

Arctic Lessons: Decoding Bombs, Bottles and Clocks

(Note: I first drafted this memoir in early 2021, before uncovering in my attic, a report I didn't even remember that I had written about the experience. It reminded me of aspects of the Arctic trip that I had completely forgotten, and also corrected some of my earlier descriptions and reflections.

I include some of those excerpts from the report here in italics, to acknowledge the fragility of memory as well as the shifting perspectives that I bring to this profound experience, 46 years later. I also include in brackets some further comments, rethinking my 2021 narrative a few years later).

Little did I imagine that my first teaching contract after completing my PhD in the U.S. and moving to Canada would introduce me to the Canadian Arctic and to its hidden colonial history.

In 1978 I was hired as a part-time instructor in the Department of Applied Social Science at Concordia University in Montreal. The Department Chair Dick McDonald was yet another [older male mentor](#) to me, a kindly professor who taught his classes in a circle of tables to encourage participation and continued working outside the university on community development projects. I remained living in Toronto working with the Participatory Research Group of the International Council for Adult Education and commuted every week to teach two classes in Social Intervention and Community Development. It was quite a crazy weekly journey on the train: climbing into a berth every Sunday evening to sleep my way to Montreal, rolling out in the morning to spend two days on campus. Then after teaching my Tuesday night class, I would board the night train to rock my way back to Toronto (after treating myself to a Montreal bagel and a cup of red wine from gallon jugs which could only be found in Quebec!).

But if that weekly trip awakened me to the complex political realities of the French-speaking province of Quebec, it was not as earth-shattering as the journey north that I experienced with my Concordia colleague Dick. In 1978 he was invited for a consultancy by an old friend, Murray Horn, who coordinated the Adult Education Program of the regional government of the eastern Arctic (what is now Nunavut). Dick asked me to join him on two trips to Baffin Island to co-facilitate workshops with 20 adult educators during their biannual staff meeting. They were almost equally divided between Inuit educators from the region and non-Inuit (*Qallunaat*), mostly young white educators from Canada's urban southern edge. I, of course, jumped at the opportunity to visit the northern tip of my newly adopted country; the 2,400 kilometres from Toronto was more than two-thirds of the distance to Peru (where I had recently lived) but the air fare was just as expensive.

(Little did I realize that the colonialism of four centuries whose impact I had witnessed in Peru was starkly fresh and alive in the Arctic region of so-called Canada, promoted by the state for its own interests in the region's resources and in a geopolitical struggle for Arctic sovereignty.

The 'Invisible' North

We landed in the main city (really only a town of a few thousand) on the island, then bearing the colonial name of Frobisher Bay, known since 1987 as Iqaluit and now the capital of [Nunavut](#). My first impression of the town was that it looked like all the buildings had been dropped from the sky. Concrete blocks stood in stark contrast to the flat white treeless but undulating icy landscape.



The only grocery store I visited also seemed to have come from the sky, filled with canned and processed goods flown in from the south, tripling their price due to the exorbitant cost of airplane fuel. The items being checked out at the cash mimicked what is now the ubiquitous junk food filling the shelves at any corner store or gas station convenience store – sugary pop and greasy and salty chips. Nowhere to be seen were any of the traditional foods of the Inuit, who until the 1950s had lived off the land as well as from the sea.

At a welcome dinner that evening, I met a dentist working in the community, who recounted how he had recently treated an 80-year-old with perfect teeth as well as a three-year-old with blackened rotten teeth. I shuddered at the image. While I had yet to focus on food issues in my research, the questions were forming in my mind. Not only about food, but about how they (and we) got to this place in history.

Colonial education and transformation

Carol Horn, Murray's wife, was a teacher in the local school and invited me to visit her third-grade classroom. I was warmly greeted by lively Inuit children; when I asked to take their picture, they crowded together to fit into the frame of my camera. In the late 1970s, there was some attempt at bilingual education in the primary grades; I noticed the walls were covered with the graphic calligraphy of Inuktitut, visual reminders of another way of knowing, of being. Still, most of the teachers had also, like the food, flown in from the south, and were English-speaking, like Carol, so they had to invite Elders who still carried the language into their classrooms. In my journal, I noted that I found in Carol's class *an incredible creativity and commitment to Inuit control in the classroom, with all forms of media used by the kids, who created their own materials.*



The tensions between the teachers operating within an educational system imposed by the federal government and the traditional ways of learning through observation and intergenerational survival activities on the land were brewing under the surface, but not yet clearly articulated. This was perhaps one reason we were invited to work with the adult educators. Dick thought I could share some of the approaches to popular education I had experienced in Peru, based on the ideas of Brazilian Paulo Freire in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which had inspired liberatory educational processes tied to social movements around the world. Similar to the Indigenous rural migrants I had worked with in Lima's squatter settlements, Indigenous populations in Canada's north were also victims of oppressive state policies and colonial-style education. {But at what point was our exporting of Latin American popular education practices yet another form of cognitive imperialism, still not home-grown deep within the ways of knowing and cultural practices of the Inuit?}

In my 1978 report, I had already offered this background:

Adult education in the north is officially part of the mammoth colonial government structure that predominates from Ottawa to Yellowknife to the multitude of local government committees in the settlements. As in most “underdeveloped over-exploited” areas of the world, adult educators are really community workers, generalists, working with basic survival and organizational issues; in this particular case, they’re caught in the dilemma of having to administer manpower (sic) and other top-down educational programs, while trying, in their words, to “grassroot the system” and facilitate the development of Inuit-controlled education.

The Baffin region group constitute most of the adult educators in the Northwest territories; they are the only group which has formed their own association – outside of the government rubric. Many of the nine white adult educators are former [Frontier College](#) workers and most have extensive experience in the North. It was their commitment to Inuit self-determination that led them to initiate an on-the-job training program for Inuit adult educators to eventually take over their jobs. Adult Education in the north seems to suffer the same low status problems as it does elsewhere, but it also appears to be the most innovative and progressive of the government programs.

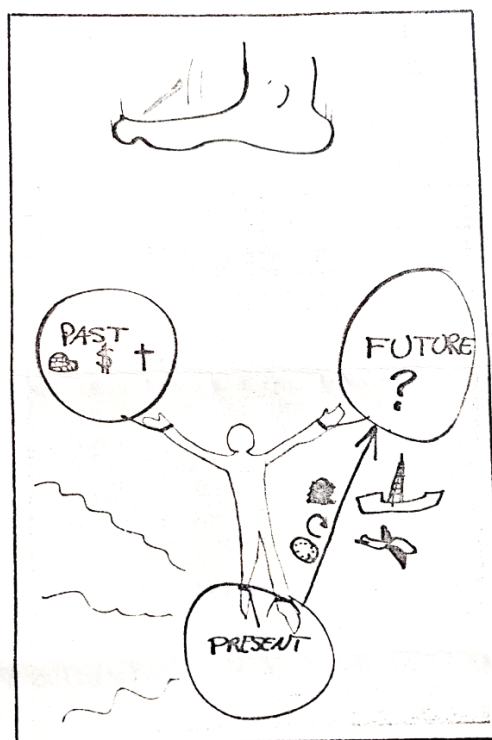
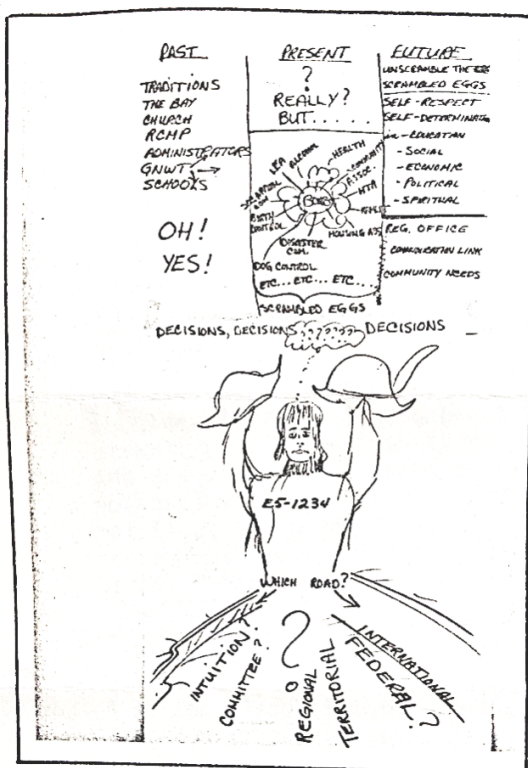
While my 1978 report concluded that *I was deeply impressed with the people and the struggle they have undertaken*, the first version of this Arctic experience that I drafted in early 2021, seems to revert to victim characterization, without acknowledging how much resistance and solidarity was already activated, even back in the 1970s.

I do remember feeling out of place, another southerner come north with little understanding of the context. And I had little idea about the best way to engage this group of adult educators from two different cultures. But we had been invited to apply Freirean approaches, and so our first goal was to start with their experiences, a basic principle of popular education.

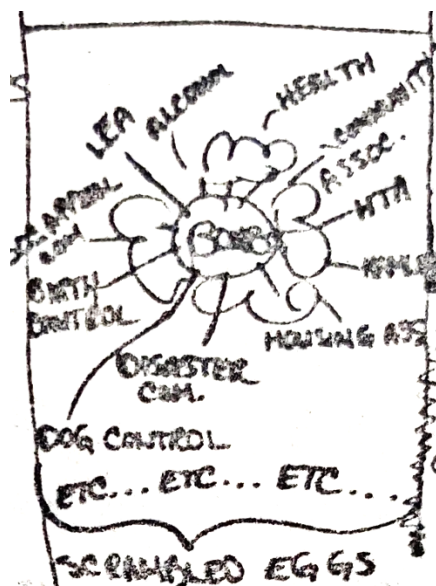
{I had forgotten that we had, in fact, *identified themes through previous collaborative planning: cross-cultural differences, adult education/community development/politics, Teaching English as a Second Language, and group dynamics.*}

Drawing the past, present and future

On the first day, after a welcome and introductions, we proposed an activity to get participants to describe what they understood as the past, present and future of this Arctic region. They were to work alone at first, drawing their personal perceptions on a flip chart. Then we asked them to share their individual drawings in two separate groups: one of all the Inuit educators and the other of the white educators from southern Canada. Each group was to consolidate their ideas and create a collective drawing to bring back to the larger group. *I only found copies of these actual drawings after I had drafted this account. So many details had been lost to my memory, and I try to recover them below:*

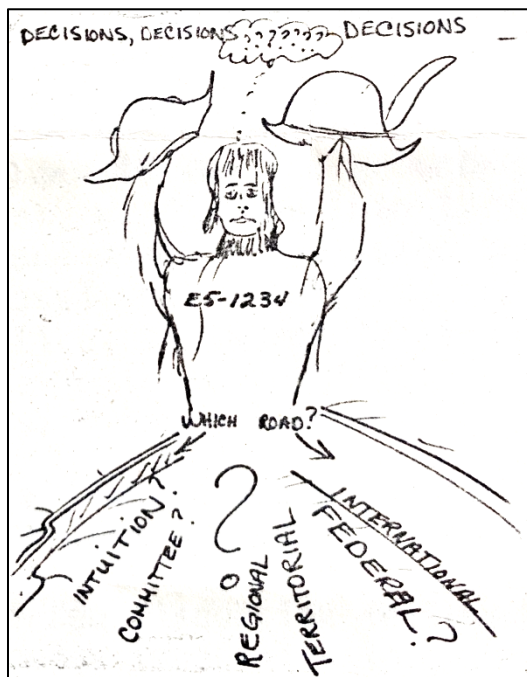
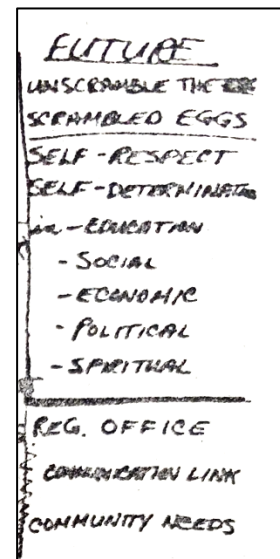


When we reconvened, the Inuit group went first. Their cultural traditions topped the list of elements followed by a shopping list of invading institutions: The Bay (referring to the Hudson's Bay Company, the first traders and key economic player), the Church, RCMP, the Greater Northwest Territorial Government, and Schools – a fully integrated package of colonial economic, political, military, spiritual and educational forces.



In the present (the late 1970s), they drew an exploding bomb, which could refer specifically to the forced relocations of nomadic people as well as more generally to the overall impact of the colonial institutions named above. The bomb had ignited a series of social problems (health, alcohol, birth control, dog control) and had imposed an alien social structure on to forced settlements, with community associations, housing associations, disaster committee and a social appeal committee?. They described the results of these impositions metaphorically as "scrambled eggs," a messy plate of all these forces combined, in one alien food, dependent on southern chickens replacing the northern animals hunted for a traditional diet.

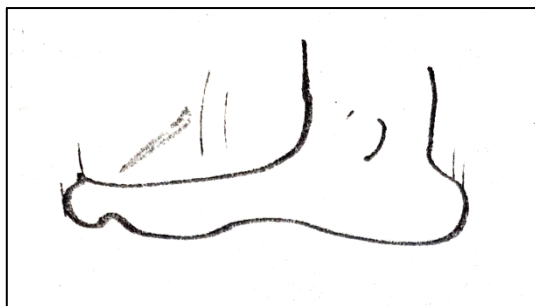
They continued the metaphor in their goal for the future, the challenge being to “unscramble the eggs.” This is a powerful metaphor when considering the interconnected elements that make up the colonial dish....how do you return them to their original singular states when they are so inextricable? But the vision is clear: self-respect at the personal level, self-determination at the level of the community and nation – understood as Inuit control of the educational, social, economic, and political systems, with a spiritual core. They located their own work in the regional adult education program as based on community needs, and serving to connect them across the vast Arctic region.



Perhaps the most striking part of their drawing was a kind of self-portrait of themselves as Inuit educators, wearing two hats, caught between two cultures, but bearing the trauma of their peoples' relocation. The number on the chest, I only learned in revisiting this drawing now, refers to the Inuit number system. The government had required the Inuit to wear round, numbered tags so they could keep track of the population. In retrospect, this practice causes me to shudder, not only for its echoing of the numbering and tattooing of Holocaust victims, but also for its similarity to dog tags; considering that dogs had been so central to the Inuit's way of life, and were also decimated in the process of colonization, the connection is painful and

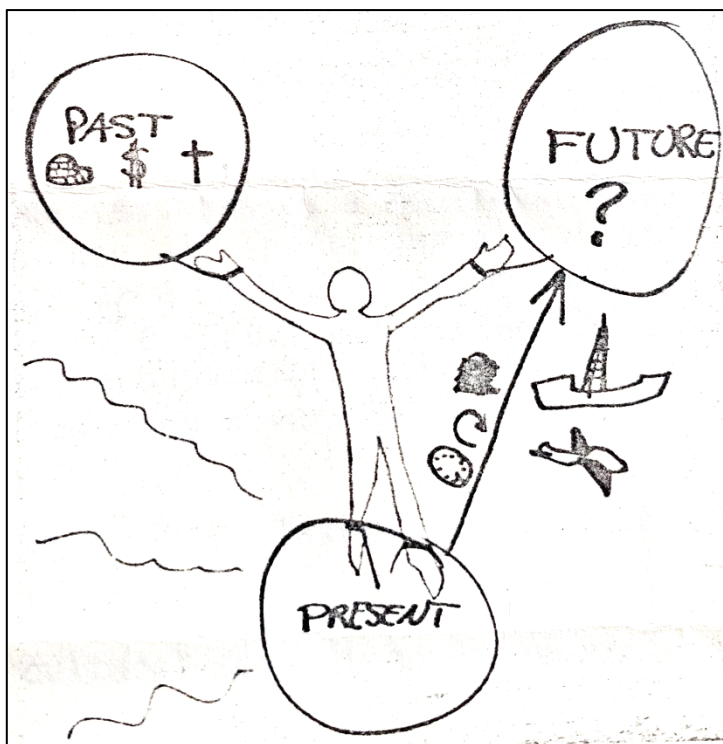
powerful.

Nonetheless, the drawing does reflect a sense of agency, on the part of the adult educators. While they recognize the contradictions they face, and difficult choices they have to make, they still see themselves as decision-makers. The roads they must choose from reflect an understanding of political levels of power (from local to global) and might also imply different ways to organize, drawing on intuitive ways of knowing and being that are deep within their cultural and spiritual practices.



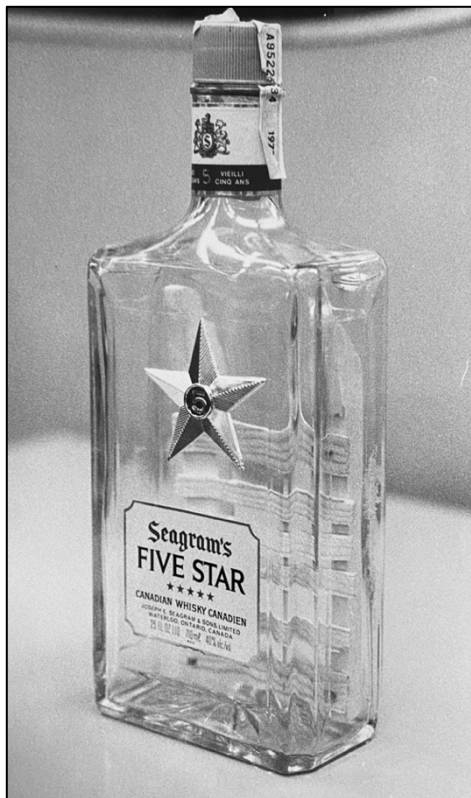
When it came time for the *Qalunaat* or white group to display their drawing, I was intrigued by the differences in their depictions. They consolidated all the colonial powers (political, economic, and cultural) into one Big Foot, representing the federal government, while the Inuit had a more nuanced sense of all the forms that foot had take, reflected in the committee structures and social impacts on their daily lives.

The white educators portrayed the past, present and future of the region more simplistically. The past included the igloo, to represent the traditional Inuit way of life on the land, impacted by the dollar and the cross, both codes for the economic interests of the colonizers accompanied by the Church, resource extraction going hand in hand with cultural imperialism. I wonder today, in late 2021, how a white educator ally would now paint a more detailed picture of that process – perhaps including residential schools, expansive drilling, a challenged seal trade, youth suicide, and other harsh realities that have entered into the public consciousness.



{an earlier draft of this story constructed by my imagination was not completely accurate, characterizing my fellow White educators simplistically as well: “They had drawn a past that showed the nomadic Inuit living off the land, a kind of romanticized image. In the present they depicted the new life for Inuit in towns, sleds replaced by snow mobiles as the main transport.” }

The white educators were seemingly bound to the present but very uncertain about their future. In my 1978 report, I noted that *the Whites left a big question mark, part reflecting a pessimism, part reflecting their own role as outsiders and their future goal to leave.*



The symbols around the arrow pointing to a future of oil rigs and airplanes may bespeak that pessimism, acknowledging ongoing colonial extractive industries and dependence on air flight for personal transport and cargo purposes. I don't recall how they decoded the other symbols, one of which appears to be a clock, perhaps representing industrial capitalist notions of time, in contrast to a more organic sense of time, based on close relationship with the land, climate and animals.

In the discussion following the two group presentations, we compared the two perspectives. My report noted common themes that were shared by both White and Inuit educators: *a sense of traditional culture being invaded by the Hudson's Bay Company, RCMP, Church, Government, Business; a feeling of being torn between two cultures, between past and future; a desire to control change and to reverse the direction of development, and a future goal of self-determination.*

In reading this now, I realize that my early 2021 reconstruction of the workshop didn't give enough credit to the White educators, who shared a critical analysis and solidarity with their Inuit colleagues. And perhaps I also discredit myself in my retrospective account, for I can see in that earlier report, written 46 years ago, I was also relatively conscious of the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples by the Canadian state and its economic interests, even if we didn't use that term at the time.

There were also clear differences that emerged from the collective analysis of the two drawings, however. The mixed group concluded that *the Whites visualized a potential (symbolic) bomb exploding in the future, while for the Inuits, it had already fallen.*

Codes of colonization

During my visit, I had been shown an art piece that spoke volumes about the impact of this 'explosion,' the colonial process of forced settlement. An Inuit artist had carved a balsa wood replica of a dog sled and somehow inserted it into a Canadian whisky bottle. Alcohol was one of the most destructive "gifts" of European colonization that contributed to the disintegration of Indigenous culture and communities, while numbing the pain of the loss of land and livelihood that the relocations had caused.

The sled was a powerful symbol of that loss: for 2,000 years the sled pulled by dogs had been the traditional transport for nomadic Arctic populations securing food sources. Two experiences gave me a visceral sense of this shift. One of the teachers took me on a tour of the frozen tundra on his snowmobile, the vehicle replacing the sled. At another

moment, a teacher invited us to fly to her town on the island, Igloolik. There I bore witness to the demise of the beloved dogs. I was horrified to see groups of mangy huskies tied up in chains by houses. They were clearly losing their strength from disuse and eventually losing their lives and their important social roles in the community.

(Only recently has the deliberate slaughter of the Nunavik sled dogs been known and acknowledge publicly. In late 2024, Gary Anandasangaree, the minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, offered a [government apology](#) as part of the slow grinding process of naming another “truth” necessary for any reconciliation process.)

I was beginning to get a taste of a monumental historical process. While Peru had exposed me to the centuries of colonialism in the south, I felt as though I was witnessing colonialism continuing to happen right now in my adopted country. The cultural schism became clearer as we continued our Inuit-Qalunaat dialogue. Having identified ourselves and our different positions through the drawings, we shifted the conversation to what educators could do in response to this reality.

Films as catalysts and community creations

Since I had been invited, in part, to share the ideas of problem-posing education proposed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we offered two films that introduced these ideas in practice. [“Starting from Nina.”](#) a film created by my friends at the Development Education Centre, featured Freire himself, but mainly focused on the application of his ideas in three Canadian contexts: an elementary school class, an ESL class, and an international NGO staff. I honestly can’t remember the other film that my report says we showed “Peru: Literacy for Social Change,” but it probably drew on my own 1976 doctoral research on Freirean methods in Peru.

My interest in Freire includes his use of “codes” such as photos and films to catalyze discussion with a group. Viewers are encouraged to “decode” the images and stories by connecting them to their own personal, social and cultural experiences. The films clearly generated strong connections, as my 1978 report notes:

- *Inuits noting the importance of having teachers of the indigenous culture;*
- *A commitment to developing problem-based curriculum relevant to the community (while facing the government pressure of having generalized territory-wide objectives);*
- *The connection to the issue of land as a critical theme in the North as well as in Peru;*
- *The contradiction of working for Inuit self-determination in a state-dominated program, with the ensuing tensions and tactics.*

The other use of the films on Freirean methods was to reconsider how ESL (English as a Second Language) was being taught. A Montreal ESL expert had been invited to run

this session. This experience was lost to my memory, so my report reveals a very interesting and ultimately constructive tension:

In order to lay the groundwork for the ESL sessions, we divided into three groups: one all Inuit, one all white and one mixed – and asked people to design a second language program, purposely not specifying the language. The result was a powerful political statement in itself: the two groups with Inuit participants chose to teach Inuktitut to whites, designing a very practical cultural activity-based learning program.

The all-white group concluded that the English classes they were teaching to women were not really needed.

I don't know how I could have forgotten how this unfolded:

A heated discussion followed around cultural domination in general and English language imposition in particular.

The TESL resource person was ready to pack his bags and “burn my books at the airport” after his defense of English as the “window to the world” and to the superior written form, was challenged heartily. Once we began to struggle with the double-edged value of learning English (for defense of one's culture as well), we worked on ESL techniques for an afternoon. (The three cultural task groups were videotaped for later analysis of the cultural and political dynamics operative in groups).

I had also forgotten how central the use of video was to our work, and to our discussion of future educational strategies. I was reminded in the report:

One group brought a videotape training tool they had produced on how to run a committee meeting and how to use the outside (usually white) resource person other than be used by him. It was carefully thought-through, scripted, technically impeccable, immediately useful to all adult educators. As the first indigenously produced and the most effective material at the conference, it made a strong political statement about the potential of Inuit control and about a more dynamic and critical use of the medium of television. (In Igloolik, where the meeting was held, the community had twice voted to keep T.V. (i.e. CBC) out of the town – clearly recognizing its potential for destroying culture. But there are also some Inuit organizing a potentially Inuit-controlled station which could use the tool in a different way for their own purposes).

The three-hour discussion that followed the premiere of the tape was the most powerful yet. The Inuit spoke most passionately about cultural revival, about their ambiguous role, about the use of media, about their strategy for the next few years.

Deepening the dialogue and discomfort

As this conversation was clearly led by the Inuit, it took our cross-cultural dialogue to a new level:

They shared their perceptions of whites with Qatloonaq adult educators and asked for the Whites' perception of them. The two groups were confronting some very deep issues about the future of the north and their future; long silences – quite common in the north – were later named as important periods for nonverbal collective analysis.

There was a strong sense of struggle, solidarity, commitment. Participants resisted "wrapping up" the discussion as premature and artificial; they preferred to let it hang and came back the next day to reflect on it. (An important learning for me as a facilitator of collective analysis).

My first draft of this Arctic tale actually focused on the moment referred to above. It was because this was perhaps my most profound learning moment, and my behaviour was directly implicated. This is how I described it before finding my notes:

There was some discomfort on behalf of the white participants, and I remember feeling awkward in facilitating the discussion. How to engage these very real differences? Here I was an ignorant outsider, a white educator from the south, guiding the process. Yet somehow it felt as though that very discomfort was opening up a space for one of the most honest conversations they had ever had. I felt silences being broken, painful realities being revealed. We were digging deeper.

We were scheduled to end at 5 PM that day, and at 4:45, I suggested that, in proper popular education style, we synthesize what we had learned and wrap up the day, a clean closing. At that point, one of the Inuit participants protested. "We are in the middle of a very important conversation, one we are only beginning," he started. "We are talking about things that are painful and are not easily resolved. We have started to listen to each other and we need to take time to digest what we have heard. We cannot just "wrap up" this conversation." And he concluded "We need to let it sit." (This was how I reconstructed the discussion which in 1978 I had noted the Inuit educators had resisted for being *premature and artificial*)

I concluded that my facilitation was, once again, dominated by the clock. And by structures and protocols that don't always respond to organic processes, what people need, what a group needs, what a community needs, what a so-called nation needs. I was deeply humbled, and yes, we let it sit. I let it sit...

Later that night, Dick found me in tears. I was shaken by the tension, by the reality that we were uncovering, by the structural obstacles to change, by my own inadequacy to respond in any helpful authentic way. I didn't know how to process my own relationship to this profound historical injustice, what is now, 50 years later, named, even by our political leaders, as "cultural genocide."

Now that you know....what do you do...?

When I returned home to Toronto after the two visits to the Arctic, I didn't know where to take my dis-ease, my awakening consciousness, my desire to do something. Most people had no idea about the reality I witnessed. Who could I talk to? But, as Thomas King so aptly put it in *The Truth About Stories*, "now that you have heard this story, you can't say that you didn't know."

And so I wrote the 5-page report that I have just uncovered and inserted into my reflections. I directed it to my fellow adult educators, colleagues in the budding Participatory Research Group (PRG). This group was already engaging in Indigenous issues, first by collaborating with CASNP (Canadian Association of Solidarity with Native Peoples), and I suggested ways we might support our Inuit counterparts.

A key proposal is one that had repercussions over time. It's another connection that had slipped my memory. But my 1978 report reminded me:

Monica Ittusardjuat, the first Inuit to finish the training program and become an official adult educator is the spear-head of a cultural revival movement within this context. She's involved in the Inuit Film Society and a new TV channel development. She was inspired by the Greenland Inuit theatre here in March to develop a popular theatre movement.

I went on to write: *She would like to keep in touch and I suggested we might send her related materials from our international contacts who are using various cultural forms and media for consciousness raising.* I noted that *she spouts not only Freire, but Kidd*, referring to Ross Kidd who was part of our PRG group, and had worked with popular theatre workers in Africa.

We did, in fact, keep in touch, and in 1979 we invited Monica to a national gathering of activists in Popular Art and Media (I've also found a report of that conference and a photo of Monica!). This small gathering of 18 was to generate material for a joint book on the subject, but it was never brought to fruition.

REVIEW THIS REPORT AND INCLUDE A PARAGRAPH ABOUT IT, WITH PHOTOS OF MONICA AND HER SON.

Fast forward 40 years and in 2019, I discovered that Monica Ittusardjuat was being honoured as a producer at the annual ImagiNative Film Festival. I found my way to a room where she had just presented, only to learn that she had already left and was on her way back up north. From that small experiment with video in Igloolik, resisting the domination of a "national broadcaster" with outsiders telling their stories within a colonial frame, Monica and others have built a network of local stations and have nurtured a growing community of local filmmakers (Zacharias Kunuk, Alatheia Amaquq-Baril, et al).

A survivor of three residential schools, Monica completed a graduate degree in Educational Administration, taught at all levels of public school and post secondary, was the National Inuit Language Coordinator at the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. After retiring in

2018, she took on her ‘dream job’ as Senior Inuktitut Editor at Inhabit Education Books, where she has written many books (both in Inuktitut and bilingual) for elementary school age, including: *Making a Whole Person: Traditional Inuit Education*. She also has been part of the production of over a dozen films as a producer or Inuktitut language consultant.

I found a 2020 [interview with Monica and her husband Serapio](#) I also recently found [Serapio’s obituary](#) which details more of his contributions to cultural and linguistic recovery.

Monica has twenty-five grand-children and two great-grand-children. She has recently reclaimed the traditional sewing techniques of making caribou and seal-skin clothing along with the more contemporary styles of parka and amauti-making. She also has mastered the art of drum-dancing.

In any case, back in Toronto I did find colleagues in the Participatory Research Group who shared this interest, and we visited Indigenous communities in northern Ontario, facilitating their [participatory research on their water supplies](#). If I honor more organic notions of time, I can see my Arctic experiences as part of an ongoing grappling, engaging, and fumbling, with related issues – in different places, taking different forms. What took 500 years to build will take generations to dismantle.

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Among the resources that have educated me since this experience https://www.nfb.ca/film/angry_inuk/ of my youth are Sheila Watt-Clotier’s [The Right To Be Cold](#), Alatheia Amaquq-Baril’s film *Angry Inuk*, and Tanya Talaga’s [The Knowing](#).

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Arctic-Amazonian artists connect in Toronto: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/arctic-amazon-mural-inuk-shipibo-artists-1.7005092>