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Looking up through the microscope

Tommy Akulukjuk*

I had the opportunity to attend the 14th Inuit Studies Conference held in Calgary this August. The theme of the conference was “Bringing Knowledge Home: Communicating research results to the Inuit.” The odd thing is, there isn’t a large Inuit population in Calgary but the theme focused on “communicating results to Inuit.” Before we arrived, I kept thinking “how are Inuit going to know what is being discussed if the conference isn’t held in an Inuit community?” The whole time that I attended the conference, I felt like a hospital patient nervously waiting for the doctor to give me his diagnosis. These people knew about my own history more than I did, many of them were experienced researchers, and almost all of them claimed to know Inuit, personally and professionally.

I had a hard time understanding why we even have Inuit Studies Conference. What benefits does it bring to Inuit, what do we see in the communities that derives from the conference and why is it important to hold such a thing? I fully understand that some of the researchers help Inuit, and I thank them for the history that they have uncovered. What, I think, was really unacceptable was that these people made their profession possible from our culture—it was as if my intellectual property rights were taken away. If these researchers make a living from studying us, of course they’re going to defend what they are doing. I have one example of what might have been wrong. In one of the rooms, they had presentations about the history of the Anglican Hospital in Panniqtuuq. Of course I was going to attend that one session, if not more, thinking that I’ll learn more about my community. At the end, when they were asking questions, I had to ask what they planned to do with their findings so that young people from Panniqtuuq could obtain the information and get a glimpse of the past and how their community developed. They gave me many different answers to how they plan to communicate to the community, anything from that what they found was just discovered and too new to reach the community, that it is hard to communicate to a community as a researcher, and one lady said that she plans to hold a tea get-together in Panniqtuuq. And whenever they were about to answer my question, they would start by saying my name first, you know the way Qallunaat do—“*Tommy*, we do plan to take it to the community”—like I was a little kid being scolded. Why weren’t these people

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involved in the curriculum development for Nunavut? Maybe, at least, that way the information would be brought home.

How would other cultures feel if there was such thing as a Qallunaat Studies Conference or a Jewish Studies Conference and have such titles as “The effects of sitting in a cubicle for 7 hours a day: A ‘Qallunaat’ perspective”? I would think that they would be offended. But for a minority culture like Inuit, it doesn’t matter if there is such a thing as an Inuit perspective. There is always going to be an Inuit perspective, but how could they represent all Inuit? I guess what I don’t like about having Inuit Studies is because it misrepresents Inuit values and customs; a single research project in one community is not likely going to have the same voice as another community. It is likely that what was discussed in the conference will never reach Inuit communities, especially when they are not held in the Inuit communities themselves.

The next conference is going to be in Paris, France. What is the Inuit population in Paris? Are the research findings really benefiting Inuit all the way in Paris? Many times I felt like I was in a show, being studied through a microscope, dissecting my organs and making conclusions from a Qallunaat perspective and suggesting and making recommendations about how to go into the future. My suggestion is that from now on we hold such conferences with Inuit in Inuit communities and work closely with Inuit.