ‘an essential element in the production
of citizens’ by colonial powers (Armitage 4), conversion to Christianity was encouraged among Inuit people and required the complete renunciation of traditional religion. In placing these stories together, Ipellie is challenging the doctrine that the two religions cannot co-exist. Given that polar animism has its ‘basis in dreams, visions and other experiences’ (Merkur 1), Ipellie’s stories, based on dreams and written from the point of view of a shaman, are a reconfiguration of traditional religious beliefs. The inclusion of Christian tropes in the collection emphasises the possibility of co-existence between the two belief systems albeit with Christianity in the minor role.

The opening story, ‘Self-Portrait: Inverse Ten Commandments’ tells of the narrator’s vision of himself in a devilish guise as he approaches Hell’s Garden of Nede. An anagram of Eden, Nede is a kind of anti-paradise. The narrator recounts his feelings of horror when he finds himself ‘literally shrivelling’ in front of an image of himself as ‘Satan Incarnate’ (6). Despite his local minister’s prior promises that maintaining his ‘good-humoured personality toward all mankind’ (6) will assure him a place in the Christian heaven, it seems that the opposite is true. This vignette allows for the possibility that the promises made by missionaries may not be the ‘Truth’ that they are purported to be. The theme of salvation is further questioned when the narrator is saved by a gesture which might be considered sacrilegious by many Christians, but which reflects the uncensored nature of traditional Inuit stories: he kneels the image in the groin. At this point the vision ends abruptly. Even the narrator of the story is baffled by the incident, noting that ‘this was a revelation that I did not quite know how to deal with’ (9), but an ambiguous ending may be read as a feature of traditional Inuit storytelling. According to Agnes Grant, an ending without resolution is a common feature of Inuit stories (2). As an Inuk explained to the early arctic explorer, Knud Rasmussen, ‘it is not always that we want a point to our stories.... It’s only the white men that want a reason and an explanation of everything’ (qtd in Petrone 2).

On reflection, the narrator finally decides that his soul has travelled through time and space to discover a ‘safe passage through the cosmos. The only way any soul is freed is for it to get rid of its Satan incarnate at the doorstep of Hell’s Garden of Nede’ (8). He has saved himself, without the agency of the Church or its ministry.

In his poem, ‘Walking on Both Sides of An Invisible Border’, Ipellie explores the difficulties of being an Inuk, forced by the history of colonisation to participate in two disparate worlds. Here, the voice of the poem longs to participate in both societies as easily as the polar bear or the shaman negotiate these boundaries. Ipellie evidently feels that this poem encapsulates his position ‘between’ white society and the traditional Inuit lifestyle, for he has published it in the Indigenous writers’ journal Gatherings; as a preface to his interview with Michael Kennedy in Studies in Canadian Literature; and he also chose to read it at the 1988 First Peoples Arts Conference at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation, entitled ‘To
See Proudly, Advancing Indigenous Arts beyond the Millennium’, and again at the Canadian High Commission in Canberra in May 2006. This idea of a position ‘between’ is further examined by Ipellie in the introduction to Arctic Dreams and Nightmares, where he comments that ‘Once embedded in a southern environment, I was trained largely to cope with the white, Anglo-Saxon, Euro-Canadian culture’ (vii). In the poem, Ipellie likens his position to that of ‘an illegitimate child/
Forsaken by [his] parents’ (ll 4–5). He writes that continually negotiating the line between cultures ‘is like/having been sentenced to a torture chamber/Without having committed a crime’ (ll 14–15). In the context of the removal of children to residential or foster care to further their education, this becomes even more poignant; juveniles are ‘detained’ elsewhere in order to receive what is considered a basic right for most families. The voice of the poem survives his predicament through a process of ‘fancy dancing’, inventing new dance steps when the border ‘becomes so wide/that I am unable to take another step’ (ll 37–38). This becomes a metaphor for his writing, which is Ipellie’s means of ‘Trying ... to make sense/Of two opposing cultures’ (ll 50–51).

In sharp contrast to the voice of this poem, shamanic figures in the story ‘I, Crucified’ negotiate life between two worlds with a casual arrogance that is considered to be a common feature of Inuit shamanism. Bragging and competitiveness, which are valued forms of interaction in Inuit society, are tested in competitions between rival shamans. The last story in this sequence, ‘I, Crucified’, is a prime example of Ipellie’s mixing of Christian stories and symbols with traditional Inuit practices in order to create an original tale. The narrator, a newly-initiated shaman, discovers his ability to travel through time and finds himself in the past, ‘hanging on a cross, crucified’ and surrounded by tundra wolves (21). The symbols of the original crucifixion have been replaced with tools of everyday life in an Inuit camp: the shaman is fixed to a whalebone cross and held in position by arrows and a harpoon. It transpires that the crucifixion is the result of the jealousy of other shamans who are unable to effectively compete with him. They set a trap, using his own ego and the quest for additional power as bait. The shaman then has to wait a thousand years to be reborn, as the contemporary narrator of Ipellie’s stories.

The narrative implies that Christ was one of many shamans the world has seen, and that the article of belief central to Christianity — that of Christ’s resurrection — can be explained through the traditional Inuit belief in reincarnation. Ipellie critiques the efforts of Christian missionaries to eradicate traditional beliefs in favour of their own, a tendency which led to his own grandfather rejecting his shamanistic powers and converting to Christianity. By intertwining the genealogies of the transplanted and Indigenous religions, he reworks the binaries of religion that the evangelical Christian colonisation created. Ipellie’s response to the difficulty of these two conflicting belief systems is to draw upon the defining features of the shaman in order to create a narrator of great power who is able to negotiate relationships with key figures of Christianity.

The shaman’s psychic or spiritual powers allow him to survive in unfamiliar environments. Rajan and Mohanran argue that ‘Literature and art are reflections of a culture and can serve ... to test limits of colonial influences’ (2). In Ipellie’s stories, the shaman represents the outer limits of colonial influence; in his transformations, he does not forego any of his traditional power, but rather adds
to it through his contact with the dominant culture. Ipellie sets up a complex relationship for readers of the dominant culture to negotiate: his shaman represents an ideology counter to that of the Euro-Canadian hegemony, yet his relationships with figures from within that ideology simultaneously authorise the shaman’s viewpoint. In this way he is able to cater to readers from both cultures.
The final story in the collection, ‘The Exorcism’, also deals with the conflict between traditional and imported religions, this time depicted as a battle between two powerful shamans, named Kappia — meaning ‘Sacred’ — and Guti, the Inuktitut word for ‘God’. Guti is an evil shaman with whom Kappia has long battled for control of the camp. The concerns with Guti stem from his abuse of power ‘to gain material things for himself’ (177). Kappia accuses Guti of abusing women and adolescent girls in return for substandard shamanic services. After a long struggle and much bloodletting, Kappia is finally able to mortally wound Guti (177–78). With his dying breath, Guti curses Kappia’s family with ‘eternal punishment’ (178). As Guti dies, ‘the colour of his brown eyes turn[s] white’ (178). Here, ‘whiteness’ is associated with both physical and spiritual death.

Kappia’s relief that the abuse and lies will die with Guti is shortlived, however, as the curse comes to fruition. The shaman-narrator is called on to exorcise Kappia and his family. The trauma experienced by those involved in the ten-day long process is clearly evident. The shaman records that ‘there were many nights when one or two of them and sometimes all at once had horrific nightmares. More often than not, most of them would come out with terrible fevers and it was not unusual to witness members of the family vomiting their food several times a day’ (179). This is reminiscent of a detoxification process, which invokes one of the main thematic concerns within Ipellie’s body of work: alcoholism among the Inuit. This symbolism also implies that for some, Christianity has been an addictive toxin.

Kappia’s wife and the mother of his ten children is the last member of the family to be exorcised. She is divested of her clothes, and the homed Guti appears in her birth canal, as though he is an infant being born — or in this case, reborn. The shaman-narrator cuts off Guti’s hands so that the being cannot hang on to Kappia’s wife (180). The demon hisses like a snake when he appears. Both the hands and the hissing recall the first story in the collection, ‘Self-Portrait: the Inverse Ten Commandments’, in which the shaman-narrator’s fingertips are transformed into small beings which hissed out the anti-commandments, ‘Thou shalt’ (6). The ten-day time period involved and ten offspring also relate to the opening story, suggesting the completion of a cycle. The role of the mother and the apparent immaculate conception involved in Guti finding his way into her womb are also references to Christian beliefs, as is the incongruously-placed crucifix around the demon’s neck. The presence of horns on the being not only invokes traditional representations of the devil, but also of the homed seal in the illustration which accompanies ‘After Brigitte Bardot’, another story in the collection. Moreover, the irony of a shaman named ‘God’ being evil is foreshadowed in the humorous ‘When God Sings the Blues’, in which the Christian God calls himself ‘Satanassee’6, the Inuktitut word for ‘Satan’. As the final piece in the collection, ‘The Exorcism’ ties together many of the images and concerns outlined throughout the book. It certainly makes clear the deeply-held suspicion of Christianity which
permeates Ipellie’s work, and both the violently descriptive language contained within the story, and the artwork which accompanies it, conform to traditional Inuit representations rather than the conventions of mainstream publishing. Ipellie’s ability to utilise traditional storytelling practices for a contemporary non-
indigenous audience is one of the strengths of his work. He also draws upon his familial shamanic tradition as an inspiration for his stories.

The spiritual functions of Inuit shamans are explored in a number of the stories, including ‘The Public Execution of the Hermaphrodite Shaman’, ‘Summit with Sedna, the Mother of the Sea Beasts’ and ‘SuperStud’. In the first, a shaman named Ukjuarluk (meaning big, bearded seal) travels to the sea bottom and negotiates the end to a famine with Sedna. As numerous social anthropologists have noted, one of the shaman’s primary functions was to engage in mystical journeys to ‘commune with celestial powers in order to advance the interests of his fellow man’ (Lewis, 1986 80. See also Mircade 289). Typically, in times of famine or illness, a shaman would be asked to enter a séance and negotiate with Sedna, the Mother of all Sea Beasts, a positive outcome for the community. (Lewis 1986 92). When Sedna was appeased, the animals would be released. Often shamans were paid in kind, and in this story, Ukjuarluk is offered a night with the hunter’s daughter, a beautiful young woman by the name of Piu. Piu, whose name means pretty, overwhelms the hermaphrodite shaman, and ‘during the height of their expression of mutual passion … Ukjuarluk would lose all care for his top garment’ (29), revealing the breasts which mark his hermaphrodisim.

The following morning, Ukjuarluk finds the camp deserted. He returns to his own camp, only to be accosted by his friends and family, and publicly disrobed. It is the women of the camp who are given the ‘honour of executing the shamed hermaphrodite shaman’ (31). The concept of a hermaphrodite is a valuable one in that it suggests two kinds of being in one; an alternative hybrid figure. Yet, while shamans are permitted certain transgressions, the idea of a male being imbued with female features and hence, presumably, female power, is clearly presented as unacceptable within the context of traditional Inuit camp life. Justice is swift, harsh and meted out by those whose power has been appropriated. Located between ‘I, Crucified’ and ‘Summit with Sedna, the Mother of Sea Beasts’, the story highlights that shamanic powers are, to some degree, mediated by the power of the common Inuk.

Sedna, the Sea Mother is, in the words of Taivitialuk Alaasuaq, the ‘most powerful and dangerous of the ancient Inuit spirits. All the animals of the land and sea originate with her, and if she is angered, starvation will surely follow’ (qtd in Gedalof 94). The name Sedna, meaning ‘the one down there’ (Merkur 104), is attributed to the Baffin Island band of Inuit known as Ooqomiut. According to legend, the young Sedna was travelling in a kayak with her family when a storm started. Her parents blamed her for the storm and threw her overboard. In most versions of the story, Sedna is said to have clung to the edge of the kayak as her father severed her fingers knuckle by knuckle. The pieces of her fingers were transformed into the sea creatures that the Inuit hunted in order to survive (Merkur 133). When traditional observances are not kept, Sedna’s hair becomes dirty with the sins of mankind and she withholds the sea animals, necessitating
a séance or a visit from a shaman. Ultimately, she is the most powerful figure in Inuit mythology because a slight against her leads to famine.

Sedna appears in the stories of all Inuit peoples, but it is interesting to note that the biggest variations — largely because of Christian influences — appear amongst the Baffin Island people, Ipellie’s cultural grouping. Ipellie further adapts the figure, altering both her appearance and her motivations in his version
of the story. For example, the illustration that accompanies the story clearly shows that she has an extra eye in the palm of each hand, in contrast to the Baffin Island version of the story in which she has only one eye, perhaps suggesting that such a powerful figure sees more than ordinary humans. Ipellie further changes the common trait of her inability to walk, transforming the handicap that prevents movement on land into a mermaid’s tale that draws on Western classical mythology. Sedna is an important character to invoke in these stories since, like the pervasive influences of the colonising cultures, she is a force both unfamiliar and powerful, with whom negotiation is critical. Ipellie is not interested in reproducing the European-influenced narratives, but neither does he feel bound to excavate and reconstruct the pre-contact stories. Instead, he specifically resists any sense of Inuit culture as ‘fixed’ or ‘past tense’ by continuously rupturing the accepted versions of the tales, transforming features of each. Like the shaman, this transformative power allows him to negotiate cultures.

The account of the shaman’s visit to the Sea Bottom closely follows the traditional sequence of events as described in theologian Daniel Merkur’s *Powers Which We Do Not Know: The Gods and Spirits of the Inuit* (113–14). The successful song composition and the ease with which he passes the sea dogs indicate that this is an extremely powerful shaman. Similarly, his attempts to placate her by combing and braiding her hair closely follow the traditional patterns of observance. In this instance, however, Sedna is not withholding the sea animals because of Inuit transgressions, but because of her own frustrations. She agrees to release the sea animals on the condition that the shaman helps her achieve orgasm, a task at which all others have failed. Forewarned of this possibility by his discussions with other shamans, the narrator has joined with them to create ‘our version of *Frankenstein*’ (41). This creature begins a chant which transports Sedna into a ‘forced-sensual-dream-trance’ where she ‘finally meets her match … her male equivalent, Andes, a god of the sea, who presides over all the sea beasts on the other side of the universe’ (41). Their coupling releases both her frustrations, and the sea beasts. For the narrator, it is the ultimate happy ending, since ‘his reputation as a powerful shaman remain[s] perfectly intact’ (42), reflecting the competitive nature of shamans, who traditionally engage in song duels to prove their worth as spiritual leaders.

In some Iglulik, Baffin Island and Polar versions, a final dimension is added to the story when Sedna’s father feels remorse and joins her at the bottom of the sea. These three groups are also the only ones whose shamans are believed to enter a light trance through a séance, allowing them to travel to the Sea Mother’s dwelling, comb her hair and appease her. Shamans encounter her father, Anguta, who is the active ruler of the dead. His role is to carry souls to the sea-bottom, and then torment the unworthy by pinching them. The door is guided by a dog, believed to be Sedna’s husband, which steps aside only long enough for Anguta to pass. This idea of Sedna living in her father’s house, where he has the role
of tormenting sinners, seems to have parallels with Christian stories. Indeed, Merkur argues that the accretion of Christian iconography is so extensive that it is impossible to recover the pre-contact role of the father (138).

Ipellie’s shaman does not draw authority solely from spiritual iconography. The shaman’s role, while spiritual, is also that of the wordsmith; a shaman would be expected to excel in song contests, and to know a number of stories about his
or her community. Ipellie further draws on the authority of William Shakespeare, often hailed as the greatest storyteller in the English literary canon. In ‘The Five Shy Wives of the Shaman’, Ipellie’s shaman-narrator meets with a man whose family includes five masked wives who are revealed to be gorgons. Taken into the confidence of his fellow-traveller, he is told that the shaman is a sympathetic soul who pities their families and thus feels obliged to marry gorgon daughters wherever he finds them. The masks replicate the dramatic iconic masks of tragedy and comedy. Again, there is a double impact to this literary choice; the narrator is once more imbued with a seemingly unquestionable authority, and yet, by re(-)presenting this in an altered way, Ipellie is interrogating the hallowed position occupied by certain writers within the Western literary canon. Shakespeare, as the hallmark of ‘good’ English language literature, is both cited as a literary authority, and undermined by being (dis)placed in the Arctic, and represented as one among many shamans, and perhaps as one more fallible than most because of his sensitive and ‘artistic’ nature.

Finally, the eponymous story ‘Arctic Dreams and Nightmares’ depicts the harsh realities of life in the Arctic, which Ipellie describes as ‘a world unto itself’ (133), and summarises a number of Ipellie’s key concerns and influences, including the conflicts between cultures and religions; the interdependence between man and beast in the Arctic; and the effect of alcohol — and potentially alcoholism — on the life of an individual Inuk. The alter ego shares with the author a desire for solitude, and is keen to explore the alternate realities of the dreaming state. Specifically, he seeks to create his own version of paradise, which he dreams is ‘Just around the next mountain’ (126). In the dead of winter, however, life is at its most tenuous and dreams give way to nightmares (127). In the dream he recounts how he becomes the ‘incredible shrinking man’ after ‘inadvertently [drinking] water from a small lake’ (129). Here Ipellie’s Inuit narrator has a moment which is clearly reminiscent of Lewis Carroll’s Alice, even though he argues elsewhere in this story that different cultures breed different types of dreams (128). This suggests that the accretion and hybridisation of cultures in the years following colonisation have been pervasive. In fact, forced to live a solitary and vegetarian existence, the shaman-narrator claims to be able to relate to other figures as diverse as k.d. lang and God in his Heaven (130).) In this state, the shaman-narrator has a nightmare wherein a huge eagle emerges from his chest [see cover image]. The pain and damage of this experience are described in detail, culminating in the eagle breaking free and flying away (131). After some weeks of reflection, the shaman is able to decode the meaning of the dream. The eagle, he decides, is representative of his unconscious mind, begun as a blood cell that became disenchanted with the amount of alcohol consumed by the shaman-narrator. After twenty years of planning, the cell had mutated, rallied a trillion others, and organised their spectacular escape when the narrator was at his ‘most vulnerable [on a] restless night in the middle of a great storm’ (132). The body which is left

behind is described as 'just another vegetating dead human being' (133). Thus the eagle embodies ideals of freedom, intelligence and strength, and these are presented as being essential for a meaningful human existence.

Potent, adaptable and resilient to the excesses of colonising cultures and capitalism, the writer-shaman is depicted by Alootook Ipellie as a figure capable
of negotiating the difficult circumstances of Inuit life. The ‘world unto itself’ of *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* is a negotiated space in which powerful iconography drawn from both cultures represents and gives voice to the living Inuk.

NOTES

2. Personal correspondence, 21/10/04.
3. Now known as the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, this is the national Inuit organisation.
4. Later known as *Inuit Today*.
6. For a detailed analysis of this story, see McMahon-Coleman in *Australasian-Canadian Studies*, 23.2 2006.
7. This contemporising strategy has been used by a number of Inuit writers in an attempt to reconcile old beliefs with the new belief structures and technologies that have accompanied white settlement. Taivitialuk Alaasuaq’s story ‘The Half-Fish’, in Gedalof’s *Paper Stays Put*, is a further example of this.
8. Ipellie often uses bold type to highlight concepts from Western culture, as an inversion of the common practice of italicising words or concepts from Indigenous cultures.

WORKS CITED


McMahon-Coleman, Kimberley 2005, 'Interview with Alootook Ipellie', Australasian-Canadian Studies—Minorities and Cultural Assertions, 23.2, pp 77–89


