

## Playing the Fool: The Satire of Canadian Cultural Nationalism in Mordecai Richler's *The Incomparable Atuk*

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Résumé de l'article

In *The Incomparable Atuk*, Mordecai Richler is just short of prophetic on the subject of Canadian cultural nationalism. Previous criticism underestimates the sophistication of *The Incomparable Atuk's* satire and trivializes its serious intent. An examination of Atuk reveals his composite nature as both the Trickster of Native culture and the fool figure of Western imperial culture. By transgressing social and geographical boundaries Atuk as Trickster undermines and reveals the authoritarian forces that have designated a marginal space for him and his people. However, as the fool accountable to his patron, Buck Twentyman, Atuk simultaneously invokes white, Western conventions. Atuk plays upon such stereotypes as Eskimo, Jew, "noble savage," and "lazy Native," finding them useful for public image and commercial enterprising. Richler uses Atuk to critique corruption, hypocrisy, and colonial mindedness. Both Twentyman and Atuk capitalize on the flaws of Canadian citizens, and thus are both representative of imperialists who colonize their subjects for personal worldly success. The serious subtext of *The Incomparable Ark* suggests that Canadians must move beyond insularity, beyond producing "junk," to creating authentic work.

# Playing the Fool: The Satire of Canadian Cultural Nationalism in Mordecai Richler's *The Incomparable Atuk*

LINDA MORRA

IN THE AFTERWORD to the recent edition of Mordecai Richler's *Cocksure* (1996), Margaret Drabble observes that the 1968 novel is "packed with warnings about the world which has come to be" (235). She also sagely remarks that *Cocksure* "would be hard to write in today's climate, when we do not rely on the censor to hack at our work, but are encouraged to censor ourselves in the name of political correctness" (238).<sup>1</sup> Such comments could be applied as justifiably to Richler's other satirical, politically incorrect text, *The Incomparable Atuk* (1963). Although it was written over thirty years ago, this novel can be seen as quite topical in light of recent media attention to Canadian cultural nationalism. Specifically, in the January 18, 1997 issue of *The Ottawa Citizen*, concerns about "the practical value of cultural protectionism," the effectiveness of related political measures in light of "new, border-crossing technologies," the tenuousness of future funding of the arts, and recent debates over a bill to protect the Canadian magazine industry — all of these suggest that in *The Incomparable Atuk* Richler was just short of prophetic (O'Neill). Yet *The Incomparable Atuk* has often been dismissed as mere light-hearted humour, or completely overlooked (as the scarcity of critical articles indicates), an oddity when one considers that its vision bears resemblance to and anticipates the satiric *Cocksure*. George Woodcock, for example, appraises *Atuk* as little more than "entertainment" and as "amusing but insubstantial" (44). Other critics and reviewers tend to evaluate it in similar terms, or to suggest that Richler was merely buying time between the publication of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* in 1959 and *St. Urbain's Horseman* in 1971 (as examples, see Ramraj 72, Carroll 98, and Myers 48).<sup>2</sup> Such criticism, which arises from the novel's "slight" length and overtly whimsical purpose, underestimates the sophistication of *The Incomparable Atuk*'s satire and trivializes its serious intent.

Specifically, the characterization of Atuk is much more complex than has been recognized: it is a composite of those traits associated with both the Trickster of Native culture and the fool figure of Western, imperial culture, and, as such, represents a blurring of postcolonial and imperialist desires and ideology. This blurring is rendered more complex by such moments in the novel as when Atuk, clearly a fool figure, adopts the guise of a shaman (a kind of Trickster figure by virtue of its transformative abilities) to deceive his own community and family. Allan Ryan, quoting Lawrence Sullivan, argues that generally the “Trickster’s character and exploits embody the process of ironic imagination. His dynamism of composition mocks, shatters and re-forms overly clear structures of the world” (8). Accordingly, his role is bound up with the disruption of prevailing social and cultural values, the contestation of forms of dominance, and his power with a sense of community, not in individualistic, self-serving or narcissistic pursuits (4). That disruption is often initiated by the representation of “cultural stereotypes in humourous and ironic fashion to reveal ... their ideological underpinnings,” or by other ironic or parodic strategies that are meant to undermine such hegemonic ideology (14). When Atuk acts like the Trickster, he adopts various guises, and, in so doing, transgresses social and geographical boundaries; he undermines and reveals (among other things) the controlling, authoritarian forces that have designated a marginal (or hierarchically low) space for him and his people.

Simultaneously, Richler’s protagonist is firmly grounded in the tradition of the fool, evokes many of that figure’s features, and, as such, reflects white, Western conventions.<sup>3</sup> A number of critics, beginning with Dr. Doran from whom such literary critics as William Willeford, Enid Welsford, Sandra Billington, and, most recently, Clifford Davidson borrow, have defined the multifarious functions of the fool. In accordance with such definitions, and omitting complexities of and variations in historical function, the fool’s role and characteristics are remarkably similar to those of Atuk: the fool is parasitic; his mimicry and use of magic are a means to exploit, if not entertain, others; he is an ostensible poet in a world of fools; and he is intricately related to his patron or “aristocratic ruler” — in Atuk’s case, Buck Twentyman.<sup>4</sup> This latter relationship suggests the existence of a hierarchical framework that continues to borrow from imperialist ideology: the fool is always appointed and legitimated by an authoritarian figure, and, as such, poses little threat. Since Atuk is hand-picked as Twentyman’s protégé — and, in fact, is referred to as “fool” on at least two occasions — he learns to operate independently of a community or family, even as he is always accountable to his master (96, 110). That Atuk

assumes this role without hesitation demonstrates how willing he is to compromise and then relinquish his own cultural and communal values for a relationship that has its antecedents in imperialist culture. This willingness is ultimately the greatest testimony of his foolishness.

The fool is parasitic because of his dependency upon persons of rank for subsistence: he is an entertainer of such persons and “survive(s) through wit and tricks” (Billington 123). Yet this relationship, as Willeford argues, becomes increasingly mirror-like:

In [the fool’s] immediate relation to the centre and to the authority he derives from it, he has similarities with a symbolic figure of fundamental importance, that of the king. There is, moreover, a deep and long-standing connection between the two ... The fool begins, socially, as the outcast, the parasite, the tramp, though he may in the course of his show prove himself more powerful than the king and in a fuller relation than the king is to the intelligence and vitality of the world that embraces the microcosmic kingdom in a larger whole. (147)

The “little threat” the fool figure may pose resides in his potential to compete with, if not share, his ruler’s status. Such power is sometimes manifested in the way in which fools, like the Trickster, engage with magic and ritual: they parody “those things which [are] considered sacred or valuable to culture” and, although such parody is “mere play,” occasionally reveal some “truth” or “rightness” by such play (Willeford 98; Davidson 5).

Here one may remark upon overlapping characteristics of the fool figure and the Trickster: they both “indulge” in “chameleon-like mutations” and employ parody, albeit for their own respective purposes (Williams 1). The Trickster of Native Canadian culture employs parody to call attention to social constructs that are embedded within an ethnocentric ideology, to challenge and perhaps alter those constructs (Ryan 8). The “Trickster mix of sacred and satiric” functions as a way of creating slippages within an imperialistic discourse that has generated preconceived ideas about what it means to be Native and has rendered that subject as marginal to the discourse (Ryan 123). Mimicry, a form of parody, embodies “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 86). Thus, parody and mimicry as employed by the Trickster would be perceived as dangerous because of that figure’s “*double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority*” (88). The fool figure may critique authority, but he almost never threatens or disrupts it, since his position has been appointed and validated by those in power:

if he threatens that authority or existing hegemonic structures, as Atuk does, he effectively loses his function.

The word “fool” evokes different connotations, however, for it may refer to a “natural” fool, or to one “deficient in judgement or sense”; to a “professional jester” who emulates the natural fool; or to one who is “the victim of some trick, imposition, or the like” (*New Century Dictionary* 597). With respect to the first kind of fool, Walter Kaiser suggests that this kind of figure is so because he “performs his natural functions naturally, without sophistication or the usage of custom” and because he “is invariably irreverent of [societal] conventions, not out of any motives of iconoclasm but simply because he does not know any better” (7); Davidson adds that these fools, “in distinction from the self-fashioned ‘artificial fools,’ were born that way” (6). Doran relates how the second kind of fool had more cunning and thus made use of his position to indulge in speaking unsavoury truths and to exercise the “absolute freedom of speech,” what would now be an equivalent to “the modern freedom of the press” (8). The fool only became “victim” when he lost his social purpose and when he failed to amuse.<sup>5</sup> Richler deftly manoeuvres Atuk through all these kinds of foolishness — Atuk *is* the “natural fool” when he arrives in Toronto from the Arctic North, he *plays at being* the fool throughout the course of the novel, and then he *plays the fool* for Buck Twentyman. As Richler dangles his puppet, Atuk, in these ways, he also employs him to direct the satire toward other characters with whom he comes into contact and, eventually, toward colonial aspects of Canadian culture; simultaneously, Richler’s use of an “Eskimo” as protagonist is suggestive of a morality that exists on the periphery of both Canadian cosmopolitan life and the novel.<sup>6</sup> If Atuk bears any resemblance to the Trickster, he rapidly loses the subversive power associated with that figure as he capitulates to Western, commercial ideology: that is, he sacrifices any tenable attachment to his own community and culture for the sake of self-interested gain. Whatever his relation to the Trickster may be, Atuk is always a fool in one sense or another.

At the outset of the novel, Atuk’s innocence characterizes him as the natural fool. When he arrives in Toronto, his “unsophisticated” nature is immediately revealed: he is “taken to see a midget wrestling match, a striperama, Rabbi Glenn Seigal’s Temple, and other wonders of Toronto,” and thereafter decides that there are ample attractions in the city to induce him to stay (3). His reverence for these wonders reveals that, rather than impugning societal norms, he utterly adheres to them. Not only this naive Eskimo, but those who take him to see and who pay tribute to such shallow entertainment — what is passed for art — are indeed

fools. For assistance in finding permanent residence in Toronto, Atuk approaches Professor Gore, whose racist observations reflect the pervasive (and dominant) social and religious values of English Canada even as they reveal both Atuk's innocence and his latent moral depravity: "Though he adored the chunky little primitive, he was not blind to the sly side of his nature. A certain un-Presbyterian shiftiness. It would be enlightening, he thought, to see what might come of a savage innocent in Toronto" (4). In these ways, Atuk is delineated as the *idiot savant*, or, as Woodcock asserts, as Voltaire's "l'ingenu" (44).

Yet, Woodcock also observes that Voltaire's fool figure as it appears in Richler's novel is distorted to demonstrate that "even a rapacious savage, acting from natural appetite, can throw into absurd relief the flaws and follies of our way of life" (44). Such a judgement underestimates the complexity of Atuk's character: although his naïveté contrasts with the folly of other characters, he is not a rapacious savage, or, at least, not immediately presented as such. From the outset, Richler strategically employs Atuk's artlessness and primitive nature to undermine the corruption and hypocrisy of the Toronto literati — a microcosm of colonial-minded English Canada — and of "civilized society in general" (Ramraj 67).<sup>7</sup> Atuk's initial disappointment in his limited achievements in Toronto is ironic because his yardstick for success is almost completely based on altruism:

Atuk felt miserable because it seemed to him that after the initial, hardly profitable, success of his book of poems, he had failed at everything in Toronto ... Here he was blessed enough to be in Toronto, and what had he made of himself? Nothing. What had he done for his family? A food parcel. His Tribe? The Elders of the Igloo? Some blurred photographs of strategic bridges, the railway station, the airport. Nothing to shout about. The Old One would be disappointed. (25)

Atuk's principal concerns — notwithstanding the early manifestation of his fascination with that which is "profitable" — revolve almost entirely around eliciting the approval of his community and his family (even his somewhat ominous "strategic" photographs of Toronto's transportation centres are for the Elders). His initial commitment to his family and community is a complete inversion of the interests of almost all those he meets. The father of Bette Dolan, Canada's "darling" athlete, for example, operates entirely out of self- rather than family-oriented interest; as such, he encourages his daughter to swim across Lake Ontario, not only because "Daddy don't like quitters," but also because her success lifts him "out of decent obscurity" into "Canadian-Father-of-the-Year" (13,15).

Atuk's "failure" is juxtaposed with the purported success of other characters, and particularly with Doc Burt Parks's self-proclaimed world-fame — "all over Canada" (30). The latter's "achievements" are motivated by self-concern, avarice, and unabashed cruelty. Bette Dolan acknowledges that her father "raised her on the teachings of Doc Burt Parks" — a notion that is undercut by the foreknowledge of her father's sadistic psychological stratagems. During her renowned swim across the lake, not only does he ignore her pleas to retrieve her from the water, but he also draws back the launch every time his daughter tries to quit (29). When Atuk contemplates the fame of persons such as Dr. Parks and wonders "what was [their] secret," it becomes evident that their secret to success is founded on self-aggrandizement and unqualified greed (30). Finally, Richler broadens his satire to target Canada as a "land of opportunity," as Atuk naively endeavours to make his way in the world by winning contests (clearly gimmicks employed by companies for the sake of advertising), one of many that seem to proliferate in Toronto:

Toronto was so rich in opportunities that an alert Eskimo could even make a start on his fortune while he slept ... At the shopping plaza, round the corner from where Atuk lived, the thirty-two-foot yacht on exhibition was being given away by Twentyman Razor Blades for the best jingle submitted by May 1st. Not only that. But each time Atuk joined the rest of the unemployed, and there had never been more in the history of Toronto, to buy bread or a tin of baked beans at the same plaza, he was given a slip to fill out that could win him his own island in the St. Lawrence. There *had* to be a winner every week. (37-38)

With great vehemence, Richler mocks the absurdity and fraudulence of such purportedly abundant "opportunities," contrasts them with the incomparably large number of unemployed persons, and underscores his irony when Atuk asks, "Why am I never lucky?" (38). Luck, it becomes evident, is not required for success in this big city.

It is not long before this "rough but impressionable Baffin Bay boy" learns how to play the game in Toronto (53). Like the Trickster, he adopts various roles that reveal and challenge hegemonic social and gender constructs; however, a "trace element" of his unscrupulous side is evident in his self-interested "play" with Bette Dolan. Recognizing that Dolan is motivated by "helping" people, Atuk confides in her that he lacks confidence because of his self-professed sexual inadequacies: "All that stands between me and hitting the bull's eye is a woman who can ... encourage me over the hump" (20). Bette thus invents sessions of "therapy" to assist him with

his difficulties. She excuses her prior frigidity by claiming that her “purity” was a sign of patriotism: “No man has ever even held me in his arms before. I couldn’t you see. Because I belong to the nation. Like Jasper Park or Niagara Falls” (21).<sup>8</sup> Her relationship with Atuk reveals, however, that her sexual abstinence was based on a Presbyterian distrust of pleasure, which holds that “love-making could [not] be anything but nasty” (23). When she discovers how much she enjoys “the funny stuff,” the unobtainable Bette becomes Canada’s Darling in a way that reverberates with comical sexual innuendo (23). Richler does not employ this scene merely for gratuitous or titillating purposes: Bette is revealed as the first of a whole cast of fools. Simultaneously, she is the victim of a broader cultural hypocrisy and, more specifically, a gender-based attitude that demands that women like Bette’s mother profess to regard sex as “filthy” (23).

Atuk’s corruptible side becomes more full-blown the longer he remains in Toronto. He thus becomes the “artificial fool” because, like the Trickster, he learns to mimic his former, more innocent self; however, his mimicry is used to disguise self-interested motivations. He is, as Welsford observes about fools in general, a “shrewd enough fellow who finds naïveté a convenient cloak for unscrupulous trickery” (32). Atuk is cognizant of prevalent Eskimo stereotypes, a “major discursive strategy (of colonial discourse),” and knows how to mimic behaviour associated with such stereotypes for personal gain; yet, the adoption of such stereotypical mannerisms also operates for Richler as a critical strategy to reveal and undermine the colonial-mindedness of those who find such behaviour credible (Bhabha 66). At *Dinner with the Tastemakers*, itself a satire on T.V. talk shows, he rubs noses with Nancy Gore because she “goes in for the nose-rubbing bit” (118). He is also reduced to using simplistic language because Nancy believes he is a natural fool:

Nancy Gore cornered Atuk.  
 “You,” she said, “enjoy — party? Have — much — fun?”  
 “Much-much.”  
 “Go eat.” Nancy Gore led him to the tables. “Good,” she said,  
 rubbing her stomach. “You eat.” (129)

Nancy Gore’s assumptions about Atuk’s ethnocultural practices and his facility with the English language reveal the kind of preconceived ideas with which Atuk must contend: in effect, her assumptions are evidence of her, rather than Atuk’s, foolishness (12).

Atuk learns from Rory Peel, another protégé of Buck Twentyman, that his adoption of the stereotypical Eskimo persona is useful for pub-



lic image and commercial enterprising. When he assures Peel that he is as “clean as a seal’s tooth,” Rory responds, “Seal’s tooth. Very good. Colourful. I want you to stick to that sort of idiom in public” (41). Atuk is indignant about the reinforcement of such clichéd behaviour until he is assured that Rory is “talking about one thing only . . . our business image” (41). The fact that this image exploits Eskimo stereotypes and yet is considered by Rory to represent both Twentyman Enterprises and the Eskimo people is in itself ironic. Still, Atuk willingly learns to invoke and perpetuate stereotypical behaviour to defend his own interests rather than to “raise the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations” (Bhabha 90); specifically, he plays at being the Eskimo fool to evade Gore’s discovery of his devious materialist stratagems. Professor Gore, concerned that he may be “lending [his] name to products for Twentyman . . . one of the biggest shareholders in the company that exploit [his] people,” confronts Atuk, whose reaction is telling:

“I do not know.”

A pause.

“Men with greased words come here and ask me to sign little papers.

I am grateful for Toronto’s goodness to me. They give me money. I sign. I am able to send money to the Bay to fight my people’s hunger and sickness. Is that bad Professor?”

“They are shrewd schemers, Atuk, and you must beware of them.”

“Oh. Good you tell me so.” (81)

Although Atuk’s own “greased words” deceive Professor Gore into believing that Atuk himself is deluded, they also suggest the shifty practices employed by Western imperialist authority figures in the negotiation of land and power; yet, Professor Gore is correct, for Atuk is both exploited and murdered by Twentyman. When he is arrested by the police for gorging on the American colonel, he again resorts to simplistic language as a way of sustaining his purported innocence: “Is much strange . . . Me simple Eskimo” (153). Finally, the public statement he makes after his arrest is fraught with trite “Eskimo” sayings and broken syntax because, by this time, Atuk knows how to manipulate his media image: “Is much sadness for me here. Man against man. Ungood. Tell them back at the Bay, Atuk will try to die tall, even as the Old One taught us in happier hunting days” (170). That Atuk plays the “noble savage” to outwit other degenerate characters and the Canadian public, and to cloak his own depravity, has

larger and graver repercussions: he perpetuates the dominant cultural ideology and structures that render his own people powerless.

As Atuk successfully draws upon the Eskimo stereotype, he adroitly draws upon Jewish stereotypes for his own purposes. His mimicry suggests his cunning; he emulates other culturally constructed attitudes and rituals as the situation dictates the need. When he approaches Rabbi Seigal about his desire to convert to the Jewish faith, he demonstrates how well he has absorbed Jewish customs. He wants to be named “Abe,” intends to study Yiddish, and cites a passage from the Old Testament: “An eye for an eye, it is written. A tooth for a tooth” (135). Simultaneously, Richler is using his protagonist to reveal the dissolution and corruption of those in the novel who celebrate the Jewish faith. Rabbi Seigal dismisses Atuk’s desire to change his name with “we don’t go in for those style names any more”; rejects his wish to learn Yiddish with “We’re modern Jews here”; and advocates “Inter-Faith” by placing a Christmas tree in the hall of the Temple (135). His reaction suggests the compromises that have been made to the colonial-minded social world of English-Canada, compromises that, like Atuk’s own, mitigate any authentic religious and cultural attachment. Finally, Richler successfully draws attention to and satirizes Jewish stereotypes by using Atuk as a mouthpiece. In conversation with Goldie, after his apparent failure at convincing Rory Peel of his “Jewishness,” he laments, “I have feelings too, you know. If you prick me, do I not bleed?” (117). In the same conversation, he asserts that “I’m a success. A somebody. What do I have to do to prove myself to all the Rorys of this world?” (117). By using Atuk to invoke Jewish stereotypes — in particular, Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* and even Duddy Kravitz from *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* — Richler directs the satire toward exclusionary and stereotypical behaviour.

The overlapping of Inuit and Jewish stereotypes is most apparent in the confrontation between Atuk and the Old One. The Old One, in great consternation over Atuk’s possible marriage to Goldie, advises him to “hearken” to his advice:

How would it be for me to sit your little half-breed on my lap and he wouldn’t be able to speak an Eskimo word? ... Shall I go to their home. To be stared at. An Eskimo. Would I feel relaxed there, Atuk? I’d have to wash and eat with cutlery. Do they know the joys of smoked deer meat? Minced seal pancakes? No. I’d be expected to eat condemned foods. Like filet mignon ... We are the chosen pagans, my son. We have a message for the world. (84-86)

The Old One's advice resonates with Jewish traditions, rituals, and expressions — the “condemned” foods he cites and his reference to Eskimos as “chosen pagans” are interchangeable with, respectively, kosher foods and the “chosen people.” Although the Old One's criticisms are directed toward Jewish culture, they have much larger implications: his fears of interracial marriages with “half-breed” children could have been elicited from any number of racial groups. If the concessions Rabbi Seigal makes suggest his absorption into dominant social structures and ideology, such resistance to negotiation with the “other” is another extreme that Richler also satirizes. Although he derides Jewish exclusionary behaviour in particular, he uses his protagonist to extend the parameters of his satire: Atuk is not just the “noble savage” of the Arctic North, for, at this point, he acts as a touchstone to reveal and deride common prejudices and stereotypes.

Richler also uses Atuk to mock lukewarm or hypocritical Judeo-Christian religious adherence. On the television game show, *Crossed Swords*, all the participants, including Atuk, must identify and discuss the merit of the quotation, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” Failing to identify the source, Harry Snipes retorts that “that's just the kind of namby-pamby talk that leads to welfare statism,” and Atuk penetratingly observes that “the thought is inspiring, much inspiring, but where has it got my people?” (92). Malcolm Ross (along with many other critics) assumes that the participants's answers reveal their moral and spiritual bankruptcy (116). To a certain extent, they do; but they are more than that. None of the participants, except perhaps Snipes, is a Judeo-Christian; thus, any conclusions about their failure to recognize the quotation as a passage from the New Testament reflect those who are part of the dominant Christian culture and who exercise judgements according to their own religious standards. The satire also turns on the source of the quotation — the Beatitudes from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, one of the essential statements of Christianity — and suggests that perhaps Atuk is right: where exactly has such “namby-pamby talk” about being meek brought his own people? (One cannot help but think of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity's “slave morality.”) Certainly, the practice of the Inuit — and much less that of the imperialist envoys who strove, in contradiction of the message they were bringing, to conquer and assimilate them into their own culture — was much closer to such meekness. Atuk's refusal to conjecture about the quotation and his defence of his “people” suggest that, at this point, he commendably refuses to “pose” for the sake of the game (even if his appearance in the show is largely for the purposes of self-promotion).

Atuk continues to play at being the fool, however, as he poses in many other situations: for instance, he presents himself as a kind of cosmopolitan “magician” to his family. His use of both magic and ritual debases what is sacred. When his family has produced what he deems to be a sufficient amount of work, he rewards them with his purportedly supernatural “invention.” The Old One, representing the entire clan, approaches his son and advises him that “there is much tension among them for you failed them yesterday. The Old One strongly recommends the magic for tonight” (70). Mimicking the traditional shaman, Atuk pleads on their behalf for this “magic”:

Atuk went into his trance. Stumbling, swaying, eyes rolling, he wandered round the room . . . “Ai,” Atuk called. “Aiii-aii.” He backed up against the window and felt behind the curtain with his hands. “Aii.” With a sudden sweep of his arm, he said, “Oh, Mighty One, let there be sound for my flock.” There was sound and Atuk saw it was good. (70-71)

His shaman-like ritual is a travesty of the actual spiritual and cultural power invested in the shaman figure; of his authenticity and importance to Inuit communities; and of the Judeo-Christian myth of creation, since he produces, not light, but “television” for his faithful flock who adore this “maker of miracles” (72). The incongruity between the power invested in the figure of the shaman (and, for that matter, in the biblical account of creation), and Atuk’s own “creation” reflects the vitiation of spiritual and cultural matters: these matters have been transformed coercively into commercial entertainment for his child-like followers. Such foolery provides Richler with a medium for “truth” to be revealed: Atuk’s invocation of magic and parody of ritual suggest how far he has drifted from his own ethnocultural and spiritual origins, demonstrate the shallowness of his relationship with his family, and reveal his complete absorption with profit-making (98).

Such foolery also indicates how much he has learned from and emulates Buck Twentyman. In order that he may continue to exploit his family, he occasionally permits “television,” a variation of carnival, “a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess” (Stallybrass 8). Such excesses are made evident in his invocation (a parody of the “Our Father”) for popular programming and general revelry: “Bring us a Dupont Special with Frank Sinatra . . . Dinah Shore . . . Elvis Presley . . . bring us songs, dances, fill us with laughter . . . Give us this day many girls with long, delicious legs and leaping breasts uncovered” (71).

This “permissible rupture of hegemony” relieves his family’s increasing resistance to work, but that rupture is licensed by Atuk only when there is an “upswing in production” (Terry Eagleton qtd. in Stallybrass 13; *Atuk* 57). Just as Twentyman exploits Atuk and his poetry readings as a way of making a hollow tribute toward Eskimo communities, evading the responsibility for “all ... the white man had done to make (the Eskimo’s) accustomed way of life unfeasible,” and thus consolidating his authority, so Atuk uses television — an interruption of the rigorous work routine he has established for his family — as a way of feigning interest in his family’s welfare, providing “licensed release,” and preventing a rebellion from being realized (2-3). In striking contrast to the Trickster, Atuk endeavours neither to overturn Western, imperialist-based hierarchies, nor to undermine its discourse: instead, he duplicates Twentyman’s form of social control of the low by the high and, in so doing, “preserves and strengthens the established order” (Stallybrass 13).

Such foolery, and, specifically, the “reward-system” Atuk has concocted for his family, suggests the depth of his depravity. Like the fool figure who parasitically fed off another’s fortune, Atuk not only profits from the lessons learned from Twentyman, he also profits from his family, whom he has had “exported” from Baffin Bay, and, specifically, from their labour in his basement factory. No longer the “pride and hope of the Elders,” he is a harsh task-master whose expectations reveal the complete desiccation of his previous sense of familial affection (39):

A tour of the basement factory, before the others had risen, satisfied him that production was slowing down again. His relatives, indolent to the bone, were in constant need of a whip-hand over them, otherwise they abandoned their work benches each morning to snooze. The demands for sculpture from London, Paris, New York, and even Tokyo, far exceeded his family’s basement production, but bringing down more relatives from Baffin Bay was no answer. Only the laziest were left. Another consideration was that the indoctrination period was too wearying. (53-54) <sup>9</sup>

Atuk is not mimicking Twentyman as a way of undermining such imperialist tendencies: he is emulating him in earnest. His commitment to instilling the importance of production in his relatives during what he terms the “indoctrination period” suggests how much commercialism is, for him, akin to a religion to which they must convert. As Richler satirizes the “lazy Native” stereotype, he also suggests Atuk’s corruption: whereas he was initially concerned with his family’s welfare, for the sake of his own prosper-

ity he voluntarily sacrifices his ethnic dignity and respect for his family — those very values at the heart of Richler's moral vision as expressed in his so-called major fiction (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, and *Barney's Version* [1997], as examples).

Atuk feeds figuratively off his family's production as he fed literally off the American colonel. Here, the cannibalistic trope may be seen as emblematic of English Canada's relationship with the United States: Richler seems to imply that Canada has devoured American culture whole even as the States consumes Canada. If Twentymen and his commercialized enterprises are seen as representative of American activity and cultural dominance — or persons of rank — then Atuk may be seen as representative of Canadians who depend on such activity and cultural dominance — or such persons — for subsistence. Seymour Bone, for example, the “rebellious, ambitious, acme-ridden [*sic*] son of a successful Presbyterian salesman” becomes a “national figure” within one week because of international, rather than national, attention to his journal, *Genius* (59):

Both *Time* and the London *Spectator* decided to do humorous columns about culture in Canada and chose Bone's journal as a logical take-off point. Very few people in Canada realized that their struggling, no-saying critic was being ridiculed. On the contrary. Most people were impressed.

“It doesn't matter what we think,” a realistic CBC producer said. “If the London *Spectator* feels he's worth writing about, we ought to give him an opportunity.” (62)

The vacuousness of Canadian culture gives rise to the valorization of attitudes, and of literary and cultural forms from abroad — so Atuk quickly learns when, in his evening classes at Eglinton Evening College, he is introduced to only British and American literature (Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*) (6). Richler also satirizes the colonial attitude and process whereby any cultural English-Canadian form — literature, magazines, art — becomes recognized as “high culture” (that is, culture which is purportedly “driven by forces for international differentiation because of its role as a constructor of the unique nation,” to borrow Sarah Corse's definition) as a result of international, not national, attention (if not validation); moreover, he mocks those who purportedly produce “high culture,” and the extent to which those cultural forms are indistinguishable from popular cultural forms (created as an “economic commodity” and thus, motivated by “international homogenization”) (Corse 6). Atuk's mimicry may be seen as a way of resisting imported and prevalent cultural

values and forms within Canada, but it may also be taken as representative of how much English Canada is parroting and fastening onto what comes from across the border. In this regard, Ross's pointed observation that no one in the text is American, except the American intelligence officer devoured by Atuk, is revealing: the novel's pervasive sense of Americanism is the result of Canada's importation and absorption of that culture (115).

Atuk is also Twentyman's parasite in a manner which parallels the American-Canadian textual paradigm. From the beginning of the novel, he is in Twentyman's service: the trading practices between imperial England and Natives are parodied as Peel gives Atuk "two electric blankets, a sack of flour, his cigarette lighter, and twelve bars of chocolate in exchange for a sheaf of his verse" (3). As the fool figure, Atuk "earns" his parasitical status by using his poetry to amuse; yet, he fails to realize that Twentyman does not explicitly require Atuk's services for entertaining, but, more pointedly, for diversion or distraction. Since the Twentyman Fur Company is "suffering from a run of foul newspaper publicity and questions in parliament" because of its exploitation of Eskimos, Twentyman endeavours to generate public sympathy for his enterprise — an enterprise so extensive, it has even infiltrated the federal level of government (2-3). He uses Atuk, as representative of the Eskimo, by including his poetry in a "series of advertisements in magazines all across Canada" (3). Although Atuk is thereafter left to his own resources, little time lapses before he is negotiating with Twentyman through Peel — this time, his poetry and his new business venture, "Esky Enterprises," are being sold to the public.

Atuk, in essence, begins to negotiate and scheme like Twentyman himself; he comes to serve as a foil for Twentyman in a manner that recalls Duddy's connection with Jerry Dingleman. As an outsider, Atuk endeavours to enter Toronto society and climb the ladder of commercial success. The second chapter, "Eskimo Tycoon," suggests that he has indeed achieved a laudable degree of worldly fortune, has abandoned his ethno-cultural and spiritual loyalties, and has become a mirror for the other "tycoon" in the text, Buck Twentyman. Atuk, utterly absorbed by his pecuniary ambitions, quickly learns to parrot Twentyman's lingo and negotiating style:

Harry Snipes wanted to see him about a possible television series. Atuk was interested, he went for the idea, but he marked the letter 'request more details,' for he was not going to get involved in another of those co-production deals, pilot films, percentages, work now and maybe, get paid later. Elsewhere, the president of Educational Folk Toys, Inc., was enthusiastic about the Esky-Doll but he wanted to get

together to discuss royalties, possible promos and the Eskybilly disc tie-up, before he went into production. (56)

Like Twentyman, he involves himself in a number of business transactions, and only commits himself to those that promise monetary gain. Finally, it is evident that he has been a good student of Buck Twentyman: Atuk has learned to exploit himself, just as Twentyman exploits the Eskimo.

Atuk's consideration of profits and "royalties" is reminiscent of Twentyman's commercialist pursuits and business negotiations with Chung Lee, the man whom he had had expatriated. When Lee confronts Twentyman because he wants thousands of tractors — and offers to pay him cash — Twentyman dismisses his concern about the "American government [who] won't let us export them to your country" (158). The "Buck" doesn't stop there: he crusades for — and sacrifices anyone who interferes with — the "cause" of Canadian nationalism, which he uses as a cover for his own material interests. Commerce prevails over all other considerations, including patriotism. More specifically, both Atuk and Twentyman are represented as imperialists who colonize their subjects for personal worldly success. If Atuk can be seen as representative of English Canada (and he can), Richler seems to imply that Canada exploits its own weaknesses for material gain, and mindlessly subjects itself to the enterprising of "Twentymen." Both Twentyman and Atuk capitalize on the flaws of Canadian citizens: Twentyman manipulates the naïveté of the public which, among other things, is disgruntled with American products, and Atuk profits from the naïveté of his family. Richler's vitriolic indictment is unmistakable when Ignak challenges first Atuk — "We wish ... you would remember Baffin Bay and how the white scum rule our land" (97) — and then Atuk's control over his family: "Wait ... Do you want his trinkets, his imperialist baubles, or do you want equal shares?" (99). Ignak's ultimatum here suggests limited options: equal shares would mean capitulating to Buck's world, and imperialist baubles would mean subservience for mere pittance. Evidently, imperialist baubles suffice.

Despite their corruption, both Atuk and Twentyman are given heroic proportions. Atuk, at the novel's outset, is mythologized and characterized as having achieved legendary success:

Atuk, the incomparable, came to Toronto from Baffin Bay in 1960. As every Canadian schoolboy now knows it was out there on the tundra that the young Eskimo had been befriended by a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman who had fed and clothed him and taught him English. At first Sgt Jock Wilson, generous to a fault but no man



of letters, had discouraged Atuk from writing poetry ... The poems, as everybody knows, later ran in a series of advertisements in magazines all across Canada. A professor from Eglinton University, Norman Gore, sought out Atuk at Baffin Bay, and came back with the ingredients of the now famous volume of poems. (2-3)

After he is “martyred,” he is related (albeit satirically) to Julius Caesar by Twentyman, who plays the part of Antony. Perhaps to make the connection between Buck and Atuk startlingly clear — if the reverberation of their names is insufficient — Richler titles the last chapter “This was the noblest of them all” and begins by chronicling, not Atuk’s origins, as one might conclude given his “incomparable” status, but Twentyman’s. Apparently, the two characters compete for ironic nobility. Although his origins are completely different from Atuk’s, there are other striking similarities:

Take Twentyman’s student days, for instance. Even though he had inherited untold millions, young Buck had insisted on working his way through college just like less fortunate fellows. And even this early in his career, he proved himself an astonishingly resourceful man. One summer, the story goes, Buck and some other high-spirited students were hired to escort several hundred Chinese back to the west coast, from where they would embark for their homeland. For now that the Chinese had built the railroad that linked the dominion from coast to coast, it was decided that they should all be repatriated. (155)

Buck’s difference from Atuk is manifested in the fact that he is nothing “like less fortunate fellows” — he is born with all the advantages in life, and uses these advantages to abuse and exercise authority over those of different racial backgrounds. Yet, Twentyman and Atuk are decidedly comparable because they both achieve legendary success by dint of their own conniving.

As Atuk becomes increasingly preoccupied with his machinations, he forgets that even if his success is comparable to Twentyman’s, he himself is no match for the almighty Buck. Atuk not only fails to divert Twentyman, he baldly insults him at the Cha-Cha-Chow-Mein poetry reading. As a fool figure, he is utterly dependent upon Twentyman (as he would not have been had he been a Trickster figure). Consequently, he mistakenly assumes that he pulls the strings regarding his participation in *Stick Out Your Neck* and that it is merely “an elaborate tax dodge” for Buck (112). It may be a form of tax evasion and a means for Twentyman to fulfill the criteria of Canadian television content, but it also becomes a means of gratifying Canada’s “need for a martyr” (159). Atuk’s boasts to

Goldie — “Come next week he’s going to need me more than I need him. In fact he can’t do without me, man . . . You watch me. I’m shrewder” — thus become ironic (112). His participation in the show ensures his demise by the week’s end and betrays his foolishness: the pursuit of a fast buck ends when an even faster Buck catches up with him. Toronto, in essence, does not “break his heart” as everyone predicts, it takes his head (39).

Atuk’s final martyrdom reveals that he has played the fool for, or been duped by, Twentyman — and Richler. In a world of commerce, materialism, and hypocrisy, it is risky — in Atuk’s case, fatal — to overestimate one’s shrewdness. For this reason, Atuk’s decapitation becomes emblematic of Canada: this connection is made explicit when the country is likened to “a beast without a head” by a director who observes how Canadians will react to Atuk’s possible conviction (172). The headlessness of both Atuk and Canada reverberates once again in the novel’s conclusion as Twentyman calls for silence from the crowd that agitates for Atuk’s freedom; he announces Atuk’s death, implies that the United States is culpable, and proceeds to invite the crowd to “use [their] noggins” (178). The scene is replete with irony: the last time Atuk used his “noggin,” he found himself as the guest-star of *Stick Out Your Neck*, “his head locked in a guillotine” (174). Leaderless and fickle Canadians will do everything but use their heads (“It doesn’t matter what we think”), and, as the allusion to Julius Caesar makes clear, will likely be persuaded to despise both the United States and Atuk. More generally, they will be manipulated by the Twentymen of the commercial world who compromise cultural standards for monetary interests. When Twentyman bids for the “Toronto franchise” of commercial television, he “delights” everyone, not only by selecting culturally debased material and promising “fifty percent Canadian cultural content,” but also by airing it when no one would watch it — from “five to eight each morning” (156-57). Given the ongoing and recent debates about Canadian cultural sovereignty, Richler’s satire, which targets the influential who applaud such compromises in Canadian cultural activity, remains timely. In short, Atuk’s foolishness is Canada’s foolishness.

Atuk’s relationship with Twentyman reveals that the latter knows how to manipulate such “foolishness” well: he transposes blame to the United States by leasing the show to an American company minutes before *Stick out Your Neck* airs because he recognizes that he can appeal to Canadian antagonism toward the States. This anti-Americanism, as Richler deftly shows, is also rooted in personal material concerns. When “Johnny Canuck” is “roused from slumber” to express anger over Atuk’s imprisonment, the protests are patently self-interested:

A mechanic who had been fired by General Motors; a man whose Buick had broken down and another with a GE mix-master that didn't work; a widow who had bought oil shares in a Texas swamp; another whose most unforgettable character had been rejected by the *Reader's Digest*; a couple who had been asked for their marriage licence in a Florida motel ... a politician who had never made the Canadian section of *Time* ... (167-68)

Patriotism becomes derivative, invoked for egocentric or inconsequential purposes. So Dr. Parks proclaims that, "We are building a new race of muscular marvels greater than the Greek Gods. We're doing it for patriotic reasons" (26).<sup>10</sup> Atuk himself experiences neither a sense of compunction when he exploits his family to make crude art for Esky-Enterprises, nor regret when, in what is perhaps the novel's blackest joke, he disposes of Mush-Mush whose interference in business is considered proportionate to losing his life.

Atuk's "plans" — his desire to manufacture and market Esky-products — are indeed a stretch from, and heighten the irony of, the original impetus behind his coming to Toronto: to become a famous poet. Although such a role also becomes a target of Richler's satire, some of Atuk's poetry, which may be of dubious quality, does have a "truth" element to it. When he is invited to speak at the Cha-Cha-Chow-Mein restaurant, Atuk takes the liberty of reading new material which, for the first time, directly impugns and disrupts the commercialized spirit and prevailing racial stereotypes in English Canada, and exposes the impoverished state of national culture:

*Twentyman Fur Company,  
I have seen the best seal hunters of my  
generation putrefy raving die from tuberculosis,  
Massey, you square,  
eskimos don't rub noses any more and the cats  
around Baffin Bay dig split-level houses ...  
Canada, wake up, you're all immigrants to me:  
my people are like niggers. (47)*

The rawness of Atuk's poem elicits Peel's rage: "You disgusting son-of-a-bitch ... from now on you clear every poem with me" (47). The offence resides in the fact Atuk "took Twentyman's name in vain" (48); he participated in an unlicensed act (one that was not authorized by official discourse) in a hierarchically low, socially-controlled space (a basement restaurant). Otherwise, Atuk is right: Eskimos have been exploited by the

enterprises of Twentymen, they do not conform to stereotypical notions, and they are part of a nation that is otherwise comprised of immigrants. The only truths, however, that seem to survive are those which subscribe to Twentyman's world — and eventually Atuk's "truths" also conform to that world.

As Atuk reads such poetry, he plans to exploit his family for the sake of Esky Enterprises: his potentially subversive power as a Trickster (who, in contemporary Native culture, represents and upholds communal interests against hegemonic ideology) is diminished by the fact that even his literary interests arise from the desire for self-promotion. Such raw ambition is deeply revealing of the exclusively self-serving bankrupt cultural climate which, for Richler, has tainted the English-Canadian arts world, specifically Toronto, and which has resulted in an insular, self-congratulatory literary community. Conversation itself has become commodified: when Professor Gore's guests realize the potential monetary value of their speech, the "wittiest tabletalk in Toronto was reduced overnight as it were to a tense exchange of monosyllables" (120). Genuine poetry, genuine cultural activity is almost completely absent in Canada and is reduced to either pecuniary concerns or the imitation of other cultural forms. When Snipes thus asks Atuk to write a "Western" for *"Metro, the magazine for cool Canucks,"* he "razor[s]" out a short story from *Collier's* — a story which has its origins in the American Western — and encourages him to use it for his own work:

Here's a good one. I want you to re-set it in Moose Jaw 1850. We haven't any Western yarns for the May issue. But please remember to change more than the names. Play around with the physical descriptions and details. Use your imagination, Atuk. (6)

As Ross has observed, such cultural activities as "newspapers, books, magazines, and films are all hand-me-down American style" (111). English Canada's voracious appetite for American culture results in the failure to develop its own imaginative reflexes. Richler's text acts as a warning about such dependency on stock writing and the tolerance of mediocrity, both of which may result in the extinction of writing of literary merit. When the columnist invited to Professor Gore's home for *Dinner with the Tastemakers* observes that "if the house was hit by a bomb it would blow out the brains of Canada," Richler ironically depicts the pretentious, depleted intellectual and cultural state of Canada:<sup>11</sup> it is not above a second-rate poet who reads in the basement of the Cha-Cha-Chow-Mein restaurant (118).

Richler's use of the poet figure as a central character — if Atuk can be considered thus — serves as a warning for readers who are foolishly

obsessed with the author rather than with the author's work.<sup>12</sup> In "The Uncertain World," he discusses how poetry in Canada is being subsumed by the figure of the poet:

Vaudeville hasn't disappeared or been killed by TV, but merely retired to small circuits, among them, the universities. Take the Canadian poets, for instance. Applying for Canada Council grants today, they no longer catalogue their publications ... but, instead, like TV actors on the make, they list their personal appearances, the campuses where they have read aloud. Wowsy at Simon Fraser U., hotsy at Carleton ... Put plainly, these days everybody's in show business. (26)

Such concerns are articulated by Louis Dudek in "'The Paperback Revolution' — Has it Guillotined Poetry?," which appeared two years prior to the publication of *The Incomparable Atuk* and which reflects one of the major preoccupations of the 1960s. Dudek claims that "the ever more obscure privately published poet will occasionally leap out of obscurity into the mass media and into a paperback 'success'— but the gap between such publicized successes and the actual literary scene will be ever greater. The meaning of a poet's reputation will therefore have little relation to literary criteria" (143). *The Incomparable Atuk* reverberates with the notions expressed in both articles. Atuk's reputation as poet has little to do indeed with his poetry, since the excellence of his work, which is entertaining, is also questionable. The title of Dudek's article is fortuitous because it, too, comments on Richler's novel: Atuk's poetry, the only flicker in the novel of any writing, which — although perhaps lacking in literary merit — acts as vituperation against social hypocrisies and prevailing stereotypes, is "guillotined" by "paperback," or commercialized tendencies. In the novel, such unlicensed acts of poetic integrity completely give way to public image and pecuniary concerns, and Atuk, the poet, is beheaded by Twentyman, the representative of materialism and imperialist tendencies.

Despite Atuk's cultural bankruptcy, resulting from his residence in Toronto and his disconnectedness with Baffin Island, his connection with the Arctic North remains significant. His implicit association with the North — with Ignak and the Old One, who remain virtually uncorrupted — provides a kind of moral framework for the reader and for Atuk. Atuk's — and by extension, Canada's — moral background would seem to reside in the realm of the North. W.L. Morton, discussing the relative importance of North Canada in "The 'North' in Canadian Historiography," observes that ultimately Canadians identify themselves geographically in relation to that "impenetrable as well as permanent frontier" (111). As in such earlier

satiric-humorous texts as Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) — in which the small town (located in “the country of the pines and the lakes” [184]) is eventually offered as an ironic ideal in contrast to what characters tend to idealize, the city — and even in such later texts as Thomas King's *Medicine River* (1989) in which the reserve is seen as a (restorative) substitute for the city,<sup>13</sup> Richler points from the city toward the more isolated regions of Northern Canada. By providing or at least gesturing toward this moral centre, Richler supports the deconstruction of the centre/margin (city/outskirts) paradigm and provides alternatives to the pretensions of urban Canada, especially Toronto. Thus, after Atuk has bought into the commercialized spirit of Toronto, he avoids the Old One, whose principles and standards grate against Atuk's materialism; he undercuts his father's placcation (“I remember when your eyes were deep and true as the blue spring sea”) by categorizing it as “Disney” talk (83).<sup>14</sup> Likewise, his brother Ignak returns to the Bay, because he refuses not only “to be condescended to” by Atuk, but also to compromise his integrity by subjecting himself to imperialist exploitation, especially that of his brother (57). Ignak's injunctions to his family to avoid the seductions of “trinkets” and “imperialist baubles” could be read as a warning for all of English Canada (99). He returns to Baffin Island because there is no provision for integrity and genuine cultural stimulus and activity in Toronto, or in Southern Canada — only deceit, egotism, artificiality, and mediocrity seem to survive and flourish.

As becomes apparent in *The Incomparable Atuk*, Richler can be seen to advocate a culture and a morality derived from what might be termed an Arctic or northern idealism. Such a tendency was evident in his fiction as early as in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, where Duddy dreams of redeeming his crassly materialistic dealings by developing virginal Canadian wilderness, and can be seen most recently in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1990), where Ephraim and Solomon find strength in the “pristine Northland” (47). Richler's belief in the Arctic ideal is part of a Canadian continuum — including, for example, Charles Sangster, Stephen Leacock, the Group of Seven, A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, Al Purdy, Margaret Atwood, and, more recently, John Moss, Aritha van Herk, and Rudy Wiebe — of seeing the North as a spiritual reservoir, as a source of cultural identity. More specifically, Richler seems to support the imaginative construction of an Arctic that is malleable and amorphous, a complete contrast to the fixity and sterility of Toronto as depicted in *The Incomparable Atuk*. Since for Richler the North may be seen to provide a kind of moral and cultural “centre,” he

also seems to imply that Canada must turn to it for indigenous works. The opening epigraph to *The Incomparable Atuk* endorses such a notion:

What would happen in Canada if full sovereignty were invoked and the southern border were sealed tight against American mass culture — if the air-waves were jammed, if all our comic books were embargoed, if only the purest and most uplifting of American cultural commodities were allowed entry? Native industries would take over, obviously. Cut off from American junk, Canada would have to produce her own.

He obliges the reader to ask how much Canadian art is second-rate because it is based on indigenous stereotypes — “Canadian junk” — or because it has been defined by its colonial status, American convention, or consumer expectation. Richler impugns Canadians who mass-produce such work as that by Atuk’s family — who “paint and sculpt badly” because “that’s what they want” (97).<sup>15</sup> Atwood has argued that pandering to audience expectation has severed us “from our social mythology [so that] we hardly know what it is” (14). Like Richler, she suggests that one “can write a mythology about [one’s] country which is absolutely fraudulent, like we could write about Mounties and huskies and living in igloos . . . but people in Germany would probably think it was [exceptional] because that is their image of what goes on over here” (15). Yet, this fraudulent mythology is, as Northrop Frye argues, also a Canadian image of what goes on here and has “almost transformed the Eskimos into a nation of sculptors . . . because we think it comes just under our standard of sophistication” (129). For such reasons, Richler is arguing in *Atuk* — fictionally, satirically — that our “sophistication” needs to be re-examined; and, for such reasons, he has claimed to feel “a deep aversion to Canadian culture and a conviction that the society he lives in is a meretricious fraud” (Cohen 55). If the borders were closed, this country’s psychic insularity would still hamper genuine development. *The Incomparable Atuk* suggests that Canadians must move beyond this insularity, beyond producing “junk,” to creating authentic work — neither the imitation of some Japanese model, nor American mass culture disguised as Canadian “high art.”

Many of Richler’s critics have failed to understand this call for a re-examination of English Canadian culture and values — and have thus overlooked *The Incomparable Atuk*’s serious subtext. It is easy to dismiss the novel’s “foolishness” as light satire — and much more difficult to accept our implicit association with Atuk. Willeford asserts that to rec-

ognize “foolishness,” readers must distinguish between what is trivial and what is not; yet, as he also suggests, the recognition of these distinctions reveals one’s own latent folly:

A fool recognizably participates in a typical form and ... our recognition of him as a fool is immediate and total. The notion that there are fools everywhere is a way of describing our awareness that anyone might at any moment make a fool of himself: a power lurks in us and may manifest itself in a foolish way of looking at others or being seen by them. This possibility is the threat and promise of folly as a show ... In seeing that figure at all, we are involved in his way of seeing. And that involvement is the basis of our connection with the fool when he appears. (31)

The fool thus “dissolves the distinction between fools and nonfools,” although that dissolution is only momentary or incomplete (Willeford 31). By implication, the fool is not always a complete fool either, as Atuk is not. This differentiation between the two is exaggerated so that one feels safer, and so “our guard against being fools ourselves” is relaxed (43). When Twentyman invites his “Friends, Canucks, countrymen” to “use [their] noggins,” however, Richler is not only eroding the distinctions made between Atuk and Canadians, he is also asking readers to consider how much Canadians, like Atuk, are being manipulated by and are engaged with the world of Twentyman (178). When Canadians begin to consider the response to the noggin challenge, *The Incomparable Atuk* will not be seen as just a way of buying time between other novels, but, ultimately, as a valuable satire in its own right.

#### AUTHOR’S NOTE

I gratefully acknowledge the support and critical feedback of Gerald Lynch and David Staines (in alphabetical order) as I developed this article.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richler expresses such sentiments in his foreword to *The Best of Modern Humour* where he argues not only that “uncompromising political commitment seems to preclude a sense of humour,” but also that “people have become so touchy that to be irreverent these days is to invite an outraged retort from some pompous organization or another” (xvi-xvii).

<sup>2</sup> The exception in this general dismissal of *The Incomparable Atuk* is Arnold E. Davidson’s assessment as found in his book, *Mordecai Richler*, where he argues that the novel “surely merits some consideration” because of its “cutting satire” (118), and in his article,



"*The Incomparable Atuk*: Mordecai Richler's Satire on Popular Culture and the Canadian Dream," in which he argues that *Atuk* is "one of Richler's most successful satires and is considerably more complex than has been generally assumed" (8).

<sup>3</sup> The theories outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) may be useful largely to evaluate the comical, carnivalesque aspects of the world of *Atuk* — and particularly such aspects as the danger in the curtailing of "freedom, . . . the cunning required to maintain it, and — above all — the horrific ease with which it can be lost" — and as a means of examining the power dynamic that is in operation in the novel (Holquist xxi); however, the fool figure is only one facet of Bakhtin's carnival. Since that figure is not given the kind of attention and detail that the scholars cited in this paper provide, Bakhtin's work is not the primary theoretical source of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the biblical fool, as one of these historical variations, has not been specifically considered in the paper. This character is considered willful because he rejects "the counsel of God" and because he "consistently mistakes the tangible goods of this world for ultimate value" (Jeffrey 289). Instead, the pervasive sense of commercialism — which is related to the parasitical nature of the fool — has been examined as a general quality of the fool figure.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Doran describes in detail how the fool was rejected if he failed to perform his role well: "The parasite was interested personally, as well as pecuniarily, in amusing his hearers, for if he failed to do so, they had no hesitation in rising, kicking his seat from under him, raining blows upon his body, breaking dishes upon his head, and fixing a rope, or collar, round his neck, flinging him headlong onto the street" (17). *Atuk*'s own beheading parallels this kind of physically oriented repudiation after he fails to "please" Buck Twentyman.

<sup>6</sup> The word Eskimo is used throughout the text to follow the form of Richler's novel; the author of this article understands that this term is now deemed politically incorrect.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "Canada" will refer to English Canada and specifically, to what Ian Angus has called the "national-popular collective will" in English Canada (43). The English Canadian tendency to refer to itself as Canada, as Angus has noted, elides "the key question of its relation to others and especially the history of violence whereby the Canadian state, as all other states, was constructed" (112). Part of Richler's satiric project seems to be involved with how English Canadian self-definition subsumes, ignores, or marginalizes other ethnocultural groups, even as it claims otherwise, a practice and mode of thought that seems to be under revision in more recent years in light of multicultural interests and practices.

<sup>8</sup> Although Richler is satirizing Bette's basis for prudery, the connection he makes between land and women in the construction of the nation is also of interest and is being investigated by such critics as Carolyn Merchant, and, with respect to Canada itself, Sherrill Grace.

<sup>9</sup> It seems plausible that *Atuk* is also a parody of James Houston and his efforts to train the Inuit to make stone-cut prints, which were sold to an international market.

<sup>10</sup> This kind of rhetoric is reminiscent of R.G. Haliburton's "The Men of the North and their Place in History" in which he articulates how a superior, virile race will emerge by virtue of one's exposure to the Canadian climate.

<sup>11</sup> Rory Peel's neurotic preoccupation with family drills in anticipation of the bombing of Toronto reverberates here and suggests the misplaced pride of English-Canada.

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Richler continues the Canadian tradition of satirizing literary figures, a tradition which includes James De Mille, Stephen Leacock, F.R. Scott, and, especially, the Paul Hiebert who brilliantly satirizes not only literary modernism and cultural nationalism but also the cult of author personality in *Sarah Binks*.

<sup>13</sup> In King's novel, the West serves the same function as the North in its relation to the city.

<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Old One's name is derived from a "prize-winning National Film Board short" in which Atuk's "father had figured," and not from his own cultural background demonstrates that even the Arctic North and Eskimos have not been untouched by imperial influence; and although he also expresses aversion to interracial marriages, the Old One may still be seen as a moral force in the novel because he shows integrity, and expresses familial, communal, and cultural concerns.

<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the literary depiction of Atuk and his family's production of sculpture has some correlation to the production of some Native and Inuit art. In *The Trickster Shift*, for example, Gerald McMaster is quoted as observing that "The students and artists from (Sante Fe) began to be drawn into the vortex of the market. You make ... what the tourists want. There was not too much experimentation because there was no concern about it. They weren't pumping out artists who were very critical of the material, they were just pumping who could create stuff" (Ryan 29).

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