

TULUGAQ – MYTHOLOGY, NATURE AND INDIGENOUS BELIEF IN ZACHARIAH WELLS' UNSETTLED

Exploring how culture and nature is presented in relation with Indigenous belief, and wider mythologies, in Zacariah Wells' *Unsettled*.

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Abstract

This article looks at the ways in which the Indigenous peoples of Canada, predominantly Inuit, and their relationship with nature are presented in Zacariah Wells' collection of poetry, *Unsettled*. Addressing the relationship between colonists and native peoples, as well as exploring cultural elements of mythology and belief, this article aims to analyse the ways in which Wells depicts the presentation, perception and destruction of Inuit tradition and culture.

The raven forms an integral part of Indigenous belief and tradition. Zacariah Wells' collection of poems, *Unsettled*, uses the image of the raven consistently throughout, exemplifying the significance of the raven within the mythology of Inuit culture. Inuits are Indigenous peoples of, what is now known as, Canada. They traditionally have an extensive system of beliefs, with ravens being heralded as the ultimate creator, believed to have brought light to the world. The prominence of ravens within Wells' collection presents a way in which First Nations culture could be said to be ruled by nature, as well as how the

traditions and culture of First Nations people are affected by the influence of colonisation.

The power of nature, and the First Nations integral part of the Canadian arctic culture, is presented in *Unsettled* through the medium of the Raven figure, the mythology of which depicts the power of natural cycles, and the Inuits' dependence on nature in order to maintain their culture. This focus on nature is exemplified by frequent reference to ravens, an animal which encompasses much of First

Nations culture through creation mythology.¹ Although raven mythology is not as prevalent in the eastern arctic areas of Canada as it is in the north-western Pacific areas, it is still a central part of the culture that Wells is presenting, as explored in Ousten and Laugrand's article 'The bringer of light: the raven in Inuit tradition', where it is termed the raven complex.² The theme of nature is further evident in the focus on seasonality and darkness throughout *Unsettled*. The figure of the raven is portrayed as a beacon of hope in the seemingly constant darkness brought by the arctic seasons, as depicted in the poem 'Qausuittuq', where 'the would be darkest [day], is no darker than yesterday'.³ It is said that in the beginning, the world was dark until the raven brought light. The raven is said to have been the ultimate creator, with the Inuit word for raven being Tulugaq, meaning creator of light. Furthermore, 'A beacon black in the salmon sky' also signifies ravens as being an integral part of the survival of Inuit culture (p. 92), as the raven is said to initiate the beginning of the first salmon run of the year. The alliterative aspect of this line, with the use of repetitive plosive and sibilant sounds adds impact to this notion. This could also be seen as representing an invasion by foreign peoples, as, while the 's' sound exists

in Inuit phonology, the 'b' sound does not. This perhaps displays the contrast between the conflicting cultures, showing how the settlers are imprinting upon the traditions of the Indigenous people. Additionally, this line demonstrates how Indigenous Canadian cultures rely on nature to survive, by following patterns of the environment and, therefore, forming a part of the ecosystem, and environment itself.

The symbiotic relationship between First Nations cultures and nature juxtaposes with the unbalanced relationship that Wells presents with the settlers. The poem 'White Trash' is one example of this, presenting the way in which white culture disturbs the natural environment. The actions of white settlers conflicts with nature, and settlers are shown to impose upon Inuits in order to repair the habitat that is being destroyed by the industrialisation and commercialisation of the South. This could be perceived through the reference to 'Inuit cons' (p. 50), who must clean up the damage caused by commercialisation, and the subsequent destruction of the environment.

Unsettled is shaped by the way in which First Nations culture is presented as being so deeply

¹ Franz Boas, "Mythology and Folk-Tales of the North American Indians". *The Journal of American Folklore*, (October-December 1914).

² Frederic Laugrand and Jarich Oosten, 'The bringer of light: the raven in Inuit tradition', *Polar Record*, vol. 42 (July 2006).

³ Zacariah Wells, *Unsettled*, Insomniac Press (Toronto, Canada: 2006), p.97, subsequent references in parenthesis.

entwined with nature, the seasons and the coastal habitat of the north-western Atlantic area. The implication of this could be interpreted as being that First Nations cultures are, in fact, a part of the local ecosystem, disturbed by the colonisers, who saw the land as ‘tabula rasa’ (p.71), meaning clean slate. The raven, which is said to have been the sole creator of wild animals, could be indicative of the significance of animals in native culture. This is presented through Wells’ constant reference to animals such as ‘beluga’ (p. 86), ‘caribou’ (p. 65) and ‘bull-seal’ (p. 36), all of which are integral parts of First Nations culture, providing a means for survival in the harsh Arctic environment.⁴ Humans are also represented through animals, such as in ‘Jake’, who is described as a ‘bull-seal of a man’ (p. 36). The environment itself is also constantly related to nature and survival, where ‘The bay’s thousand whitecaps aren’t waves, they’re beluga’ (p. 86). This could be seen as Wells signifying the relationship of Indigenous people with the environment, and how they form a natural part of the ecosystem, with age-old systems in place which are now part of the natural cycles. This contrasts with the way in which the settlers have forced their way into the environment, as depicted in the poem ‘Terra Iam Cognita’, where colonisers are said to have ‘came upon this land [...] claimed it as Nunavut’ (p. 71). The ironic use of the term

‘nunavut’, meaning Our Land in Inuktitut, demonstrates the callous nature of the theft of Inuit land. Although this land belonged to the Indigenous peoples, it was claimed, as though uninhabited, by ‘brave explorers [...] the Bylots and the Baffins and the Frobishers’ (p. 71). Here, Wells makes direct reference to the explorers Robert Bylot, William Baffin and Sir Martin Frobisher, who made expeditions to ‘discover’ the New World. All of these men have areas of Nunavut named after them: Bylot Island, Baffin Island, Baffin Bay and Frobisher Bay. Wells’ distaste towards these men and their activities can be further seen in the poem ‘Frobisher’s Bay’, which refers to ‘Sir Martin’s respectable pirates’ (p. 46). This oxymoronic reference portrays the contrasting ways in which explorers and colonists perceived their actions, in comparison with the way in which it was received by the native peoples. Explorers believed themselves to be superior, educated and thus ‘respectable’, whereas their actions would have been viewed as those of ‘pirates’, who were invading land that did not belong to them and stealing it. This further displays the strained relationship between settlers and natives, and how the theft of native land relates to the destruction of Indigenous culture through the disruption of the natural patterns that were in place. The ‘ravens wheeling over the boats’ (p. 71) in ‘Terra Iam Cognita’ could be interpreted as

⁴ Frederic Laugrand and Jarich Oosten, *Hunters, Predators and Prey: Inuit Perceptions of Animals* (January 2014)

depicting the distress, felt by the Indigenous peoples, of the impending destruction of their land. Wells immediately follows this with 'black inkblots on a white sky' (p. 71), which perhaps signifies the colonist's perception of the natives. The image of the raven could be seen as a representation of Inuit culture, which would have been seen as unsightly inkblots on the blank slate that they perceived the land to be.

Despite the raven's status as the creator, the Inuit relationship with the raven is a complex one. While revered, the trickster element of the raven, and its nature as a scavenging carrion bird, are depicted in *Unsettled* through the poems 'Critics Swarm the Gallery' and 'Scavengers'. These poems, respectively, describe the actions of the raven through the lines 'Ravens swing croaking low over carrion' (p. 95) and 'A bored raven picks white bones' (p. 61). These depictions of the raven as a thief and scavenger have resulted in Inuits both revering and dreading the presence of ravens. This duality has resulted in many representations of the crow as being two separate ravens, which each exhibit, separately, the raven as the creator and the raven as the mischief-maker. While the raven is said to have brought light to the world, it is also said to never do anything which is not for its own benefit. Additionally, the raven is said to revel in creating mischief in order to satiate his aforementioned boredom. These aspects of good and evil of the raven's personality mean

that Wells' presentation of the raven is multifaceted, and can be perceived in a variety of ways, simultaneously representing the raven in both positive and negative ways. Although this may seem contradictory, this could be seen as a true representation of the Inuit's relationship with the raven, and the way in which they do not simply have either a positive or negative perception of the raven as a creator figure. This complexity is explored extensively in Bukowick's article 'Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow', which addresses the many ways in which the crow - which is seen as being interchangeable with ravens within mythology - is perceived as both a good and evil figure. For example, ravens are also said to be a traditional omen of death and destruction.

The motif of the raven throughout *Unsettled* could possibly be perceived as signifying an omen of the death of Inuit culture itself. The line, 'A creature of earth, no more of the sky' (p. 93), perhaps signifies the reduction of Indigenous cultures to simply that of myth and legend, removing their power as belief systems. Furthermore, the 'white fire' (p. 36) and 'setting white sun' (p. 37) referenced in 'Jake' could be an allusion to the legend of the crow being thrown into the flame and charred black. Jake embodies the spirit of the trickster, who is said to be able to take any form,

including humans.⁵ This could possibly be further indicative of the destruction of First Nations culture, as Jake's spirit is destroyed when he visits the white-dominated South. This can be seen when he returns 'a shrunken shell...gaunt, hollow' (p. 37), having become dependent on drugs. Addiction is a prominent issue amongst the First Nations, where drug dependence rates are far higher than among the population of Canadians.⁶ The traditional representation of the raven as an insatiable glutton can be seen through his 'monstrous hunger for pleasure and love...for booze...for sex...' (p. 36).⁷ The character of Jake's sick humour and trickster tendencies could be seen as further evidence that Jake is a representation of the raven. This could be interpreted as further demonstrating the strains of the relationship between natives and settlers, seeing how the colonists are still progressing with the destruction of Inuit culture. 'Ravens wheeling...black ink blots on white sky' (p. 71) could, alternatively, signify the ravens as observing the invasion, thus symbolising change and opportunity.⁸ This idea of change could be perceived as

presenting the evolution, forced or assimilative, of Indigenous cultures. As ravens are said to be intermediaries between the physical and spiritual world,⁹ as well as being omens of death,¹⁰ this could be seen as further evidence of the death of Inuit culture. Contrarily, this could simply further signify a period of change and adaptation in Indigenous cultures.

A loss of Indigenous culture, as represented through an inversion or disregard for Inuit tradition and cultural beliefs, is evident throughout several Wells' poems. The poem, named 'Sauniq' (p. 92), meaning namesake in Inuktitut, could be seen to represent a modern disregard for the historical Inuit culture amongst younger generations. This could perhaps be as a result of modern Canadians having attempted to forcefully assimilate Indigenous children from their cultures through the use of residential schools. These schools were put in place with the purpose of eradicating all traces of Indigenous culture and

⁵ Franz Boas, "Mythology and Folk-Tales of the North American Indians". *The Journal of American Folklore*, (October-December 1914).

⁶ Dinah Kanate, David Folk, Sharon Cirone, Janet Gordon, Mike Kirlew, Terri Veale, Natalie Bocking, Sara Rea, Len Kelly, 'Community-wide measures of wellness in a remote First Nations community experiencing opioid dependence', *Canadian Family Physician*, vol. 61, Issue 2 (February 2015).

⁷ Boas, Franz, 'Mythology and Folk-Tales of the North American Indians', *The Journal of American Folklore*.

⁸ Karen Elizabeth Bukowick, *Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow* (Boston, 2004)

<https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir:102331/datastream/PDF/view>.

⁹ Karen Elizabeth Bukowick, *Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow*.

¹⁰ Karen Elizabeth Bukowick, *Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow*.

beliefs.¹¹ The line ‘He only shares one of his names with the hunter’ (p. 93), being the hunter’s ‘grandson’ (p. 93), who kills the hunter’s companion the raven, the ultimate creator in First Nations mythology, could be symbolic of the dying nature of First Nations cultures, exemplifying the younger generations losing touch with sacred beliefs, possibly as a result of the aforementioned residential schooling, or, alternatively, through other methods of forced assimilation and indoctrination into western culture. Furthermore, the line ‘A dead trickster’s a hex to a hunter’ (p. 93) could perhaps further serve to exemplify a loss of touch with, and belief in, traditional legends. According to Inuit legend, a hunter caught the raven and threw it into a fire, turning it black. This could possibly be seen, simply, as an adaptation of this traditional legend, perhaps signifying a sense of frustration towards traditional Inuit culture, and a rejection of their intricate belief systems by younger generations due to settler attitudes towards Indigenous cultures.

This loss, or adaptation, of Inuit culture could also be perceived through reference to various other mythological influences made throughout the collection. The many

references to Norse mythology, specifically ‘Fenris ... ragnarok...vidar’ (p. 74), may be indicative of the Inuit population which spreads from Canada into Greenland, and how there are a number cultural similarities between the traditions of the two peoples, as seen through the observable parallels between the mythological belief systems of the Norse and Inuit people.¹² Furthermore, reference is made to ‘Apollo’ (p. 73), who burnt the raven that returned with news of Coronis’ infidelity.¹³ Wells also alludes to Norse mythology, through the poem ‘Huginn and Muninn’ (p. 89). This poem is named after a pair of ravens which feature in Norse mythology, who are said to be messengers for the god Odin. Furthermore, the reference to ‘conjuring Norse ghosts’ (p. 98) could be in reference to the Norse belief that ravens are lost or damned souls,¹⁴ perhaps indicating an assimilated fear of ravens, and, by proxy, Indigenous traditions. As well as directly referencing, or alluding to, other mythological belief systems, further direct reference is made to a specific Inuit legend depicting the trickster nature of the figure of the raven, where the raven leads travellers to a mountain and sets off an avalanche so he can return to peck out their eyes.¹⁵ ‘A raven led me to a cliff...In the

¹¹ Agnes Grant, *No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada*, Pemmican Publications (Manitoba, Canada: 1996).

¹² Park, R. (2008). Contact between the Norse Vikings and the Dorset culture in Arctic Canada. *Antiquity*, 82(315), 189-198.

¹³ David Stuttard, *Greek Mythology: A Traveller’s Guide from Mount Olympus to Troy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p.57

¹⁴ Mark Schwan, ‘Raven: The Northern Bird of Paradox’, *Alaska Fish and Game* (January 1990)

¹⁵ Cited as told by A. Qavviaktok in Frederic Laugrand and Jarich Oosten, ‘The bringer of light: the raven in Inuit tradition’, p191

spring the ravens...pecked out my eyes' (p. 89) could also be seen as an inversion of Inuit legend of the raven being the creator of light and thus allowing people to see. In 'Huginn and Muninn', where 'A boy has drowned. A raven wheels above him. A second squats on the shore' (p. 89). This exemplifies the trickster nature of the raven, who simply watches as the child drowns, as the water's surface turns black with his hair (p. 89). Additionally, this could perhaps be seen as an inversion of the tale of the raven as the creator, where, instead of being the creator of light, the raven is slowly turning everything back to black, perhaps as a form of trickster revenge

for the perceived loss of faith in the mythological power of the raven.

Wells employs Inuit tradition, as well as various other mythological systems, in order to present the ways in which Indigenous Canadian culture relates to nature and the Arctic environment, and how Inuit culture and people coexist with, and participate in, the culture of the colonisers. Various subversions and adaptations of tradition exemplify how Inuit traditions remain, as well as evolve or degrade, as part of the modern formation of Canada.

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