



Podcast: Voices from the Field 35 – Kinauvit? What's Your Name? The Eskimo Disc System and a Daughter's Search for her Grandmother – A Conversation with Norma Dunning

Description

In this episode, guest host Aluki Kotierk speaks with Dr. Norma Dunning about her book "Kinauvit? What's Your Name? The Eskimo Disc System and a Daughter's Search for her Grandmother," which investigates the little-known system of issuing numbered identity tags to Inuit in Canada between 1941 and 1978.¹

Dr. Dunning situates the Eskimo Disc System within the broader process of colonization. She details the impacts of this dehumanizing system on the health and well-being of Inuit, including loss or “suspension” of Indigenous identity, shame and internalized colonization (often compounded by residential school experiences), as well as living in constant fear of losing access to food, healthcare, and education.

Dr. Dunning situates the Eskimo Disc System within the broader process of colonization. She details the impacts of this dehumanizing system on the health and well-being of Inuit, including loss or “suspension” of Indigenous identity, shame and internalized colonization (often compounded by residential school experiences), as well as living in constant fear of losing access to food, healthcare, and education.

This podcast is part of the NCCIH Surveillance Project.

Bios

Dr. Norma Dunning



Dr. Norma Dunning is a Padlei Inuk writer, professor, and grandmother. She has published five books and has received many literary awards. Her books have been translated into several languages. She teaches Indigenous Health Studies at the First Nations University of Canada and lives in Regina, SK.

¹ Dunning, Norma. Reflections of a disk-less Inuk on Canada's Eskimo identification system. *Études Inuit Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (2012), pp. 209-226.



Aluki Kotierk



Aluki Kotierk was sworn in as the 8th President of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated on December 13, 2016. During her campaign, Aluki focused on empowerment, Inuit language and culture, collective healing and Inuit identity. Originally from Igloodik, Aluki lives in Iqaluit with her family.

She grew up in a bi-cultural home as the oldest of seven children. After attaining a bachelor's and master's degree from Trent University, Aluki worked for various Inuit organizations including Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami) and Nunavut Sivuniksavut.

Aluki returned to Nunavut where she has held several senior management positions in the Government of Nunavut and the Office of the Languages Commissioner. Kotierk was most recently Director of Inuit Employment and Training for NTI. Aluki has a passion to empowering and improving Inuit lives and has a keen interest in how Inuit culture and language can be better incorporated into the way programs and services are delivered.

Transcript

-Music-

Aluki Kotierk: Tunngasugissi. Welcome to Voices from the Field, a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH), which focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

-Music-

Aluki Kotierk: Tavvauvusii. Greetings. My name is Aluki Kotierk and I'm very happy to share that I'll be the host for today's podcast. We have the great pleasure of speaking with Dr. Norma Dunning about her book entitled, *Kinauvit? What's Your Name? The Eskimo Disc System and a Daughter's Search for her Grandmother*.

Before we begin, I would like to invite Dr. Norma Dunning to introduce herself.

Dr. Norma Dunning: Well, I'm Norma Dunning and I'm Padlei Inuk, writer, and professor, but the best job is being a grandmother to six grandchildren. I teach at First Nations University in Regina, Saskatchewan.



Aluki Kotierk: Thank you, it's so great to meet you. We're here to talk a little bit about your book. In your book you stated that you teach the Eskimo Identification Canada System in every class that you instruct, regardless of the course. Can you tell us why do you think it's so important that more people are aware of this identification system?

Dr. Norma Dunning: I think a very big part of it, Aluki, is it is unknown and quite often when we're talking about Indigenous Canadian history, often Inuit are left off. I sometimes think that has to do with the population size and the location of where the majority of Inuit live. I think when I am teaching – I always teach Indigenous-based courses – and quite often, First Nations are highlighted more so and get a great deal more visibility than Inuit get. To me, it's about informing people about a part of Inuit Canadian history that isn't taught or isn't brought up in, let's say, in a K-12 Social Studies class. And for me, I'm very honored to be able to increase the visibility of Inuit at any time. So, to me it's really an aspect of our history that is not taught and it should be.

Aluki Kotierk: Thank you for that. I'm wondering if I can dig a little bit deeper about – as I recognize having gone to university myself as an Inuk, I am very aware of the aspect where, for instance, I took Native Studies and so much of the content was focused on First Nations. But as you did the research for this book, I think it became quite apparent that there was not much documentation. Could you talk a little bit about your thoughts about why that might be?

Dr. Norma Dunning: Well, a part of it has to do with FOI itself (the Freedom of Information Act) that we have in Canada, that's a part of it. The other part of it is how government chooses to not release historical records, and in this case, the disc lists are archived but unavailable, really, for I think it'll be about another 20 years. And so there's these kind of, I don't know, restrictions, and I will say government enforced restrictions that surround this system. And I don't know [...], I believe that. ... I know, as a researcher, that I've met other researchers who will say that their fonds or their research will not be available for 50 years or something to that effect, and I think a part of that is wanting to ensure that the population that was initially most affected have passed on. Researchers have that kind of power where they can say, "This is tucked away for however length of time." I do know at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, that there are the Williamson fonds, but I don't know how much access I would actually have with it, and so there's always these kind of restrictions. So, that is one component.

And when we look at Inuit history, it is very recent. It is often not written down and often from the point of view of non-Inuit people who went into Canada's north acting as administrators or missionaries, and we don't have the Inuit voice inside of that system. That is what I had hoped to bring forward.

Aluki Kotierk: That is fascinating, thank you so much.



I'm going to change a little bit of gears and I want to focus on well-being. As we know, well-being is not limited to the physical domain. I was curious to find out a little bit more about the unease you describe where you actually asked your mother what you were, and I want you to maybe describe some of the nuances that you learned to understand about your mother not sharing that you and your siblings are Inuit.

Dr. Norma Dunning: Well, not initially sharing that. We have to remember what are the long-term effects of somebody who sat in a residential school just outside of Winnipeg for eight full years. There was no going home at Christmas, no going home at summer, and that had to do with the cost of travel and transporting students to and from. So, that was the situation that my mother grew up in. During the course of her serving time at residential school, her parents passed away, so when she is released at age 16, she is considered a minor and was fostered into a French family in The Pas, Manitoba.

So we can see how, I think and how I in time interpreted it, it's a form of protection. I think there are many Indigenous mothers who do the same thing, where they're not as open about what they are, which in turn becomes what their children are. I don't think that we should ever, ever push or press a residential school survivor to tell their story. That is something that is completely up to them. But in the course of all of it, I always thought that there was something that wasn't right within my family. I couldn't put my finger on it when I was younger and when my mom told me, "Well, you tell people you're French," that's what I did.

So, when we talk about wellness and when we talk about survivors and intergenerational trauma, I think every family has secrets, no matter who we are or where we are, and we have to respect them, when it comes to surviving residential school for eight full years. I mean when you think of it, it is amazing that my mother and my two aunts survived it at all. And so, when we're talking about wellness and we're talking beyond the physicality of wellness, I think that my mother coped in the best way that she could. She did not want to talk about her time in residential school and only ever said those five words, "It was really, really hard." I have to respect that and it's not up to me to push any further.

So, I think though, in time, I never allowed my sons to identify as Indigenous at school because I knew what could happen in terms of them becoming coded and the amount of money that the public education system will receive if they have Indigenous students within that population, and to me, I didn't want that to happen to my kids. So, in that way, I could understand why my mom did what she did. It made sense.

Aluki Kotierk: Thank you so much for sharing that. I think it's an illustration of how love comes in so many forms and this deep feeling of protectiveness. I wondered if you want to say anything about – because in my mind there's protectiveness, but there's also some shame carried by many people who have gone to residential school. Is that something you would like to speak about?



Dr. Norma Dunning: You know, Aluki, I think there is shame and it's because of, I think, the absolute abuse that went on within those schools. And I know in the school that my mother attended, if she dared to speak Inuktitut, the nun would reach into their mouths and pull on their tongues. Now that's a very invasive kind of thing to have happening to you. And so to me, we have to respect those survivors and we have to respect what they do want to share with us. And I think that when you call it a display of love – where we're not going to tell you exactly what you are and instead you can go out into the world and tell people this – that shows the racism that my mother would have experienced.

And so, I think we have to look at it in a positive light. And I think for myself, I had to do a lot of my own research into who my family was, who my ancestors are. And I think in doing that, it's a way of earning who you are and I think it made me feel stronger as an Inuk woman. It took me a long time to figure it out that nothing happens overnight. But I think when you earn it or when you really take the time to think about your ancestry and what each of those people lived, I think that when you can identify, when you self-identify, then it has a deeper meaning. I hope that makes sense.

Aluki Kotierk: Thank you. I think it's really important to talk about the journey of understanding and I think that there's a lot of compassion that one can have when we start believing and knowing that everyone is doing their best. At times, we're not able to understand the behavior but over time, when you become more aware of more information, you're able to understand it deeper and have more compassion for them, as well as where we're at today.

Dr. Norma Dunning: I agree, Aluki, and I think there's something about discovering things a little later in life and trying to understand all of your family and why did they operate the way they operated in the world. I think that there is a level of maturity that is also required in that.

And so, I often have a hard time with people who blame their parents. I think, “Oh, you really have to think about what they lived and what brought them to where they are today.” And we're always changing; our parents at some point stop being our parents and become people, and we have to really take the time to try to understand them. And I think that's, in terms of being Inuk, in terms of being family, that we have an obligation to our ancestors and to our present-day family members, and to be respectful and to really just not expect people to live the life that you want them to live. We have to give that thought, we have to be, I think, much more loving, much more empathetic to one another.

Aluki Kotierk: It sounds like you spend a lot of time reflecting and personal growth, and understanding with new experiences and new encounters, how it affects you today. When I was reading through the book, I very unexpectedly – and I'm reading this book about you looking for your grandmother and I came across an excerpt about my own grandmother. You write, “Panic and trepidation filled Rachel Uyarasuk to the point that she returned to a dismantled camp and tried to break up the ice in search of her family's discs, because she feared being sent to jail for the human act of losing an item.” So, when I read that, I was overcome with emotion and felt so numb – that deep



kind of strong feeling of protectiveness – that, “How dare people make my grandmother feel that way.”

So, I was hoping you could maybe talk a little bit and elaborate on how the Eskimo Identification Canada System impacted Inuit behaviour when they were in use and whether, in your view, there is a continued impact felt by Inuit today.

Dr. Norma Dunning: First of all, because the north was split into districts – and I always think, “what would our lives be without borders, without geographical borders?” and those borders automatically make people different from one another. And so, when the story of your grandmother, her fear – that's what I thought of, just her absolute fear of, “I've lost the discs, I'm going to end up in jail,” and here she goes back to the camp and she's chipping away at the ice, just in case maybe they're there – that's absolute fear. And I often say this, and I don't know if you'll agree with me Aluki, but I think that Inuit, by nature, are quiet people and when we started to have non-Inuit administrators, and mission people, and RCMP – initially Northwest Mounted Police and later RCMP coming into the north – I feel that they were very heavy-handed towards the Inuit population overall, and they instilled the kind of fear inside of us that would never have been there before.

And one of the people I interviewed, he talked about how there was this difference between E1 and E2 Inuit and in his view, E2 Inuit would get very angry about the system, where E1, in his thinking, did not. But we have to think about the longevity of this system and 30 years – it goes on for 30 years – and inside of that with all the people, all the Inuit that I interviewed, it was their mother who would give them their disc and tell them, “You have to memorize this number.” And the person that I was just speaking about, that gentleman, he was being told that when he was in around the age of four or five – and you see this responsibility that the mothers took up and you want to be sure that your child can get through life with as little obstacles as possible, so memorize this number because this number is what gets you to be able to see a doctor, to be able to go to school, to be able to buy groceries, to ... in every interaction within your life. And so, the mothers were the ones who really ..., “You have to know this number, you have to have this memorized.” And they would, the children would memorize it.

But let's say that the districts, the geographical districts and borders that the government created in the north, prior to that – I've read where my Inuit, Padlei Inuit, we were called the People of the Willow, the People from Beyond, and Inuit did not distinguish one another based on a number. And so that shifts people's thinking, their thinking shifts. And when we look at some of the other people that were... other Inuit that were interviewed for this book, you can see one gentleman, he lived and relived forced relocations five times in his early life. And then having to have the disc and that was your identifier, more so than your name, and at the end of it all, because the disc system bleeds into Project Surname, which bleeds into Project Correction. The Government of Canada really doesn't have a grip on the population in the north until, I think, in around the mid 1990s, which is not so long



ago. But what he did is he hired a lawyer to be sure that he would never have to experience any kind of a name change or any kind of identifier again. So, you can see where people are like, “That's enough, that's enough intervention into my life and I'm not going to allow the government to do this anymore. I'm going to hire a lawyer. This is my name. That's the end of it.”

And what I think is disturbing for me – I had read the comments on an article from Nunatsiaq Newspaper, and they had done a 2022 article about this book. The comments afterwards were, “Oh, well she's just a woman who's trying to make money off of marginalization,” and it's so blatantly ignorant. So, I can only assume that these comments came from non-Inuit and people who just see it as a system that did not create harm. I have often had people say to me, “Well nobody died. Nobody died, so what's the big deal?” And then they'll go on to say, “We all have a number. We have social insurance numbers, we have driver license numbers, and healthcare numbers.” But what I always have to remind them is that you don't have to present that number when you buy groceries or when you go to school; you're not having that additional identifier. And so in that process too of bringing in the disc system, Inuit are also being told, “No more Inuit names, no more of that. You have to use biblical Christian names.” So now we're talking about the interference with tradition and how names carry from one person to the next generation to the next generation, and what those names signify. And so, people can say, “Well, nobody died,” but there were traditions that, to me, were put on hold. I will always say “we're still standing,” so we didn't completely lose everything.

So, it made us look at one another differently, Aluki, like we're looking at each other: are you E1 or E2? And we would never think to do that, we just wouldn't. So, you see how it starts to, how colonialism comes in, and control and surveillance comes on to a population without really a clear explanation as to why you have to have that disc. All they're told is, “You have to have it, you have to have it on your person,” and that's it.

But I've had other Inuit who have said to me, “Well, why did we have that system, and when you see it travels on for a 30-year lifespan, how come it didn't stop sooner?” I think it's quite amazing when we can have this system carrying on in a country and have the southern population completely unaware of it.

Aluki Kotierk: It is fascinating that it was used for 30 years. I think the fear that you describe, in my view, still underpins much of the relationship between Inuit and non-Inuit that exist today. You can still see the remnants of the fear due to the fact that non-Inuit had the authority and power, in many circumstances, and when you look at the social determinants of health, even in Nunavut currently, you see the inequities between these different populations. I mean, there's so much to unpack in the different layers of the system and how it's impacted Inuit individually, across the communities. Is there anything else you would like to add to this conversation?



Dr. Norma Dunning: I would like to add that this system has never been apologized for. So, we had a government that... [...] Mr. Trudeau apologized for everything, and there were the apologies over the dog slaughters in Nunavik and some apology towards forced relocation, but this system has never been apologized for. And some people will say, “Well, what would an apology do?” What an apology would do would be to recognize harm and the harm that was brought to Inuit through being forced to become a number instead of a person. And that can tell you, when we're talking about the non-Inuit and how heavy-handed things were and how to make things simpler for themselves, we'll just give them a number. But now you have to change your names and you can't fall back on traditional naming systems. You have to use biblical Christian names.

And to me it comes down to how unfair it was. It was completely unfair. And so to me, that one component – and I know that there are still many Inuit who still have their discs – and so to me, an apology – that would be nice, and it's the recognition of what government did at that time.

Aluki Kotierk: Thank you for that. Earlier you talked or mentioned that we can be positive about things that we learn, and so I thought I would end this podcast by reading your dedication in the front of the book. It says: “This work is dedicated to all Inuit Canadians: past, present and future. Stand tall and always remember that we are more than a number.”

Dr. Norma Dunning: You know, I've written a few books and I've been fortunate that Canada actually reads them. And every time I cannot say when I write that dedication I am crying, and [...] that I have a great deal of pride when it comes to Inuit Canadians and all that we have survived, and all of our positive possibilities that are waiting for us and yes, we have always, always been more than a number.

Aluki Kotierk: Thank you so much for your generosity and insights and for participating in this podcast, Dr. Dunning, or I would say qujannamiimarialuk. I think you would say matna.

Dr. Norma Dunning: Yes, I would say matna.

Aluki Kotierk: Yes. Thank you so much. That concludes our podcast, and I encourage all our listeners to go get a copy of their own book, *Kinauvit? What's Your Name? The Eskimo Disc System and a Daughter's Search for her Grandmother*.

-Music-

Aluki Kotierk: To hear more podcasts in this series, head to *Voices from the Field* on the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health's website nccih.ca. Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a Creative Commons license. Learn more at www.sessions.blue.



The National Collaborating Centre for
Indigenous Health (NCCIH)
3333 University Way
Prince George, B.C.
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tel: (250) 960-5250
Email: nccih@unbc.ca
Web: nccih.ca

Le Centre de collaboration nationale de la santé
autochtone (CCNSA)
3333 University Way
Prince George (C. - B.)
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tél : 250 960-5250
Courriel : ccnsa@unbc.ca
Site web : ccnsa.ca

© 2025 The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH). This publication was funded by the NCCIH and made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of PHAC.