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## Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature by Keavy Martin

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## **Sometimes, an Excruciating Eye-Licking is Necessary**

***Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*** by KEAVY MARTIN  
UMP, 2012 \$27.95

Reviewed by **ALLISON K. ATHENS**

I first met Keavy Martin in an Inuit literature class during the summer of 2010 when I attended the University of Manitoba's Panguitung Bush School. Although already a graduate student at the time, I took the undergraduate course in an effort to expand my knowledge of the North American Arctic and the related, yet locally articulated, political, social, and artistic ambitions and challenges faced by northern peoples, especially northern indigenous peoples. Martin's class, and now her book, fulfilled the course's (and her own) mandate to "give back" in an effort to decolonize an area of study (and a region) that has been traditionally articulated in terms set by colonial relations. In one of the many anecdotes from her visits to Panguitung that pepper her study, and one with which I have personal experience, she reflects on elder Joanasi Qappik's answer to student questions about the (potentially appropriative) use of the Inuit *inuksuk* as the emblem of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Qappik's feelings about the use of this cultural icon surprised students schooled in sensitivity towards adapting cultural symbols out of context. During my visit, Qappik replied that he did not mind the use of the *inuksuk*; in fact, he added, it was a positive outcome for Inuit that every

southerner who viewed the adapted symbol would then think about Inuit in their homeland, Nunavut. For Martin, Qappik's answer, and the ensuing response by students, encapsulates the problems and the potential of Inuit literary studies in southern, that is, non-Inuit, academic institutions. Inuit cultural material has long been used in southern art and culture, often in ways that do not benefit the Inuit. Yet, in the context of contemporary political decolonization, sensitivity towards hierarchical relations, and cross-cultural alliances for social justice, the same material has often been made static under rubrics of cultural relativism. However enlightened the viewing frame, these cultural and artistic artifacts still remain exotically other.

Martin offers a mediating approach from within Inuit cultural forms, with theories of interpretation that originate within traditional and contemporary Inuit texts. Among other topics, she analyzes the political history of the Inuit through the framework of literary nationalism; the adaptation of traditional stories in Zacharius Kunuk's films and Michael Kusugaq's fiction; the literary history of Inuit songs becoming southern poetry; and the formal conventions and stylistics of recorded life stories in oral history projects. In her reading, which follows Qappik's analysis of the *inuksuk*, adaptation of source material for another purpose, or in a new context, fits within Inuit formal praxis. Martin urges scholars in the academy to use Inuit cultural material, but rather than "hoard" it, or only emphasize the decontextualization of the cultural material in a manner that reinforces unequal relationships

between Inuit artists and southern scholars, one should approach the work in terms of “reciprocity.” Or, as she states, “Like the offer of food [such as seal or whale fat], this resource should not be refused or handled squeamishly; rather, visitors to the *qaggiq* [ceremonial house] must learn to accept the gift—and the responsibilities that come with it.”

Additionally, Martin’s work on Inuit literature focuses on the literary assumptions that previous scholars from the academy have taken to the Inuit archive. Responsive to the modern political gains of the Inuit, Martin proposes the analogy of the temporary, contingent, and sometimes even ambiguous, transformations inherent in the Inuit literary trope of “skins” in her contribution to the decolonization of indigenous knowledge and cultural artistry. *Skins*, Martin writes, “have much to say about the challenges and potential of adaptation.” Inuit adapt the skins of other animals for the necessary clothing and tools for arctic life, but the harvesting of another being for one’s own use carries with it certain risks and uncertainties that require constant attention to the metaphors, stories, and obligations one proposes for these activities. Martin reads the excruciating eyeball licking of the blind boy Aningaak by a loon—a process that transforms his lack of sight into “the sharpest of vision”—as an allegory for “navigating Inuit intellectual geography.” “Learning to see well,” she writes, “can be a painful process and might require you to put your trust in something unfamiliar or even uncomfortable.”

Delving into the unfamiliar is exactly what literature does, according

to Doris Sommer in her 1999 study, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*: “Literature . . . is what exceeds or defies habitual patterns of communication, because it notices difference and requires continuous translations.” The “provincializing” of hegemonic analytical methodologies, while remaining attentive to the difference and danger of cross-linguistic work in *Stories in a New Skin* resonates, on the one hand, with the work of previous multilingual anti-colonial literary scholars such as Sommer. On the other hand, Martin adjusts academic interest in the north away from figuring non-Euro-American literature as exotically other, because in *Inuit Nunaat*, the Inuit Homeland, the southern-trained scholar is the minority. I, for one, emerged from the book with a sharper understanding of how a western (or southern) trained academic has found the language within Inuit intellectual culture to speak to a western/southern academic audience about Inuit art. Moreover, Martin enacts her reciprocal obligations in an ethical engagement to the (real, political) people of her scholarly work. In a decolonizing move that privileges the individuality of Inuit artists over the undifferentiated critical community, Martin often refers to “the academy” and “literary scholars” in her indictment of past and current scholarly treatments of Inuit art. Given the contentious, lively, and progressive debates within the academy by scholars allied with those to whom they feel their work serves, I would be curious to know which scholars’ work these arguments are intended to address.

Martin's addition to Inuit literary studies is a timely reminder that fields, cultures, and methodologies are always in transition as they are adapted for changing conditions. In the last chapter, "I Can Tell You the Story as I heard It: Life Stories and the *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* Land Bridge," Martin transforms the adaptive metaphor of skins to that of a "land bridge" in order to build a more concrete passage for southern scholars to follow towards accessing Inuit cultural ideals. *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* (IQ) is a developing political and cultural policy for the territory of Nunavut and translates to "what Inuit have known for a very long time." Martin, through the First Annual Report of the *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* Task Force, clarifies the temporality of IQ: "The Inuit way of doing things: the past, present and future knowledge, experience and values of Inuit society." Reading the life stories that are recorded in such cultural documentation projects as literature—while incorporating them into the fabric of Inuit intellectual geography—literally retraces old steps across the land and keeps cultural and historical content alive for future generations to continue to think about, engage with, and adapt. The land bridge metaphor once again recalls Qappik's sentiments: Inuit literature is rooted in a specific place and to use it elsewhere invokes the place it originates and makes a tie to it. This tie, or relationship, in turn, manifests an obligation. Will one hoard the sustenance or reciprocate freely?

**ALLISON K. ATHENS** recently completed her Ph.D. in the Department of Literature, with special emphasis in

Feminist Studies, at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She specializes in northern narrative practices, focusing on stories that explore and transgress the boundaries of language, nations, genders, and species. Her dissertation project investigates the parameters of administrative discourse when confronted with the interrelated lives of northern peoples and animals and is structured around four key physical and figural beings—polar bears, seals, caribou, and salmon.