Speaking for Themselves

The Legacy of Residential Schools on Inuit Languages in Canada

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical decline of Inuktitut as a result of the residential school system and the recent resurgence of the language as an act of resistance against assimilation from the Inuit community in Canada. This paper will answer following questions: how did this decline affect the Inuit and what are its residual effects? What are the sources and motivating factors behind the resurgence of Inuktitut? This research is relevant in understanding the role Inuktitut plays within Inuit culture and sovereignty. It also outlines the process of healing and reconciliation through language resurgence.

KEYWORDS

Inuit, Residential Schools, Reconciliation, Inuktitut
This paper examines the historical decline of Inuktitut as a result of the residential school system and the recent resurgence of the language as an act of resistance against assimilation from the Inuit community in Canada. This paper will answer following questions: how did this decline affect the Inuit and what are its residual effects? What are the sources and motivating factors behind the resurgence of Inuktitut? This research is relevant in understanding the role Inuktitut plays within Inuit culture and sovereignty. It also outlines the process of healing and reconciliation through language resurgence.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Aboriginal children across Canada were separated from their families and communities and placed in church-run, federally funded boarding schools (Amagoalik 94). These schools were designed to assimilate young Aboriginal peoples, some as young as age five, into dominant Euro-Canadian cultures, forcing children to speak either English or French and adopting the cultures of their colonizers (Amagoalik 94, Baloy 540). Aboriginal practices and languages were strictly forbidden and were considered to warrant punishment by government and church officials (Baloy 540, Amagoalik 94). Enormous longstanding consequences on Aboriginal cultures and communities have resulted from these residential school systems, with many accounts of severe psychological, physical and sexual abuse surfacing in recent years (Baloy 540, Amagoalik 94, Miller 4). The violence and the assimilationist agenda of these schools has caused major and intergenerational disruptions in Aboriginal families (Baloy 518).

These disruptions are a result of both an institutional devaluing of Aboriginal languages, and the separation of Indigenous elders from their communities. Many residential school survivors lost their fluency in their native language and refrained from teaching their
mother tongue to their own children in an effort to protect them from the trauma and pain they experienced\(^1\) (Baloy 518).

This has caused generations of potential Aboriginal language speakers to grow up in monolingual households, leaving Aboriginal languages in Canada to be considered among the most endangered in the world (UNESCO, Baloy 518).

The statement of apology to residential school survivors given on behalf of the Government of Canada by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008 marked the most publicized moment of reconciliation with Aboriginal residential school survivors (Miller 11). For many non-Aboriginal Canadians, the apology was the first indication of abuse or mistreatment in residential schools. However, the apology was not without problems; for example, it included little demarcation between the three Aboriginal groups present in Canada. This has contributed to a common conceptual homogenization of the Aboriginal experiences within residential schools. This standardization of residential school experience, as well as other media coverage and literature surrounding residential schools, has often left non-Aboriginal audiences surprised that Inuit were affected by the residential school experience much differently than other Aboriginal communities (“We were so far away…”, Miller 37).

Heather Igloliarte, an Inuk curator and scholar, explained the societal forces specific to Inuit residential school survivors in an interview in 2009:

> There were not many Northern schools until 1955. […] The residential school system was but one facet of massive and rapid cultural changes during the first half of the 20\(^{th}\) century, which included the settlement of communities, the rapidly developing economy, relocations, adaptation to

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\(^1\) Lynda Brown, an urban Inuk mother, employee of the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre, and daughter of a residential school survivor states: “The shame and culture shock [my mother] experienced at residential school is why she didn't pass along the Inuktitut language and didn't teach me the things that I'm now teaching my kids” (1).
Christianity and the devastating outbreak of such epidemic diseases as tuberculosis. [...] Inuit children were introduced to a completely foreign way of life (Igloliarte in Grussani 10).

Understanding the specific nuances and differences between First Nations, Métis and Inuit experiences of residential schools is important in evaluating how the schools have affected Aboriginal peoples.

Language is widely regarded as one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity for many Aboriginal groups (Canada 399, Battiste 20). In examining a brief history of the decline of Aboriginal languages in Canada, the residential school legacy is considered to be one of the prevailing catalysts (Norris 8). This paper will focus on the effects of these schools on the Inuit, one of three major groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This paper will explore the testimony of residential school survivor Alice French in order to understand the loss of culture that within the Aboriginal community as a result of residential schools. French’s generation of Inuit residential school survivors became witnesses to the decline of Inuktitut. Despite this decline, in the past two decades, Inuktitut has become one of the leading examples of successful Indigenous language resurgence in Canada (Norris 9). This paper will explore the contributions of two recent initiatives, the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre and Isuma Productions, are increasing the use of Inuktitut in both the north and south of Canada. This paper will show how new media has emerged as a form of healing in the Inuit community with a case study of Isuma Productions’ television programming. Lastly, it will be shown how the establishment of language education programs outside of Northern Inuit communities such as the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre, are crucial for the preservation of Inuit culture and can contribute to the healing process of language restoration.

Alice Masak French and the Inuit Residential School Experience
Residential school survivor and Inuit author Alice Masak French’s autobiographical novel *The Restless Nomad* recounts her experience returning to her family after her stay at one of these schools. Although I have chosen to use the case study of Alice Masak French as an example of the linguistic loss that occurred with Inuit in residential schools, it is important to establish that her stories are not necessarily indicative of the experiences of all residential school survivors. French’s account draws attention to the differences of Inuit experiences from other Aboriginal groups. French’s personal writings from within the Inuit community also reveal the high degree of importance Inuit people place on Inuktitut as a form of cultural continuation.

Born in 1930, French was one of the first generation of Inuit children to be sent to residential schools. In the initial establishment of schools in the North, attendance was not mandatory for all children (“We were so far away…”). With the introduction of government institutions, specifically the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Christianity in the North, some Inuit parents encouraged their children to attend school to learn English (“We were so far away…”). With the settlement of previously nomadic Inuit communities, many parents also chose to move into towns that had schools where their children could attend during the day (“We were so far away…”). Due to the death of French’s biological mother at a young age, French was sent to the All Saints Anglican Residential School in Aklavik while her father continued to live off the land and hunt to earn income. French’s autobiographical account, *The Restless Nomad*, is important because it includes language-based exclusion, and the struggles she faced when trying to speak Inuktitut. French becomes a personal witness to the decline of Inuktitut, and it is within this context that her novel is examined.

French begins *The Restless Nomad* as her father comes to the school to retrieve her and take her back to his home (1). French’s father had remarried since her mother’s death. Although French’s father has visited her briefly during her stay at the school, she has not met her new stepmother and half-sisters. This is a significant event because it shows that although French is returning home to her
community of origin, she has little emotional connection to her newly blended family. On the voyage back to her father’s home, she contemplates the following:

As I lay in my sleeping bag, I thought of the things I would have to learn to do. I knew my stepmother did not speak any English and I did not think my sisters did, either. [...] Then I asked my father to speak in Invialuktun2 to me. I could understand most of the words, but when I tried to answer I found I had first to translate the words from English into Inupeak (8).

This passage exemplifies French’s unease in speaking Inupeak. French’s account is important because it highlights the difficulty in using Invialuktun, and how loss of language contributes to cultural exclusion. Upon meeting her new family members, French describes a conversation between her stepmother and sisters where she has trouble understanding and responding in Invialuktun. French’s younger sister asks “Where have you come from? How come we have never seen you before?” (10), French remains silent due to her inability to express herself, despite desperately wanting to explain. This interaction highlights the conflict that French experiences in her home. The struggle occurs because French feels like a stranger when she interacts with her family due to not being able to speak Inupeak. This situation is representative of the displacement that many Inuit peoples experienced when they were displaced from their homes and placed into residential schools.

While French enjoys the sense of belonging she receives from being in her family, they are also often disappointed in her ability to complete traditional duties or meet expectations. As French reflects “First of all, I had a mental block with my native tongue, and my tongue was stiff from speaking English. I could make myself

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2 Invialuktun/Inupeak refers to one of many regional dialectic variations of the Inuktitut language family.

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understood using pidgin language, but mostly I made people laugh because I did not always say what I wanted to say” (12). This sense of displacement is further compounded when she feels is being mocked. Thus, not being able to articulate proper vocabulary leaves French feeling ridiculed, and contributes to French’s feelings of isolation.

French’s siblings manage to acquire enough English to converse with her, and she later mentions she, “never really had to speak in Inupeak to [her] family” (111). This implies French could rely on English words and expressions to fill in her linguistic gaps. Despite exposure to the language and relearning rudimentary vocabulary and phrases, French continues to have an accent and has barriers to expressing herself in Invialuktun, which reduces her ability to pass the language on to her children (178). This highlights the damage done by residential schools as an inter-generational problem that continues to have repercussions. As a result of not being able to communicate in Inuktitut, specific vocabulary for many traditional Inuit skills were also lost.

French managed to relearn certain techniques in cooking, and sewing, despite facing heavy criticism from her stepmother (12). Despite learning these techniques again, French does not master them and associates their processes with childhood embarrassment. Another example of the cultural loss that occurs was when French attempted to finish her housework. When completing housework, French had forgotten or misunderstood specific practices or orders of instructions. French’s stepmother displays frustration at having to instruct her in methods that other Inuit girls traditionally learned in early adolescence (12, 16).

French also struggles with incompatible cultural differences between her familial life and the ideologies in Anglican dogma. For example, French notes how public breastfeeding is common in Inuit maternal practice, however, she becomes uncomfortable and embarrassed at the sight of an exposed female breast (12). This indicates the permeation of Anglican-Christian values into French’s comprehension of culture and what constitutes acceptable behaviour. While French recognizes herself as Inuk, she ultimately rejects certain aspects of traditional Inuit life due to their incongruity with the
lessons and cultural teachings embedded in her at the Anglican school. This demonstrates an isolation from French’s traditional culture and community, compounding feelings of exclusion and the difficulties of maintaining traditional language skills.

In this quote, French reflects back on the difficulties the residential school had caused her to experience, “I had come home full of optimism, thinking that just by being there I could pick up my heritage, culture and language. I soon found out that this was not so. The school had done its job well” (12). French expresses the difficulty as a result of this language loss in transmitting cultural knowledge to her own children in this passage:

Our native language suffered because it was not spoken at home as often […] I could not criticize this lack of keeping our language as I was also guilty. I spoke only in English to my children and never thought of the importance of teaching them about our rich culture. (136)

This is important as it shows how French regrets not being able to impart more of her heritage, language, and culture to her children. Furthermore, French is also able to recognize the pressures and difficulties she faced under rapidly changing cultural circumstances. Many residential school survivors, particularly students subjected to the later mandatory attendance policies, were not afforded the opportunity to rejoin their families or communities after their stays in the schools (French 178). As a result, immense emotional and psychological traumas suffered by many survivors continues to affect generations of Inuit (Iglioarte quoted in Grussani 11). French’s feeling of alienation from traditional culture as a result of language decline remains in the North to this day, and continues to be an obstruction to community development and public health (Chandler et al. 392).
Longlasting effects of the decline of Inuktitut

For the Inuit, language is consistently mentioned as one of the strongest signifiers of identity. As Inuit youth intervener David Joanasie explains:

I feel I am more fortunate than others who are not as connected with their Aboriginal culture. I speak, read, and write fluently in Inuktitut and have learned and experienced Inuit culture enough to be able to practice a lot of the values and customs associated with it. (317)

Joanasie mentions his linguistic fluency as being essential to his identity as Inuk. This is important because it shows the integral role that language plays in self-identification in the Inuit community. Without his language Joanasie would be unable to self-identify as being Inuit as he considers it an essential component to his culture.

Heather Igloliarte presents a different viewpoint from Joanasie. Igloliarte identifies from the perspective of an Inuk who did not grow up surrounded with Inuktitut. As Igloliarte states, “I definitely felt the intergenerational impact of residential school if only in the sense that that I never grew up hearing Inuktitut” (quoted in Miller 37). This is important because it reinforces the fact that Inuktitut has become an essential landmark of identity for the Inuit that is mentioned frequently and prominently when discussing identity and the impact of residential schools. Thus, in order to fully belong to the culture it is essential to be able to speak the language.

Reinforcing the importance of language as being essential to the cultural continuation process is scholar Shelley Tulloch. Tulloch has interviewed many individuals about the connections between Inuktitut and Inuit identity. In one instance, an informant told Tulloch:

...an anecdote of an Inuk being told repeatedly by his peers, “You’re not Inuk, you’re Indian”, meaning, “You are not one of us”; an exclusion based solely on language, on the
fact that the individual does not speak Inuktitut. Such comments and anecdotes reveal the negative consequences of strict adherence to the position that language is essential for identity. (Tulloch 6)

Tulloch has also identified the act of speaking Inuktitut to another Inuk (or another speaker of Inuktitut) as denoting sameness (5). Thus not speaking or understanding Inuktitut implies difference. While language is an important element for other Aboriginal groups, membership into many of these nations is not based as largely on language fluency as the Inuit. As with many minority languages, Inuktitut is a tool for creating, developing and maintaining Inuit identity (Tulloch 2). Without this tool, maintenance of the culture becomes increasingly difficult for individuals and communities.

Researchers Michael J. Chandler, Darcy Hallet and Christopher E. Lalonde have found that “Indigenous language use, as a marker of cultural persistence, is a strong predictor of health and wellbeing in Canada’s Aboriginal communities” (398). Strong correlations between indigenous language programming and lowered rates of youth suicide have suggested that teaching these languages allows young people to construct identities and envision themselves as part of a community (Chandler et al. 392). Thus, language learning has become essential for the continuation of Inuit culture and a sense of belonging. By increasing the use of Inuktitut, the Inuit are able to overcome and defy the cultural interruption that the residential school system has caused. In this way, language learning becomes a method of reconciliation and healing.

Moving Towards Cultural Healing: Political and Visual Sovereignty in Isuma Productions

Natalie Baloy, a researcher specializing in urban Aboriginality, explains how language can be a tool to indigenous sovereignty. As Baloy explains, “as Aboriginal peoples continue to voice their concerns and seek redress, language become[s] symbolic of...
reclamation of and pride in [Aboriginal] identity […]” which is then associated with decolonization (541). In Lynda Brown’s autobiographical article, she says, “I began to reclaim the Inuit language” (2). This use of political vocabulary to describe language learning aligns with Baloy’s theory of decolonization, as the rise of Inuktitut allows for a rise in Inuit empowerment.³ Baloy’s theory is important because as Inuit use their language, they are able to better envision themselves as an organized political entity, and thus begin to negotiate their sovereignty. The assertion of political sovereignty allows for Inuit to protect their own interests, and thus begin to reconcile and heal collectively from trauma caused by assimilation efforts.

Many Inuit have begun to use new forms of media to maintain and encourage the use of their languages. With 28,000 native speakers, Inuktitut is considered a “viable language” by Statistics Canada and has a significant audience for cultural consumption (Norris 9). This is important because it shows that Inuktitut, despite repeated attempts by Canadian institutions, continues to develop.

Isuma Productions, an Igloolik-based independent film production company with 75% Inuit ownership, has arisen out of the need for Inuit to tell their own stories in their own languages (About, Isuma Productions). By producing images and media of themselves, Inuit gain cultural and visual sovereignty over their own representation. As a result, media offers both voice and agency for Inuit communities, and utilizes television as a method to pass on their traditional cultural teachings and language.

³ The recent United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), a document that provides an aspirational framework of rights for Indigenous people all over the world (AANDC q.4), even includes specific articles relating to language. Article 16.1 notes: Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.
Zachary Kunuk, director of the critically acclaimed film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (1999), was drawn to filmmaking because he feels the medium bears a strong resemblance to the Inuit oral tradition (Berger 6). In Inuktitut, oral and verbal skills are considered more important than writing (Tulloch 5). Television and film as media forms have suited the language and cultural learning process appropriately (Tulloch 5). As a result, television and film have become supplementary tools in cultural transference. For example, Talurjuaq father Isaac Paniigayak, speaks about his children’s interaction with television: “When they see and hear the stories being told on TV, and by visiting elders, listening to them reminds us/them of what has been forgotten and adds to their knowledge” (Tulloch et al. 141-2). This is important because it reinforces the role that television and media can play in the continuation of culture. As television and media project images of Inuit experiences back to their community, this media experience reinforces and supports the notion of Inuit culture within a contemporary continuity. Inuit peoples are then able to both visualize and hear their cultural teachings through the median of the television.

Avi Santo, a professor of communications at Old Dominion University, has studied and analyzed numerous aspects of Inuit television within Indigenous media theory. Santo argues that Inuit television in particular creates a sense of citizenship where Inuit audiences are able to envision themselves as both continuations of the past as well as active agents of “a cultural future” (395). This shows a connection between the rise of Indigenous media and Indigenous organization for sovereignty. Viewing Inuit culture and Inuktitut in new media forms resists residual contemporary effects of assimilation from dominant, colonizing powers, allowing for new methods of reconciliation and healing to develop within the community. This reconciliation and healing emerges when Inuit communities begin to take agency over their future and culture.

Further exemplifying the role that media can play in cultural continuation is the specific time period of the establishment of Isuma
Productions. This time period is important because it coincided with the establishment of the territory of Nunavut. This indicates the importance of the social relations built out of indigenous media practices as it was essential for helping to develop support and sensibilities for Indigenous desires of self-determination (Ginsberg 315).

The Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre and Inuktitut Learning for Urban Inuit

Ottawa, Ontario is home to the largest urban Inuit community in the south of Canada (Shane et al 414). Kathy Wilson and Evelyn J. Peters argue that although relations between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian government are not always constructed or framed as nation-to-nation negotiations, Aboriginal peoples have a cultural and national identity that is distinct from the dominant Canadian culture (397). Thus, moving from a reservation to a Canadian urban centre is a transnational migration, as it involves movement between two political and cultural entities (Baloy 522). In southern Canada, many Inuit have experiences comparable to immigrants without having technically crossed a border (Baloy 522). For urban Inuit, maintaining a diasporic connection to the north becomes paramount in continuing cultural practices and community connections. One example of a resource to maintain this connection can be found at the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre (OICC website).

According to researcher Mary Jane Norris, the survival of Inuktitut relies on the passing of the language from one generation to the next (11). Children’s early education becomes crucial in any form of language learning, as the younger the speakers of a language, the greater number of fluent speakers will be able to support its viability (Norris 11). This highlights the importance of early childhood education in passing on traditional cultural values and language. It also stresses the importance of centres like the OICC in preserving traditional cultural values. However, barriers to early childhood education pose problems for the Inuit community in urban, southern Canada (Shane et al 412). This is important because in order to move ahead with the healing process, it is essential that these barriers to
early childhood education are negotiated. With the barriers in place, the learning process becomes increasingly difficult: Inuit children growing up in Ottawa become vulnerable to language loss when they attend English-speaking schools, and are surrounded by English and French in their urban communities (OICC website).

Traditionally, Inuit elders also play an active role in child rearing (Shane et al. 412). However, Inuit families in urban centres often have fragmented family networks, as many elders and other extended family members remain in northern communities (Shane et al. 415). This highlights the challenges the Inuit community faces in attempting to maintain their cultural heritage. Furthermore, the historical effects of residential schools have reduced the number of fluent Inuktitut speakers, and many Inuit parents and grandparents do not speak Inuktitut themselves. Without access to elders or fluent speakers, few resources existed for Inuit families to learn Inuktitut in urban centres. This problem is further compounded and made more immediate because Inuit peoples face a rapidly increasing birth rate (“Aboriginal Peoples in Canada”). As a result, many parents became increasingly concerned for the future of their culture and their children in Ottawa.

One solution to these multi-layered challenges lies with the OICC. The OICC was established in order to provide a large variety of Inuktitut language and Inuit culture programming for both children and adults (OICC website). The OICC provides a space for elders to interact and connect with children, which complies with both traditional Inuit educational practices and cognitive development of early childhood language learning. By including Inuktitut language classes for adults they allow for Inuit such as Heather Igloiliarte who identify strongly as Inuk, but were not exposed to the language as children, an opportunity to reconnect and discover this important aspect of identity. The OICC has been a successful community project in developing Inuktitut as well as family literacy, nutrition and public health, winning numerous awards and grants (OICC website). This is important because it shows that...
the programs that the OICC are effective in meeting the needs of the Inuit community. It also shows that the OICC is essential to healing and reconciliation processes, as it has become the anti-residential school: a site of resistance and healing. It combats the damage done by the residential schools through nourishing and celebrating the culture and language that the schools and the Canadian federal government attempted to assimilate. In this way, the OICC can be framed as a centre of resistance as well as resurgence, becoming a catalyst for the improved health and continual healing of the Inuit community.

Despite many rapid changes that have occurred in Inuit communities in the past century, Inuit culture remains to be one of the many vibrant and viable Aboriginal cultures within Canada. Alice Masak French presents an emotional and intimate perspective on the consequences Inuit peoples faced when put into the residential school system. French’s inclusion within the essay is intended to put a human personality and personal account to the often faceless “Aboriginal residential school survivor” narrative, while also recognizing the uniqueness of the Inuit in their residential school experiences. The author’s reoccurring mention of the loss of her language punctuates the text, and allows for consideration to be given to the hundreds and thousands of similar accounts that continue to affect Inuit history. In re-learning and asserting the needs of the Inuit linguistically through new media and early childhood education, Isuma Productions and the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre are contributing to the longevity of the Inuktitut language, which acts as the vehicle in which Inuit culture can be transmitted. These cultural institutions are reactions to the residential schools: they actively resist while adapting to new environments, allowing for the resurgence of language and sovereignty for Inuit communities.
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