Taking the Floor

by Florence Duchemin-Pelletier

University Rennes 2

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Abstract

The inherent dynamics and challenges of speaking up vary from one context to another. Depending on both cultural expectations and socio-political history, local voices have sometimes remained unheard on the global stage. Drawing on the example of the Canadian Inuit, this paper considers the strategies undertaken by artists and activists when it comes to "taking the floor." It first focuses on the genealogies of struggle, both internal and transcultural, before examining the question of multivocalities. Finally, it addresses the role of local epistemes and suggests shifting perspectives so they can be part of a global art history.

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Introduction

"How do we do it when our anger is too quiet and soft to get anyone's attention?" asks filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril in her 2016 documentary film *Angry Inuk*. By doing so, not only does she address the specific impact of anti-sealing protests on Indigenous economic sustainability, she also raises the issue of whether non-radical discourses can be heard and legitimated on a global stage. Indeed, in the wake of critical theory, history has been more inclined to retain patterns of struggle and emancipation that favor strong gestures, ruptures, and revolutions and that leave middle grounds, small achievements, and failures behind. Such a tendency has contributed to the invisibilization and silencing of unspectacular engagements both historical and artistic.

Indigenous peoples, for they represent the "unfinished business of decolonization,"[1] are most particularly affected. It should be noted that a distinct form of colonialism characterizes their situation, one that has not been acknowledged by postcolonial studies nor integrated into global narratives.[2] Usually referred to as "settler colonialism," it is defined as the rapid outnumbering of Indigenous peoples in their own land, denying them the possibility to build national structures or fight for national independences. This incomplete state of decolonization ultimately excludes them from a linear model of history, one with a beginning and an "end," that would normally spur the retracing of its many steps.

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[1] Franke Wilmer, *The Indigenous Voice in World Politics: Since Time Immemorial* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), 5.

[2] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Absences, therefore, do not equate to silences and lack of protest, but rather to realities "actively produced as nonexistent."[3] Let us search and we shall find Sámi, Ainu, and Inuit committed movements in the 1960–1970s or Chukchi and Nenets activism in the 1980–1990s, to name but a few circumpolar examples. Their symbolic invalidation is not only symptomatic of Eurocentric epistemes, but it also reinforces primitivist frameworks that deny critical thought and militancy to certain peoples without examining how local cultural expectations might influence means of expression. Considering all of this, *taking the floor* in such contexts where no militant history has been made audible appears particularly challenging.

How can artists and activists get out of this state of inaudibility? Which strategies and prerequisites must be undertaken? Drawing on the example of the Canadian Inuit, this paper argues that *taking the floor* is less about speaking up than taking the lead and shaping springboards in advance. It shows that multimodal strategies of enunciation do not necessary depart from local epistemes and are even able to strengthen them. Lastly, it examines the place of non-Indigenous art historians in this process and suggests necessary shifts.

Building Genealogies and Transcultural Solidarities

One of the first challenges Indigenous artists face is the non-native forging of their art and culture. In the case of the Canadian Inuit, the art market is a Southern construct[4] that incorporated prejudices that were smoothly converted into markers of a so-called cultural authenticity. A large number of collectors expect Inuit contemporary art to be devoid of any foreign encounter and to provide “positive vibes.” These expectations leave little if no space for anger or contestation. However, even in the early days, artists produced nonconformist works, sometimes outside the art market, that were unnoticed by art history. Although Alootook Ipellie’s cartoons and caricatures published in the 1970–1980s periodical *Inuit Ullumi* have recently gained recognition, Paulusi Sivuak remains, for example, acclaimed for his depictions of Arctic wildlife, but not his dissident drawings.[5]

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[3] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[4] In light of Inuit geography and linguistic uses, the West is named "South" and Inuit Nunangat (homeland) "North."

It might be thought that present artists and activists seek to uncover this specific critical history, but, in reality, their agenda aims at something else — maybe because the 1970s schism between the Inuit of Nunavik left traumatic marks.[6] Given that consensus (*aajiiqatigiingniq*) is one of the key values of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit[7], they would rather pick figures who act with self-restraint and get everyone to agree. In other words, the need to establish a critical genealogy that prepares the ground for speech does not translate to the unearthing of the forgotten combative, but rather in the reevaluation of the best-known and consensual as resistant and engaged.

Napatsi Folger’s recent work is indicative of this process. In 2020, she dedicated a series of 6-panel comics strips to 6 iconic Inuit artists. In one of them, she depicts a subtly subversive Jessie Oonark making good use of the critical function of laughter while navigating through a maze of injunctions – let us recall that laughter responds to the social imperative of self-discipline and control of emotions for Inuit.[8] Napatsi comments: “Jessie Oonark is the ultimate representation of the kind of strength and agency that I have always associated with Inuit women. […] I hope that someday I am able to provide that same example of fortitude and independent thinking to younger generations of Inuit."[9]

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[5] Paulusi Sivuak was part of the dissident movement Inuit Tungavingat Nunamini, which opposed the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement and the Inuit delegation who signed it in 1975. The split extended to whole families and communities in Nunavik, see Lisa Koperqualuk, “Mouvements politiques des Inuit,” *À babord!* 54, April–May 2014, https://www.ababord.org/Mouvements-politiques-des-Inuit and Caroline Hervé, *Le pouvoir vient d’ailleurs: Leadership et coopération chez les Inuits du Nunavik (Arctique québécois)* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2005).

[6] Zebedee Nungak, *Wrestling with Colonialism on Steroids: Quebec Inuit Fight for their Homeland* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2017).

[7] This term describes Inuit knowledge or “what Inuit have always known to be true. ”

[8] Michèle Therrien, “Les exigences du célèbre rire inuit,” in *Paroles à rire*, ed. Éliane Daphy and Diana Rey-Hulman (Paris: Inalco, 1999), 211–222.

Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory, for her part, chooses to reassert the role of Kenojuak Ashevak in Canada's art and political histories. In her performed poem, *I Am the light of happiness* (2018)[10], she states that Canada was hand-drawn by the artist. Using a proper transcription and pronunciation of her name, more importantly, she draws a line between Kenojuak, the neutral and popular icon, and Qinnuajuaq, the resilient figure who "used art to heal."[11]

Challenging the idea that Inuit have always been isolated, artists extend this inner filiation to renowned anticolonial models in order to build new transnational and transcultural solidarities. While First Nations and other Indigenous figures are evoked, the most interesting recent development has been the integration of Black activism. Only a handful of artworks explore this association as of yet, but on social media, where speech circulates, Inuit do not hesitate to multiply the references. Among others, multimedia artist Jesse Tungilik, renowned for his critical approach to colonialism, has mentioned Aimé Césaire, Martin Luther King Jr., and W.E.B. DuBois. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, singer and activist Becky Han posted a short video in which she translated "Black Lives Matter" into inuktitut ("Qirniqtait Inuusingit Atuutiliit"); emerging artist Dayle Kubluitok designed a poster with Black and Inuit raised fists for the Nunavut Black History Society and Katherine Takpannie documented the meeting of Black and Indigenous women in Ottawa in her 2019 series of photographs *Katiniakusii* ("Several of us coming together").[12]

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[9] Napatsi Folger, "Jessie Oonark. Inuit Art Icons in Comics," *Inuit Art Quarterly*, August 12, 2020. https://www.inuitartfoundation.org/iaq-online/jessie-oonark.

[10] Laakkuluk performed this poem as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's 2018 retrospective *Tunirrusiangit: Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxOlm5hO_Tc.

[11] Anna Hudson, Jocelyn Piirainen, and Georgiana Uhlyriak eds., *Tunirrusiangit: Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018).

[12] Takpannie exhibited this series as part of the 2020 exhibition *They Forgot We Were Seeds* at the Charleton University Art Gallery. https://cuag.ca/exhibition/they-forgot-that-we-were-seeds/.

These new alliances, though, should not flatten singular histories — the pitfall for art historians would be *to indiscriminately apply* a postcolonial perspective to Indigenous works and discourses. As Jean-Philippe Uzel has shown, the paradigms of hybridity, *métissage*, or creolization are ineffective in the context of settler colonialism, where sense of belonging and cultural singularity are often the driving force. Conversely, local epistemes offer keys for comprehension. In our case study, Inuit do not seek to emulate outside models: they build bridges that enlighten their own history and reveal the extent of their commitment. In forging such prospective tools, they subscribe to the principles of *piliriqatigiinniq* (working in a collaborative way for the common good) and *qanuqtuurniq* (being innovative and resourceful).

Multivocal Strategies of Enunciation

In 2014, throat-singer Tanya Tagaq won the prestigious Polaris Music Prize for her album *Animism*. Her acceptance speech was memorable: on a national stage, she said, "Fuck PETA." Even though she did it with a hint of humor, this strong gesture aroused controversy. While it ironically overshadowed her performance and its visual display unit linked to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement, the backlash gave her the opportunity to further expand on colonial issues.

However, such an approach can also enflame tensions in Inuit communities. If the Inuit generally believe that things should not be kept hidden, speech is supposed to remain under control: above all, one should not disrupt the collective harmony and give a negative image of the group. Tanya Tagaq's improvisations, because they express pain, rage, and sexuality (forced or consensual), have a radical tone that some judge foreign to Inuit culture and reprove. Therefore, and because most artists also want to raise awareness among their Inuit audience, Inuit artists are careful to balance visible gestures with quieter actions.

To achieve this, and to gradually standardize their presence on the global stage, they adopt a strategy that consists in covering a large territory, in terms of both space and practice. Not only have they increased their virtual presence on the Internet, but they also intend to join mainstream pop culture and high-flying art events. In collaboration with the First Nation curator Candice Hopkins, media art collective Isuma represented Canada at the 2019 Venice Biennale, when Taqralik Partridge's installations were shown at the 22nd Biennale in Sydney — editions where Indigenous artists have been more present than ever.

In terms of cultural sovereignty, several artists work towards the normalization of Indigenous skills, reindigenization of words or objects that have lost their precolonial meaning, and reappropriation of archives. Mark Igloliorte with his *Seal Skin Neck Pillow* (2019), Nala Peter with her sealskin lingerie (2016) or Couzyn Van Heuvelen with his faux *Sealskin Rug* (2021) all seek to counter animal rights advocates' long-standing narratives with unexpected, stylish or kitschy everyday items.[13] Borrowing from meme aesthetics, Mark Igloliorte took inspiration from a series of 1970s drawings by Luke Anguhadluq, sketches of miniature *qajait* held at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, and a written statement that gives its title to the work: *Kayak Is Inuktitut For Seal Hunting Boat* (2019). Adding a clever use of the unstretched canvas — similar to drying animal skins — he reminds Qallunaat[14] that, before being a leisure activity, the *qajaq* is an Inuit technology whose form stems from its purpose.

Jesse Tungilik and Glenn Gear, for their part, rearticulate Indigenous temporalities by associating the precolonial past and a futurist imagery. Jesse Tungilik's *Seal Skin Spacesuit* (2019) alludes both to his childhood imagination and the fact that *angakkuit* (shamans) used to travel to the moon long before

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[13] Mark Igloliorte explained that he felt his neck pillow had the potential to become a "popular thing" that people could travel and cross borders with (Toronto Inuit Association 2021). Igliorte's *Seal Skin Neck Pillow* and *Kayak Is Inuktitut for Sealing Hunt Boat* are from his project *Traverse* (https://markigloliorte.net/traverse 2016–2019); Peter's sealskin lingerie was shown at AXENÉ07 Gallery's *Floe Edge: Contemporary Art and Collaborations from Nunavut* (2016); van Heuvelen's *Sealskin Rug* (2021) was shown at the Winnipeg Art Gallery's *Inua* (https://www.wag.ca/event/inua/).

[14] Qallunaat refers to white people and, by extension, can be used to name non-Inuit. The address to Qallunaat is here visible through the transcription of the word kayak instead of *qajaq* (plur. *qajait*) or *kajak* (Labrador dialect).

Qallunaat did, while Glenn Gear's *Iluani/Silami* (2021) offers a meditative space where the time of the myth and the visible world can reunite, where igloos have satellites and ravens enjoy hip-hop fashion.[15] In doing so, they both deny the backward-looking image of Inuit, showing that the Inuit have always been capable of creativity and flexibility and that they have a legitimate place in global discussions.

This illustrates that taking the floor does not lean on a unified and monovocal strategy, but on multiple determinations and singular experiences that embody Inuit epistemes. This diversity allows simultaneous, amplified speech acts that oblige art historians to step out of their comfort zone and observe what happens in the fields of music, cinema, theater, design, and fashion, through which Inuit artists navigate with ease. Such fluidity jeopardizes Western verticalities and partitionings but also demonstrates the appearance of new art worlds that reshuffle inherited colonial art systems.

Shifting Perspectives

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* has become one of Indigenous artists and scholars' favorite texts.[16] And for good reason: in this seminal book, the Māori academic defines concrete issues encountered by her peers and provides recommendations rather than simply deconstructing Western scholarship. In doing so, she underlines the necessity of a proactive engagement: "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions."[17] While suggesting the outline of a "researching back," she insists on the addressee of the book: "[It] is written primarily to help ourselves."[18]

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[15] Tungilik's *Seal Skin Spacesuit* (2021) was completed at a residency at Concordia University; Gear's *Iluani/Silami* (2021) was shown at the Winnipeg Art Gallery's exhibition *Inua.*

[16] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

[17] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 5.

[18] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 17.

For its part, Western research has continuously tried to revise its hegemonic gaze, from Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, to Pierre Bourdieu's participant objectivation, to reflexive anthropology.[19] However, even when interviewers put on their facilitator cap, they remain prisoners of the paradox described by Gayatri Spivak, opening spaces while remaining in control of them.[20] To put it another way, focusing on the question of space conceals what is being made of it: where does it start and end? is it temporary or permanent? is what is produced inside given any validity? Instead of expedients, activists demand mastery of their ways of action and awareness of their knowledge.

If Torres Strait Islander thinker Martin Nakata, leaning on Sandra Harding's strong objectivity, postulates that Indigenous reflexive approaches can happen at the cultural interface — a lived and theorical space of negotiation between epistemological tensions[21] — Boaventura de Sousa Santos' sociology of absences maintains that silences result from the invalidation of certain forms of knowledge.[22] It is this very shift between the questions of space and modes of enunciation that appears necessary.

Heather Igloliorte, associate professor at Concordia University, is currently the only Inuk to hold a Ph.D in art history. Her work, building an *Inuit* art history, is nonetheless pursued collectively with her fellow artists, essayists, and curators. When it comes to taking the floor, all address Inuit epistemic requirements: speaking from one's experience and preferring nuance to any so-called objectivity. First person singular and personal recollections are an integral part of papers, talks, and curatorial practices. Essayist Leanne Inuarak-Dall sees herself and her mother "reflected in the ulu [knife] of Kiugak Ashoona's sculpture" she comments on.[23] Co-curators of *INUA* — Qaumajuq's inaugural exhibition[24] — Heather Igloliorte, Asinnajaq, Krista Ulujuk Zawadski, and Kablusiak each choose to exhibit an artwork made by a relative, displaying their intimate relationship to the collection.

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[19] Christian Ghasarian ed., *De l'ethnographie à l'anthropologie réflexive: Nouveaux terrains, nouvelles pratiques, nouveaux enjeux* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002).

[20] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

[21] Martin Nakata, *Savaging the Disciplines: Disciplining the Savages* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

[22] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*.

However, subjective enunciation is not the only Inuit trait of this taking the floor: the alternative shape given to discourses also plays a part. The production of art history often departs from academic essays, as poems and performances by Taqralik Partridge and Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory, as well as drawings by Napatsi Folger, demonstrate.[25] In her *Karoo Ashevak* (2020)[26], the latter offers a critical commentary on the categories assigned by Western art history that contributes to a globalized art history — her final panel "Mic Drop" places the act of taking the floor and writing another art history as a masterful performance.

When Spivak finally stresses that "who will listen" is more crucial than "who should speak," she also alerts us to the risk of being left outside of global academia or trapped in a neoprimitivist bubble as soon as these local modes of enunciation are used: "the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism."[27] As Santos puts it, it is not a matter of relativism, but of admitting different kinds of knowledge as equally valid *as knowledge*.[28] Even more than sharing or opening spaces, the challenge for non-Indigenous art historians, as allies, is to engage in an "alternative thinking of alternatives"[29] from which counter-narratives can arise and be recorded in a new, polyphonic, art history.

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[23] Leanne Inuarak-Dall, "Seeing Myself Reflected in the Ulu of Kiugak Ashoona's Sculpture. Uqallaqatigiinngniq: Sharing Voices," *Inuit Art Quarterly*, May 28, 2021. https://www.inuitartfoundation.org/iaq-online/seeing-myself-reflected-in-the-ulu-of-kiugak-ashoona-s-sculpture.

[24] Qaumajuq ("it is bright, it is lit") is the Inuit Art Center that opened in March 2021 at the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

[25] Let us note that the first two are also curators and that Napatsi Folger is a contributing editor for *Inuit Art Quarterly*.

[26] Part of Folger's series, published online, Inuit Art Icons in Comics (https://www.pressreader.com/canada/inuit-art-quarterly/20210315/281505048955834).

[27] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 59.

[28] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, 190.

[29] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, 42.

Conclusion

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang assert that "decolonization is not a metaphor."[30] For Indigenous peoples, it is not only about decolonizing the mind[31], but also about reclaiming lands, economic sovereignty, and about securing a future for youth.[32] Artists and activists are aware of that and the fact that their militant history has not been recorded makes speaking twice as difficult. Taking the floor, indeed, is not self-evident when nothing seems to precede the act. Rebuilding critical genealogies, both foreign and local, participates in this effort to affirm that the struggle for emancipation was always part of one's history, and that a practice is now being perpetuated. If this approach has been called revisionist[33], and even though strategical rewritings do exist, it mostly responds to the fact that discreet, but significant, expressions of engagement have escaped Western models.

Artists, however, recognize the need to address multiple audiences and temporarily move from their own cultural requirements to create a grand gesture, crush stereotypes, or reach new generations — at the risk of disapproval from their elders. In societies where restrained speech is valued, such a rhythm cannot continuously be held and must be cadenced with quieter actions. Occupying the media stage and incidentally expanding art categories is part of this strategy. The multiplication and diversification result in a rich chorus that amplifies voices.

On the other hand, non-Indigenous scholars can benefit from "learning to learn" from Indigenous epistemes, whether these have remained strong or been affected by colonial assimilation.[34] Acknowledging the conceptual frames of

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[30] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

[31] Wa Thiong'o Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann Education Books, 1986).

[32] Peter McFarlane and Nicole Schabus eds., *Whose Land Is It Anyway? A Manual for Decolonization* (Vancouver: Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC, 2017).

[33] Vine Deloria Jr., "Revision and Reversion," in *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, ed. Calvin Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 84–90.

[34] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2–3 (2004): 523–581. Rauna Kuokkanen, "'To See What State We Are In': First Years of the Greenland Self-Government Act and the Pursuit of Inuit Sovereignty," *Ethnopolitics* 16, no. 2 (2017): 79–195.

Kaupapa Māori, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, Sumak Kawsay (quechua for "good living") or Ainupuri[35] is a real challenge for global art history, yet they can offer keys to understanding artistic dynamics of present and past works. Taking them into consideration also permits other ways of building knowledge, going beyond the authoritative paradigm of reconciliation, and establishes a dialogue between art histories that have their own needs and priorities: "Our questions are important," Linda Tuhiwai Smith says. "Research helps us to answer them."[36]

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[35] Lucien Clercq, "La revalorisation socioculturelle aïnoue par la construction de marqueurs identitaires originaux: deux exemples cérémoniels de réappropriation ethnohistorique (Prolégomènes: 2e partie)." *Media and Communication Studies* 71 (2018): 1–36. http://hdl.handle.net/2115/68771.

[36] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 199.

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