Every Picture Tells a Story: Three Generations of Visual Autobiography by Inuit Women

Lisa Carl*[1]

[1]North Carolina Central University – United States

Abstract

This paper explores the visual and textual autobiographies of three generations of Inuit women as a partial cultural history or ethnoautobiography. These women – grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter – have documented, in narrative and drawings, their lives on isolated Baffin Island, Canada, from the early 20th century to today. The paper focuses on the as-told-to autobiography and drawings of Pitseolak Ashoona, as documented in her 1970 book Pitseolak: Pictures out of My Life (in Inuktitut and English, edited by Dorothy Eber). Her book weaves meditation on the artistic process, assessments of herself as both a "real artist" and a businesswoman, traditional stories of village life and belief, and contemplations of the ways in which her life, and village life in general, have changed as a result of white exploration and occupation. (Pitseolak, a talented fabric artist, began making prints in the 1950s after artist James Houston came to Baffin Island and taught its inhabitants to create and sell prints and carvings.) Napachie Pootoogook, Pitseolak's daughter, created narrative drawings depicting on positive and negative aspects of Inuit womanhood, including camp life, "settlement" in Cape Dorset, motherhood, spousal abuse, and forced marriage. A 2005 exhibit of her works at the Winnipeg Art Gallery included short descriptions in Inuktitut, similar to those in her mother's book. Napachie's daughter Annie Pootoogook's drawings, which focus on contemporary Inuit life, were exhibited in Toronto in 2005. This paper presents these women's work as fascinating and rare glimpses into Inuit life and art and the life of the female artist. At the same time, mindful that both narratives and drawings are hybrid products of Native and non-Native narrative approach, artistic method, and world view, it considers the complexities of expression and interpretation caused by this hybridization.

*Speaker