

RESCUING SEDNA: DOORSLAMMING, FINGERSLICING, AND THE MORAL OF THE STORY

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- 186 I remember one woman came into our house who had run away from her husband. She had walked about 50 miles—it was early spring. At that time I was too young to understand what was going on. I remember though, my mother welcomed this woman to our house and fed her and gave her some clothes. I heard of another woman who also ran away from her husband and she was never found.

—Rev. Armand Tagoona

In the final moments of Ibsen's *A Doll House*, Nora Helmer walks out on her husband and three children, punctuating her departure with a now-famous slam of the door. Joan Templeton, author of *Ibsen's Women*, describes the impact of this scene on the original nineteenth century audience: "When Betty Hennings, the first Nora, slammed the door in Copenhagen's Royal Theatre on December 21, 1879, her contemporaries were not, in what we have come to identify as the usual Victorian way, 'shocked'; they were deeply shaken" (112). Indeed, the contemporary critical response to the play was consistent in its condemnation of Nora's decision to abandon her duties as wife and mother: she was unscrupulous, unfeminine, and likely hysterical, and Ibsen, in creating her, had flouted the conventions not only of morality but of literary composition (Templeton 112-118; Marker and Marker 85-89).

Almost immediately, Ibsen's original ending was deemed unsuitable, and although the play continued to be staged, it appeared with a variety of alternate endings. In the first German production, for instance, lead actress Hedwig Neimann-Raabe refused to perform the doorslamming scene, and the author was forced to write an alternate ending in which Nora, instead of deserting her children, "sinks to the floor and cries: 'Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them'" (qtd. in Templeton 113). Several other adaptations also omitted the offensive door-slam and lowered their cur-

tains on Noras in various stages of repentance (Templeton 113). Ibsen's revolutionary plot twist was thereby stripped of its political impact; with the wife returned to her proper sphere, Victorian viewers could go about their lives without fear of social catastrophe.

Other actors and directors were bold enough to slam the door, however, and as a result *A Doll House* became, in Elaine Hoffman Baruch's words, "the feminist play *par excellence*" (374). "In closing the door on her husband and children," Gail Finney writes, "Nora opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women's movement" (91). Naturally, Ibsen himself was celebrated for his contributions to the project of female emancipation (Finney 93). In a 1879 letter to the Norwegian feminist Camilla Collett, he expresses his "warm, complete sympathy with you and your life-task" (qtd. in Innes 11), and in that same year, he delivered a scathing harangue at a gathering of the Scandinavian Club in Rome, after its members had rejected his proposal to allow women to vote in club meetings (Templeton 125-6). Yet in 1898, when Ibsen was invited to address the Norwegian Women's Rights League, he made the infamous statement:

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I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I...must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general...My task has been the description of humanity. (qtd. in Innes 26)

Almost two decades after the first Nora upset Europe's understanding of female nature, Ibsen himself seems to have joined the ranks of the bowdlerizers. As feminism threatened to become the dominant feature of his play—and to bestow him with the label of defender of women's rights—Ibsen balked, and back-peddled, his lofty tone barely concealing the desperation of an author trying vainly to control the interpretation of a highly-successful text. Invoking his authority as the creator of the play, he attempts to muffle the slam of the door.

To theatre companies and audiences around the world, however, Ibsen's 1898 recanting makes little difference, and the climactic ending of *A Doll House* continues to provoke discussions about the role of women in society. In 1980, Elaine Hoffman Baruch declared the play to be "a myth of our time...if by myth we mean the embodiment of the ideals and aspirations of a sex" (374). Indeed, Nora's story seems to resonate with the experiences of women worldwide; the website ibsen.net keeps a running list of current Ibsen performances, which are routinely staged in countries like Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Columbia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United States ("Current Ibsen Performances"). As part of the 2008 International Ibsen Conference, a seminar entitled "Nora's Sisters" linked Ibsen's play with the current situation of

women in Palestine (Thorkildsen). Since Nora first left the doll house, in other words, she has ventured further than even Ibsen could have imagined.

When I first read the above-quoted anecdote by the Inuk¹ writer Armand Tagoona, I wondered whether that unnamed woman who ran away from her husband might be an Inuk Nora—whether, like the heroine of Ibsen’s play, she had tired of playing house. As a then-graduate student in a Comparative Literature program, I was seeking ways to open up the usual comparatist trade routes to include Indigenous literary traditions. In a seminar taught by Professor Antje Budde, we explored Noraism as an international phenomenon; eager to be inclusive, I began to consider the feminist implications of ‘Noras of the North’—Inuit stories of unhappy wives. Yet although the Greenlandic theatre company Silamiut staged Ibsen’s poem “Terje Vigen” in 2005, the National Library of Norway’s online database of Ibsen performances does not record any stagings of *A Doll House* in the Inuit homeland² (“Silamiut”; “Repertoire Database”). The Inuit oral tradition, however, does contain many stories about

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women leaving bad husbands. The CBC North recordings *Inuit Unikkaaqtuanguit/ Inuit Legends* (Vol. 1 and 2) include several examples. In the story of “The Man in the Moon,” for instance, a woman escapes her cruel husband by invoking the help of the benevolent moon-man. In “The Orphan Shaman,” a woman who is abused by her husband runs away with her sister, and they survive on the land together until it is safe for them to return to the community. In “Illimarasujuk,” a wife outwits a husband who has turned cannibal, and flees to her brothers’ camp. Although not all of these stories end happily, they would seem to accommodate interpretations relating to feminist resistance and the rejection of the domestic role. Might these Inuit characters then deserve a place in the pantheon of international Ibsenite ‘doorslammers’?

The work of postcolonial feminist critics such as Chandra Mohanty, Uma Narayan, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, however, has demonstrated the ways in which such comparisons can be deeply problematic. As Mohanty reveals in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” humanistic conceptions of the universal oppression of women across cultures risk maintaining a Eurocentric frame of reference, and ignoring the local specificities of non-Western women’s experience (73-74). In other words, there is the possibility that reading Inuit stories with reference to Ibsen may automatically position the European text as the “norm,” and discount the particularities of Inuit traditions, or of the experience of colonization (Mohanty 65). As a basis for comparison, then, the mere fact of leaving one’s husband may not have much potential. However, I would argue that although Ibsen may not have much relevance to the lives and narratives of Inuit women, the story of his (and his critics’) reaction to Nora’s controversy creates a point of circumpolar connection. Just as Ibsen and his critics felt obliged to “rescue *A Doll House* from the contamination of feminism” (Templeton xv), the storytellers, translators, and editors of Inuit oral traditions have likewise struggled to guard the published *unikkaaqtuat*—the traditional stories—from the apparent taint of misogyny.

As I outline below, Inuit stories provide particular challenges for non-Inuit audiences, who—having little knowledge of Inuit intellectual traditions—are generally ill-equipped to understand them. As a result, contemporary editors and translators of Inuit stories often feel obliged—as Ibsen did—to attempt to manage those troublesome interpretations that threatened to overwhelm the story. And although adaptation is certainly an essential component of any performative tradition, it becomes more difficult to celebrate when it comes about as the result of pressure from a mainstream audience. I argue that interpreters of Ibsen and tellers of Inuit stories both struggle with the same problem: the seemingly unavoidable need on the part of the audience to distill the complexities of an unfamiliar or unsettling text down to a set of easily-understood principles—to find a moral in the story.

One of the best-known Inuit stories is about a woman who does not want to get married. Uinigumasuittuq (‘she doesn’t ever want to take a husband’) refuses to accept any of the suitors who come for her, much to the irritation of her father. But one day, a handsome stranger arrives and persuades her to return with him to his remote island home. Soon, however, she discovers that she has been deceived—her new husband is no human man, but a bird-spirit in disguise. Uinigumasuittuq’s father eventually comes looking for her, and she leaves with him quickly, hoping to escape before her husband returns from hunting. But as father and daughter paddle away from the island, the bird-husband flies after them. He dives down toward the little boat, stirs up the water with his wings, and the waves grow higher and higher. The father, fearing for his life, decides to throw his daughter overboard. But Uinigumasuittuq clings to the side of the boat, and her father has no alternative but to take up his knife and to cut the first joints of her fingers off, one by one. When still she clings, he cuts off the second joints, and then the third. As the pieces of her fingers fall into the water, they transform into the sea mammals—the *natsiit* (ringed seals), the *ugjuut* (bearded seals), and the *aiviit* (walruses).³ Uinigumasuittuq, meanwhile, sinks to the bottom of the ocean, where she becomes Takánâluk Arnâluk, a powerful and feared spirit—the mother of the sea-beasts. When she is angry, she withholds the animals, and the *angakkuit*—the shamans—must visit her and persuade her to release them.

This story of the origin of the sea-mammals appears in many different versions across the Inuit homeland, and Takánâluk Arnâluk has many other names.⁴ When Franz Boas visited the Uqqurmiut⁵ of southern Baffin Island, he recorded the name Sedna—“a distortion of the Inuktitut word ‘sanna,’ meaning ‘down there’” (Boas 175; Qitsualik, “Matter”). In Nattilingmiut territory, she is called Nulijajuk, “the ever-copulating one” (Thalbitzer, qtd. in Laugrand and Oosten 20). In many versions of the story, she is initially married to a dog husband, and her children become the first members of various non-Inuit groups, especially the *allait* or *itqiliit* (Indians) and the *qallunaat* (white people) (Laugrand and Oosten 38-40). In the eastern Canadian Arctic and Greenland, the young woman’s second marriage to a bird-husband generally results in the creation of the sea-mammals, and in the young woman’s transformation into the sea spirit (Laugrand and Oosten 52). In this form—often with

the tail of a fish—she appears regularly in Inuit sculpture and printmaking, and so has become increasingly famous in the South. In 1994, the figure of Nuliajuk made an appearance in the comic book *Aquaman*, and in 2004, when a group of American astronomers discovered an object at the far edge of our solar system, they felt that it was “appropriate to name it in honor of Sedna, the Inuit goddess of the sea, who is thought to live at the bottom of the frigid arctic ocean” (David; Brown).

In her heyday, Takánâluk Arnâluk was no mere bedtime story. When the Reverend Edmund Peck arrived in Cumberland Sound in 1894, he found that belief in Sedna was one of the major barriers to the spread of Christianity (Laugrand, Oosten and Trudel 26).⁶ Intimately connected to the Inuit resource base, she was deeply embedded in the belief system of the people. This has led to some confusion about Sedna being a ‘goddess’—a term commonly used in southern descriptions of the sea woman. But as the Inuk writer Rachel Qitsualik points out, this is not an accurate assumption: “She is not a goddess, but rather a special creature of fear and tragedy” (Qitsualik, “Trouble”; Laugrand and Oosten 23). Indeed, the figure of Sedna exists in an uncertain position between power and victimization. Although the survival of the people is quite literally in her hands, she seems to be in a constant state of misery and dependence. As Alexina Kublu says, “...because the woman whom they called Takannaaluk (the horrible one down there) had no fingers, she wasn’t able to (use a) comb, and so her hair became tangled...When the shaman would get to the sea-bed, he would comb Takannaaluk’s hair. Only when her hair was combed would the sea-mammals be able to surface once again” (Angmaalik et al. 160-161).⁷

Although Sedna is intimidating, the degree of her power and agency seems to fluctuate with each telling of the story. In some versions, she makes a conscious decision to punish the people when they break the rules; in others, her very capacity to withhold or release the sea-creatures is not in her control. Her abilities as a creator, after all, are involuntary, and they are rooted in an event of extreme violence and betrayal. Indeed, the father’s attempted murder of his daughter represents a troubling—but crucial—moment in the story, and storytellers handle it in different ways. Alexina Kublu’s account is quite straightforward: “*iputiminut anaulituinnalauraluaq&uniuk savingminut aggangit ulammaaliqpait*”—“He hit her with his paddle, and (when that didn’t work) he chopped off her fingers” (Angmaalik et al. 159). In the version that Rasmussen recorded from the Iglulingmiut, the event is slowed down, and the gruesome details savoured: “...the girl clung to the side of the boat, and as she would not let go, her father hacked off the top joints of her fingers, and the fingers tips fell into the sea, and seals came bobbing up all round the boat” (Rasmussen 65). When the woman continues to cling to the boat “with the stumps of her hands,” the father severs the second finger-joints, and then the third, and the bearded seals and walrus appear (65).

Many other tellers, however, subtly shift the degree of the father’s responsibility in the young woman’s dismemberment. In Rachel Qitsualik’s version, Sedna’s father arrives with a rescue party of several younger men, and it is they who turn on her

when the bird-spirit raises the storm:

The father wheeled about upon hearing the anguished cry of his child, and that that the young men had thrown her overboard. And yet he was paralyzed, watching but lifting not hand in assistance...the girl's cries of fear and agony were quickly drowned out by the repeated blows of oars upon her now mangled hands. And still she clung, until at last her hands came apart under those blows—first the fingertips, then pieces of second digits, the flesh of which disappeared into the waters. (qtd. in Bilson and Mancini 53)

Other versions are more squeamish: they diminish the violence and horror of the attack. As Laugrand and Oosten point out, “[i]n Inuit art books, hardly any carving depicts the cutting of Sedna’s fingers” (54). Indeed, because the Inuit art industry is directed almost entirely at non-Inuit consumers, it is likely that the image of Sedna has shifted to accommodate its new audience. The same goes for the narrative; Michael Kennedy gives the example of Beverly Brodsky McDermott’s 1975 book *Sedna: An Eskimo Myth*, in which the story, he says, has “been somewhat sanitized to meet the perceived needs of a children’s audience” (214). McDermott’s first-person narrator describes the traumatic event as follows: “I struggled to breathe and clung to the boat. To save himself, my father struck at my hands. My fingers broke into little pieces and fell into the sea” (qtd. in Kennedy 215). Here, the father does not even have a weapon—a paddle or a knife—and as he ‘strikes at’ her hands, it is not even clear that he hits them. As Sedna’s fingers “break into little pieces,” they spare her the indignity of *being broken* (in the passive sense), and thereby mitigate any excessive suffering or victimization. “As I watched,” she says, “I saw my fingers become shiny seals, fat walruses, and great whales. And so I became mother of all sea beasts” (McDermott, qtd. in Kennedy 215). Similarly, the 2002 dramatized recording of the story by CBC North ends with Nuliajuk gaining a kind of wisdom, or acceptance, as she sinks under the waves: “Ah!,” she says rapturously, “*Tukisivunga*—now, I understand. Now I see my destiny. I have been chosen by the great spirits to fill the oceans with the sea mammals. I have created the seals, the walruses, the narwhals, the whales, and all the other great sea animals for all Inuit” (*Inuit Unikkaaqtuangit* Vol. 1).

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Just as the moment of Nora’s door-slam proved too shocking for nineteenth century European audiences, here, the attempted murder of Sedna, and the severing of her fingers, prove too scandalous to narrate to a contemporary non-Inuit audience. As the story has been translated into English, then, and as its audience has expanded to include southern readers, it has been re-emplotted, and the transformation is striking. Now, the dismemberment of the woman appears to have become part of the plan of a benevolent higher power; in this paradigm, we lose the angry or vengeful Sedna—the one who withholds the food source and must be placated. As she narrates her own history in the first-person, Sedna becomes much less terrifying, less foreign, and less problematic. More specifically, the violence done to her is diminished, or justified; Sedna is almost a kind of Christ-figure, who must suffer—and be sacrificed—for the ultimate salvation of all. These adaptations, I would argue, suggest a kind of anxiety about the cruel ending of the Sedna story. Like Ibsen, Sedna’s editors and translators

seem to be concerned with the possibility that the story could be mined for social commentary or understood to contain a straightforward representation of the minds of its authors.

In 2006, Pauktuutit, the Canadian Inuit women's organization, re-released its popular booklet *The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture*. Originally published in 1989, *The Inuit Way* aims to "encourage understanding and lead to a strong and optimistic future for Inuit and for all who come to Canada's north" (*Inuit Way* n.p.). In other words, although the booklet is printed in a bilingual English/Inuktitut edition, it is aimed at (and likely consumed by) a primarily non-Inuit readership (*Inuit Way* 1). Perhaps because of this, the authors provide an extremely careful representation of Inuit life and tradition, and the ways in which they have adapted over the past several decades. Notably, they steer clear of many of the issues that Pauktuutit has worked hard to "break the silence on," such as child sexual abuse and violence against women ("FAQs"). This editorial rigour is especially apparent in the booklet's brief rendition

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According to one version of this legend, Sedna was a beautiful Inuit girl who was pressured into marriage by her father. Unknown to Sedna, her husband was actually a raven who fed her fish and kept her in a nest on an island far away from her family. Her father, who missed Sedna terribly, went in his kayak to rescue her but the raven, with his special powers, called up a storm. The father panicked and pushed Sedna into the cold water. As she clung to the kayak, her frozen fingers and hands were broken off and fell into the sea where they became seals, whales and other sea mammals.⁸ (*Inuit Way* 4)

Here, again, the violence of the father is greatly diminished. His 'panic' in pushing his daughter overboard differs markedly from the deliberate actions of the earlier versions; here, he does not seem to have any direct responsibility for the mutilation of Sedna's hands. The telling instead substitutes another possible culprit—the Arctic cold. In this way, Sedna does not seem to be a victim of violence so much as of circumstance.

Scholars of oral traditions often reference the ways in which the process of editing and publishing the Indigenous classics for an English-speaking audience impacts the stories in strange ways. Richard Dauenhauer and Nora Marks Dauenhauer—who have published several books on Tlingit oral tradition—explain that "[s]ome educators have advised against including unpleasant elements such as death. That is like the Easter story without the Crucifixion" (23). Robin McGrath, meanwhile, points out that many editors appear to have "an aversion to bodily functions": they often diminish or remove sexual or scatological references ("Leaving the Teeth" 4). In many cases, this squeamishness renders the events of the stories nonsensical (McGrath, "Leaving" 4; Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 23). Southern readers, apparently, expect Indigenous stories to have an Edenic purity or nobility about them; the bawdy content of many traditional stories is therefore upsetting to romanticized mainstream conceptions of pre-colonial North America.⁹

In the tale of Sedna, the violence leading to the wife's transformation is crucial to the sense of the story. The sea-woman's ability to withhold the animals means starvation and a slow death for the people; this devastating power, and this monumental ill-temper, are a direct consequence of horrific actions of the father (and perhaps also of the bird-husband). The story thus posits an explanation for the brutality of famine, and reminds the inhabitants of a highly-interconnected cultural landscape of the wide-reaching consequences of their actions. The danger, however, is that these subtleties may be lost on contemporary readers, who may mistake the story as condoning violence against women. McGrath notes the prevalence in Inuit literature of violent and horrific events, and observes that "Native stories have often come under attack from even the most progressive and liberal educators for breaking [the] happy-ending rule [of mainstream children's stories] and for presenting the universe as not just impersonal but as downright malevolent" ("Monster Figures" 52). In the hands of both Inuit and non-Inuit editors, the stories are often toned down or censored. And while much traditional Indigenous literature, unfortunately, is often marketed to a grade-school audience,¹⁰ it is not only children's texts which are subject to this puritan refinishing. Pauktuutit, in revising the Sedna story for *The Inuit Way*, seems to be concerned more generally with the possible interpretations by *qallunaat*—white people, or southerners.

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Southern understandings of Inuit gender roles have been heavily informed by notions of "hunter-gatherer" societies as being composed of dominant, hunting males and submissive, domestic females (Bodenhorn 57). Naomi Musmaker Giffen's 1930 study *The Rôles of Men and Women in Eskimo Culture*, for example, emphasizes the gender issues which have since developed into sensationalized popular stereotypes of Inuit culture, such as instances of polygamy or 'wife-swapping,' or the occasional killing of female infants at birth (73; 2). Eleanor Leacock, in her book *Myths of Male Dominance*, explains that many anthropologists' studies have been skewed by their commitment to the theory of universal female subjugation (314). While more recent studies,¹¹ along with the increasing number of texts available by Inuit authors, have revealed the ways in which such understandings gloss over the complexities of Inuit gender roles, many southern readers are unable to conceive of a hunting society which does not reflect the gender inequalities of an American kitchen in the 1950s, or a Norwegian parlour-room in 1879.

In describing the 'Inuit Way,' then, Pauktuutit is no doubt acutely aware of the ingrained beliefs of the *qallunaat* audience, whose understanding of Inuit traditions may still be drawn mainly from *Nanook of the North*, with its almost comedic depiction of Inuit culture and gender roles. And just as if it had been written for children, *The Inuit Way* deprives its readers of information which they may not be able to handle. For example, in recent years, the issue of traditional marriage practices has become a subject of some contention, as female elders describe being married at a young age and forced to move away to the home of their new husbands. "My marriage," says Apphia Agalakti Awa, a Pond Inlet elder, "it isn't a nice story, it doesn't

sound nice. I don't want people to be shocked" (Awa et al. 36). In the 1993 *Final Report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women*, members of Pauktuutit explain that "[t]o many young women...marriage was a frightening event, and there are many stories of women being carried off kicking and screaming by their potential husbands" (*Inuit Women* 143).¹² They clarify, however, that although these practices are no longer held to be acceptable, they should not be automatically understood as condoning violence against women. Indeed, the authors say, "Pauktuutit has been active in dispelling the myths and confusion over the acceptability of violence against women and children in Inuit culture" (*Inuit Women* 152).

However, in creating *The Inuit Way*—a text with a much larger public readership than the above-mentioned *Report*—Pauktuutit chose a different tactic. In the section entitled "Traditional Marriage Practices," the authors explain that:

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In some parts of the Arctic, it was traditional that a man would come into camp and 'steal' his new wife away, sometimes throwing her over his shoulder or onto his *komatiq* (sled) and begin to leave the camp. This was symbolic of the fact that the wife's family didn't want her to leave nor did she want to leave. After much yelling and laughing, the newlywed couple would leave her family and join her husband's family in his home territory. (*Inuit Way* 22)

Like the Sedna story, this account glosses over any suggestions of violence or force, and differs drastically from the versions told by Inuit elders. In the process of these revisions, there is again the implicit fear that readers might assume that these stories contain authoritative truths about Inuit society—for instance, that misogyny in the North is not only deeply ingrained, but acceptable. Pauktuutit likely hopes to prevent the audience from coming to the conclusion that current problems with abuse in Inuit communities may be linked to tradition, rather than resulting from a legacy of colonial mismanagement and rapid cultural change.¹³

Like Ibsen, the authors of *The Inuit Way* seem to be concerned about the ways in which the politics of feminism may be impacting the reception of their story. In his 1898 assertion that his "task has been [merely] the description of humanity" (rather than the staging of a feminist coup), Ibsen may have feared that *A Doll House*, as a political tool of the women's rights movement, would be encompassed, or overshadowed, by its 'message.' Similarly, the tellers of Inuit stories must contend with the possibility that their work, in the context of another culture, may be transformed into Aesop's fables—that upon finishing the story, the reader may add a phantom final line about 'the moral of the story.' Southern audiences may conclude empirically—and incorrectly—that violence against women is central to Inuit culture. Stories like Sedna's, after all, are profoundly unfamiliar for many southern readers, and in the face of such daunting interpretive challenges, they have a tendency to latch on to any idea—no matter how oversimplified—of what a text is 'about.' Strangely, the experience of encountering the stories of another culture has the tendency to turn many readers into 19th-century ethnographers—keen to draw sweeping conclusions, or generalized theories.¹⁴

Often, storytellers will try to pre-empt these totalizing interpretations by offering one or two of their own. Ibsen, you will recall, declared that his “task ha[d] been the description of humanity,” rather than the emancipation of housewife (qtd. in Innes 26). The authors of *The Inuit Way* make a similar attempt to govern the interpretation of the controversial story: they explain that “[t]he legend of Sedna provides insight into how Inuit culture values the family and children very highly, and yet due to the challenging environment in which they exist, are sometimes forced to make difficult decisions” (4). The Inuk writer Rachel A. Qitsualik, discussing the story of Imarasugjuk¹⁵—the cannibal who attempts to murder his wife—asks rhetorically:

Is this a lesson that such abuse is traditionally acceptable, meant as instructions for how men should treat their wives and daughters? Hardly. It is no coincidence that Imarasugjuk’s actions are linked to cannibalism—the lowest a human being can stoop in traditional thought. The abuse and murder of the women are, in this tale, deliberately linked with cannibalism in order to mark this man as the epitome of all that is hateful to Inuit. (“A Matter of Courage”)

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Stories of violence against women, she argues, are meant to *warn* against such abuse.¹⁶ In this light, the stories become much safer, more acceptable, and much less offensive to contemporary gender politics.

While many Inuit stories do have “a message for people’s lives,”¹⁷ this identification of this moral creates a problematic relationship between the reader and the text (Aupilaarjuk et al. 187). As Susan Sontag writes, “[t]he modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (6). Particularly when faced with a story that does not conform to accepted rules of propriety, readers often hastily seek to create order out of chaos, or to bring the text back into the realm of their control. The Oblate missionary Maurice Métayer, who translated and edited hundreds of Inuit tales, attempted to explain the story of “The Magic Drum”—in which the skeleton of a woman comes back to life with the aid, literally, of a man’s heart—in a letter to Al Purdy: “You see now the very important message of this story: a woman is not fully a woman without the love of a man” (Métayer 6). As Purdy later suggests, this moral endows the story with a kind of reductive didacticism; by guiding the audience’s interpretation, it rigidly controls the experience of a text which may, at first glance, lie beyond the ken of many southern readers (Métayer 6). But *panicking* about the possibility of not understanding often leads us to make some of our worst critical decisions, as we search desperately for methodologies that will make quick and easy sense of the unruly text. As scholars, this kind of relief is our worst enemy—it means the end of struggle, the end of learning.

At the risk of mimicking Ibsen—my intention here is not to separate these works from their political or social significance. All stories undoubtedly have messages, purposes, and impacts in the world; these are inextricably linked to the artistry of their expression, and often just as difficult to pin down.¹⁸ And I have no qualms about storytellers who attempt to shift the ideological locations of their work, or to influ-

ence their critical reception of their texts. Indeed, Pauktuutit, like other interpreters of the Sedna story, is no doubt responding to the changing conditions under which the story is now understood—and to the changing needs of communities. Today, the threat of starvation due to breaches in protocol may be less pressing for communities; more urgent, perhaps, is the problem of domestic violence, symptomatic of the dire impacts of colonial intervention into Inuit life. As Alooook Ipellie points out, the *strength* of the performed text, furthermore, lies in this adaptability—this capacity to remain relevant to each new generation of listeners (xv). This is how Sedna can gain a fan-base in southern Canada, and how Nora can speak to a theatre full of Palestinian women.

196 Yet this encounter between the Norwegian play and the Inuit legend demonstrates the trouble that occurs when the moral of the story threatens to become definitive, and when writers and editors are intimidated, or frustrated, into excising the text's more provocative moments. When the ideology of a text becomes an impenetrable glaze, when it smoothes over every bump and crevice, then it is no longer doing its work. Indeed, it is not the task of feminism, or of other emancipatory projects, to simply render the whole world politically correct. The removal of offensive material actually deprives these movements of their most powerful tools. It is the doorslamming and fingerslicing qualities of stories, after all, which challenge readers, which provoke them to discussion, and which force them to grapple with the messier side of art and society.

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NOTES

1. 'Inuk' is the singular of 'Inuit.'
2. *Inuit Nunaat*—the Inuit homeland—includes Greenland, the Nunatsiavut region in Labrador, the Nunavik region of Northern Quebec, the territory of Nunavut, the Inuvialuit Settlement Region in the Northwest Territories, and parts of coastal Alaska and Siberia.
3. In the version told by Alexina Kublu, the animals created are ringed seals, square-flipper (bearded) seals, and belugas. "The creation of the walrus," she says, "occurs in another story...that of the myth of 'Aakuluguusi and Uummaarniittuq' the first people" (Angmaalik et al. 152). The synopsis included here closely follows the latter part of the story recounted by Knud Rasmussen in his 1929 *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos* (Vol. VII No. 1 of the *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition*) (63-67). In this version, as in many others, the young woman first marries a dog-husband, and her children are sent away to become the Dene (or sometimes the *qallunaat*—white people).

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4. For a more comprehensive list, see Kennedy (211), Boas (177-181) and Laugrand and Oosten (20-21).
 5. Ethnonyms such as Uqurmiut and Nattilingmiut are local designations of Inuit groups. The ending -miut means 'people of'; the term 'Iglulingmiut,' for instance, refers to the people of Iglulik (who are more properly called Amitturmiut). See Bennett and Rowley 340.
 6. In a famous incident, Ashivak—wife of the influential shaman Angmaalik—led a group of women in sewing a set of clothing tailored to Sedna's superhuman proportions, and symbolically threw it into the sea to mark the break from the old beliefs (Akulujuk et al. 79).
 7. In Alooook Ipellie's 1993 story collection *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, Sedna's victimization has a more overtly sexual character—she has been sexually abused by her father, and is demanding that the shamans help her with her inability to orgasm (35-42).
 8. The precise origins of this version are not made apparent. Although it makes use of the anglicized South Baffin name 'Sedna,' the Inuktitut version is about 'Nuliajuk' (which is the Nattilingmiut version) (Laugrand and Oosten 21). It is unusual that the bird-husband is a raven (*tulugaq*), rather than a sea-bird—a fulmar or petrel (Kennedy 212).
 9. For a wonderful description of the clash of Indigenous and European aesthetic traditions, see Tomson Highway's "Why Cree Is the Sexiest of All Languages."
 10. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer comment on "the reluctance of the educational establishment to accept contemporary oral literature as serious, adult literature" (24).
 11. See d'Anglure, Briggs, Bilson and Mancini, Bennett and Rowley, and Angmaalik et al.
 12. Elder women often report that although marriage was a very difficult time, they later came to love their husbands; Awa says, "as I grew up, I began to realize what a good husband I have and how lucky I am" (Awa et al. 36).
 13. Other Pauktuutit initiatives, such as the 2003-2006 Nuluq Project on Abuse Prevention and the 2006 *National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities*, detail the ways in which the events of the past sixty years—many of them the by-products of colonization—have undermined the wellbeing of Inuit communities: "The negative impact of the residential school system continues to affect individuals, families and whole communities. These experiences have had deep effects on self-esteem, emotional resilience and coping abilities. Other trauma that has affected the Inuit includes enforced relocations; uncontrolled outbreaks of disease and famine; unilateral imposition of modern laws and customs; and external governance" (Pauktuutit, *National Strategy* 4). Pauktuutit now works to reduce the negative impact of this legacy on Inuit women and children.
 15. For a critique of the tendency toward generalization that is a part of much early Inuit ethnography, see Kublu, Laugrand, and Oosten's introduction to the *Interviewing Inuit Elders* series (Angmaalik et al. 1-12).
 16. The spellings of this name vary from place to place.
 17. In Sedna's case, however, such a moral might not fit easily—although Takánluk has the ability to cause starvation, it was through the mutilation of her fingers that the sea-mammals—the primary source of food, fuel, and material—were created.
 18. The Igloolik elder Emile Imaruittuq, when prompted by an audience of Inuit students, extrapolates on the significance of the story of the orphan Kaugjagjuk (another tale with an often very violent ending): "I think the meaning of that story is that you have to love orphans at all times. People were being shown that you cannot abuse an orphan and treat them terribly. You have to treat everyone respectfully" (Aupilaarjuk et al. 187).
 19. As Joan Templeton explains, Ibsen's distinction between the "poet" and the "social philosopher" is not necessarily absolute; Ibsen's aesthetics, she argues, *enhance* the political impact of his play: "[h]e had remained the painstaking artist as he took the woman's part" (145).