

**In Memoriam**

**Jean L. Briggs (1929–2016)**

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# In Memoriam

## Jean L. Briggs (1929–2016)



Jean Briggs in Toronto,  
May 23, 2009. Photo  
by Alana Johns.

Jean Briggs was born in the United States on May 28, 1929. She told (Michael) Conor Cook and me that this day coincides with the blooming of bridal wreath or *Spiraea*, which is certainly the case in Toronto every year. I first met Jean when I taught linguistics at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where she was Henrietta Harvey Professor and then later Professor Emerita after teaching anthropology there for over four decades. She was a bit intimidating. No general light talk but probing questions and an expectation that detail and accuracy be central. Later, when I was teaching at the University of Toronto, she asked me to be co-investigator on her Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) project to make a dictionary based on the extensive tapes and notes she made during her work with the Utkuhiksalingmiut. These Inuit originated from the Utkuhiksalik region in Nunavut and later moved into settled communities. We started the work in 2000, when we received our first SSHRC grant.

Jean received her PhD in anthropology from Harvard University in 1967. Her thesis supervisor was Cora Du Bois, the second woman ever tenured in the Faculty of Arts and Science at Harvard. When I think of it, Jean's crusty nature may have been due not solely to growing up in New England, but also to having become a highly successful female academic in those days. Cora Du Bois introduced the techniques and perspectives of psychology into anthropology. Jean's research centred on patterns of emotion within Inuit culture, e.g., absence of overt anger or "the psychodynamic underpinnings of Inuit culture" as manifested through the play of one child (Briggs 1998, 2). Her approach was subjective; she did not describe things categorically as an outside observer, but instead developed ideas within the context of her own social interactions and observations of details. In 2005 she earned the Lifetime Teaching Award from the Society for Psychological Anthropology. Jean received many other honours to acknowledge her contributions, including being made a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2001 and being awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Bergen in 1996. Her most famous work is the book *Never in Anger*. I read it while visiting an Inuit community and learning firsthand about the more indirect nature of interpersonal disagreements. Jean had a special interest in the

socialization of small children, which led to her book *Inuit Morality Play: The Emotional Education of a Three-Year-Old*, which won the 1999 Boyer Prize from the Society for Psychoanalytic Anthropology and was also co-winner of the 1999 Victor Turner Prize from the Society for Humanistic Anthropology.

Jean's research in anthropology and linguistics was primarily based on two locations she visited. One involved extended visits in the mid-1960s to Chantrey Inlet in the Utkuhiksalik region near the mouth of the Back River. The other visits were to a hunting camp in North Baffin near Pangnirtung. Jean resided in these camps at a time when groups of Inuit lived solely on the land, and in later years when they moved into settlements. As I became familiar with her exacting and assiduous methodology, I often thought about the Inuit in the camps on the land where she stayed for lengthy periods. She was not only a Qablunaaq (Caucasian) but also a female Qablunaaq, and one who had little truck for traditional female roles, even in her own society. I think she engaged people intellectually (as she did the rest of us). She learned to speak Utkuhiksalingmiutut by immersion, and subsequently by asking questions in the language, frequently metalinguistic in nature. Her Inuit interlocutors were up to the challenge and ready to consider and discuss with her abstract matters of contextual meaning, grammatical variations, and dialect. Her main colleagues in this type of endeavour were members of the Utkuhiksalingmiut family who had adopted her and other members of the Utkuhiksalingmiut community. These included Rosie Kigiak and her family, Simon Tookoome, and Joedee Joedee. Jean kept copious notes and well-organized audiotapes.

After retirement, Jean continued with her research, especially the language materials. She lived modestly in her beloved Maddox Cove on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. I remember asking after visiting her first house there—which was quite close to the edge of a cliff overlooking the churning, frigid Atlantic waters—if she worried about falling off. Her reply was simply that she wore crampons on her boots in the winter when it was icy.

Although Jean referred to herself frequently as a technological dinosaur, it was she who insisted that our dictionary team devise a long-distance work technique. We had learned from Marguerite MacKenzie that group editing is much more efficient while looking at a common projector screen. Jean maintained that we could (and must) work jointly in this fashion online, because an Italian friend of hers worked on translation documents this way. Not knowing the friend or the details, I had to find and learn how to use online meeting software (WebEx). Screen sharing in the mid-2000s was truly a miracle. Conor could be in Santiago, Chile, Jean in St. John's, and me in Toronto, but we felt as if we were sitting together in the same room, barring local broadband and hearing issues. Jean's corporal and mental faculties were strong to just before the end of her life. In February 2012, when she was eighty-two years old, she and Conor visited Gjoa Haven to consult with the community about the writing systems we were hoping to use for the dictionary. We published

*Utkubiksalingmiut Uqaubiitigut: Dictionary of Utkubiksalingmiut Inuktitut Postbase Suffixes* in 2015, but did not get to finish the “Big Dictionary,” a dictionary of regular words. Jean’s incisive perceptions, as well as those of her Utkubiksalingmiut mentors and collaborators inform the postbase dictionary in every respect. She and Conor worked together closely, and Jean highly valued Conor’s vital contribution. It was Jean’s decision not to have the book published by a more academically prestigious press. She wanted to make it available across the North at an affordable price to Inuit. We were very happy with the quality of publication by Nunavut Arctic College. One event that pleased Jean immensely was the opportunity to communicate some of her thoughts through the CBC radio show *Ideas*.<sup>1</sup> Her memory was honoured by a special panel session at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in Washington, DC, in late 2017. Remembered with fondness for all of the many facets of her personality and admired for the quality and depth of her research, Jean Briggs’s legacy will provide many with one person’s snapshot of a time now gone but viewed with an abundance of analytical detail.

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1. The resulting two episodes, “Never in Anger and Beyond: Parts 1 and 2, can be found at <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2263114454> and <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2263120301>.