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Nick Newbery fonds / Nunavut Archives/ [Culture. Qulliit 1977-2004. 18. Qulliit. Iqaluit – Soapstone qulliq. Shorty Shoo 2003].

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Table of Contents

About *Matrix*

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies (*Matrix*) is an open-access, peer-reviewed and refereed scholarly journal published by the International Network for Training, Education, and Research on Culture (Network on Culture), Canada. *Matrix* is published online twice yearly (Spring and Autumn).

Matrix is a new journal in the humanities and social sciences, founded to provide an interdisciplinary forum for those who are working from the theoretical stance of matriculture as a Geertzian cultural system. Matriculture refers to the cultural system that brings together all cultural aspects informing the lives of mothers, usually women, of a given society, and by extension, the lives of women. Talking about matricultural systems allows us to consider as primary the cultural context of a given society as perceived, constructed, and lived by its women.

Similar to other cultural systems such as art, religion, or mathematics, employing the heuristic of matriculture allows for, among other things: cross-cultural comparisons; fresh insights into the social roles of women, men, otherwise identified, children, and the entire community of humans, animals, and the environment; and/or renewed understandings of historically mis-labelled cultures. With Guédon's work in mind, then, and based on Geertzian principles, the concept of matriculture is both a model *of* reality by rendering the structure of matricultures apprehensible and a model *for* reality, where psychological relationships are organized under its guidance.

We encourage submissions from scholars around the world who are ready to take a new look at the ways in which people - historically and currently - have organized meaningful relationships amongst themselves and with the natural environment, the myths, customs, and laws which support these

relationships, and the ways in which researchers have documented and perhaps mis-labeled the matricultures they have encountered.

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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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Matriculture Among Circumpolar Peoples:

Introduction

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In recent years, the circumpolar regions have reemerged as a focus of global attention and framed as lands vulnerable to threats of climate change,[1] security,[2] sovereignty,[3] and resource extraction.[4] While Arctic sovereignty discussions ramped up due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022,[5] they were further compounded in 2025 by remarks made by U.S. President Donald Trump's stated desire to acquire Greenland for strategic security

1 Ishfaq Hussain Malik and James D. Ford, 'Understanding the Impacts of Arctic Climate Change Through the Lens of Political Ecology,' *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 16, no. 1 (2025): e927, 1-2.

2 Fei Gao and Peiqing Guo, 'Unique risks and evolving trends in Arctic governance: a forward-looking analysis based on policies and practices,' *European Journal of Futures Research*, (2025) 13:5, 4-5.

3 Gabriella Gricius, 'A decolonial approach to Arctic security and sovereignty,' in *Handbook of the Politics of the Arctic*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026, 431-432.

4 Lukasz Kozera and Robert Kłaczyński, 'The role and importance of the arctic and its sea route in international economic relations,' *Grassroots Journal of Natural Resources* 8, no. 1 (2025), 712.

5 Justin Barnes, Nicholas Glesby, and Heather N. Nicol, 'Canada, the USA, and the Evolving North American Arctic Security Context: Balancing Traditional and Non-traditional Security,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics*, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026, 494.

purposes and resources.[6] These events rekindled political discourse on Arctic sovereignty, and Arctic nation states and their allies responded with public military demonstrations to show their renewed interest in the Arctic, vowing to protect the region.[7] In turn, circumpolar citizens rallied in their streets, in protest against the U.S. threat to Greenland.[8]

Although the Canadian Arctic has not been directly threatened, its strategic position across from Greenland has led Canadian political leaders to travel to northern territories where they have made announcements to major projects and expanded militarization.[9]
If we can learn anything from history to make sense of this current era of perceived threat to Arctic territory, it has repeatedly shown how Arctic lands are valued insofar as they contain resources and provide trade and travel routes, rather than as lived cultural worlds. But for circumpolar Inuit living in northern homelands, *Inuit Nunaat*, for example, the Arctic is their home and an invaluable cultural source that shapes their unique way of life.[10]

Although not new, the perception of the North only as a vast expanse that is rich in resources awaiting extraction is exacerbated in our current era by the phenomena known as 'Arctic Amplification,' in which the effects of climate change occur faster in the polar regions.[11] The Arctic sea-ice is melting faster and ice-free seasons are extending for longer duration, factors that have the potential to open up extraction and trade routes once barred by sea-ice.[12] As a result, Arctic nation states perceive both the climatic and

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6 Jaroslav Lukiv, 'Denmark planned to blow up Greenland runways if US invaded, reports say,' *The BBC*, March 19, 2026. Accessed online May 2, 2026: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c33ln4mp1p2o.

7 Paul Kirby, 'European military personnel arrive in Greenland as Trump says US needs island,' *The BBC*, January 15, 2026. Accessed online May 2, 2026: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd0ydjvxpejo.

8 Mah Noor Mubarik, ''This is all our family': Nunavummiut rally to support Greenland, as Inuit leaders also speak up,' *CBC North*, January 19, 2026. Accessed online on May 2, 2026: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/inuit-greenland-9.7052083.

9 The Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, P*rime Minister Carney announces ambitious new plan to defend, build, and transform the North*, Government of Canada, March 12, 2026. Accessed online on May 2, 2026: https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2026/03/12/prime-minister-carney-announces-ambitious-new-plan-defend-build-and.

10 Patricia A.L. Cochran, ICC Chair On behalf of Inuit in Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Chukotka, *A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, April 2009. Accessed online on May 2, 2026: https://iccalaska.org/wp-icc/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Signed-Inuit-Sovereignty-Declaration-11x17.pdf.

11 Masakazu Yoshimori, Takao Kawasaki, Ayako Abe-Ouchi, and Hiroyasu Hasumi, 'Arctic Amplification in the Past, Present, and Future: A Review for the Challenge to the Integrative Understanding of its Mechanism,' *Journal of the Meteorological Society of Japan*, Ser. II 103, no. 5 (2025), 523.

12 Gao and Guo, 5-6.

geopolitical threats as urgent, and in response have renewed military attention and intervention across the region as demonstrable measures of their Arctic sovereignty.[13]

I studied both the concept and evolution of Canadian Arctic sovereignty as it relates to Inuit culture in my recent PhD thesis (2024), wherein I examined two landmark criminal court cases that implicated Inuit: *R v Uluksak and Sinnisiak* (1917), and the Belcher Island murder trials (1941). These trials were significant in Inuit history because they were the first trials to be conducted and interpreted between Inuit and colonial languages. The historical files pertaining to these trials contain some early twentieth century examples of communication between Inuit and non-Inuit that provide a window to view this period's cultural exchange, examined through the judicial and religious messages relayed between them found within the archives.[14]

All the records pertaining to both cases were written by non-Inuit men in English or French. Where files recorded speech acts of Inuit, they were recorded by non-Inuit men through the medium of interpreters – some who were Inuit and others non-Inuit, all of whom were men. Only Inuit men served as police 'special constables,' guides, and interpreters.[15] Yet despite their starring role in these cases, Inuit silence in the archives marked a significant absence. To 'hear' what Inuit may have said in these events, my thesis applied Inuit-specific frameworks – Inuit language, laws, and philosophy – to the records as a lens to interpret what these events might have meant to Inuit who experienced them, thereby reconstructing an Inuit perspective.[16] This work aimed to restore historical Inuit agency and humanity.[17]

If Inuit men's voices were markedly absent from the historical record, the silence of Inuit women was even more so. Such absences were not simply the result of record-keeping practices but were embedded within the wider processes of colonial administration that structured whose voices counted and could be heard. This issue of *Matrix* seeks out circumpolar women's voices from the northern hemisphere to find and draw out where they exist, reconstruct where absent, and, in particular, highlight resiliency as an enduring feature of matriculture found within the circumpolar regions, despite changes ushered in by colonial contact in the North.

In the North American colonial timeline, colonists were late to arrive and penetrate the North due to the colonists' lack of knowledge and technology to traverse through the

13 Gao and Guo, 7-8.

14 Sharon Angnakak, *Inuit Perspectives in and on "Arctic Show Trials,"* PhD diss., Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2024, 9.

15 Angnakak, 24-25.

16 Angnakak, 17-22.

17 Angnakak, 176.

rugged and harsh environment of the Arctic regions.[18] When European colonists began to settle in the North, the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution had already taken hold in the southern regions of North America.[19] Although colonist exploration and expansion northward occurred from the eighteenth century onwards, largely sustained by the search for the Northwest Passage, the whaling industry, and then the fur trade,[20] newer technology in the early twentieth century – such as railways and electricity – brought on more permanent colonist settlements as these new technologies required new resources.[21]

The First World War altered geopolitics globally but also placed considerable pressure on Arctic nation states to demonstrate authoritatively their administration over lands in the circumpolar region. Driven by emerging economies built on new technologies and in response to global conflict, colonists in the early twentieth century discarded the fur trade and begun to explore Indigenous lands in northern regions to stake out potential mineral and metal deposits,[22] and at the outset of the Second World War, quite rapidly setup military bases across the Arctic.[23] Thus, in pursuit of state sovereignty, the colonization of the Arctic *felt* much more rapid, and was often brought on by coercive structures that sought to reorganize social, cultural, and spiritual life for northern Indigenous Peoples.

To frame Indigenous histories primarily through rupture and loss, however, risks resurrecting the old colonial belief that the Arctic was an empty wasteland; this concept was extended to circumpolar Indigenous Peoples' themselves, as colonists characterized them under deficiency and absence.[24] Colonists compared Indigenous cultures and societies to their own, and in so doing they could not recognize Indigenous religion, law, and culture. Instead, colonists believed that Indigenous Peoples in the circumpolar regions lacked any sort of law, hierarchy, or culture.[25] If Indigenous cultures were recognized at all, they were described as fleeting and vulnerable to erasure due to European acculturation and adulteration.[26] This deficit view of Indigenous culture obscures the longer histories of

18 Angnakak, 25-26.

19 Gregory Clark, Kevin H. O'Rourke and Alan M. Taylor, *Made in America? The New World, the Old, and the Industrial Revolution*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, Working Paper #14077, Cambridge, MA, June 2008, 1-4.

20 Lenore A. Grenoble, 'Contact and shift: Colonization and urbanization in the Arctic,' *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Contact* 2 (2022), 484-488; Peter Usher, Peter, 'The Canadian Western Arctic: a century of change,' *Anthropologica* (1971), 171-180.

21 Morris Zaslow, *The Northward Expansion of Canada 1914-1967*, Vol. 17, McClelland & Stewart, 2016, 8-9.

22 Zaslow, 9-16.

23 Angnakak, 113-126.

24 John Amagoalik, 'Wasteland of nobodies,' In *Nunavut: Inuit regain control of their lands and lives* (2000), 138-139.

25 Angnakak, 73-89.

26 Pamela R. Stern, and Lisa Stevenson, *Critical Inuit Studies: an Anthology of Contemporary Arctic Ethnography*, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006, 261; Jacob Gruber, 'Ethnographic

change and adaptation, as well as the ongoing agency of Indigenous Peoples, who, like any other human society found around the world and throughout time, have navigated the arrival of newcomers toward both cultural continuity and transformation.

While narratives of rupture and loss remain central to many accounts of Indigenous histories in the circumpolar regions, this issue presents reflections that can better our understanding of the human experience of change itself. Human societies have never been static; they have always been shaped by shifting environmental conditions, evolving technologies, and changing social relations. Indigenous communities were – and continue to be – deeply engaged in processes of cultural change. As one submission in this issue (Racah) describes about the Indigenous People known as the Nenets, they continuously express their traditional cultures albeit interwoven with new forms of knowledge. In this context, *matriculture* can be understood as a dynamic force through which culture is re-interpreted with new expressions of traditional knowledge and practices that are continued through intergenerational transmission.

In this issue of *Matrix*, we are provided an opportunity to hear voices from the North that speak about women who are central to negotiating cultural change and who remain for their communities a source of cultural continuity. In drawing out these voices from circumpolar matricultures, this issue's submissions examine women's land-based economies on the tundra and taiga and women's artistic practices, as well as presenting a collection of interviews from circumpolar women recently recorded by the Editorial Collective of *Matrix*. These interviews, available through both the audio links or in transcript, provide additional context to the themes explored in this circumpolar issue; its collection contributes to a broader body of women's knowledge that complements the archival record.

Throughout the issue, themes of cultural change and continuity are explored, showcasing how circumpolar communities and cultures are sustained through women's labour, their participation in local economies, and through their community leadership essential in navigating and negotiating the cultural change brought on by intercultural contact, changing geopolitical tensions, and the evolving technological realities that move and shape globalism. In 'Reweaving the Tundra: Women, Fire, and Fractured Traditions in Anna Nerkagi's Prose,' Maria Gatti Racah explores Nenets matricultural change and continuity through the symbolism of the hearth presented in three selected prose written by Nenets author Anna Nerkagi. Racah's analysis draws on the symbolism of the hearth related to Nenets female subjectivity and experience presented in Nerkagi's stories that depict women and the hearth: either at the fire, displaced from it, or beyond it.

Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology,' *American Anthropologist*, Vol 72, No 6, 1970, 1290.

The *chum* – a tent-like structure and traditional home of the Nenets – is a microcosm of the cosmos in which gendered roles are inscribed. Nenets women have the responsibility to maintain the hearth, the heart of domestic space that is connected to cosmological and ecological relations, where fire is treated as a living presence. Here, Racah categorizes Nergaki's female characters according to their proximity to – or rupture from – the hearth, demonstrating that fragility and resilience are not opposite characteristics, but intertwined. Nenets culture, founded upon a reindeer-herding semi-nomadic society, has not disappeared despite Russian colonial policies that sought to Russify the Nenets, but continues as a lifestyle on the tundra chosen by women in which the *chum* and its hearth (i.e. women's work) is central to tundra life. Racah notes that Nergaki herself founded and ran an ecological-based school on the tundra devoted to passing on traditional knowledge to Nenets youth. As Racah states, the transmission of Nenets culture is inseparable from the work of women.

When she was a child, Nergaki herself experienced the Russian colonial policy of forceful removal from her home on the tundra and Nenets culture to be placed in a boarding school. This storyline, written in her semi-autobiographical prose, details how such a process marked internal fractures caused by the externally imposed suppression of Nenets language and embodied forms of land-based knowledge associated with the tundra. The boarding school system removed children from their parents, and this separation – especially from their mother – eroded traditional forms of knowledge, particularly concerning the skilled labour required for living on the tundra. Yet amidst this rupture emerged Indigenous adaptation and agency, especially shown in Nergaki's real-life school on the tundra where she reoriented her colonial education back to her community. Despite colonial pressures towards Russification, Nenets women are returning to the tundra to re-weave new forms of education with their traditional knowledge, a matricultural adaptation in which women are central.

In Laurel Thorne's article titled 'Rematriating the Archipelago: A Gendered Environmental History of Kodiak,' Indigenous women's labour was also central to the continuity of Alutiiq culture, whose homelands are on Kodiak Island off the coast of Alaska in the United States. Thorne's analysis of Alutiiq matriculture demonstrates the significance of the land in shaping Indigenous culture, as she surveys the historical and current relationship between Alutiiq women and their Arctic environment.

Situated within ecofeminism and inspired by current Alutiiq female scholars, Thorne's work shows that despite successive colonial pressures from Russia and the United States, women's knowledge of the environment, along with their subsistence and in-ground steam bathing practices, provided the avenue for community and cultural survival. Traditionally, Alutiiq women had a reciprocal relationship with their environment in which they refrained from entering or crossing certain outdoor places during times of

menstruation and childbirth, as women's biological functions were believed to be powerful forces that could influence their surrounding environment. As women took care in how they interacted with the environment with practices of respect and restraint, the environment in turn provided women with their food for survival and materials for livelihood, while simultaneously serving as places where women could go during times of menstruation and childbirth to heal and rejuvenate in steam baths. Thus, the environment was intrinsically linked to women's bodies as they protected the environment while gaining healing, survival, and livelihood. This analysis provides an example of how matriculture can be shaped both by women's biological child-bearing functions and their surrounding environment.

The Russian and American colonial regimes disrupted Alutiiq women's relationship with the environment by removing them from the land and placing them into the wage economy based on extracting resources from the land. Thorne's theory on women's bodies as connected to land is analyzed through this disruption – colonial regimes that removed women from the land simultaneously extracted from the land. Despite this doubled disruption, as Thorne demonstrates, Alutiiq cultural continuity was made possible because of Alutiiq women who – despite the pressures of colonial-imposed changes – have maintained the subsistence practices embodying environmental values; their practices that focus on environmental protection continue today.

In describing the practices of steam-baths – a special healing technique facilitated by women for women who are menstruating or have just given birth – Thorne demonstrates the ways in which women share knowledge with each other through the care and labour they provide to each other during times of need. Like Racah, Thorne also sees rupture and resilience not as complete opposite experiences or expressions of matriculture, but as a field of intersection where women experience and navigate both coercion and choice.

Where matriculture for Racah and Thorne presents a site of rupture and resilience, Tammy Wolfe's submission entitled 'Matriarchal Beads: The Resistance, Resurgence and Reclamation of Traditional Indigenous Beadwork' presents matriculture as a site for creative practices which manifest Indigenous knowledge and identity; she writes from her perspective as a First Nation *Ininiw Iskwew* (Swampy Cree woman), scholar, and beader. Indigenous women's beading practices are presented as a form of material culture through which cultural knowledge, identity, and continuity are sustained and transformed by women across generations; they demonstrate that Indigenous cultural persistence operates through adaptation, innovation, and women's agency rather than static preservation.

Wolfe argues that beading is a form of Indigenous women's and, specifically, matriarchal cultural practice that exemplifies Indigenous matriculture. In Wolfe's analysis, Indigenous

matriculture is a system of knowledge transmission and identity formation, with relational aspects that encompass both cosmological and earthly relationships through which cultural continuity is sustained across generations. Rather than representing an unchanging tradition, beading demonstrates how Indigenous women across North America have actively adapted, reinterpreted, and renewed cultural practices in response to shifting historical conditions brought on by various external forces throughout colonial history.

Beading, then, is a site of Indigenous matricultural transformation: from the incorporation of glass beads through settler trade through the use of beadwork in expressions of political identity and resistance to its contemporary resurgence through powwows and digital platforms, beading emerges as a dynamic site of cultural continuity. The practice of beading is not solely preserved; it is continuously remade with new expressions. In this sense of renewal and reinterpretation, Wolfe challenges deficit-based narratives of cultural loss, despite successive ruptures throughout colonial history, by foregrounding Indigenous women's roles as agents of continuity, innovation, and resurgence; she shows how cultural knowledge transmission persists through externally imposed changes.

Wolfe's discussion about the positive roles of modern social media in sharing traditional knowledge of beading is an additional example of the ways in which cultural transformation is guided by an individual's agency in negotiation with their environment, exemplifying a new type of environment that is shaping culture. Where Racah and Thorne's analysis focused on Indigenous knowledge and matriculture in relation to a traditional and physical environment – the tundra – Wolfe's analysis introduces an entirely new environment shaping matriculture: virtual environments. These new platforms used by Indigenous Peoples to share culture have led to what Wolfe describes as an 'Indigenous renaissance,' highlighting the positive force of going viral in today's virtual world. Wolfe credits this adaptation of cultural practices through the use of technology to current Indigenous movements of decolonization in which the Indigenous matriarchy is experiencing a cultural resurgence and revival.

Tia Tidwell discusses matriarchal practices related to kinship in her lyrical reflection titled 'From the Earth' that focuses on Nunamiut matriculture. Hailing from the Anaktuvuk Pass of Alaska, Tidwell presents a deeply personal reflection of her name that she acquired through the traditional naming practices of the Nunamiut: in her Inupiaq Indigenous language, her name is Puya, meaning 'from the earth.' This reflection strikes right to the core of the themes common in all of the submissions: change, resilience, continuity and transference of cultural knowledge from generation to generation.

In 'From the Earth,' we are invited to glimpse into inner Nunamiut belief systems that transcend time and place. Tidwell offers a reflection on a personal name that is oriented

towards this world and these relationships, but which also extends connections to those who once bore the same name, connecting ancestors with current day people. In Nunamiut belief, one's personal name speaks to what Tidwell describes as 'intergenerational survival,' a direct counter-description to the term 'intergenerational trauma' conventionally used in discussions about the colonial history of many Indigenous Peoples. This highlights the author's preference for positive self-descriptions that accentuate the triumph of survival.

Tidwell reflects on a most intimate moment that one can experience in life: the death of her grandmother, who, by virtue of Tidwell's Nunamiut name, has extended their kinship to sisterhood. She discusses the responsibilities that come with a traditional name (or a name acquired from traditional practices), where the personal relationships and kinships that belonged to the one whose name is passed on to another person when they die is transferred to the person who inherited the name. One of the powerful and most intimate scenes of Tidwell's contribution is when she relates staying by her grandmother's side as she passes away and describes the moment from the first person: "I welcomed her and said goodbye." This foregrounds her dual relationship with her grandmother, created through both her biological and naming ties. Tidwell describes names as containing and having the ability to release memory, presence, and kinship; she carries on that tradition in naming her daughter Kivaaluk after her own grandmother passed away. Being reunited with her grandmother through her daughter's inheritance of her grandmother's name thereby continues the matrilineal kinship and traditional practices of her community.

While this issue presents three different analyses of circumpolar matriculture and a lyrical personal reflection, it also highlights other scholarship through several book reviews. Two are situated in the circumpolar region and one outside, with common elements of cultural continuity and matricultural leadership presented throughout. In Elizabeth Ann Bartlett's review of Kaarina Kailo's book *Sauna, Culture, Sweat and Spirituality: On the Architectonics and Cosmology of Sacred Space*, we find an analysis of how the traditional sweat and sauna practices of Indigenous Peoples have deep roots in matristic culture. According to Kailo, the sweat lodge is the first temple, the earliest form of spirituality in which the temple is like a womb. In this sense, both Thorne and Kailo analyze mariculture as being shaped both by women's bodies and their environment, both observing an intrinsic link between the two.

In Linnéa Rowlatt's review of *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*, a co-edited volume by Michèle Hayeur Smith and Alexandra Sanmark, Viking matriculture is broadly defined as the system of symbols pertaining to Viking women – the maternal and the feminine – which shaped social expectations of women and the opportunities available to them. Rowlatt highlights how much of what we know of historical women – in this case Viking women – is through the interpretive

frameworks of male historiographers and archaeologists, resulting in recycled androcentric understandings of Viking culture.

In response, this book strives to discern Viking women in the historical and archaeological record by uncovering and reconstructing Viking matriculture. This scholarship draws out female agency and leadership that is connected to a Viking woman's social status – and not her sex – illuminating the sub-classes of femininities that existed within. More broadly, this study speaks to the importance of women's scholarship on women, which requires an interpretative approach that is attuned to gendered experiences and embodied knowledge.

A dynamic of female embodiment observed beyond the circumpolar context is found in Angela Sumegi's review of *Divine Messengers - the untold story of Bhutan's female shamans*, by Stephanie Guyer-Stevens & Françoise Pommaret. They present accounts of the Bhutanese women known as *delom*, or those who 'return from the dead,' who serve as intermediaries between earthly and cosmological realms. As described in the work reviewed, these women occupy roles as healers, diviners, and spiritual authorities by drawing on embodied experiences that legitimize their knowledge and authority within their communities.

The *delom*, Sumegi highlights in her review, operate at the fringes of religious hierarchies; as such their practices are socially inscribed and sustained by community recognition instead of deriving legitimacy from Buddhist authority. This is yet another example of the broader matricultural patterns evident in other works presented in this issue which situate women primarily in everyday communal activities as opposed to formal structures of social power. Though culturally and geographically distinct from the North, Sumegi's review of Bhutanese *delom* adds to the common theme in women's roles as community leaders through which women's labour preserves cultural knowledge.

Cultural continuity can be understood not only through analysis, as presented in the works introduced so far, but also through lived experience. The first-person account that concludes this Introduction reflects on a visit to Atsua Ku (Grandma's Camp) in 1998 is entitled 'A Meeting at Grandma's Camp (Selections).' Written by the late Lucie Dufresne, it consists of selections from her 1998 essay. This excerpt captures the land-based practices through which knowledge is shared, embodied, and sustained across generations of First Nations in the Yukon.

Dufresne provides a richly detailed description of her visit to Atsua Ku, a salmon camp located forty-five minutes from Whitehorse in which she spent one August day in 1998. The vivid details transport the reader to Atsua Ku, where we witness the female leadership whose labour sustains the camp and provides both a livelihood for their family and the

preservation of traditional knowledge. Dufresne introduces us to sisters Lin [Linda Waugh] and Dorothy, who led the operations of the camp. The sisters and their brother, Carl, reclaimed their family's camp from its previously deteriorated state, when squatters used it as a wood camp and polluted the area, and revived its natural pristine beauty, transforming it to a traditional salmon camp where the family carried on the traditional practices of their grandparents. Dufresne's narrative details how her hosts Dorothy and Lin [Linda] provided her an opportunity to participate in local First Nation culture by sampling modern versions of traditional foods, by learning about the history of the camp and the family business, and by giving her an opportunity to learn how to make a dreamcatcher.

Though Grandmother Waugh featured in the narrative has since passed, Atsua Ku has been reinterpreted today through descendants of Linda Waugh. Her legacy speaks to the enduring strength of Waugh's matriculture while echoing similar patterns of adaptation and resilience as featured in Wolfe's analysis in beading traditions as a matricultural site for Indigenous women's knowledge transmission. A decade ago, salmon numbers in the Yukon decreased considerably, prompting Linda Waugh's granddaughter, Carissa, to activism and building awareness of the salmon through beadwork she creates under her Northern Tutchone name Ékè Éwe, in which she beads salmon pins. Carissa describes her beadwork in her recent short film titled *Beading Atsua Ku* that honors her grandmother, Linda Waugh, and her salmon camp, Atsua Ku.[27] Faced with environmental change and the loss of a key food source, Carissa created a beaded salmon pin titled *Atsua Ku* as visual art to raise awareness, express grief, and advocate for protection of salmon and the ecosystems they depend on.[28] Carissa's 'artivism,'[29] as she calls it, was on display recently at the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre during talks between the Council of Yukon First Nations, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government, and the Indigenous-led project *To Swim and Speak with Salmon*; they met to discuss efforts to grant the Yukon River legal personhood as a form of environmental protection.[30]

Carissa's artivism is an example of the resistance work that Indigenous matriarchs are employing, similar to that found in Wolfe's article 'Matriarchal Beads,' and highlights how these artistic responses are deeply tied to both cultural continuity and matriarchal leadership. It also speaks to Thorne's discussion on Indigenous matriculture as expression and practice of environmental protection. In the contexts of Carissa and her late Grandma Linda Waugh, the latter presented in Dufresne's excerpt, salmon is not only a resource, but

27 CBC Communications, 'Community film screening celebrates Yukon First Nations' connection to salmon,' *CBC News*, April 29, 2026. Accessed online May 2, 2026: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/community/community-film-screening-celebrates-salmon-9.7180703.

28 CBC, 'Community film screening,' April 29, 2026.

29 CBC, 'Community film screening,' April 29, 2026.

30 Aiden McRae, 'This Yukon artist's beadwork and 'artivism' puts focus on salmon and cultural loss,' *CBC North*, April 15, 2026. Accessed online May 2, 2026: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/salmon-loss-into-artivism-9.7158697.

a central part of community life, identity, and intergenerational knowledge. Dufresne highlights how respect is a central concept to Grandma Lin's overall understanding of her relationship with the land. The people occupying the camp prior to Atsua Ku destroyed the land through extraction of timber as a wood camp, and thus disrespected the land in Waugh's perspective. To restore relational balance of the land, Waugh and her family restored it to a traditional salmon camp where they revived traditional practices.

Carissa's honouring of her Grandmother Linda Waugh, shown through her beaded artivism and her inspiration derived from spending time at her grandmother's camp, speaks to the relationship between Alutiiq women and their environment as discussed by Thorne, who argues that matricultural knowledge as embodied knowledge is relied on by communities in current day advocacy for environmental protection. This relationship between women and the environment, as Thorne describes it, sustains cultural practices that ensure the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge and upholds relationships to the land where the collective responsibility of the community continues to be a traditional value that passes on, even in the face of ecological uncertainty.

From Dufresne's first-person narrative, with its rich description of First Nation matriculture recorded in 1998, to Carissa's current artivism, matriculture is understood not only as something that can be reconstructed from the past, but as a living *matrix*: a site where women's labour and activities shape cultural landscapes. Whether through beadwork, narrative, or land-based practices, Indigenous and circumpolar women continue to sustain and transform their cultural knowledge across generations, ensuring its continuity not through strict adherence to a preserved archetype, but through ongoing practices – women's labour – that constantly renew culture into new expressions while ensuring their community's survival.

About the Author

Sharon Angnakak is an Inuk scholar born and raised in Iqaluit, Nunavut, specializing in Inuit history, law, and cultural continuity. Her work foregrounds Inuit agency in colonial records and explores transformation, resilience, and the enduring strength of Inuit knowledge systems.

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Matriculture chez les peuples circumpolaires :

Introduction

SHARON ANGNAKAK, PhD

Ces dernières années, les régions circumpolaires sont revenues au centre de l'attention mondiale et ont été présentées comme des terres vulnérables aux menaces liées aux changements climatiques,[1] à la sécurité,[2] à la souveraineté,[3] et à l'extraction des ressources.[4] Alors que les discussions sur la souveraineté arctique se sont intensifiées en raison de l'invasion russe de l'Ukraine en 2022,[5] elles ont été encore aggravées en 2025

1 Ishfaq Hussain Malik et James D. Ford, 'Understanding the Impacts of Arctic Climate Change Through the Lens of Political Ecology,' *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 16, no. 1 (2025): e927, 1-2.

2 Fei Gao et Peiqing Guo, 'Unique risks and evolving trends in Arctic governance: a forward-looking analysis based on policies and practices,' *European Journal of Futures Research*, (2025) 13:5, 4-5.

3 Gabriella Gricius, 'A decolonial approach to Arctic security and sovereignty,' dans *Handbook of the Politics of the Arctic*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026, 431-432.

4 Lukasz Kozera et Robert Kłaczyński, 'The role and importance of the arctic and its sea route in international economic relations,' *Grassroots Journal of Natural Resources* 8, no. 1 (2025), 712.

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par le souhait déclaré du président américain Donald Trump d'acquérir le Groenland à des fins de sécurité stratégique et de ressources.[6] Ces événements ont ravivé le débat politique sur la souveraineté arctique, et les États-nations arctiques ainsi que leurs alliés ont répondu par des manifestations militaires publiques pour montrer leur intérêt renouvelé pour l'Arctique, promettant de protéger la région.[7] À leur tour, les citoyens circumpolaires se sont rassemblés dans leurs rues pour protester contre la menace américaine sur le Groenland.[8] Bien que l'Arctique canadien n'ait pas été directement menacé, sa position stratégique en face du Groenland a poussé les dirigeants politiques canadiens à se rendre dans les territoires du Nord, où ils ont fait des annonces concernant des projets majeurs et une militarisation accrue.[9]

Si l'on peut tirer quelque chose de l'histoire pour donner un sens à cette ère actuelle de menace perçue pour le territoire arctique, c'est l'observation répétée que les terres arctiques sont valorisées dans la mesure où elles contiennent des ressources et fournissent des routes commerciales et de voyage, plutôt que comme des mondes culturels vécus. Mais pour les Inuits circumpolaires vivant dans les terres d'origine nordiques, comme les Inuits Nunaat, par exemple, l'Arctique est leur foyer et une source culturelle inestimable qui façonne leur mode de vie unique.[10]

Bien que ce ne soit pas nouveau, la perception du Nord uniquement comme une vaste étendue riche en ressources en attente d'extraction est exacerbée à notre époque par le phénomène connu sous le nom d'« amplification arctique », où les effets du changement

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5 Justin Barnes, Nicholas Glesby, et Heather N. Nicol, 'Canada, the USA, and the Evolving North American Arctic Security Context: Balancing Traditional and Non-traditional Security,' dans *The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics*, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026, 494.

6 Jaroslav Lukiv, 'Denmark planned to blow up Greenland runways if US invaded, reports say,' *The BBC*, le 19 mars, 2026. Consulté en ligne le 2 mai, 2026: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c33ln4mp1p2o.

7 Paul Kirby, 'European military personnel arrive in Greenland as Trump says US needs island,' *The BBC*, le 15 janvier, 2026. Consulté en ligne le 2 mai, 2026: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd0ydjvxpejo.

8 Mah Noor Mubarik, '‘This is all our family’: Nunavummiut rally to support Greenland, as Inuit leaders also speak up,' *CBC North*, le 19 janvier, 2026. Consulté en ligne le 2 mai, 2026: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/inuit-greenland-9.7052083.

9 Bureau du premier ministre du Canada. *Le premier ministre Carney annonce un nouveau plan ambitieux pour défendre, développer et transformer le Nord*. Gouvernement du Canada, le 26 mars, 2026. Consulté en ligne le 2 mai 2026 : https://www.pm.gc.ca/fr/nouvelles/communiques/2026/03/12/premier-ministre-carney-annonce-nouveau-plan-ambitieux-defendre

10 Patricia A.L. Cochran, ICC Chair On behalf of Inuit in Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Chukotka, *A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, avril 2009. Consulté en ligne le 2 mai, 2026: https://iccalaska.org/wp-icc/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Signed-Inuit-Sovereignty-Declaration-11x17.pdf.

climatique se produisent plus rapidement dans les régions polaires.[11] La banquise arctique fond plus rapidement et les saisons sans glace s'allongent plus longtemps, des facteurs qui pourraient ouvrir des routes d'extraction et commerciales autrefois bloquées par la glace de mer.[12] En conséquence, les États-nations arctiques perçoivent à la fois les menaces climatiques et géopolitiques comme urgentes, et en réponse ont renouvelé l'attention militaire et l'intervention dans la région comme mesures démontrables de leur souveraineté arctique.[13]

J'ai étudié à la fois le concept et l'évolution de la souveraineté de l'Arctique canadien en lien avec la culture inuite dans ma récente thèse de doctorat (2024) qui a examiné deux affaires criminelles majeures impliquant les Inuits : R c Uluksak et Sinnisiak (1917) et les procès pour meurtre de l'île Belcher (1941). Ces procès ont eu un impact important dans l'histoire inuite parce qu'ils ont été les premiers procès menés et interprétés entre les langues inuites et coloniales. Les dossiers historiques relatifs à ces procès contiennent des exemples du début du XXe siècle de communication entre Inuits et non-Inuits qui offrent un aperçu des échanges culturels de cette période, à travers les messages judiciaires et religieux transmis entre eux qui se trouvent dans les archives.[14]

Tous les documents relatifs aux deux cas ont été rédigés par des hommes non inuits en anglais ou en français. Là où des dossiers rapportaient le discours ou les actes des Inuits, ils étaient écrits par des hommes non inuits par l'entremise d'interprètes – certains Inuits, d'autres non-Inuits, et tous des hommes. Seuls les hommes inuits servaient comme « agents spéciaux » de police, guides et interprètes.[15] Pourtant, malgré leur rôle principal dans ces affaires, le silence inuit dans les archives marquait une absence importante. Pour « entendre » ce que les Inuits ont pu dire au cours de ces événements, ma thèse a appliqué aux archives des cadres spécifiques aux Inuits – la langue, les lois et la philosophie inuites – comme une lentille pour interpréter ce que ces événements pouvaient signifier pour les Inuits qui les ont vécus, reconstruisant ainsi une perspective inuite.[16] Ce travail visait à restaurer l'agentivité et l'humanité inuites historiques.[17]

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11 Masakazu Yoshimori, Takao Kawasaki, Ayako Abe-Ouchi, et Hiroyasu Hasumi, 'Arctic Amplification in the Past, Present, and Future: A Review for the Challenge to the Integrative Understanding of its Mechanism,' *Journal of the Meteorological Society of Japan*, Ser. II 103, no. 5 (2025), 523.

12 Gao et Guo, 5-6.

13 Gao et Guo, 7-8.

14 Sharon Angnakak, *Inuit Perspectives in and on "Arctic Show Trials,"* Thèse de doctorat, Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2024, 9.

15 Angnakak, 24-25.

16 Angnakak, 17-22.

17 Angnakak, 176.

Si les voix des hommes inuits étaient remarquablement absentes des archives historiques, le silence des femmes inuites était encore plus complet. De telles absences n'étaient pas simplement le résultat de pratiques de tenue de registres, mais étaient intégrées dans les processus plus larges de l'administration coloniale qui déterminaient quelles voix comptaient et pouvaient être entendues. Ce numéro de *Matrix* recherche les voix des femmes circumpolaires de l'hémisphère nord pour les trouver et les faire ressortir là où elles existent, les reconstruire là où elles sont absentes et, en particulier, mettre en lumière la résilience comme caractéristique durable de la matriculture présente dans les régions circumpolaires, malgré les changements initiés par le contact colonial dans le Nord.

Dans la chronologie coloniale nord-américaine, les colons ont tardé à arriver et à pénétrer dans le Nord en raison du manque de connaissances et de technologie nécessaires pour traverser l'environnement dur et rude des régions arctiques.[18] Au moment où les colons européens ont commencé à s'installer dans le Nord, les avancées technologiques de la Révolution industrielle s'étaient déjà implantées dans les régions du sud de l'Amérique du Nord.[19] Bien que l'exploration et l'expansion des colons vers le nord aient eu lieu à partir du XVIIIe siècle, principalement soutenue par la recherche du passage du Nord-Ouest, l'industrie baleinière, puis le commerce des fourrures,[20] les technologies plus récentes au début du XXe siècle – comme les chemins de fer et l'électricité – ont amené à des établissements plus permanents de colons, car ces nouvelles technologies nécessitaient de nouvelles ressources.[21]

La Première Guerre mondiale a modifié la géopolitique mondiale, mais a aussi exercé une pression considérable sur les États-nations arctiques pour qu'ils démontrent avec autorité leur administration des terres de la région circumpolaire. Poussés par des économies émergentes bâties sur de nouvelles technologies, et en réponse aux conflits mondiaux, les colons au début du XXe siècle ont abandonné le commerce des fourrures. Ils ont plutôt commencé à explorer les terres autochtones dans les régions du nord pour dégager d'éventuels gisements minéraux et métalliques[22] et, au début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, ont rapidement établi des bases militaires à travers l'Arctique.[23] Ainsi, dans la

18 Angnakak, 25-26.

19 Gregory Clark, Kevin H. O'Rourke et Alan M. Taylor, *Made in America? The New World, the Old, and the Industrial Revolution*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, Working Paper #14077, Cambridge, MA, June 2008, 1-4.

20 Lenore A. Grenoble, 'Contact and shift: Colonization and urbanization in the Arctic,' *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Contact* 2 (2022), 484-488; Peter Usher, Peter, 'The Canadian Western Arctic: a century of change,' *Anthropologica* (1971), 171-180.

21 Morris Zaslow, *The Northward Expansion of Canada 1914-1967*, Vol. 17, McClelland & Stewart, 2016, 8-9.

22 Zaslow, 9-16.

23 Angnakak, 113-126.

quête de la souveraineté des États, la colonisation de l'Arctique *semblait* beaucoup plus rapide, et a souvent été avancée par des structures coercitives qui cherchaient à réorganiser la vie sociale, culturelle et spirituelle des peuples autochtones du Nord.

Cadrer les histoires autochtones principalement en termes de rupture et de perte risque cependant de ressusciter l'ancienne croyance coloniale selon laquelle l'Arctique était un désert vide; ce concept a été extrapolé aux peuples autochtones circumpolaires eux-mêmes, les colons les caractérisant en termes de carence et d'absence.[24] Les colons comparaient les cultures et sociétés autochtones aux leurs, et ce faisant, ils ne pouvaient pas reconnaître la religion, la loi et la culture autochtones. Au contraire, les colons croyaient que les peuples autochtones des régions circumpolaires manquaient de toute forme de loi, de hiérarchie ou de culture.[25] Dans les cas où les cultures autochtones étaient reconnues dans une certaine mesure, elles étaient décrites comme éphémères et vulnérables à l'effacement en raison de l'acculturation et de l'adultération européennes.[26] Cette vision déficitaire de la culture autochtone obscurcit les longues histoires de changement et d'adaptation, ainsi que l'agentivité continue des peuples autochtones, qui, comme toute autre société humaine présente dans le monde et à travers le temps, ont navigué l'arrivée des nouveaux venus vers la continuité culturelle et la transformation.

Bien que les récits de rupture et de perte demeurent centraux dans de nombreux récits des histoires autochtones dans les régions circumpolaires, ce numéro présente des réflexions qui peuvent améliorer notre compréhension de l'expérience humaine du changement elle-même. Les sociétés humaines n'ont jamais été statiques; elles ont toujours été façonnées par l'évolution des conditions environnementales, l'évolution des technologies et l'évolution des relations sociales. Les communautés autochtones étaient – et continuent d'être – profondément engagées dans des processus de changement culturel. Comme le décrit une soumission dans ce numéro (Racah) à propos des peuples autochtones connus sous le nom de Nenets, ils expriment continuellement leurs cultures traditionnelles, bien qu'entretissées à de nouvelles formes de savoir. Dans ce contexte, la matriculture peut être comprise comme une force dynamique à travers laquelle la culture est réinterprétée avec de nouvelles expressions de savoirs et de pratiques traditionnels qui se poursuivent par transmission intergénérationnelle.

Dans ce numéro de *Matrix*, nous avons l'occasion d'entendre des voix du Nord qui parlent des femmes qui sont au cœur de la négociation du changement culturel et qui, pour leurs communautés, restent une source de continuité culturelle. En faisant émerger ces voix

24 John Amagoalik, 'Wasteland of nobodies,' Dans *Nunavut: Inuit regain control of their lands and lives* (2000), 138-139.

25 Angnakak, 73-89.

26 Pamela R. Stern, et Lisa Stevenson, *Critical Inuit Studies: an Anthology of Contemporary Arctic Ethnography*, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006, 261; Jacob Gruber, 'Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology,' *American Anthropologist*, Vol 72, No 6, 1970, 1290.

issues des matricultures circumpolaires, les soumissions de ce numéro examinent les économies féminines basées sur la terre sur la toundra et la taïga ainsi que les pratiques artistiques féminines, tout en présentant une collection d'entrevues de femmes circumpolaires récemment enregistrées par le collectif éditorial de *Matrix*. Ces entrevues, disponibles à la fois via les liens audio et en transcription, apportent un contexte supplémentaire aux thèmes abordés dans ce numéro circumpolaire; le matériel recueilli ici contribue à un corpus plus large de connaissances féminines qui complètent les archives.

Tout au long du numéro, des thèmes de changement culturel et de continuité sont explorés, montrant comment les communautés et cultures circumpolaires sont maintenues par le travail des femmes, leur participation aux économies locales et leur leadership communautaire, qui sont essentiels pour naviguer et négocier le changement culturel engendré par le contact interculturel, les tensions géopolitiques changeantes et les réalités technologiques évolutives qui alimentent et façonnent le globalisme. Dans « Reweaving the Tundra : Women, Fire, and Fractured Traditions in Anna's Prose » (Retisser la toundra : femmes, feu et traditions fracturées dans la prose d'Anna Nerkagi), Maria Gatti Racah explore le changement matriculturel et la continuité des Nenets à travers le symbolisme du foyer (feu domestique) présenté dans trois proses sélectionnées écrites par l'auteure nenets Anna Nerkagi. L'analyse de Racah s'appuie sur le symbolisme du foyer en relation avec la subjectivité et l'expérience féminines des Nenets, telles que présentées dans les histoires de Nerkagi qui dépeignent les femmes et le foyer : soit au coin du feu, déplacées de celui-ci, soit au-delà.

Le *chum* – une structure ressemblant à une tente qui est la demeure traditionnelle des Nenets – est un microcosme du cosmos dans lequel des rôles genrés sont inscrits. Les femmes nenets ont la responsabilité de maintenir le foyer, le cœur de l'espace domestique, qui est lié aux relations cosmologiques et écologiques, où le feu est traité comme une présence vivante. Ici, Racah classe les personnages féminins de Nergaki selon leur proximité – ou leur rupture – avec le foyer, démontrant que la fragilité et la résilience ne sont pas des caractéristiques opposées, mais sont imbriquées. La culture nenets, fondée sur une société semi-nomade d'élevage de rennes, n'a pas disparu malgré les politiques coloniales russes qui cherchaient à russifier les Nenets. Elle continue comme un mode de vie choisi par les femmes où le *chum* et son foyer (c'est-à-dire le travail des femmes) sont au cœur de la vie dans la toundra. Racah note que Nergaki elle-même a fondé et dirigé une école écologique sur la toundra dédiée à la transmission des savoirs traditionnels aux jeunes Nenets. Comme le dit Rachah, la transmission de la culture nenets est indissociable du travail des femmes.

Nergaki elle-même a vécu la politique coloniale russe d'expulsion forcée de sa maison sur la toundra et de la culture nenets alors qu'elle était enfant et placée dans un internat. Cette intrigue est écrite dans sa prose semi-autobiographique qui détaille comment un tel

processus a marqué des fractures internes causées par la suppression externe de la langue nenets et des formes incarnées de savoir terrestre associées à la toundra. Le système des internats retirait les enfants de leurs parents, et cette séparation – surtout de leur mère – a érodé les formes traditionnelles de savoir, notamment en ce qui concerne les compétences manuelles requises pour vivre sur la toundra. Pourtant, au milieu de cette rupture ont émergé l'adaptation et l'autonomie autochtones, particulièrement illustrées dans l'école réelle de Nergaki sur la toundra où elle a réorienté son éducation coloniale vers sa communauté. Malgré les pressions coloniales en faveur de la russification, les femmes nenets retournent dans la toundra pour tisser de nouvelles formes d'éducation avec leurs connaissances traditionnelles, une adaptation matriculturelle où les femmes sont au cœur.

Dans l'article de Laurel Thorne intitulé « Rematriating the Archipelago : A Gendered Environmental History of Kodiak » (Rematriation de l'archipel : une histoire environnementale genrée de Kodiak), le travail des femmes autochtones était aussi central dans la continuité de la culture Alutiiq, dont les terres d'origine se trouvent sur l'île Kodiak, au large de l'Alaska aux États-Unis. L'analyse de Thorne sur la matriculture Alutiiq démontre l'importance de la terre dans la formation de la culture autochtone, alors qu'elle examine la relation historique et actuelle entre les femmes Alutiiq et leur environnement arctique.

Située dans l'écoféminisme et inspirée par les chercheuses alutiiques actuelles, le travail de Thorne montre que, malgré les pressions coloniales successives de la Russie et des États-Unis, la connaissance de l'environnement par les femmes, ainsi que leurs pratiques de subsistance et de bains à vapeur dans le sol, offraient la voie à la survie communautaire et culturelle. Traditionnellement, les femmes alutiiq entretenaient une relation réciproque avec leur environnement où elles s'abstenaient d'entrer ou de traverser certains lieux extérieurs pendant les périodes de menstruation et d'accouchement, car les fonctions biologiques des femmes étaient considérées comme des forces puissantes pouvant influencer leur environnement. Alors que les femmes prenaient soin de leur interaction avec l'environnement, avec des pratiques de respect et de retenue, l'environnement leur fournissait à leur tour leur nourriture pour survivre et des ressources pour leur subsistance, tout en leur offrant des lieux où elles pouvaient aller pendant les périodes de menstruation et d'accouchement pour guérir et se ressourcer dans des bains de vapeur. Ainsi, l'environnement était intrinsèquement lié au corps des femmes, car elles protégeaient l'environnement tout en gagnant la guérison, la survie et la subsistance. Cette analyse donne un exemple de la façon dont la matriculture peut être façonnée à la fois par les fonctions biologiques de maternité des femmes et par leur environnement.

Les régimes coloniaux russe et américain ont perturbé la relation des femmes alutiiq avec l'environnement en les retirant de la terre et en les plaçant dans une économie salariale

basée sur l'extraction des ressources de la terre. La théorie de Thorne sur le corps des femmes comme lié à la terre est analysée à travers cette perturbation – des régimes coloniaux qui ont retiré les femmes de la terre tout en extrayant simultanément des ressources de la terre. En dépit de cette double perturbation, comme le démontre Thorne, la continuité culturelle des Alutiiq a été rendue possible grâce aux femmes Alutiiq qui – malgré les pressions des changements imposés par les colonies – ont maintenu les pratiques de subsistance incarnant les valeurs environnementales. Leurs pratiques axées sur la protection de l'environnement se poursuivent aujourd'hui.

En décrivant les pratiques des bains de vapeur – une technique spéciale de guérison facilitée par les femmes, pour celles qui ont menstrué ou viennent d'accoucher – Thorne démontre comment les femmes partagent leurs connaissances entre elles par leur échange mutuel de soins et de travail en temps de besoin. Comme Racah, Thorne voit aussi la rupture et la résilience non pas comme des expériences ou expressions complètement opposées de la matriculture, mais comme un champ d'intersection où les femmes vivent et naviguent à la fois la coercition et le choix.

Alors que la matriculture pour Racah et Thorne présente un site de rupture et de résilience, l'article de Tammy Wolfe intitulé « Matriarchal Beads : The Resistance, Resurgence and Reclamation of Traditional Indigenous Beadwork » (Perles matriarcales : la résistance, la résurgence et la récupération du perlage traditionnel autochtone) présente la matriculture comme un lieu de pratiques créatives qui manifestent le savoir et l'identité autochtones. Elle écrit de son point de vue en tant qu'*Ininiw Iskwew* (femme moskégonne [crie des marais] des Premières Nations), érudite et perlière. Les pratiques de perlage des femmes autochtones sont présentées comme une forme de culture matérielle à travers laquelle le savoir, l'identité et la continuité culturelles sont maintenus et transformés par les femmes à travers les générations; ils démontrent que la persistance culturelle autochtone fonctionne par l'adaptation, l'innovation et l'agentivité des femmes plutôt que par la préservation statique.

Wolfe soutient que le perlage est une forme de pratique culturelle des femmes autochtones et, plus précisément, une pratique culturelle matriarcale qui illustre la matriculture autochtone. Dans l'analyse de Wolfe, la matriculture autochtone est un système de transmission des connaissances et de formation identitaire, avec des aspects relationnels qui englobent à la fois les relations cosmologiques et terrestres par lesquelles la continuité culturelle est maintenue à travers les générations. Plutôt que de représenter une tradition immuable, le perlage montre comment les femmes autochtones à travers l'Amérique du Nord ont activement adapté, réinterprété et renouvelé leurs pratiques culturelles en réponse aux conditions historiques changeantes causées par diverses forces extérieures tout au long de l'histoire coloniale.

Le perlage est donc un site de transformation matriculturelle autochtone : de l'intégration des perles de verre grâce au commerce des colons, à l'utilisation du travail de perles dans l'expression de l'identité politique et de la résistance, jusqu'à sa résurgence contemporaine lors des powwows et sur les plateformes numériques, le perlage s'impose comme un lieu dynamique de continuité culturelle. La pratique du perlage n'est pas seulement préservée; elle est continuellement refaite avec de nouvelles expressions. S'appuyant sur ce sentiment de renouveau et de réinterprétation, Wolfe remet en question les récits de perte culturelle basés sur le déficit, malgré les ruptures successives tout au long de l'histoire coloniale, en mettant en avant les rôles des femmes autochtones comme agents de continuité, d'innovation et de renaissance. Elle montre comment la transmission des connaissances culturelles persiste à travers des changements imposés de l'extérieur.

La discussion de Wolfe sur les rôles positifs des médias sociaux modernes dans le partage des connaissances traditionnelles sur le perlage est un autre exemple des façons dont la transformation culturelle est guidée par l'agentivité d'un individu en négociation avec son environnement, mettant en lumière un nouveau type d'environnement qui façonne la culture. Alors que l'analyse de Racah et Thorne portent sur le savoir autochtone et la matriculture en relation avec un environnement traditionnel et physique – la toundra – l'analyse de Wolfe introduit un environnement entièrement nouveau qui façonne la matriculture : les environnements virtuels. Ces nouvelles plateformes utilisées par les peuples autochtones pour partager la culture ont mené à ce que Wolfe décrit comme une « renaissance autochtone », soulignant la force positive de devenir viral dans le monde virtuel d'aujourd'hui. Wolfe attribue cette adaptation des pratiques culturelles par l'utilisation de la technologie aux mouvements autochtones actuels de décolonisation, où le matriarcat autochtone connaît une résurgence et un renouveau culturels.

Tia Tidwell aborde les pratiques matriarcales liées à la parenté dans sa réflexion lyrique intitulée « From the Earth » (De la terre), qui se concentre sur la matriculture du Nunamiut. Originaire du col d'Anaktuvuk en Alaska, Tidwell offre une réflexion profondément personnelle sur son nom, acquis selon les pratiques traditionnelles de dénomination des Nunamiut : dans sa langue autochtone inupiaq, son nom est Puya, signifiant « de la terre ». Cette réflexion va droit au cœur des thèmes communs à toutes les soumissions : changement, résilience, continuité et transfert des connaissances culturelles de génération en génération.

Dans « From the Earth » (De la terre), on nous invite à entrevoir les systèmes de croyances intérieurs des Nunamiuts qui transcendent le temps et l'espace. Partant d'un nom personnel, Tidwell offre une réflexion orientée vers le monde actuel et les relations contemporaines, mais qui étend aussi des liens avec ceux qui portaient autrefois le même nom, reliant les ancêtres aux gens d'aujourd'hui. Selon la croyance nunamive, le nom

personnel fait référence à ce que Tidwell décrit comme la « survie intergénérationnelle », une contre-description directe du terme « traumatisme intergénérationnel » utilisé conventionnellement dans les discussions sur l'histoire coloniale de nombreux peuples autochtones. Cela met en lumière la préférence de l'auteur pour des auto-descriptions positives qui accentuent le triomphe de la survie.

Tidwell revient sur un moment des plus intimes que l'on puisse vivre : la mort de sa grand-mère qui, en vertu du nom Nunamiut de Tidwell, a étendu leur lien de parenté à la sororité. Tidwell discute des responsabilités liées à un nom traditionnel (ou un nom acquis à partir de pratiques traditionnelles), où les relations personnelles et les liens de parenté qui appartenaient à celui dont le nom est transmis à une autre personne à son décès sont transférés à la personne qui hérite le nom. L'une des scènes les plus puissantes et les plus intimes, décrite par Tidwell à la première personne, est celle où elle reste aux côtés de sa grand-mère alors que celle-ci décède : « Je l'ai accueillie et lui ai dit au revoir. » Cela met en avant sa double relation avec sa grand-mère, créée à la fois par ses liens biologiques et de noms. Tidwell décrit les noms comme contenant et ayant la capacité de libérer la mémoire, la présence et la parenté. Elle perpétue la tradition Nunamiut lorsque sa grand-mère Kivaluuk décède, en nommant sa propre fille Kivaaluk. Par l'héritage du nom Kivaluuk par sa fille, l'auteure retrouve sa grand-mère et perpétue la parenté matrilinéaire et les pratiques traditionnelles de sa communauté.

Bien que ce numéro présente trois analyses différentes de la matriculture circumpolaire et une réflexion personnelle lyrique, il met aussi en lumière d'autres travaux à travers plusieurs ***[trois?]*** critiques de livres. Deux sont situés dans la région circumpolaire et un à l'extérieur, avec des éléments communs de continuité culturelle et de leadership matriculturel présents dans chaque cas. Dans la critique d'Elizabeth Ann Bartlett du livre de Kaarina Kailo, *Sauna, Culture, Sweat and Spirituality : On the Architectonics and Cosmology of Sacred Space*, on trouve une analyse de la façon dont les pratiques traditionnelles de sudation et de sauna des peuples autochtones ont des racines profondes dans la culture matristique. Selon Kailo, la hutte de sudation est le premier temple, la forme la plus ancienne de spiritualité, dans laquelle le temple ressemble à un utérus. En ce sens, Thorne et Kailo analysent tous deux la matriculture comme étant façonnée à la fois par le corps des femmes et par leur environnement, les deux auteures observant un lien intrinsèque entre les deux.

Dans la critique de Linnéa Rowlatt de *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women : Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*, un volume coédité par Michèle Hayeur Smith et Alexandra Sanmark, la matriculture viking est largement définie comme le système de symboles concernant les femmes vikings – les symboles du maternel et du fémin – qui ont façonné les attentes sociales envers les femmes et les opportunités qui s'offraient à elles. Rowlatt souligne à quel point une grande partie de ce que nous savons des femmes historiques –

en l'occurrence des femmes vikings – provient des cadres interprétatifs des historiographes et archéologues masculins, ce qui aboutit à des compréhensions androcentriques recyclées de la culture viking.

En réponse, ce livre s'efforce de discerner les femmes vikings dans les archives historiques et archéologiques en découvrant et reconstruisant la matriculture viking. Cette recherche met en lumière l'agentivité et le leadership féminins liés au statut social d'une femme viking – et non à son sexe – en éclairant les sous-classes de féminités qui existaient dans leur socété. Plus largement, cette étude souligne l'importance de la recherche des femmes sur les femmes, qui nécessite une approche interprétative adaptée aux expériences genrées et au savoir incarné.

Une dynamique d'incarnation féminine observée au-delà du contexte circumpolaire se trouve dans la critique d'Angela Sumegi sur *Divine Messengers - The Untold Story of Bhutan's Female Shamans*, par Stephanie Guyer-Stevens et Françoise Pommaret. Les auteures présentent des récits sur les femmes bhoutanaises connues sous le nom de *delom*, ou celles qui « reviennent d'entre les morts », qui servent d'intermédiaires entre les royaumes terrestres et cosmologiques. Comme décrit dans l'ouvrage examiné, ces femmes occupent des rôles de guérisseuses, devineuses et autorités spirituelles en s'appuyant sur des expériences incarnées qui légitiment leur savoir et leur autorité au sein de leurs communautés.

Les *delom*, souligne Sumegi dans sa critique, opèrent en marge des hiérarchies religieuses; ainsi, leurs pratiques sont socialement inscrites et soutenues par la reconnaissance communautaire plutôt que de tirer une légitimité de l'autorité bouddhiste. C'est un autre exemple des schémas matriculturels plus larges évidents dans d'autres ouvrages présentés dans ce numéro, qui situent les femmes principalement dans des activités communautaires quotidiennes plutôt que dans les structures formelles du pouvoir social. Bien qu'elle s'adresse à une communauté culturellement et géographiquement distincte du Nord, la discussion de Sumegi sur les *delom* bhoutanaises s'ajoute au thème récurrent du rôle des femmes en tant que leaders communautaires, dont le travail préserve le savoir culturel.

La continuité culturelle peut être comprise non seulement par l'analyse, telle que présentée dans les œuvres discutées jusqu'à présent, mais aussi par l'expérience vécue. Le récit à la première personne qui conclut cette introduction reflète une visite à Atsua Ku (le camp de grand-mère) en 1998, et s'intitule « Une rencontre au camp de grand-maman (sélections) ». Écrit par feu Lucie Dufresne, il est composé de sélections de son essai de 1998. Cet extrait saisit les pratiques terrestres par lesquelles le savoir est partagé, incarné et maintenu à travers des générations de Premières Nations du Yukon.

Dufresne offre une description riche et détaillée de sa visite à Atsua Ku, un camp de saumon situé à quarante-cinq minutes de Whitehorse, où elle a passé une journée d'août en 1998. Les détails saisissants transportent le lecteur à Atsua Ku, où l'on assiste au leadership féminin dont le travail soutient le camp et assure à la fois la subsistance de leur famille et la préservation du savoir traditionnel. Dufresne nous présente les sœurs Lin [Linda Waugh] et Dorothy, qui dirigeaient les opérations du camp. Les sœurs et leur frère, Carl, ont repris le camp familial de son état auparavant délabré, lorsque des squatteurs l'ont utilisé comme camp forestier et ont pollué la région. Les trois ont ravivé sa beauté naturelle et pristine, le transformant en un camp traditionnel de saumon où la famille a perpétué les pratiques traditionnelles de leurs grands-parents. Le récit de Dufresne détaille comment ses hôtes Dorothy et Lin [Linda] lui ont offert l'occasion de participer à la culture locale des Premières Nations en goûtant des versions modernes de plats traditionnels, en découvrant l'histoire du camp et de l'entreprise familiale, et en apprenant à fabriquer un attrape-rêves.

Bien que Grand-mère Waugh, présente dans le récit, soit depuis décédée, Atsua Ku a été réinterprété aujourd'hui grâce aux efforts des descendants de Linda Waugh. Son héritage témoigne de la force durable de la matriculture de Waugh tout en faisant écho à des schémas d'adaptation et de résilience qui ressemblent à ceux présentés dans l'analyse de Wolfe sur les traditions de perlage comme site matriculturel pour la transmission du savoir des femmes autochtones. Il y a dix ans, le nombre de saumons au Yukon a considérablement diminué, ce qui a poussé Carissa, la petite-fille de Linda Waugh, à s'activer. Sensibilisant le public au saumon par le biais de son travail de perles, elle crée des épingles à saumon sous son nom Tutchone du Nord, Ékè Éwe. Carissa décrit son travail de perles dans son récent court métrage intitulé *Beading Atsua Ku*, qui rend hommage à sa grand-mère, Linda Waugh, et à son camp de saumon, Atsua Ku.[27] Face aux changements environnementaux et à la perte d'une source alimentaire essentielle, Carissa a créé une épingle de saumon perlée intitulée *Atsua Ku* comme art visuel pour sensibiliser, exprimer le deuil et plaidoyer pour la protection du saumon et des écosystèmes dont ils dépendent.[28] L'« artivisme » de Carissa, comme elle l'appelle,[29] a été récemment exposé au Centre culturel Kwanlin Dün lors de discussions entre le Conseil des Premières Nations du Yukon, le gouvernement Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, et le projet *To Swim and Talk with Salmon*, dirigé par les autochtones; ils se sont réunis pour discuter des efforts visant à accorder à la rivière Yukon la personnalité juridique comme mesure de protection de l'environnement.[30]

27 CBC Communications, 'Community film screening celebrates Yukon First Nations' connection to salmon,' *CBC News*, April 29, 2026. Accessed online May 2, 2026: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/community/community-film-screening-celebrates-salmon-9.7180703.

28 CBC, 'Community film screening,' April 29, 2026.

29 CBC, 'Community film screening,' April 29, 2026.

30 Aiden McRae, 'This Yukon artist's beadwork and 'artivism' puts focus on salmon and cultural loss,' *CBC North*, le 15 avril, 2026. Consulté en ligne le 2 mai, 2026:

L'artivisme de Carrisa est un exemple du travail de résistance que les matriarches autochtones emploient, similaire au travail décrit dans l'article de Wolfe « Matriarchal Beads », et met en lumière comment ces réponses artistiques sont profondément liées à la fois à la continuité culturelle et au leadership matriarcal. Il s'inscrit aussi dans la discussion de Thorne sur la matriculture autochtone comme expression et pratique de la protection de l'environnement. Dans le contexte de Carissa et de sa défunte grand-mère Linda Waugh, cette dernière présentée dans l'extrait de Dufresne, le saumon n'est pas seulement une ressource, mais un élément central de la vie communautaire, de l'identité et du savoir intergénérationnel. Dufresne souligne comment le respect est un concept central dans la compréhension globale que Grand-maman Lin a de sa relation avec la terre. Les occupants du camp avant Atsua Ku ont détruit la terre en extrayant du bois tout en l'utilisant comme camp forestier, et donc, du point de vue de Waugh, ont manqué de respect à la terre. Pour rétablir l'équilibre relationnel de la terre, Waugh et sa famille l'ont restaurée en un camp traditionnel de saumon où ils ont relancé les pratiques traditionnelles.

L'hommage de Carissa à sa grand-mère Linda Waugh, démontré par son artivisme de la perlure et son inspiration tirée du temps passé au camp de sa grand-mère, rappelle la relation entre les femmes alutiiq et leur environnement, telle que discutée par Thorne, qui soutient que le savoir matriculturel, en tant que savoir incarné, est utilisé par les communautés dans leur plaidoyer actuelle pour la protection de l'environnement. Cette relation entre les femmes et l'environnement, telle que la décrit Thorne, soutient des pratiques culturelles qui assurent la préservation et la transmission des savoirs traditionnels et maintient les liens avec la terre, où la responsabilité collective de la communauté demeure une valeur traditionnelle qui se transmet, même face à l'incertitude écologique.

Du récit à la première personne de Dufresne, avec sa riche description de la matriculture des Premières Nations écrite en 1998, à l'artevisme actuel de Carissa, la matriculture est comprise non seulement comme quelque chose qui peut être reconstruit à partir du passé, mais comme une matrice vivante : un lieu où le travail et les activités des femmes façonnent les paysages culturels. Que ce soit par le travail de perles, la narration ou des pratiques terrestres, les femmes autochtones et circumpolaires continuent de maintenir et de transformer leur savoir culturel à travers les générations, assurant sa continuité non pas par une adhésion stricte à un archétype préservé, mais par des pratiques continues – le travail des femmes – qui renouvellent constamment la culture en de nouvelles expressions tout en assurant la survie de leur communauté.

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À propos de l'auteur

Sharon Angnakak est une chercheuse inuite née et élevée à Iqaluit, au Nunavut, spécialisée en histoire, droit et continuité culturelle inuits. Son travail met en avant le rôle actif des Inuits dans les archives coloniales et explore la transformation, la résilience et la force durable des systèmes de connaissances inuits.

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Reweaving the Tundra:

Women, Fire, and Fractured Traditions in

Anna Nerkagi's Prose

MARIA GATTI RACAH, PhD

Abstract

Anna Nerkagi (b. 1952), a Nenets writer and cultural activist from the Yamal Peninsula, is one of the few female Indigenous voices in Russophone literature of the North. Beyond her literary work, she has promoted tundra education and the preservation of Nenets culture, exemplifying a form of female creative agency linking literature, education, and cultural stewardship.

This article examines her prose through the lens of the relationship between women and the hearth, understood as a central site of ethical, cosmological, and ecological mediation in Nenets life. Focusing on Aniko, Ilir, *and* White Moss, *it reads these works as a loose trilogy structured around shifting configurations of female subjectivity: women at the fire, women displaced from it, and women beyond it.*

Drawing on close textual analysis and ethnographic research, the article argues that the hearth functions as a living relational centre linking humans, animals, and other-than-human beings. At the same time, Nerkagi's narratives register the disruptions brought by Soviet modernity, particularly through boarding schools and the erosion of female genealogies. Rather than opposing tradition and modernity, her works show how Nenets matricultural systems persist through women's labour and ritual authority, allowing the tundra's social and cosmological fabric to be continuously re-woven.

Keywords: Nenets, Anna Nerkagi, matriculture, hearth, Indigenous Russia

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Résumé

Anna Nerkagi (née en 1952), écrivaine et militante culturelle nenets originaire de la péninsule de Yamal, est l'une des rares voix féminines autochtones dans la littérature russophone du Nord. Au-delà de son travail littéraire, elle a promu l'éducation sur la toundra et la préservation de la culture nenet, incarnant une forme d'agence créative féminine reliant littérature, éducation et intendance culturelle.

Cet article examine sa prose à travers le prisme de la relation entre les femmes et le foyer, comprise comme un lieu central de médiation éthique, cosmologique et écologique dans la vie des Nenets. En se concentrant sur Aniko, Ilir et White Moss, il présente ces œuvres comme une trilogie vaguement liée, structurée autour de configurations fluctuantes de subjectivité féminine : des femmes au feu, des femmes déplacées de celui-ci, et des femmes au-delà.

S'appuyant sur une analyse textuelle approfondie et des recherches ethnographiques, l'article soutient que le foyer fonctionne comme un centre relationnel vivant qui relie humains, animaux et êtres autres que les humains. En même temps, les récits de Nerkagi témoignent des perturbations apportées par la modernité soviétique, notamment par les pensionnats et l'érosion des généalogies féminines. Au lieu de présenter la tradition et la modernité comme des opposés, ses œuvres montrent comment les systèmes matriculturels nenets persistent grâce au travail et à l'autorité rituelle des femmes, ce qui permet de retisser continuellement le tissu social et cosmologique de la toundra.

Mots-clés : Nenets, Anna Nerkagi, matriculture, foyer, Russie autochtone

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Anna Nerkagi's prose emerges from the tundra and returns to it. Writing in Russian from within the lived experience of Nenets nomadic life, her works articulate the tensions between Indigenous cosmologies and the profound transformations brought about by Soviet modernity. At the centre of this article is the hypothesis that, across her prose, the relationship between women and the hearth functions as a privileged site through which these tensions are narrated and reconfigured.

This article focuses on three of Nerkagi's *povesti*[2] – *Aniko from the Nogo Clan*, *Ilir*, and *White Moss* – and proposes to read them as a loose trilogy structured around the figure of the hearth and its relation to female subjectivity. Women at the fire, women displaced from it, and women beyond it constitute not fixed categories, but shifting positions through which the stability and fracture of Nenets life are made visible.

Born in 1952[3] into a reindeer-herding family in a *chum* in the tundra near the Laborovaia trading post on Yamal, Nerkagi was heir to a clan whose origins were associated, in local belief, with a powerful shaman (Samson Normand 2003: 42)[4]. As a child she was taken from the tundra to attend a boarding school; she later studied at the Geological Faculty of the Tyumen Industrial Institute. In the early 1970s, she met the writer and critic Konstantin Lagunov, who urged her to abandon her early, derivative stories about 'southern seas' and unrequited love and to write instead about the tundra and the Nenets – «what you have lived» (Drozhashchikh 2021: 8). Her first *povest'*, *Aniko iz roda Nogo* [*Aniko from the Nogo Clan*][5], appeared in regional and central journals in 1975-76 and was published as a book in 1977; *Ilir* (a proper name derived from the Nenets root *il*, meaning 'life') followed soon after. In 1978, she became the first Nenets woman admitted to the Union of Soviet Writers.

Shortly thereafter, however, Nerkagi left Tyumen and returned to her father's camp near Laborovaia, choosing to live in the tundra. There she combined domestic and herding work with broader social engagement: she worked in an *agitbrigade*, intervened publicly on the

[1] This research was supported by the Italian PRIN 2022 project *From Post-Trauma to Ecology: Contemporary Gender Narratives in Slavic Cultural Texts*, funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU (CUP C53D23006950006; Project no. 2022S3XZZ5).
[2] *Povest'* is a Russian narrative genre situated between the short story and the novel. The term is retained here to avoid reductive translations that would obscure its specific literary and cultural connotations.
[3] According to other sources, she was born in 1951. See V. Rogachev, 'Genii chistoi krasoty. Kritiko-biograficheskii ocherk tvorchestva Anny Nerkagi' [A Genius of Pure Beauty: A Critical and Biographical Essay on the Work of Anna Nerkagi], in A. Nerkagi, *Molchashchii*, SoftDizain, Tyumen, 1996, pp. 405–414, here p. 410; see also the entry 'Nerkagi Anna Pavlovna' in the *Elektronnaia biblioteka tiiumenskogo pisatelia*, https://writer-tyumen.ru/index.php?m=autor&aid=139 (last access 12 December 2025).
[4] On the nexus between shamanism and Nenets literature, see Zhuleva's comprehensive study (2019).
[5] Nogo is a Russian version of the name; the correct one from Nenets would be Nokho.

economic and educational conditions of reindeer-herders, criticised the boarding-school system and, in the mid-1990s, founded the farm *Zemlya Nadezhdi* (Land of Hope), which functioned both as an economic unit and as a familial-educational environment for orphaned children and adolescents (for further details on the project and its profoundly ecological pedagogical framework, see Morgun 2022). Her four *povesti* – *Aniko*, *Ilir*, *Beliy yagel'* [*White Moss*, 1995[6]] and *Molchashchii* [*The Silent One*, 1996] – were eventually gathered in the 1996 volume, framed by Lagunov's 'Open Letter' and a critical essay by V. Rogachev (Nerkagi 1996). Biographically and textually, Nerkagi herself embodies the trajectory of a woman taken away from the hearth who, under new historical conditions, returns to the tundra and keeps the fire alive.

In approaching Nerkagi's prose, it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of analysis. The texts construct a literary world that draws on, but does not simply reproduce, Nenets social and cosmological practices, or historical conditions. Ethnographic and historical accounts, in turn, document such practices in ways that are variable, rather than fixed or universally shared. The readings proposed here therefore seek to bring text and ethnography into dialogue without collapsing them into a single explanatory frame.

Ethnographic research has shown that Nenets life is structured not simply through a fixed division of labour between men and women, but through a complex system of embodied practices, spatial regulations, and relational norms that organise everyday life in the tundra (Liarskaya 2005; see also Vallikivi 2024). Gendered roles are inscribed in concrete forms of behaviour and movement: for instance, a range of prohibitions regulate how women may relate to tools, animals, or traces in the landscape, reflecting a broader system of ideas about purity, danger, and the ordering of space (Liarskaya 2005: 317).

Within this system, the *chum* – i.e. the tent (*mya* in Nenets) – is not merely a dwelling but a relational and cosmological space, in which the organisation of the interior reflects and sustains broader social and environmental relations. As has been argued in studies of circumpolar architecture, the hearth, the household, and the wider environment form an inseparable nexus, so that the domestic space cannot be understood independently of the cosmological and ecological relations that sustain it (Wishart 2013: 1-2). At the centre of this space stands the hearth, which among the Nenets is treated as a living and agentive presence. Fire must be carefully tended and 'fed,' and only those who belong to a given household are entitled to maintain it; it protects, warns, and, if disrespected, may also harm (Laptander 2020: 166-167). In this sense, the maintenance of the hearth is not simply a practical task, but a central practice through which relations between humans, animals, and other-than-human beings are continuously negotiated. It is within this

[6] For the English translation, see *White Moss*, translated by Irina Sadovina and published by Pushkin Press (2026).

relational and cosmological framework that the three *povesti* examined in this article can be situated.

Aniko iz roda Nogo is an autobiographical *povest'* centred on a Nenets girl who is taken away from her family's small tundra camp to attend a boarding school and then an institute in the city. While Aniko is away, her mother and younger sister die in a tragic accident; a letter from her father, Seberuy, calls her back to the tundra. Through a limited cast – the parents, the family friend Passa, and a few human and non-human figures (the reindeer Temuyko, the dog Buro, the wolf Lame Devil) – the *povest'* constructs a dense portrait of life in a Nenets camp, its rituals, and moral codes. The narrative centres on the painful encounter between a father who expects his daughter to come back and take her place in the *chum*, and a young woman whose years away have rendered both the tundra and her father profoundly unfamiliar. The *povest'* ends without Aniko's return: what is staged is not a completed homecoming, but the spiritual and temporal distance that has opened up between the protagonist and her native world.

Set in a tundra camp in the first years after the Revolution, *Ilir* recounts the story of an eight-year-old Nenets orphan who lives in the household of Mayma, the owner of a vast reindeer herd. Determined to hide his animals from the approaching 'Red sled' (i.e. the Soviet power), Mayma drives them deep into the tundra; Ilir, however, eventually reveals their hiding place. To punish this act of 'betrayal' the wealthy master subjects the boy to a series of increasingly cruel trials and ultimately chains him like a dog. Alongside this realistic plot runs a symbolic layer drawn from Nenets folklore: Ilir nourishes his hope for liberation through the legend of the Blue Giants, destined to defeat evil on earth. Around the central conflict between Mayma and Ilir, the *povest'* sketches a small community of damaged or marginal figures – the embittered old woman Varne, the physically disabled Khon, and Ilir's mother, whose death in childbirth leaves him utterly defenceless. These figures are set against the backdrop of a world in which the old order and the emerging Soviet power clash over land, herds, and authority. The *povest'* ultimately stages the struggle between violence and goodness, greed, and compassion, in the most vulnerable space of all: the life of a Nenets child.

Conceived by Nerkagi as a continuation of *Aniko*, *White Moss* is a *povest'* about the impact of modernity on the genealogical and affective continuity of a Nenets community that remains in the tundra. Rather than following those who have left, the narrative explores what happens to the social and cosmological order when departures become irreversible and when the traditional structures of kinship and domestic life begin to erode. At its centre are two pairs from different generations; the old herder Petko and the young man Aleshka; Aleshka's elderly mother and his wife. Petko, recently widowed, can no longer rely on his wife Lamdo to light the fire, mend clothes, and maintain the daily rhythm of the *chum*: when a woman dies she takes 'half of life' with her, and the widower is forced to

move to the other side of a friend's hearth, to live 'across the fire.'[7] Aleshka, who has spent time away from the tundra, is torn between his love for Ilne – a girl who has left and will not return – and the necessity of marriage as a condition of survival in nomadic life. The *povest'* follows his reluctant marriage to a woman chosen according to traditional norms, and the tensions that arise when the wrong woman takes her place by the hearth.

Against this narrative backdrop, it is worth briefly considering how Nerkagi's work has been read and contextualized. Existing scholarship on Nerkagi has been shaped first and foremost by the rich body of regional criticism that accompanied the publication of her works from the mid 1970s onward. More recent academic work – most notably O.K. Lagunova's monograph (Lagunova 2007) – has sought to systematise this reception by situating Nerkagi's oeuvre within the broader context of the 'young written literatures' of the North, foregrounding their rootedness in oral tradition and regional literary debates of the 1970s-80s. V.A. Rogachev's afterword to *Molchashchii* reads the different novels as steps in an increasingly apocalyptic diagnosis of Soviet and global modernity. More recent approaches – such as Klavdia Smola's argument that Soviet-era Indigenous literatures can be interpreted within the broader analytical frame of postcolonial studies (Smola 2017) – offer important insights into the ways internal colonialism, assimilation policies, and culturally ambivalent forms of modernity have shaped both the production and the reception of Nenets writing.

This article builds on these contributions while shifting the focus to the relationship between women and fire as a central prism through which to read Nerkagi's *povesti*. I argue that across *Aniko*, *Ilir* and *White Moss* female characters can be grouped according to their shifting proximity to – or rupture from – the hearth: women at the fire, women weeping by the fire, and women beyond the fire. Fire becomes the lens that allows us to read the three *povesti* together; women are the vector through which the fire registers the state of health, fracture, or loss of the Nenets world. In this perspective, fragility and resilience appear not as opposites but as intertwined: the fact that Nenets nomadism has not disappeared, and that the tundra lifestyle still attracts younger generations (Liarskaya 2010), is inseparable from the work – material, affective, and cosmological – performed by

[7] «A year earlier his wife Lamdo, a woman not yet old, had departed into the eternal night. There was no one left to set their small family tea table in the mornings, no one to mend the *kisy*, no one to kindle the fire. When a woman dies, she takes half of life with her; and later one begins to understand that the person with whom one shared one's days also carries away a part of the soul, too […] Old Petko himself went to live on the other, unoccupied side of the *chum* of his old friend, the Nenets man Vanu. To live 'across the fire' – as the old people would have said – meant not to live in one's own chum [Год назад ушла в вечную ночь его жена, не совсем старая женщина Ламдо. Некому стало ставить по утрам их семейный чайный столик, некому починить кисы, разжечь огонь. Когда умирает женщина, она уносит с собой половину жизни, а потом начинаешь понимать, что тот, с кем ты делил дни, уносит еще и часть души […] Сам старик Пэтко стал жить на другой, свободной половине чума у старого друга, ненца Вану. Жить через огонь – так сказали бы старые люди, значит, не в своем чуме]» (Nerkagi 1996: 12).

women around the hearth. Nerkagi's writing, and her own life choices, can be read as part of a broader effort to 're-weave' the tundra, keeping the fire alight under Soviet and post-Soviet skies.

AT THE FIRE: THE ETERNAL POSTURE OF A NENETS WOMAN

This section examines how Nerkagi translates dynamics of change and the tensions they generate into narrative form through female characters whose proximity to the fire – «in the eternal posture of a Nenets woman, outwardly unmoved by what has occurred» (Nerkagi 1996: 17)[8] – determines the ethical and cosmological stability of their communities.

In Nenets cosmology, the hearth is not merely a domestic feature but an organising principle of the world, as shown with clarity in the following passage from *White Moss*:

> Like every woman of the tundra, Aleshka's mother was convinced that all of human life in its fullness begins precisely with the fact that the women of the world, in every part of the earth, light their fires in the morning – and only after that can men, children, dogs, and reindeer go about their own tasks (Nerkagi 1996: 103)[9].

Crucially, the hearth belongs to women. Among many Northern peoples, the spirit of the hearth is represented in explicitly feminine form – as the Fire-Mother, Fire-Woman, or Fire-Grandmother[10] – an anthropomorphic being who protects the household, announces danger, and must be respected through food offerings, verbal restraint, and the careful maintenance of the fire itself. In Nenets system, women alone are authorised to kindle the fire, feed it, and interpret its signs; even the master of the household may refrain from touching the hearth, according to some ethnographic accounts (see Khristoforova 2023: 176-178; Zhuleva 2019: 103).

This gendered structure has deep cosmological roots. As Zhuleva observes, in Nenets myth the progenitor of the world is a woman, a figure whose creative force is reflected in the very constitution of space. Her association with the tundra and with the ancestral mother suggests that the environment itself is conceptualised through feminine generativity

[8] «в извечной позе ненецкой женщины, безучастной к случившемуся».
[9] «Как всякая женщина тундры, мать Алёшки была убеждена, что вся большая человеческая жизнь начинается именно с того, что женщины мира во всех частях земли разжигают по утрам огни, и только после этого мужчины, дети, собаки, олени смогут делать свои дела».
[10] See for detailed analysis on these figures in folklore/mythology: Pushkareva 2007 (English version 2019).

(Zhuleva 2019: 73).[11] Within this cosmological framework the hearth becomes the material site where the feminine principle articulates its relational power: it links the living with their ancestors, stabilises the boundaries of the *chum*, and establishes the ethical order of the community.

Few scenes in Nerkagi's oeuvre render this cosmological dimension of the hearth as powerfully as the long passage in *White Moss* in which the mother of Aleshka – aware that her life is ending – approaches the fire to deliver her final *slovo* [word]. The scene is not a form of decorative ethnography, but a dramatic condensation of the three functions of fire: as a symbol of protection, as a unifying agent, and as a means of purification and an amuletic force (Laptander 2020). In this sense, the fire emerges both as the guardian of the household and as the witness of genealogical continuity. Only through a woman's hands, voice, and ritual posture can this connection be enacted.

Nerkagi stresses the gravity of the moment from the outset: «The word to the fire is the word of the soul. It is the first and the last, granted only once in a lifetime, as birth and as death» (Nerkagi 1996: 32)[12]. It is an event of ontological exposure. The old woman is afraid – of inadequacy, of approaching the Great Fire (*Velikii Ogon'*) with an unprepared soul. Ritual authority is shown to be neither automatic nor guaranteed by age; it must be earned through embodied knowledge and moral maturity.

The choreography is meticulous. She searches the ashes for a living ember – «like a living, burning heart» (Nerkagi 1996: 33)[13] – and places two coals beside it so that they ignite together. The gesture is maternal and cosmological at once: to ignite the fire properly is to awaken the heart of the household. When the three coals catch fire – «the three of them… were instantly taken up by the pale blue flame» (Nerkagi 1996: 33)[14] – the woman smiles with relief: the flame itself has given a sign of acceptance.

> «I have come with a word», she said quietly. But she spoke firmly, for she knew that there could no longer be any doubt, neither in her soul nor in her voice. «For the last time I have kindled you. For the last time my hands have touched your body, and my eyes have sought your gaze». Watching the flame intently, the woman restrained the trembling in her hands, knowing that she must no longer add any logs. The fire knows by itself. What follows is its own affair. It may go out while there is still wood, or it may burn even when not a single ember remains. Such is its will.

[11] In *White Moss*, throughout the narrative, the tundra itself is figured as a maternal presence: in a key scene, on his wedding night, Aleshka flees the chum and lies down in a hollow in the moss, as if the land were providing a second nuptial bed.
[12] «Слово к огню – слово души. Первое и последнее, и оно даётся лишь раз в жизни, как рождение и как смерть».
[13] «словно живое горящее сердце».
[14] «все трое… мгновенно занялись голубеньким пламенем»

> Without lifting her head, feeling only the warmth and the light upon her face, the woman continued, her soul now strengthened:
> «I will not let tears fall upon your face. I will not complain, nor will I curse. Another woman's hands will tend you. That is why I am here… but not only for that», she added hastily, changing her posture. She knelt, bowing her head even lower. The fire was not her equal.
> «I bow before you».
> «I hear you», the Fire replied. But this was not the fire that was lit each morning by the will of the old woman's hands. It was the great root of life. The proudest, the most ardent heads had bowed before it in all ages, imploring not only warmth and well-being for themselves. Incomprehensibly vast is the power of Fire over humankind, and the woman's quiet, sorrowful voice came to sound not as a demand, nor as a whim, nor as a threat, but as a timid plea, fearful of slipping into despair and pain (Nerkagi 1996: 33).[15]

Her plea centres on one demand: the fire must protect her son, but if he ever violates its order – «If my son should wish death upon you… burn him!» (Nerkagi 1996: 34).[16] Here the hearth emerges as the highest arbiter of moral life: a force to which even maternal love must defer. The «rare golden flame»[17] marks the ritual as complete: the lineage is secured, and the woman's custodianship fulfilled.

While the scene discussed above foregrounds one dimension of female transmission – women speaking to the fire on behalf of future generations and thereby sustaining the ethical and cosmological fabric of the community – Nenets women also play a crucial role in maintaining relations across different domains of existence, especially when the

[15] «– Со словом пришла, – негромко сказала. Но твёрдо сказала, ибо знала, что сомневаться ни в душе, ни в голосе уже нельзя.
– Последний раз я разожгла тебя. Последний раз мои руки коснулись твоего тела, а глаза искали взгляда.
Зорко следя за пламенем, женщина, сдерживая дрожь в руках, зная, что нельзя уже подложить поленьев. Огонь сам знает. Дальше его дело. Он может потухнуть, когда есть ещё дрова, а может и гореть, если даже не останется ни одного уголька. Его воля.
Не поднимая головы, лишь чувствуя на лице своём тепло и свет, женщина продолжила, окрепнув душой:
– Я не уроню слёзы на лицо твоё. Не пожалуюсь, и не прокляну. Руки другой женщины будут беречь тебя. Вот почему я тут… но не только поэтому, – торопливо поправилась она и сменила позу. Она стала на колени, ещё ниже склонив голову. Огонь ей не чета.
– Я преклоняюсь перед тобой.
– Слышу! – ответил Огонь. Но это был не тот огонь, который загорался по утрам по воле рук старой женщины. Великий корень жизни. Ему поклонялись самые гордые, горячие головы, во все века вымаливая для себя не только тепло и благополучие. Непостижимо велика власть Огня над человеком, и робкой просьбой, не капризом и не угрозой стал звучать тихий печальный голос женщины, боясь перейти на отчаяние и боль».
[16] «Если сын мой пожелает смерти тебе……сожжи его!»
[17] «огонь золотой, редкостный по цвету».

boundaries between them grow porous. Ethnographic accounts show that Nenets cosmology does not distinguish sharply between the human world and its surroundings. Alongside the *nentsy* (real people), the tundra is inhabited by a wide range of other agents: spirits of place, beings created before humans who dwell at the margins of the *oikoumene*, and the dead, as well as animals, birds, and plants. These beings are not conceived as inert nature nor as radically other, but as *other persons*: they possess their own modes of life and traditions, can understand human speech, and require forms of reciprocal attention and care (see Khristoforova 2023: 185 ff. and 203 ff).

In such a relational system, order does not rest on rigid separation but on the careful management of coexistence. Moments of transition are therefore moments of heightened risk, when the balance between domains may be disturbed. It is primarily in these liminal situations that women exercise their authority as mediators, regulating passage, speech, and proximity between different layers of the cosmos (Liarskaya 2005). In Nenets cosmology, the land of the dead is imagined as a negative counterpart of the world of the living – identical yet inverted.[18] Ethnographic accounts describe Nenets funerary practices as a set of actions that regulate the transition of the dead, ensuring that objects, bodies, and relations assume their proper form beyond the world of the living (see Khristoforova 2023: 229–233). Within this framework, death emerges as a paradigmatic moment of passage, requiring careful ritual mediation. In Nerkagi's narrative, these practices are consistently entrusted to the female community, which prepares the body, organises the farewell, and sustains communication with the dead.

In *Aniko*, the funeral of Nekochi – Aniko's mother – and her small daughter is entrusted to the female community. It is they who prepare the bodies for the journey and make sure that everything that once belonged to the deceased is broken or torn before being placed in the grave, so that it may assume its proper form in the other world. Women also manage the dialogue with the dead, who, according to belief, come to meet the newly deceased and to receive news from the world of the living. The ritual thus becomes an act of controlled communication across ontological boundaries. In Nerkagi's scene, it is the oldest woman – Passa's mother – who directs this fragile liturgy:

> People do not offend Nekochi.
> While the meat is cooking, they generously pour tobacco into the corners of the coffin, into the fire, and simply onto the ground.
> Silently, with lowered heads, they sit around the fire. Everyone wishes to do something kind for Seberuy's wife, and at the same time to give her a charge: so that there, in the camp of those who have departed, she may put in a word for those who have remained and tell in detail how each one lives.

[18] See Laptander and Vitebsky 2021: «The model of domestic fire encompasses all humans. The dead also sit in groups around a fire, though this is an anti-fire, with small, blue flames that burn with icy cold. But even here, it keeps its function as the focal point of a group» (p. 17).

> This is not so much a funeral as a farewell to a person who has decided to go to another world.
> Passa's mother was older than all the others. She knew the customs better, and therefore she spoke:
> – Do not be silent. One must say something. So many have come to her now. And all of them are listening to her story. They must also hear our voices.
> – Yes, Passa adds. They must know that we have come to see her off, that on the earth she lived well.
> The old Nenets woman continues:
> – Do not take offence, Aniko's mother. – Women rarely call one another by name; more often they call one another by the name of a living child. – We dressed the little girl well. She will not be cold. And for you – you can see it yourself – here is your new *yagushka* (Nerkagi 1996: 319).[19]

Such scenes reflect a broader cosmological structure. In Nenets cosmogony, as in other Northern cultures, the divinity of the Middle World – the realm of the living – is feminine and articulated through two complementary names: *Ya-Nebya*, the mother of all living beings, and *Ya-Myunya*, the womb of the earth that receives the dead (Khristoforova 2023: 146; Pushkareva 2007).

Just as the dead belong to the category of 'other persons' with whom relations must be carefully maintained, so too do animals form part of this wider community of beings. In the tundra, they are not external resources but co-dwellers, bound to humans through shared work, dependency, and exposure to vulnerability. The woman's domain – centred on the *chum* and the hearth – thus becomes the space where relations with animals are negotiated not through domination, but through gestures of nurture, proximity, and care. It is in this context that Nerkagi places one of the most striking scenes of *Aniko*: Nekochi breastfeeding the orphaned reindeer calf Temuyko.

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[19] «Люди не обижают Некочи. Пока варится мясо, они щедро насыпают табак в уголки саркофага, в костёр и просто на землю.
Молча, склонив головы, сидят вокруг костра. Всем хочется сделать приятное жене Себеруя и вместе с тем дать наказ, чтобы она там, в стойбище ушедших, замолвила слово за тех, кто остался, да' подробно рассказала, кто как живёт. Это скорее не похороны, а проводы человека, решившего уйти в другой мир.
Мать Пассы старше всех. Она лучше знает обычаи и поэтому говорит:
– Не молчите. Надо говорить о чём-нибудь. Сейчас ведь их очень много к ней пришло. И все слушают её рассказ. Они должны слышать и наши голоса.
– Да, – добавляет Пасса. – Они должны знать, что мы пришли провожать её, что на земле она жила хорошо.
Старая ненка продолжает:
– Не обижайся, мать Анико. – Женщины редко когда называют друг друга по имени, чаще – матерью живого ребёнка. – Девочку мы хорошо одели. Ей не будет холодно. А на тебе, ты сама видишь, твоя новая ягушка».

> When the camp grew quiet, she set about feeding the stubborn little one again, and again without success. Then the woman knelt down beside him, slipped off her *yagushka*, unbuttoned the collar of her dress. She covered the reindeer calf's eyes with her palm. He did not even stir. When Nekochi brought her breast to him, he flinched, then, wetting the nipple with his saliva, drew the milk into himself.
> – Seberuy!
> He lifted his head and was struck dumb: Temuyko, the unacknowledged son of the herd, was sucking at her breast, his little legs braced against the floor.
> They fell asleep only at dawn. Temuyko, covered with the *yagushka* and caressed by his new mother, only now and then raised his head; he no longer cried, but seemed to peer at something in the faint twilight of the chum.
> Nekochi fed him for a week; then she accustomed him to fish soup, to bread, and even to sugar (Nerkagi 1996: 325-26)[20].

In this way, Nekochi extends the maternal gesture to another species. Through this act, Nerkagi situates her within the broader logic of women at the fire: the scene places human and animal life within the same moral space and shows how continuity in the tundra is maintained through caring, embodied practices. Women, positioned at the hearth, emerge here not as symbolic figures but as practical mediators of this interdependence, holding together humans, animals, and a world shaped by relationships rather than possession.

WEEPING BY THE FIRE: WOMEN IN A FRACTURED ORDER

If the women at the fire discussed in the previous chapter embody the possibility of continuity and balance within the Nenets world, Nerkagi's prose also registers the moments in which this order fractures. When the ethical equilibrium of the *chum* is disturbed – whether through abuse of authority, fear of dispossession, or the collapse of relational roles – the hearth ceases to function as a space of protection. This chapter focuses on such moments of internal collapse, examining how *Ilir* and, in a different

[20] «Когда в стойбище стало тихо, она снова принялась кормить маленького упрямца, и опять напрасно. Тогда женщина опустилась рядом с ним, сбросила ягушку, расстегнула ворот платья. Закрыла ладонью глаза оленёнку. Тот даже не пошевелился. Когда Некочи поднесла ему грудь, он вздрогнул, затем, помочив слюной сосок, втянул в себя молоко.
– Себеруй!
Тот поднял голову и обомлел: Тэмуйко, непризнанный сын стада, сосал грудь, упёршись ножками в пол.
Уснули только на рассвете. Тэмуйко, укрытый ягушкой и обласканный своей новой матерью, лишь изредка поднимал голову, но уже не плакал, а что-то высматривал в негустых сумерках чума.
Некочи кормила его неделю, потом приучила к ухе, хлебу и даже сахару».

register, *White Moss* portray the suffering produced when male authority becomes violent or misaligned, and when the fire turns from a centre of care into a space of exposure. Through these narratives, Nerkagi shows how the consequences of historical change are first inscribed not in ideology or institutions, but in women's bodies, roles, and silenced endurance.

Set in the first years of Soviet power in the tundra – a temporal shift that was probably adopted on the advice of Nerkagi's mentor to soften the text's social accusatory force (a conjecture formulated by Rogachev, in Nerkagi 1996: 411) – *Ilir* is one of her most severe narratives. Rogachev interprets the *povest'* as a double indictment: of conservative, oppressive relations within Nenets society on the one hand, and of the false promise of the new Soviet authority on the other, which, despite its rhetoric of liberation, proves incapable of protecting the most vulnerable.[21] What gives *Ilir* its critical force, though, is not ideological accusation as such, but the way historical pressure and internal disalignment converge within the intimate space of the *chum*.

The figure of Mayma – a wealthy owner of reindeer – embodies this collision. He appears simultaneously as the product of a genealogy of accumulation and as a man acting under the pressure of an approaching power that threatens his dominance. His violence represents a distorted response to vulnerability and perceived impotence, a transformation of authority into coercion. One of the deeper sources of his frustration is his son Khon, a central and highly compelling figure of the *povest'*, whom it is not possible to discuss here in detail. The child is crippled, a condition that causes Mayma profound suffering by depriving him of a 'worthy' heir, while also insinuating a deep sense of guilt: Mayma's wife maintains that Khon's disability is a punishment inflicted by *Ya-Myunya* for the beatings he administered to her while she was pregnant (Nerkagi 1996: 127). In *Ilir*, the distortion of the value system of male authority – one that comes to regard reindeer as more precious than human beings – has immediate consequences for the ethical function of the hearth. Before Ilir himself is chained, humiliated, and reduced to a condition likened to that of a dog, the disintegration of order has already been inscribed in the fate of women – those who depend most directly on the fire as a guarantee of safety and continuity.

[21] Nerkagi herself later stressed, however, that ideological confrontation was never the primary motor of the text: «I literally wrote the povest' *Ilir* in a single breath, about a deformed boy who proved through his fate that land and human beings are one. But I had already become such a Soviet person that I could not write 'just like that'. I needed a background. So I overlaid my hero's destiny onto the events of the Civil War. Even so… at the time I was least of all interested in the problems of class struggle in the tundra [Я буквально на одном дыхании сочинила повесть "Илир" про мальчика-уродца, который своей судьбой доказал, что земля и человек – едины. Но я была уже настолько советским человеком, что писать просто так не могла. Мне потребовался фон. Поэтому судьбу своего героя я наложила на события гражданской войны. Хотя… меня тогда менее всего интересовали проблемы классовой борьбы в тундре]» (quoted in Drozhashchikh 2021: 15-16).

While the figure of Khon's mother undergoes a relatively positive development, marked by the emergence of maternal feeling and growing compassion toward her son and toward Ilir (see Nerkagi 1996: 213-215 and Koneva 2016), the story of Ilir's own mother is entirely tragic. Widowed as a result of Mayma's exploitation of her husband, she is left to rely solely on her young son for survival. Although Mayma already has two wives – a practice still attested in the 1930s, as scholarship on Nenets polygamy has shown, with clear social and economic rationales (Glavatskaya 2016) – he becomes irresistibly drawn to her, begins to visit her *chum*, and impregnates her. Nerkagi makes clear that this relationship is not grounded in fascination or compassion, but in fear: faced with violence and dependence, the woman submits.

When the time comes to give birth, she follows the rules of ritual purity and constructs a small *chum* outside the main dwelling in order not to contaminate it. As scholars have shown, this practice reflects a belief – widespread among many Northern peoples – that childbirth is a liminal moment, a passage between worlds akin to death, and therefore potentially disruptive of cosmic order (Zhuleva 2019: 69; Golovnev and Osherenko 2018: 37-38).[22] When she dies from the cold shortly after childbirth, her death appears not as a random tragedy, but as the logical outcome of a world in which the fire no longer protects those who depend on it.

At this point, another female figure assumes the role of caregiver: Varne, the old woman considered mad by the camp. She instructs Ilir about the hardships that await him now that he will be alone and advises him to preserve a live ember from the fire of his *chum* when it is dismantled, as a means of protection and support. The scene unfolds around the fire, which stands as both witness and participant in the dialogue:

> – Tomorrow morning they will take down your *chum*. Take a warm ember from the fire and hide it, so that no one notices. The fire is the third presence in our conversation now: you will forget my words, but the son of the fire will remember them – Varne bent over the nearly dying hearth, took a smouldering ember in both hands, brought it to her lips, and began to whisper something.
> The ember hissed; the skin on her fingers darkened visibly, while Ilir, transfixed by the expression on the woman's face, did not dare to move.
> At last the old woman threw the ember back into the fire and, brushing a lock of hair away from her ear, bent even lower, as though eavesdropping on the faint tongues of flame.
> She listened for a long time. A grey strand of her hair flared up, releasing an acrid smell. Extinguishing it, the old woman gave a satisfied grunt.

[22] On the interpretation of the laws of purity as techniques for preserving cosmic order, see Mary Douglas's seminal study *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966).

> – Now I will leave, and I probably won't live much longer. But tomorrow, don't forget to take the ember. And know this: the path ahead of you will be hard. But you will walk it. For now, sleep, and do not go again to the dead—do not disturb them. Try not to cry, or your mother's head will ache –
> Varne stood up, bowed to the fire in thanks for its warmth, and quietly went out (Nerkagi 1996: 137).[23]

Varne's story itself constitutes a profoundly tragic narrative insertion. The only child of an extremely poor pair of nomadic fishermen, she receives a marriage proposal shortly after coming of age. Her father leaves the *chum* to procure meat for the celebrations and never returns; he is later found murdered in the tundra. Mother and daughter are taken in by Mayma's camp, where the mother soon dies, while the daughter is condemned to perform the most menial labour for others, without a *chum* of her own, nor hope for future happiness. This situation – a narrative anticipation of what will soon happen to Ilir – is so unbearable that the young woman invokes the spirit Kharbtso, hoping to be driven mad and thus relieved of the weight of consciousness. When this finally happens, however, the spirit does not grant her this gift, and she is forced to feign a madness she cannot truly inhabit. It is she who is the first to oppose Mayma, cursing his sledges (including the sacred one bearing the idols) and his *khorey*, the pole used to direct the reindeer (see the scene in Nerkagi 1996: 143): when women transgress the prescriptions intended to keep male and female domains separate, misfortune falls upon men (Liarskaya 2005: 324; Golovnev and Osherenko 2018: 33).

While in the case of the women in *Ilir* the source of their tragic trajectories appears to lie in Mayma's violence, which shatters the harmony among the camp's inhabitants – human and non-human alike – the imbalance at the centre of *White Moss* is of a different nature. As anticipated, the plot revolves around an absence: Ilne, who left years earlier for the boarding school, has never returned. At the camp she left behind her father – widowed at the time of the narrative and forced to settle in his friend Petko's *chum*, thereby triggering marital tensions – and young Aleshka, who has always been in love with her. The latter's

[23] «– Завтра утром будут снимать твой чум. Возьми тёплый уголёк из костра и спрячь его, чтобы никто не заметил. Огонь сейчас в нашем разговоре третий, ты забудешь мои слова – сын костра будет помнить, – Варнэ наклонилась над почти умершим костром, взяла обеими руками тлеющий уголёк, поднесла его к губам и что-то зашептала.
Уголёк шипел, кожа на пальцах заметно чернела, а Илир, завороженный выражением лица женщины, не смел даже пошевелиться.
Наконец старуха бросила уголёк в костёр и, убрав с уха прядь волос, наклонилась ещё ниже, словно подслушивая разговор слабых язычков пламени.
Она слушала долго. Седая прядь её вспыхнула, издав неприятный запах. Потушив её, старуха довольно хмыкнула:
– Теперь я уйду и жить, наверно, буду недолго. А ты не забудь взять завтра уголёк. И знай: путь у тебя впереди трудный. Но ты пройдёшь его. А сейчас спи и не ходи больше к умершим, не мешай им. Старайся не плакать, а то у мамы твоей будет болеть голова.
Варнэ встала, поклонилась костру, благодаря его за тепло, и тихо вышла».

drama, compelled to marry another woman, constitutes one of the novel's central narrative lines, counterbalanced by his mother's tribulations in safeguarding the lineage of the *chum* (as discussed above). Ilne's figure functions as a variation on the character of Aniko, to whom we will return shortly. What calls for attention here, however, is the distortion produced by the arrival of an unwanted woman at the hearth. Aleshka resists the marriage – which has effectively been imposed on him by the elders in the name of Nenets tradition – and refuses to consummate it. The young wife, whose figure emerges only through the gaze of others, suffers this rejection in silence until one morning she can no longer hold back her tears. «Don't cry. Your tears will fall onto the face of the Fire. He must not know of … our misfortune» her mother-in-law tells her. And Nerkagi adds: «That their misfortune was shared, the woman did not doubt» (Nerkagi 1996: 104)[24].

This collective drama, generated by Ilne's absence, unfolds largely – characteristically of Nenets culture (Khristoforova 2008; Vallikivi 2024) – in silence. This emerges clearly in the following scene, in which the father and the young man are unable to articulate what they carry in their hearts:

> «…It is not my daughter who lights the fire in his *chum*. It is not she who warms his blood and will bear him a son. It was not she who saw the sled off in the morning, and it will not be she who weeps over him one last time. And that means he has no reason to pity me. And I have no right to ask for pity» – the old man thought, staring into the flickering embers of the small fire, watching with sorrow as one glowing eye after another went out.
> The fire that had only just warmed him was dying. In the same way human feelings fade, turning to dust – even the best of them, the most sincere and pure. No one can be judged or reproached for this.
> Autumn comes, leaves turn yellow, flowers and grasses wither, and people do not reproach nature for it.
> «…Will I be able to explain that I have never stopped waiting for his daughter, even though there is a girl living in my *chum* – a girl who has not become a woman? I did not take her, and I will not take her. Will he believe me? Will he not laugh if I say this?» – Aleshka thought, also staring ahead of him. The words burned inside him. […] Time passed. There is a silence that is especially heavy (Nerkagi 1996: 93).[25]

[24] «"Не плачь. Слёзы уронишь на лицо Огня. Он не должен знать о… нашей беде". Что беда их общая, женщина не сомневалась».

[25] «…Не моя дочь разжигает огонь в его чуме. Не она веселит ему кровь и принесёт сына. Не она провожала утром упряжку, и не ей плакать над ним в последний раз. А значит, и не ему жалеть меня. А мне не просить жалости», – думал старик, глядя в мерцающие уголья костерка, с тоской наблюдая, как гаснет глазок за глазком. Умирает огонь, который только что грел его. Так же меркнут людские чувства, становясь пылью, даже самые лучшие, искренние и чистые. Никого не осудишь и не попрекнёшь за это. Приходит осень, желтеют листья, сохнут цветы и травы, и люди не ропщут за это на природу.

The novel, however, concludes with a form of reconciliation of the two men. Both appear to relinquish their pain to the camp community and to find, within its social and relational logic, a space in which to go on living.

In *White Moss*, the fracture does not take the form of open violence, but of absence. Ilne's departure – shared, silently, by the men who remain – leaves the hearth without the woman who once anchored it, revealing how profoundly the Nenets order depends not only on fire itself, but on the female presence that keeps it alive. It is from this absence, from women who are no longer by the fire, that Nerkagi's third configuration emerges: women who have left.

BEYOND THE FIRE: WOMEN WHO HAVE LEFT

The protagonist of Nerkagi's debut novel, *Aniko*, embodies a third type of female figure in her work: women who have left the tundra. Aniko is unmistakably a largely autobiographical character, a narrative projection of the inner fracture that Nerkagi herself experienced. This fracture emerges from being torn between the tundra and what she refers to as the 'big world' – not yet a clearly defined space, but rather an impulse of attraction toward an elsewhere perceived as lying beyond the limits of her native environment:

> From childhood I was drawn toward the big world; I longed to go beyond the limits within which my fellow countrymen most often remain. Like Aniko, the heroine of my first *povest'*, after finishing my studies at the boarding school in the settlement of Beloyarsk, I left for the big city and enrolled at the Tyumen Industrial Institute.
> It took years to come to a rather simple realisation: that there is nothing greater, more spacious, or dearer than one's native land, my beloved (Baydaratskaya) tundra.
> If Aniko, the heroine of the *povest'*, wavered between the city and the tundra, then I made my choice.
> On the peaks of the Polar Urals grows ancient white lichen. No one touches it except the wind and the sun. For me, this beautiful moss is a fusion of freedom, pride, unattainable beauty, and independence.[26]

«...Смогу ли объяснить, что не перестал ждать его дочери, хотя в моём чуме живёт девушка, не ставшая женщиной. Я не взял её и не возьму. Поверит ли? Не засмеётся ли он, если скажу об этом?» – размышлял Алёшка, тоже глядя перед собой. Слова жгли его. […] Прошло время. Есть особо тяжёлое молчание».

[26] Quote in Rogachev, *op. cit*., Nerkagi 1996: 410: «С детства меня тянул большой мир, я стремилась за пределы того, чем чаще всего обходятся мои земляки. Как и Анико из моей первой повести, закончив учебу в школе-интернате в поселке Белоярск, я уехала в большой город, стала учиться в Тюменском индустриальном институте. Потребовались годы, чтобы осознать довольно простую мысль, что нет

Nerkagi belongs to the generation that grew up during the most intensive phase of Soviet educational policy in the North. As documented by Liarskaya, this period – to which she refers as that of the 'classical boarding schools' (from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s), and especially its early stage up to the mid-1970s – was marked by a particularly aggressive drive toward Russification (Liarskaya 2013). Indigenous children were sent to boarding schools as part of a centralized state policy, often against the will of their parents; the use of native languages was strictly prohibited not only in the classroom but also in everyday interactions among the children themselves. While this system contributed to the emergence of an *intelligentsiya* among the northern minorities – who would later play a crucial role in national revival and cultural and political activism from the 1980s onward, and to which Nerkagi herself belongs – it was also a profoundly traumatic experience. The violence of this educational regime did not simply produce mobility or social advancement; it generated a deep internal fracture, marked by the suppression of memory, language, and embodied forms of knowledge.

This fracture lies at the core of *Aniko*, which can be read as its narrative chronicle. The novel follows the young woman's return to her native camp after years of absence and stages the cognitive dissonance that defines her condition. Aniko has almost entirely repressed her childhood, along with her native language, and her arrival at her father's camp does not take the form of a homecoming. Rather, it unfolds as a journey into a painful and repressed past – one that resists reconciliation and exposes the lasting effects of displacement produced by colonial education.

Aniko represents the modern, educated, and successful young woman, the quintessence of the cultural revolution that Soviet education was meant to bring about. Her return 'home', however, fractures this monolithic self-image and, by confronting her with her father's pain as well as with her own, compels her to question the priorities she had hitherto taken for granted. During her visit to her mother's grave – one of the most dramatic moments in the novel – Aniko is seized by a profound sense of guilt and says: «Forgive me. I was to blame for our separation – I left you in order to study, to become better. But did I truly become better?» (Nerkagi 1996: 355).[27]

The encounter with Aleshka, a childhood peer who, like Aniko, had attended the boarding school but was later forced to return to the tundra after his father's sudden death, further intensifies her doubts. It is through him that the novel most explicitly articulates the hybrid condition to which the younger generations of Nenets are relegated. Reflecting on the

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ничего больше, просторнее и милее, чем родная земля, дорогая моя (Байдарацкая) тундра... Если Анико, героиня повести, металась между городом и тундрой, то я выбор сделала... На вершинах Полярного Урала растет вековой белый ягель. Кроме ветра и солнца, никто не трогает его. Для меня этот красивый мох – сплав свободы, гордости, недоступной красоты и независимости».

[27]«– Прости меня. Я была виновата в нашей разлуке, ушла от тебя, чтобы учиться и быть лучше. Только лучше ли я стала?».

experience of the *internat*, Aleshka observes: «The boarding school is a good thing. But think about it – how many young people actually returned to the tundra after boarding school? And those who did return, what did they bring back with them? They never properly learned to read and write, and they forgot the crafts of their fathers. So, we end up as neither people of the tundra nor people of the city – some kind of mixture…» (Nerkagi 1996: 361).[28] Education, he concedes, may in principle be valuable; yet in practice it produces subjects who belong fully to neither world – neither to the tundra nor to the city – while simultaneously eroding traditional forms of knowledge and labour. Aleshka goes on to demand recognition, on the part of the authorities, of the value of Nenets professions and ways of life, which the school system persistently marginalizes.

Aniko is left deeply unsettled. Speaking with her old friend, she gradually realizes that she cannot bring her father to the city, as she had naively imagined at the beginning of the novel; at the same time, she is unable to imagine herself returning to the tundra. In a moment of emotional outburst, she exclaims: «So, for his sake [father's], must I repeat my mother's fate?». Aleshka's response is sharp and deliberately provocative: «So you want to live in a comfortable apartment, while other Nenets women are supposed to sit by the hearth? You're educated – then go and make their lives better. […] When you have felt the full weight of a woman's life on your own skin, then you will know what needs to be done» [Nerkagi 1996: 362].[29]

The scene closes not with resolution, but with Aniko's inner turmoil. Somewhere deep within herself, she begins to sense that Aleshka may be right, yet the implications of this recognition are overwhelming:

> Somewhere deep down, Aniko began to realise that the young man was right. But how… how could she give everything up: the institute, the theatre, the cinema, dancing, debates with friends about art, about an interesting and vibrant future? How could she forget the noisy, feverish streets of the city, the beloved places where she had so often thought and dreamed so well, and voluntarily surrender herself to the frozen silence, lose herself in the white expanse of snow, put on a *yagushka*, live by the light of a kerosene lamp and… grow old?! (Nerkagi 1996: 362).[30]

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[28] «Интернат – это хорошо. Но вспомни, много ли молодых вернулось после интерната в тундру. А те, кто вернулся, что они принесли? И грамоте толком не научились, и ремесло своих отцов позабыли. Вот и получаются из нас не тундровые жители, не городские, смесь какая-то...».

[29] «Что же, ради него [отца] я должна повторить судьбу матери?»; «Значит, ты хочешь жить в благоустроенной квартире, а другие ненецкие женщины пусть сидят у очага? Ты же грамотная, вот и сделай их жизнь лучше. […] Вот когда ты на собственной шкуре почувствуешь всю тяжесть жизни женщины, тогда будешь знать, что делать».

[30] «Где-то в глубине души Анико начала сознавать, что парень прав, но как… как бросить всё: институт, театр, кино, танцы, споры с товарищами об искусстве, об интересном и ярком будущем? Как забыть шумные, горячие улицы города, любимые места, где не раз так хорошо думалось и

In fact, the novel gestures toward the possibility of a third path, situated between the abandonment of one's land and a full return to traditional life. This alternative is embodied by Ira Laptander, Aniko's former schoolmate – far from a particularly brilliant student, unlike the protagonist – whom Aniko encounters shortly before leaving once again for the 'mainland'. After completing her medical studies in the city, Ira declines the position she has been assigned in a large urban center and instead asks to be sent to the tundra, where she works as a veterinary assistant, caring for the herds. As the novel repeatedly suggests, the younger generations are called upon to use the education they have received to improve the lives of their people.

> Ira, who had never been the chair of the youth council and, after joining the Komsomol, had not sat – like Aniko – at the desk of the Komsomol secretary, had suddenly become a support for her people? Had begun to heal them and care for them?
> And she? What had *she* done – she, Aniko Nogo, once respected and admired by everyone? Built some rotten shed called *personal well-being*? As if Aniko wanted to live only for herself. Could that really be true? Very well, she would return here – but there was not even a proper place to wash. And the institute? Three years of study were no joke. No. Something was wrong. She had stirred up this turmoil in her soul for nothing. One must live, and that is all – and how, let each person decide for themselves.
> It sounded firm and reassuring – and yet a residue remained in her soul. (Nerkagi 1996: 375-76).[31]

Ira's figure therefore interrupts the apparent binary between leaving and returning: she embodies a form of 'return' that does not undo education but redirects it toward the tundra and toward collective care. For Aniko, however, this possibility does not translate into a solution; it remains an unsettling mirror that exposes the gap between individual success and responsibility toward one's community. As the autobiographical passage cited at the opening of this chapter makes clear, it is precisely this third path that Nerkagi herself would ultimately choose – reorienting education not away from the tundra, but back toward it.

мечталось, и добровольно отдать себя мёрзлой тишине, затеряться в белом просторе снегов, надеть ягушку, жить при керосиновой лампе и… состариться?!»

[31] «Ира, которая никогда не была председателем совета дружины, а став комсомолкой, не села, как Анико, за стол секретаря комсомольской организации, вдруг стала опорой своему народу? Стала лечить его и заботиться о нём?
А она? Чем занялась она, всеми тогда уважаемая и почитаемая Анико Ного? Построением какого-то гнилого сарая, имя которому – личное благополучие? Можно подумать, что Анико хотела жить только для себя. Неужели это правда?.. Ну хорошо, вернётся она сюда, но тут даже толком помыться негде. А институт? Три года учёбы не шутка. Нет. Что-то не так. Зря переполох подняла в душе. Надо жить, и всё, а уж как, это пусть решает каждый.
Крепко и утешительно сказано, и всё-таки в душе остался осадок».

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the narratives discussed in this article suggest that Anna Nerkagi's prose does not simply mourn the potential disintegration of Nenets cultural order, nor does it idealize a return to an untouched past. Rather, it articulates a space of negotiation in which continuity is made possible through adaptation. Central to this process are women, insofar as they most consistently sustain the ethical, affective, and ecological order of the *chum* when that order comes under pressure.

This literary vision finds a striking parallel in ethnographic research on Yamal. As Liarskaya has shown, the region has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt to modern pressures without collapsing its nomadic foundations (Liarskaya 2010). Crucially, this resilience is linked to a gender shift that did not replace women's roles in the *chum* but rather reconfigured them within the existing nomadic order. Where Soviet policies introduced the figure of the *chumrabotnitsa* – a salaried female worker detached from the internal economy and symbolic order of the camp – effectively removing women from their relational role at the hearth, the camp itself frequently ceased to function as a coherent unit. By contrast, the third way evoked in Nerkagi's prose – exemplified both by fictional figures such as Ira Laptander and by Nerkagi's own life choices – points toward a different outcome: one in which women remain embedded in the domestic and affective core of nomadic life, while also gaining new forms of education and agency. Only in this way does the tundra continue to function as a lived environment, rather than being reduced either to a relic of the past or to a purely productive space.

In this light, Nerkagi's writing can be read as a sustained reflection on cultural resilience. Her prose does not deny loss, fracture, or pain; instead, it shows how Nenets matricultural systems, though destabilised, continue to function through women's labour and ethical commitment. Her prose suggests that survival in the circumpolar North depends less on resisting change than on carefully mediating it, preserving the relational structures – above all those maintained by women – that allow Nenets society to endure. The hearth, kept alive by women who neither fully abandon the tundra nor remain untouched by modernity, becomes the site where cultural webs are not merely preserved, but actively re-woven.

About the Author

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Rematriating the Archipelago:

A Gendered Environmental History of Kodiak

LAUREL THORNE, MA

Abstract

This paper draws on Alutiiq oral legends and histories to craft a gendered environmental history of the Kodiak Archipelago from the perspective of Alutiiq women, examining their relationships with the island environment and their roles within it. Alutiiq women were stripped of their autonomy over their reproductive and environmental roles under Russian and American colonization. However, Alutiiq values, including Nunapet, Nunapet Carliarluki, and Unguwacirpet, endured, linking women's physical health to land stewardship. Alutiiq women historically led hunting festivals, prepared fish and skins, and controlled their reproductive lives through breastfeeding and midwifery. Today, Alutiiq women reclaim environmental values through crafts and birthing practices, embodying what Cutcha Risling Baldy calls "(re)righting and (re)riteing Indigenous epistemologies." Their survival and revival demonstrate how Alutiiq women resisted colonialism and sustained reciprocal relationships with the environment.

Keywords: reciprocity, Alutiiq women, subsistence practices, reproductive health / practices, environment

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Resumé

Cet article s'appuie sur les légendes orales et les histoires des Alutiiq pour élaborer une histoire environnementale genrée de l'archipel Kodiak du point de vue des femmes Alutiiq, en examinant leurs relations avec l'environnement insulaire et leurs rôles en son sein. Sous la colonisation russe et américaine, les femmes Alutiiq ont été privées de leur autonomie sur leurs rôles reproducteurs et environnementaux. Cependant, les valeurs d'Alutiiq, dont Nunapet, Nunapet Carliarluki et Unguwacirpet, ont perduré, continuant à lier la santé physique des femmes à l'intendance des terres. Historiquement, les femmes Alutiiq dirigeaient les festivals de chasse, préparaient poissons et peaux, et contrôlaient leur vie reproductive par l'allaitement et la maternité. Aujourd'hui, les femmes d'Alutiiq reprennent possession des valeurs environnementales à travers l'artisanat et les pratiques d'accouchement, incarnant ce que Cutcha Risling Baldy appelle « (re)righting and (re)riteing Indigenous epistemologies » (rétablir les droits et les rites des épistémologies autochtones). La survie et la renaissance de ces épistémologies démontrent comment les femmes d'Alutiiq ont résisté au colonialisme et maintenu des relations réciproques avec l'environnement.

Mots-clés : réciprocité, femmes Alutiiq, pratiques de subsistance, santé / pratiques reproductives, environnement

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INTRODUCTION

The Kodiak Archipelago is made up of twenty-five islands, covers 5,360 square miles of land, and is home to forty small glaciers; it lies 250 miles southwest of Anchorage in the Gulf of Alaska along the Katmai coast. These geographical facts accurately describe the location, but do not reflect how the Alutiiq, who have called Kodiak home for over 7,500 years, understand place, environment, and history. A better summation of Kodiak comes from the statement, “This is the land that we belong to, not the land that belongs to us.”[1]

1 Alisha Susana Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun—We Are Learning How to be Sugpiaq: Exploring Kodiak Alutiiq Literature Through Core Values*, PhD diss. (University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2012), 150.

Shared by an Alutiiq elder and recorded by Alutiiq literary scholar Alisha Susana Drabek, this statement captures a relational understanding of the land that cannot be conveyed through geographic descriptions alone.

This article explores the environmental history of the Kodiak Archipelago through the experiences of Kodiak Alutiiq women. The Indigenous peoples of Kodiak are referred to in historical and contemporary sources in several different ways. *Sugpiaq* — an Alutiiq term meaning 'real people'— was the precolonial self-designation Indigenous people on Kodiak used, while *Alutiiq* is an indigenized version of the term 'Aleut,' which Russian colonizers broadly applied to refer to all Indigenous peoples of Southwest Alaska.[2] Both Alutiiq and Sugpiaq are popular self-designators on Kodiak today, and Alutiiq is also used to describe the language. In this article, I will use *Alutiiq* and *Alutiit* to refer to the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq.[3]

The origins of the Alutiit on Kodiak are preserved in oral traditions passed down through generations, documented through elder recordings, and in accounts shared with explorers, anthropologists, students, and folklorists; it was later compiled by the Alutiiq Museum and Repository scholars into a collective volume.[4] Storytelling plays a central role in Kodiak Alutiiq culture, serving to pass down knowledge and share cultural worldviews. Alutiiq oral traditions include *quliyanguat*, life or history-based stories, and *unigkuat*, legends and origin narratives.[5] These stories describe journeys from mainland Alaska to Kodiak and emphasize the decision to settle based on the island's abundance, naming it *Qik'rtaq* (island).[6]

When human people arrived in the archipelago over 7,500 years ago, they encountered a maritime environment defined by ocean and rugged coastlines, jagged mountains rising

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2 *Kodiak Alutiiq Language Textbook*, edited by April Isiik G. L. Counceller, Ph.D., and Dehrich Isuwiq Chya, M.A., with Peggy Arnangcuk Azuyak, M.A., Michael Nanit'sqaq Bach, M.A., Candace Cutmen Branson, M.A., Alisha Agisaq Drabek, Ph.D., and Tonya Iwa'ista Heitman, J.D. (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 2; Amy F. Steffian, 'Alutiiit Quliyangua'it Patuirluki: Uncovering Alutiiq History,' in *Imaken Ima'ut—From the Future to the Present: Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq History*, ed. Amy F. Steffian (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 2.

3 Alutiit is the plural form of Alutiiq. Amy F. Steffian and April G. Laktonen Counceller, *Alutiiq Traditions: An Introduction to the Native Culture of the Kodiak Archipelago*, 5th ed. (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2022), 3.

4 Dehrich Chya and Amy F. Steffian, eds., *Unigkuat: Kodiak Alutiiq Legends*, with contributions by April G. L. Counceller and Alisha S. Drabek (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2021), xxv.

5 Chya and Steffian, *Unigkuat*, 3.

6 Chya and Steffian, *Unigkuat*, 5; 'Island - Qik'rtaq,' *Alutiiq Word of the Week*, Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, accessed May 1, 2026, https://alutiiqmuseum.org/collection/index.php/Detail/word/297. *Qik'rtarmiut*, meaning 'people of the island,' is another name for the Kodiak Alutiit.

from low fog, glaciers flowing into salmon-filled rivers, and forests of Black cottonwood trees. Kelp lined the shoreline, supporting sea otter, fish, and bird populations, while pebble beaches, tide pools, and sheltered coves formed small ecosystems along the coast. Puffins flew above the water with their lifelong mates, humpback whales breached the surface offshore, and Kodiak bears foraged for salmonberries and wild blueberries beneath the forest canopy. This is Kodiak Island, still known to the Alutiit as their environment and home. Alutiiq communities historically organized their lives around environmental patterns, living in winter villages and relocating to salmon camps during the summer. Their reciprocally-focused relationship with the land and water shaped social and spiritual life. Key to this relationship were Kodiak Alutiiq women, whose labour and knowledge underpinned community survival and continuity. Despite Russian and American imperial challenges, this relationship persisted and remains important to Alutiiq women's identity today.

This article traces that relationship from the precolonial period through the era of Russian colonization beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the American period following the 1867 purchase of Alaska, and into the twentieth century and the present day. Across these periods, Kodiak Alutiiq communities encountered social and ecological disruptions, including village consolidation, epidemic disease, ecological degradation, missionization, industrial fishing, military occupation, natural disasters, and oil contamination.[7] These events reshaped Alutiiq relationships with the land and water, but did not eliminate them because the Alutiit People persevered to maintain them.

Centreing Kodiak Alutiiq women, this article examines how subsistence labour, healing and reproductive knowledge, and cultural responsibilities structured reciprocal relationships between people and the environment. Alutiiq women played central roles in gathering and processing foods, crafting clothes and tools, managing household and communal resources, and engaging in seasonal ceremonial and spiritual practices. Women’s reproductive and healing practices, including contraception, plant medicine, feminine hygiene, tracking ovulation, tracking menstrual cycles, midwifery, and childrearing, as well as the biological functions of women’s reproductive systems such as

7 For more scholarship on these disruptions on Kodiak, see: April Isiik Laktonen Counceller, 'MiRikaan’saat: Americans,' in *Imaken Ima’ut—From the Future to the Present: Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq History*, ed. Amy F. Steffian (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 104-174; Dehrich Isuwiq Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata: When the Russians Arrived,' in *Imaken Ima’ut—From the Future to the Present: Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Hisltory*, ed. Amy F. Steffian (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2024), 74-104; Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 3-4, 139-141, 151-153; Ryan Tucker Jones, *Empire of Extinction: Russians and the North Pacific’s Strange Beasts of the Sea*, 1741–1867 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 97; Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80, 94-95.

menstruation and breastfeeding, were deeply entrenched in environmental wisdom and collective well-being, positioning women as mediators between land and the community.

Russian and American colonial regimes disrupted these relationships through the extraction of women's labour, a restructuring of domestic life, the regulation of women's health, and the promotion of economic systems oriented towards environmental exploitation. This article argues that, despite the Russian and American colonial structures that constrained Alutiiq women's choices, Alutiiq women adjusted to these circumstances by maintaining subsistence practices, preserving reproductive and healing knowledge, and sharing environmental values within families and communities. These strategies enabled the continuation of Alutiiq relationships to land despite sustained colonial coercion.

Methodologically, this article draws on a large body of evidence through archival analysis, ethnographic interpretation, and oral histories to construct a gendered environmental history of the Kodiak Archipelago. Knowledge of the precolonial period derives from archaeological research and secondary historical and anthropological scholarship, both Alutiiq-produced and non-Alutiiq. For the Russian period, the article draws on colonial records alongside secondary historical scholarship, again both Alutiiq-produced and non-Alutiiq. The American period primarily relies on Alutiiq oral traditions and community-produced sources. Alutiiq-produced scholarship, recorded oral traditions, and community-based materials serve as the main interpretive framework to ground the work in Alutiiq ways of knowing.

This article treats Indigenous knowledge as the primary source of authority rather than as supplementary to colonial or academic sources. The research presented here is deeply indebted to the scholarship, oral traditions, and cultural materials produced by Alutiiq scholars and community members.[8] Colonial records and non-Alutiiq secondary scholarship are engaged critically, read for their silences, biases, and imperial assumptions, and interpreted in relation to Alutiiq perspectives. I am a settler-scholar from the Chickasaw homelands in Northern Mississippi, writing this article while living and studying on Narragansett and Wampanoag lands. I am not a part of the Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq community and do not claim to speak for it. My aim is to centre Alutiiq women's voices and experiences, while recognizing that my role as a settler scholar is to foreground Alutiiq histories responsibly rather than speak on others' behalf.

8 While I have developed relationships with members of the Kodiak Alutiiq community through my broader research, this article was not produced through a formal collaborative or consultative process with community members. I have therefore relied on publicly available community-produced materials, Alutiiq scholarship, and cultural resources, and recognize that my interpretations are shaped and limited by what community members have chosen to share in those contexts.

Framework and Methodology

The history of Kodiak Alutiiq women's environmental roles is situated within the broader historiography of gender, colonialism, and the environment, and speaks to scholars working at the intersections of Indigenous environmental history, Indigenous feminist scholarship, and the colonial history of Alaska and the North Pacific. While feminist scholars established the foundation for gender as a category of analysis within environmental history, the field often depends on generalized categories that overlook the diversity and specificity of women's experiences.[9] Ecofeminism proposes a relationship between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, but some approaches risk romanticizing women's relationship with nature.[10] These frameworks can conceal how gender, ecology, and colonial power operate across different historical contexts.[11]

Despite the expansion of scholarship on women and the environment, Indigenous women's histories are still underrepresented. Indigenous women and women of colour are often mentioned briefly and generically, creating an illusion of a singular or collective experience. Expanding environmental histories to include Indigenous women's histories is crucial for creating a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the field. This article contributes to the effort by centreing an Alaskan Native community whose gendered environmental relationships and colonial encounters remain understudied in both Indigenous environmental history and Indigenous feminist scholarship. Within Indigenous environmental history, it moves the field beyond its predominant focus on the continental United States to examine how an Alaskan Native community understands and sustains relationships with a subarctic marine environment across centuries of colonial disruption.

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9 For more scholarship on gender and environmental history, see: Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Mary-Ellen Kelm and Lorna R. McLean, eds., *This Elusive Land: Women and the Canadian Environment* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Carolyn Merchant, 'Gender and Environmental History,' *The Journal of American History*, 76, no.4 (Mar. 1990); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Haper Collins, 1980); Glinda R. Riley, *Women and Nature: Saving the Wild West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Nancy C. Unger, 'Women and Gender: Useful Categories of Analysis in Environmental History,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
10 Unger, 'Women and Gender,' 624. For more scholarship on ecofeminism, see: Melissa Leach and Cathy Green, 'Gender and Environmental History: From Representation of Women and Nature to Gender Analysis of Ecology and Politics,' *Environment and History* 3, no. 3 (October 1997): 344; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Indraprastha Press, 1988), 38-55.
11 Unger, 'Women and Gender,' 625.

The article draws on Indigenous feminist scholarship that centres women's relationship to the environment. Binnizá/Zapotec & Maya Ch'orti scholar and scientist Jessica Hernandez draws attention to the "strong relationship Indigenous women have with their environments" and calls for "Indigenous women to be brought to the forefront of environmentalism."[12] Her work positions women as knowledge holders who sustain their people, environment, and communities, offering a useful lens for interpreting the environmental history of Kodiak Alutiiq women.[13]

Other Indigenous feminist scholars further shape this analysis by examining how colonial power reshaped gender systems. Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy demonstrates that settler colonialism depends on the survival of the heteropatriarchy and the subjugation of Indigenous women, particularly because women's reproductive abilities threatened colonial social organization.[14] She shows how Indigenous women have been flattened into stereotypes that situate them as passive or sexualized, erasing their central roles within communities. In response, she argues for centreing Indigenous women through oral narratives and cultural practices, stressing that this is essential for "(re)righting, (re)riting, and (re)writing Indigenous epistemologies."[15] Drawing on Seneca feminist scholar Mishuana Goeman, Risling Baldy stresses that "Native women are at the center of how our nations, both tribal and non-tribal, have been imagined," and that engaging Native feminisms as fundamental to both traditional cultures and revitalization efforts that develop a future which looks back on the past.[16] This emphasis on centreing Indigenous women through oral accounts and cultural practices is vital to this article's approach in sharing the histories of Kodiak Alutiiq women and their environments.

Alutiiq women's relationships to the land cannot be separated from their bodily and lived experiences, part of a continuum which includes their social and cultural contexts. Women's authority over their bodies, their knowledge, and their relationships with the environment are bound together. Similarly, Brianna Theobald argues that reproductive politics cannot be separated from colonial politics when she states, "Indigenous women's reproductive bodies proved symbolically and materially central to colonial objectives."[17] Penobscot lawyer and activist Sherri Mitchell further connects women, land, and colonization by examining how the suppression of women's authority is linked to

12 Jessica Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science* (North Atlantic Books, 2022), 180.
13 Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves*, 180.
14 Cutcha Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies,* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 11-12.
15 Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You*, 12.
16 Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing for You*, 12.
17 Brianna Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 4.

environmental destruction and patriarchal violence.[18] Mitchell argues that reclaiming women's knowledge and authority is necessary for restoring balanced relationships with the land.[19] Within Indigenous feminist scholarship, this article provides a historical case study that applies and extends these frameworks to demonstrate how gender, subsistence, and reproductive and healing knowledge were central to Alutiiq ecological relationships.

This article also engages Marie-Françoise Guédon's concept of matriculture, which she defines as "that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric."[20] Guédon emphasizes that matriculture refers to a cultural system rooted in women's participation in supporting community life, rather than only in kinship structures or social organization.[21] In the Kodiak context, matriculture offers a structure for analyzing Alutiiq women's subsistence labour, reproductive practices, and environmental value as vital to cultural survivance. In this article, ecofeminism is used to situate matricultural systems into a broader history of colonial domination and environmental destruction, emphasizing the role of gender in forming material and cultural life. The sections that follow exhibit how Kodiak Alutiiq women's subsistence labour, reproductive and healing practices, and cultural responsibilities created a reciprocal relationship with the environment and how these relationships were reshaped during Russian and American colonization.

Alutiiq Values

To ground these theoretical frameworks in the Alutiiq context, it is essential to turn to the cultural values that have guided Alutiiq women's relationships with nature. These values created the framework through which Alutiiq women's subsistence, reproductive, and healing practices gained meaning and authority. The core values of the Kodiak Alutiit are divided into five spheres: the physical, social, cognitive, spiritual, and conscience-ethical spheres. While these values were formally identified and codified collaboratively by Alutiiq elders and educators through the Native Educators of Alutiiq Region (NEAR) in 2002, and later translated into the Alutiiq language and organized by Drabek into a five-spheres values map, the Elders understood them as reflective of longstanding Alutiiq lifeways and traditions.[22]

18 Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), 121.
19 Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions*, 123.
20 Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 3.
21 Guédon, 'Introduction,' 6.
22 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 119.

Alisha Drabek describes the purposes of the values noting that, “they are intended to inspire healthy living and establish a self-determined, positive image for Alutiiq people, thus promoting a strong sense of identity and greater self-esteem, rooted in spirituality.”[23] The physical sphere, known in Alutiiq as *Nuna*—meaning 'land'— “consists of physical health, material objects, economy, and our relationship to the ecosystem.”[24] For Alutiit, *Nuna* represents “the ecological values that sustain well-being and general physical health for the Kodiak Alutiiq people.”[25] This reciprocal relationship shows that the physical health of the land is inseparable from that of the people.[26] Central concepts within this sphere include:

- Nunapet (Our land) 'Ties to our Homeland'
- Nunapet Carliarluki (Taking care of our land) 'Stewardship of animals, land, sky, and waters'
- Unguwacirpet (Our way of being alive) 'A subsistence lifestyle respectful and sustained by the natural world'[27]

The first concept, *Nunapet*, expresses how Alutiiq identity is rooted in their homeland.[28] The *Nunapet Caliarluki* emphasizes the responsibility to respect and care for the homeland.[29] The *Unguwacirpet* refers to an 'all-encompassing way of life” where daily routine is intertwined with the natural world — “living off the land, as a source for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and fuel, through hunting and gathering practices used to gather and process resources firsthand as passed down through the generations.”[30] Together, these values shaped how Alutiit understood and cared for the land, and how the land, in turn, supported them. In the pre-colonial period, Alutiiq women played a central role in upholding and spreading these values through their daily lives within subsistence, reproduction, healing, and knowledge sharing. These values revealed what women’s environmental authority looked like before colonial disruption began.[31]

Central to understanding women’s authority within this value system is Alutiiq gender ideology, which is organized differently from that which Russian and American colonizers would impose. Alutiiq society is matrilineal, tracing kinship and leadership through the

23 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 143.
24 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 148.
25 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 148.
26 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 148.
27 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 148.
28 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 148.
29 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 150.
30 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 151.
31 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat’stun*, 148.

maternal line. The position of village headman, or *angayuqaq*, passed from a woman's brother to her son (uncle to nephew) rather than father to son, reflecting how central women's lineages were to political and social life.[32] Women's authority extended beyond the subsistence and domestic realm and into the spiritual and ceremonial realm; they served as shamans, healers, and *kala'alek*, religious leaders who oversaw winter hunting festivals.[33] Alutiiq gender ideology is also not binary; they honour two-spirit individuals known as *arnauciq* and *nukallpia'uciq*. The expressions of both feminine and masculine traits by these individuals were understood as a sign of special spiritual power.[34]

Pre-Colonial Environmental Foundations

The pre-colonial period examined in the next section refers primarily to the Koniag cultural period (AD 1400 to 1763), the cultural period immediately preceding Russian contact.[35] Most of the practices described here are rooted in a long history spanning over seven and a half millennia, across the Ocean Bay, Kachemak, Koniag, and Alutiiq traditions. Archaeologists divide the precolonial history of Kodiak into three related traditions, each reflecting a distinct way of life, although artifact types, housing styles, and patterns of land indicate continuity between these traditions.[36] This reflects the changes of one cultural group over thousands of years. Archaeologists describe developments during these thousands of years in this way:

> Kodiak's hunting, fishing, and gathering societies grew, adopted new technologies, and harvested resources with increasing intensity and efficiency. Ultimately, this process resulted in the development of the late prehistoric Alutiiq culture with its large communities, sophisticated technologies, and complex social, spiritual, and artistic traditions.[37]

The subsistence, reproductive, and healing practices described in this section draw primarily on this late prehistoric and early contact period, while acknowledging that Alutiiq culture was dynamic and adaptive long before the Russians arrived. The sources

32 Crowell et al., 2001, as cited in Tara Lynn Christiansen-Stiller, *Exploring the Concepts of Rematriation and the Sugpiaq/Alutiiq People's Traditional Values and Ways of Being to Address Historical Trauma*, PhD diss. (University of North Dakota, 2025), 17.
33 Amy F. Steffian and April G. Laktonen Counceller, *Alutiiq Traditions: An Introduction to the Native Culture of the Kodiak Archipelago*, 5th ed. (Kodiak, AK: Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 2022), 57.
34 Steffian and Laktonen Counceller, *Alutiiq Traditions:* 55.
35 Amy F. Steffian, Marnie A. Leist, Sven D. Haakanson Jr., and Patrick G. Saltonstall, eds., *Kal'unek — From Karluk: Kodiak Alutiiq History and the Archaeology of the Karluk One Village Site* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2015), 40.
36 Steffian et al., *Kal'unek*, 40.
37 Steffian et al., *Kal'unek*, 40.

drawn on here include archaeological research, ethnographic accounts, historical secondary literature, and Alutiiq historical scholarship. This section does not present Alutiiq life as static or timeless, but rather as a community built on values deeply rooted in the relationship between people and the environment.

THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Alutiiq Women and Subsistence Practices

To fully understand how Alutiiq women's environmental roles were challenged by colonialism, it is necessary first to situate these roles within their cultural and ecological contexts. This section demonstrates how Alutiiq women's subsistence labour was an integral part of their reciprocal relationship with the environment. Hunting, fishing, and gathering plants, eggs, and shellfish were vital to Alutiiq culture as they not only provided the necessities of life and brought people together, but also connected people to the land.[38] Subsistence practices cultivated kinship between people and land, and the sharing of these practices between community members ensured this knowledge survived. Alutiiq communities revolved around environmental conditions and seasonal cycles, living in their main villages in winter and at seasonal hunting and fishing camps in summer.[39] Almost every aspect of Alutiiq subsistence culture included women. Women worked as mediators between the environment and the community, using their hands to craft essential products and tools. Women were responsible for making grass baskets, spruce root hats, hunting boat skins, and clothing, especially waterproof gut skin parkas.[40] Women collected plants, including vegetables and berries, for food or medicine.[41] Before winter came, women prepared and stored the mammals and fish that the men had harvested. All winter, Alutiiq villages held hunting festivals to honour the spiritual relationship between animals and humans and to ensure success in future hunting expeditions.[42] Hunting festivals included masked dancers, rituals, feasts, and performances.[43] Women also served

38 Gwenn A. Miller, *Kodiak Kreol: Communities of Empire in Early Russian America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 8; Aron L. Crowell and April Isiik Laktonen Counceller, 'Sugucihpet,' in *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, ed. Aron L. Crowell and Amy F. Steffian (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2001), 137.
39 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 30-33.
40 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 41.
41 Crowell and Counceller, 'Sugucihpet,' 182.
42 Aron L. Crowell and Jeff Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs: Alutiiq Spiritual Life and Traditions,' in *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, edited by Aron L. Crowell and Amy F. Steffian (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2001), 198-203.
43 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol,* 5-6; Crowell and Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs,' 198-203.

as religious leaders, or *kala'alek*, who oversaw the hunting festivals and led their ceremonies.[44]

Women's roles were closely connected with every stage of subsistence processes. Their roles also expose how important women were to Alutiiq society—for example, hunters believed the hunting hats that women crafted brought them good luck or power in their hunts.[45] When a woman became a mother, she was responsible for teaching her daughters these practices to protect the future of their land and community.[46] It was not only through their subsistence practices that Alutiiq women sustained a balanced relationship with the land; their reproductive and healing practices similarly sustained that relationship.

Alutiiq Women and Reproductive Practices

Alutiiq women's reproductive and healing practices were a second form of environmental responsibility, one which connected population and resource management, animal relations, and overall ecological health. Nancy Unger notes how some Indigenous communities in harsh environments practiced forms of population self-monitoring, and Indigenous women exercised reproductive control as part of this process.[47] Prolonged breastfeeding, for example, was one of the most significant methods. For many Indigenous communities, breastfeeding is a traditional practice that promotes mother-child bonding and keeps an infant healthy.[48] These are some of the reasons women would breastfeed for two to five years, and prolonged breastfeeding suppressed ovulation, bringing decreased fertility.[49]

In 1829, Russian Alaskan governor Ferdinand von Wrangell observed that Alutiiq women breastfed their children for as long as they could or until they were three years old; Russian naval officer G.I. Davydov similarly noted that women nursed their children up to three years "and sometimes even longer, if a new pregnancy has not intervened."[50]

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44 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 5-6; Crowell and Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs,' 208-211.
45 Crowell and Counceller, 'Sugucihpet,' 157.
46 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 45.
47 Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers,* 19.
48 Best Start Resource Centre. *Breastfeeding for the Health and Future of Our Nation: A Booklet for Indigenous Families.* (Toronto, Ontario, 2017); 'Indigenous Breastfeeding,' FACE Resources, last accessed 12 December 2024, https://www.faceresources.org/indigenous-breastfeeding/; Erika Finestone and Cynthia Stirbys, 'Indigenous Birth in Canada: Reconciliation and Reproductive Justice in the Settler State,' in *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth*, ed. Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2017).
49 Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*, 19.
50 Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangel and Richard A. Pierce, *Russian America: Statistical and Ethnographic Information,* (Kingston, Ont: Limestone Press, 1980), 53; Gavriil Ivanovich Davydov, *Dvukratnoe*

Further, the importance of breastfeeding in Alutiiq society is reflected in Alutiiq tattoo practices. Alutiit used piercings and tattoos to signify age, gender, family, home village, achievements, and social standing.[51] Most importantly, tattoos held spiritual significance, and new mothers wore tattoos on their breasts in the hope that they would bring milk.[52] This tradition underlines the value Alutiiq mothers placed on breastfeeding.

Through breastfeeding, women exercised control over their reproductive bodies. Whether these decisions were made with individual or community needs in mind, they contributed to the population management by Alutiit on the island.[53] Because the amount of resources available at a given time determined survival, spacing out births enhanced the well-being and sustainability of Alutiiq communities on Kodiak. Through breastfeeding, Alutiiq women taught their children care, responsibility, and reciprocity. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson discusses breastfeeding as an act of resistance against colonization, as a method of passing down community values.[54] For Alutiiq women, this included passing down the understanding that the land and its resources were not separate from the people who depended on them. The relationship between community and environment was one of reciprocal responsibility, which began at birth.

Midwives were also an integral part of Alutiiq culture. Midwives were everyday healers in their community who, according to anthropologist Joanne B. Mulcahy, "had extensive knowledge of plants, midwifery, and a bloodletting technique called lancing, and other forms of surgery."[55] Midwives were involved in the birthing process from the prenatal period to postnatal care. They often spent time in the steam bath with their patients, massaging and healing them. This healing knowledge extended to plant medicine. Yarrow, for example, was prepared by picking the leaves, soaking them in hot water, and applying them directly to ease menstrual cramps.[56] This practice illustrates how intimately Alutiiq women's environmental knowledge and bodily care were entangled.

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puteshestvie v Ameriku morskikh ofitserov Khvostova i Davydova, pisannoe sim poslednim, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Morskaia tipografiia, 1810), trans. Colin Bearne, ed. Richard A. Pierce as *Two Voyages to Russian America, 1802–1807* (Kingston, ON: Limestone Press, 1977), 44–45.

51 Steffian and Laktonen Counceller, *Alutiiq Traditions:* 55.

52 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 49.

53 Breastfeeding and extended lactation appear to have been the primary means of birth spacing among Kodiak Alutiiq women. Drawing on earlier ethnographic accounts of Kodiak, anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička notes that there is "nothing definite on the subject of infanticide." This suggests infanticide was not a documented practice in the Kodiak Aluiiq context. Aleš Hrdlička, *The Anthropology of Kodiak Island* (Philadelphia: Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, 1944), 80.

54 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 148-152.

55 Joanne B. Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island: The Life of an Alutiiq Healer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 45.

56 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 57.

Alutiiq communities also had protocols for childbirth itself. Russian observer Urey Lisianski recorded that childbirth took place in a separate hut, and mother as well as child are obliged to stay there for twenty days, after which the mother washed herself and the child and took a sweat bath.[57] Read through a European lens, this appeared as quarantine; however, the isolation is meant to mark a monumental change in a woman's life and give the child and mother time together before returning to community life. The role of the midwife was essential to a village; she was a healer who was a liaison "between nature and culture, or between the world of the living and ancestral spirits."[58] Midwives maintained a 'circle of reciprocity' with the natural world by bringing new life into the village and guiding women through childbirth; they "created the community anew."[59] Postmenopausal women gained freedoms denied to younger, fertile women, and midwives in particular accumulated spiritual and healing authority as they aged.[60] Their position in the community was shaped by their lifetime of care and practice. Alutiiq midwives reveal how closely environmental knowledge and community continuity were intertwined. Through an ecofeminist lens, this type of midwifery illustrates how the health of women's bodies and the health of the community were understood as inseparable, making a midwife both a healer of the community and a keeper of Alutiiq futurity.

Menstruation protocols also exhibit how closely Alutiiq women's reproductive lives were tied to the environment. A young Alutiiq woman's first menstrual cycle marked a significant coming-of-age moment. During her first cycle, she would traditionally spend up to six months in a designated room or dwelling, and her reemergence into the community symbolized her journey into womanhood.[61] To commemorate this transition, young women received two vertical tattooed lines on their chin, visually marking their new status.[62]

Menstruation itself was surrounded by protocols that reflected an understanding of women's reproductive power and its relationship to the environment. As Alisha Drabek explains, Alutiiq traditions emphasize avoiding contamination of the environment and connect women's reproductive power directly to environmental health. Drabek writes that "Alutiiq traditions of right behavior… also extend to the power of women," particularly during menstruation.[63] These protocols might appear as restrictions imposed on women from an outside perspective, but Mulcahy cautions against this reading, noting

57 Urey Lisianski, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806* (London: John Booth, 1814), II, 80.
58 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 71.
59 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 50.
60 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 71.
61 Crowell and Leer, 'Ukgwepet—Our Beliefs,' 206.
62 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 49.
63 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun,* 151.

that in a symbolic system, an element may be "regarded as powerful without being negative."[64] She asks whether seclusion limited women's power or was it instead "a source of strength for women, a time when important roles were learned, and ritual knowledge passed on."[65] This was a question that elder women answered, describing these traditions as keeping life orderly, and young women listened. As Clyda Christensen of Larsen Bay recalled, "We listened! That was the midwives and older people teaching us."[66] This suggests that menstrual protocols were not experienced as punishment but as instruction, and were part of the intergenerational passing down of knowledge that connected women to one another and to the land. Though recorded in the twentieth century, these practices reflect knowledge disseminated across generations and are ingrained in precolonial Alutiiq relationships with the environment. Elder Lucille Antowak Davis recalled being told by her father that once she began menstruating, she could no longer accompany him on fox hunts because she would "dirty the ground where I trap."[67] Menstruating women were also prohibited from crossing rivers "for fear that the Salmon would stop swimming upstream."[68] These practices are clear examples of matriculture; women's reproductive lives were an intricate part of the community and ecological life, contributing to sustaining and regulating life.

Rather than signifying a lack of environmental stewardship or agency, these practices reflect an Alutiiq worldview in which women's menstruation was understood as significant and consequential. The restrictions surrounding menstruation were a form of environmental regulation that viewed women's bodies as powerful and needing protocol to maintain ecological balance. As Drabek notes, these protocols also signify the belief that animals are "highly sensitive to humans… and to give themselves up in a hunt they expect to be respected."[69] By observing these regulations during menstruation, Alutiiq women upheld environmental balance and reinforced reciprocal relationships with the land. Together, subsistence labour and reproductive and healing practices positioned women as active agents in maintaining environmental balance, a balance that colonial powers sought to dismantle.

RUSSIAN COLONIZATION

Russian colonization of the Kodiak Archipelago began in the mid-eighteenth century and fundamentally reshaped Alutiiq life. Following Vitus Bering's expeditions in the 1740s,

64 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 38.
65 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 38.
66 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 38.
67 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun,* 151.
68 Crowell and Counceller, 'Sugucihpet' 142.
69 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun,* 151.

competing fur trading companies moved into the region in pursuit of sea otter pelts, eventually leading to the consolidation of the fur trade into the royally chartered Russian-American Company (RAC) in 1799. The RAC governed the colony and regulated the fur trade in Alaska until the colony was sold to the United States in 1867.

From the onset, Russian colonization was violent and extractive. The Awa'uq Massacre of 1784, in which Russian forces violently subdued Alutiit at Refuge Rock, marked a turning point in Alutiiq history. The following decades brought hostage-taking, epidemic disease, control over food supplies, labour extraction, and significant population decline.[70] Prior to and in the early decades of Russian presence, Alutiiq communities continued to be spread across dozens of villages throughout the archipelago and had little interference in village social life from Russians. This changed dramatically after the 1837 smallpox epidemic, when the RAC consolidated survivors from around sixty-five villages into seven larger settlements near Russian posts.[71]

This reorganization of Alutiiq settlement patterns brought more of the population under direct colonial surveillance for the first time. The experiences described in this section shifted significantly across the Russian period, meaning Alutiiq village life in 1790 looked quite different in the 1850s. Alutiiq women's bodies, labour, and reproductive knowledge became particular targets of colonial control. The subsections that follow examine how Russian colonialism challenged Alutiiq women's authority over marriage and kinship, subsistence labour, healing and cultural knowledge, and their own bodily lives, while also showing how women adapted and resisted within these constraints.

Marriage And Kinship

As Russian colonization began in the mid-eighteenth century, the relationship between Alutiiq women and the environment began to shift. Violence, starvation, and epidemics tore through communities, with Alutiiq women especially vulnerable.[72] The 1837 smallpox epidemic alone killed approximately thirty percent of the Kodiak Island population, dramatically diminishing the Alutiiq labour force the RAC depended on.[73]

The dynamics described in this section operated differently depending on where Alutiiq women lived and when. Before the 1837 epidemic, most of Alutiit lived in villages at some

70 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 75; Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732–1867* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 39–58, 101–120; Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 18–36, 71–95, 96–121.
71 Sonja Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2008), 39.
72 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 75; Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 39–58, 101–120; Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 18–36, 71–95, 96–121.
73 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 85.

distance from Russian posts, and the RAC's ability to reshape domestic and social life was constrained. After consolidation, proximity to Russian posts and *kreol* settlements intensified colonial pressures on family structure, labour, and women's reproductive lives.[74]

Unions between Russian men and Alutiiq women, which began in the eighteenth century, continued throughout the Russian period, and were described as being relationships of "amity and enmity."[75] Since very few Russian women came to Alaska, many Russian hunters married or cohabited with Alutiiq women.[76] While some relationships were coerced, others were negotiated or consensual, and some Alutiiq women likely made strategic choices to form a union in order to secure survival, resources, or protection within increasingly harsh colonial conditions.[77] Marriage could function as a plan for survival rather than an imposed condition. These were active decisions within and against colonial structures that sought to eliminate these women's agency. As Risling Baldy demonstrates, settler colonialism depends on the subjugation of Indigenous women precisely because their reproductive authority threatens colonial social organization, which is why pressure was placed on Alutiiq women to adopt Western domesticity.

As *kreol* communities grew, the RAC's need to classify them grew. Under the second charter of the RAC in 1821, *kreol*s became a recognized social estate within the Russian Empire and were given special privileges giving members of the *kreol* social estate easy access to employment with the RAC.[78] The RAC encouraged the growth of the *kreol* social estate, believing that *kreols* were "a bridge between people and savages."[79] Within this system, Alutiiq mothers were expected to raise their sons as future RAC hunters, officers, and clerks, and to raise their daughters to be suitable wives for company employees. These expectations increasingly pressured Alutiiq women to adopt Western notions of motherhood, domesticity, and marital duties. For example, some Alutiiq women were baptized into Orthodox Christianity before marrying their Russian husbands in an Orthodox Church. Where Alutiiq menstrual protocols had positioned women as active participants in maintaining environmental and community well-being, Orthodox

74 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 46. *Kreol* (plural: *kreoly*) was in common use in the colony from the early nineteenth century and formally codified as an official legal designation under the RAC's 1821 charter, which recognized *kreol*s as a distinct social estate within the Russian Empire. The term referred to the mixed-heritage offspring of Russian men and Alaska Native women. The Alutiiq word for *kreol* is *kasaakaruaq*, Roxanne Easley, 'Creole Policy and Practice in Russian America: Iakov Egorovich Netsvetov,' *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 108, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2017): 63–64.
75 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 114.
76 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 42.
77 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 85-96; Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 54-59.
78 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 40.
79 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 96.

Christianity introduced a markedly different framework. Rooted in Levitical notions of ritual impurity and officialized in Canon 2 of Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century, Orthodox canon law held that menstruating women were ritually unclean and barred them from entering the church or receiving communion during their period.[80] This was not a recognition of women's power, but a restriction on their participation in religious life.[81] Because Russian employees on the frontier were prone to drinking and gambling, the RAC promoted ideals of domesticity that positioned Alutiiq women as good housewives who could soften and improve their husbands' habits and thereby create more diligent workers. Ultimately, the welfare and prosperity of the RAC depended on the cultivation of colonial family life and domestic order.[82]

At the same time, Alutiiq and *kreol* women in *kreol* settlements and Russian posts brought Alutiiq material and immaterial culture with them, maintaining alliances and trade connections to their Alutiiq relatives and villages of origin.[83] The RAC's own policy kept Alutiits and *kreol*s administratively separate, but women moved across boundaries and between both worlds.[84] Women moved among villages and colonial settlements, and this is largely invisible in the historical record. Russian administrators recorded the population of a village based on the ethnicity of the male heads of each household, making the presence of Alutiiq women or *kreol* women at a *kreol* settlement or Russian post undocumented.[85] This movement was a form of intercultural, economic, and kinship negotiation: by maintaining trade connections and alliances with their villages of origin, women circulated Alutiiq goods, food knowledge, and subsistence practices in colonial settlements, and by sustaining kinship ties across the administrative boundary between Alutiiq and *kreol* categories, they ensured that cultural knowledge was not contained within colonial classifications but continued to flow between communities. Alutiiq women used the spaces between colonial categories to maintain the networks that colonial administrations sought to sever.

Labour And *Yasak*

Beyond the domestic sphere, Alutiiq women were also compelled to perform labour for the RAC under coercive colonial conditions. The RAC organized large sea otter hunting parties with Alutiiq men from across the entire archipelago that would travel as far as

80 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 40.
81 Teva Regule, W*omen and the Canons of the Church: A Difficult Relationship*, paper presented at the Volos Academy Canon Law Conference, May 2014, 2–3.
82 Wrangelll, *Russian America,* 16 .
83 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 46.
84 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 91.
85 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 46.

Sitka and the Kenai peninsula for months at a time.[86] Many men never returned, killed by storms and drownings.[87] This left many villages across the archipelago composed solely of women, children, and elders, and left them wholly responsible for managing subsistence practices. After the 1837 epidemic, the RAC responded to the diminished workforce and directed that "women and children were to be employed to enable men to go hunting."[88] Women's labour became essential to the survival of the colonial economy.

The RAC extracted food and goods from Alutiiq women, requiring them to supply these products for the company stores with little or no compensation for this labour. The company stores sold back the supplies to the Alutiiq communities which had produced them.[89] In many cases, this labour was performed at the expense of the women's ability to prepare sufficient supplies for their own families, as their labour and resources were diverted to the company.[90] Through the extraction of women's labour and the restructuring of domestic responsibilities, the RAC significantly constrained women's autonomy over their relationships with the environment.

Women's labour was further affected by the RAC through the introduction of *yasak*, a tribute system which required Indigenous communities to supply the Russians with furs to demonstrate their loyalty.[91] Although this system was officially abolished in 1794, Alutiiq hunters continued to be pressured to sell the majority of their furs to the RAC for little compensation, a policy which the Russians enforced with violence.[92] Within this context, women's labour was redirected away from subsistence practices towards the colonial economy.

One example of this change was Alutiiq women stitching bird skins into parkas that served as payment for Alutiiq labour.[93] Before the Russian period, bird skin parkas were not commonly worn among the Alutiiq, but because all fur materials were reserved for company use, bird skins became the only option for making parkas. A Russian Orthodox missionary Hieromonk Gedeon records, after Alutiiq men gathered the bird skins, "the men's wives, mothers, or sisters processed the skins and finished the parkas, the later are issued to their men— and to the others— against the sea otters they take."[94] This process

86 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 66-67.
87 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 66-67.
88 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 84-85.
89 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 70-71.
90 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 70-71.
91 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 85.
92 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 90.
93 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 86.
94 Hieromonk Gideon, *The Round the World Voyage of Hieromonk Gideon, 1803–1809*, trans. Lydia T. Black, ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, ON: Limestone Press, 1989), quoted in Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 69.

drew directly on women's traditional ecological knowledge, including their understanding of which bird species produced suitable skins, how to harvest and process them seasonally, and the technical expertise required to prepare and stitch them, which had been developed and passed down across generations as part of Alutiiq relationships with the environment. The RAC extracted this knowledge alongside women's physical labour, redirecting it from community sustenance toward colonial production. Time spent performing labour for the colonial economy replaced other forms of subsistence labour and often left little food or material to bring home.[95] The colonial economy extracted Alutiiq women's labour and environmental knowledge, while denying its economic significance. This would continue into the American period.

Through the tribute system and forced exchange system, women's labour became a part of colonial extraction rather than community survival. At the same time, the incorporation of Alutiiq women's labour into the colonial economy did not strip it of all meaning. Traditional subsistence practices continued under colonial restraint. This is seen in archaeological evidence from village sites where Alutiiq material culture was found alongside imported European goods.[96] Women continued to rely on their skills to sustain their communities and preserve environmental knowledge, even as these skills were used by colonial forces. Women's labour for the Russian colonizers, then, was an intersection of coercion and choice. Alutiiq women did not simply submit to colonial labour demands; they worked within them and sustained their skills and knowledge which that colonial extraction system depended on but could not control. The RAC could not fully extinguish the matricultural system of women's participation in social, spiritual, and ecological life.

Children, Schooling, And Reproductive Authority

For *kreol* children living near Russian posts, colonialism further disrupted their connection with their Alutiiq culture and heritage. Many children were sent to day schools or boarding schools away from their villages, where — according to Russian naval officer and imperial administrator Pavel Golovin — they were taught Russian, God's commandments, and basic arithmetic.[97] Beyond early lessons, the curriculum became strongly gendered: boys were trained to become bookkeepers, warehouse overseers, captain's assistants, captains, and church officials, while girls were taught domestic labour so they could become servants or wives of RAC employees.[98] This was not the experience of many Alutiiq children who lived in villages that were not under the direct control of Russians, a

95 Chya, 'Kasaakat Tekicata,' 92.
96 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 67-68.
97 Pavel Nikolaevich Golovin, *Civil and Savage Encounters: The Worldly Travel Letters of an Imperial Russian Navy Officer, 1860-1861* (Portland: Western Imprints, Oregon Historical Society, 1983), 100-105.
98 Golovin, *Civil and Savage Encounters*, 101.

consequence of the RAC policy of keeping Alutiiq and *kreol* populations separate because these groups served the company differently.

For many families, the schooling system undermined Alutiiq women's autonomy and familial lives. They lost authority over deciding when to have children, how to raise them, and how to pass on traditional knowledge. Children were not guaranteed to inherit the reciprocal relationship with the land and its seasonal resources that their ancestors had sustained across generations. Their sons, raised within RAC systems, were not promised the same relationship with hunting, based on stewardship rather than extraction.

Daughters' menstruation, traditionally understood within Alutiiq culture as an expression of women's spiritual power and their responsibility toward the environment, a recognition of the strength women carried rather than a mark of impurity, was reframed under Orthodox influence as pollution and spiritual uncleanliness.[99] This was a fundamental disruption of how Alutiiq women understood their bodies in relation to the land. Even under these pressures, Alutiiq women found ways to maintain their authority, passing their healing and environmental knowledge through breastfeeding, midwifery, and informal transmission, practices colonial institutions could surveil but not control.

Environmental Damage From The Fur Trade

Russian colonialism disrupted not only Alutiiq social and economic life but also transformed the marine environment, the foundation of Alutiiq women's subsistence labour and their communities' survival. The fur trade's primary target, the sea otter, was a keystone species whose removal had severe consequences for the surrounding environment.[100] After fur trader Grigori Shelikhov's arrival on Kodiak in 1785, sea otter hunting on the island enormously escalated, and within a decade, the surrounding waters were nearly exhausted. Without sea otters to control the sea urchin populations, urchins multiply and deplete the kelp forests that shelter fish, mussels, and other invertebrates that Alutiiq communities depended on.[101] For Alutiiq women, this was catastrophic, as the nearshore environment provided a large share of their food resources. With men being conscripted into sea otter and fur seal hunting parties, women were the only ones responsible for gathering food for the family.[102] The resulting decline in nutrition made Alutiiq communities more vulnerable to the epidemic diseases introduced with Russian contact, connecting environmental collapse directly to population decline that further

99 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 151; Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island*, 38.
100 Ryan Tucker Jones, *Empire of Extinction: Russians and the North Pacific's Strange Beasts of the Sea, 1741–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 92, 94.
101 Jones, *Empire of Extinction*, 97.
102 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 84-85.

destabilized Alutiiq life.[103] Read through an ecofeminist lens, the destruction of the sea otter is inseparable from the assault on Alutiiq women's bodies and labour. Environmental degradation and the subjugation of women were part of a single colonial project.

Russian colonizers sought to remake the Alutiiq women of Kodiak and the land itself, and some impacts of colonization were irreversible, although a permanently severed relationship between Alutiiq women and their environment was not among them. After Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867, colonialism was not dismantled but only replaced under a new structure, and Alutiiq women faced similar challenges from another colonizing power. No significant changes occurred overnight, aside from slightly more freedom and opportunities to return to certain Alutiiq practices. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that American capitalism and Christian missionaries began to encroach on Kodiak Island.

AMERICAN COLONIZATION

The sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 did not end the colonial disruption of Alutiiq life but merely replaced one colonial structure with another. In the early decades of the American period, the federal government had little direct presence on Kodiak, and Alutiiq communities retained some continuity with practices that persisted during the Russian period.[104] This changed towards the end of the nineteenth century and accelerated in the twentieth century. Commercial fishing, Protestant missionary activity, and federal boarding school policies changed the economic, social, and spiritual frameworks of the archipelago.[105] While the Russian colonial period focused on the extraction of marine mammals and the labour of Alutiiq hunters, American colonialism focused on wage labour and the suppression of Alutiiq culture and language.[106] For Alutiiq women, this meant new challenges to their relationship with the environment; just as during the Russian period, they adapted, resisted, and maintained their authority.

Experiences with the Canning Industry

American colonial governance restructured, rather than dismantled, the systems that were already constraining Alutiiq women's environmental and reproductive roles. This section examines how industrial fishing, wage labour, and schooling further challenged these roles. Commercial fishing rapidly overtook Kodiak's economy after the first cannery

103 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 84-85.
104 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 107.
105 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 111-113, 123-127.
106 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 111-113, 123-127.

opened on the island in 1881.[107] Subsistence practices shifted from being disrupted by Russian entrepreneurship to being forced to participate in an American cash economy. Alutiiq women who were members of the Orthodox Church or married to RAC employees no longer had special status or extra resources to protect themselves in this new society. As the canning industry expanded on Kodiak, it replaced many of the families' subsistence practices as men worked on dories and fishing boats for private companies while women worked in canneries, cleaning and packing fish. This labour drew on Alutiiq women's existing knowledge of fish species, season patterns, and preparation and preservation methods developed across generations of subsistence practice.[108] The cannery industry did not need to build this knowledge because it positioned itself to exploit it. They benefited from women's familiarity with the resource and the work, while framing that familiarity as an inherent capacity rather than the aggregated environmental knowledge it was. Scholar Juliana Hu Pegues emphasizes that Native Alaskan women's labour in canneries was framed as a natural extension of their traditional roles rather than as legitimate industrial labour in a capitalist economy, a characterization that racialized their labour. This framing erases Native women's labour from histories of commercial fishing in Alaska.[109] This fits into how Risling Baldy describes how settler colonialism strives to flatten Indigenous women into functional categories that serve colonial economies. For Alutiiq women, this represented yet another colonial reframing of their work within a system in which they were not in control.

As the canning industry grew on Kodiak, cannery work became a defining feature of Alutiiq women's and girls' lives. *Illuani* — meaning 'to be inside the story" in the Alutiiq language, from the root *iluo* meaning 'in it or inside it"— oral history accounts provide evidence of how Alutiiq women and girls experienced this shift, showing how the canning industry reshaped mobility, childhood, and seasonal routines.[110] In 1976, teacher Dave Kubiak and his high school students on Kodiak founded an oral history magazine entitled *Illuani*. The students interviewed older community members to record their experiences and memories to share with the greater Kodiak community. These magazines are a valuable source of information for understanding what everyday life was like on Kodiak during the twentieth century.[111] As mentioned in the accounts of many older Alutiiq women, the cannery industry provided their first wage job as girls.

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107 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 105.
108 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 111-13.
109 Juliana Hu Pegues, 'Unbecoming Workers: Asian Men and Native Women in Alaska's Cannery Labor Regime,' in *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 109-145.
110 Dave Kubiak, Ed Opheim Sr., Florence Pestrikoff, Iver Matutill, and Susan Malalill, *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 1 (May 2001).
111 Dave Kubiak, Ed Opheim Sr., Florence Pestrikoff, Iver Matutill, and Susan Malalill, *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 1 (May 2001): 1–10.

These accounts show both constraint and agency. They show the downsides of working in a cannery while also showing the opportunities that women navigated within colonial labour systems. In 1924, Natalie Simeonoff, who grew up on Kodiak's Woody Island, recalls beginning work in a cannery at age twelve. She remembers that cannery work required mobility, as families moved between locations depending on seasonal labour demands and job availability.[112] Alma Soderberg's experiences of working in canneries follow a similar pattern. She began working in a cannery in Ouzinkie in 1957 at the age of seventeen and throughout her life, she moved around depending on where work was available. Together, these accounts illustrate how Alutiiq girlhood became reorganized around industrial labour rather than subsistence practices at an early age. Alma also emphasizes the physical difficulty of the work, including early mornings, long hours, repetitive labour, and cold conditions. At the same time, Alma explains how she liked the opportunity to earn money and work alongside others. Many Alutiiq women remember working in canneries with nostalgia, as canneries became important sites of community.[113]

Alma also noted that cannery labour offered opportunities to learn about the world beyond Kodiak and to travel to other parts of the island.[114] Her reflections on the difficulties and the benefits of working in a cannery expose the complexities of Alutiiq women's experiences in the cannery industry. These accounts resist a singular narrative of victimhood or triumph; they reveal women navigating real constraints while seeking meaning within them. Reflecting on how many Alutiiq women found community in canneries highlights the perseverance of Alutiiq women in enduring life under colonial regimes and in finding mutual support.

The commercial fishing industry also attracted many immigrants to Kodiak, particularly from Scandinavian countries. As a result, Kodiak became a place where many cultures converged. The mixing of these cultures and the introduction of new social and economic structures made it increasingly difficult to maintain strong ties to Alutiiq culture. Julia Naughton from Afognak recalls that during the summers in her childhood, she and her brother would play cannery, building a pretend cannery on the edge of the lake and using a boat to catch fish.[115] This memory shows how, even as families continued to pass down subsistence practices, children were also absorbing a new worldview shaped by industrial labour and capitalist production.

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112 Natalie Simeonoff, 'Growing Up on Woody Island,' *Illuani: Inside, the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 7 (1976): 85–89.
113 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 113.
114 Alma Soderberg, 'That's the Toughest Job I Ever Had,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no.4 (2004): 32–33.
115 Julia Naughton, 'Afognak Was a Nice Place to Be Born and Raised…,'*Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 8 (1979): 17-21.

Mission and Boarding Schools

Cannery labour was not the only transformation Alutiiq women experienced during the twentieth century. Mission and boarding schools intensified these disruptions by targeting language, kinship, and intergenerational knowledge sharing. Russian Orthodox education had allowed Alutiiq students to speak multiple languages and did not seek to sever their ties to their culture and environment fully. In contrast, the Baptist mission schools, which opened in the late nineteenth century, forbade students from speaking any language other than English and relied on shame and punishment to discipline Alutiiq children. During this same period, boarding schools became increasingly common. From Kodiak, children were sent to boarding schools in Alaska and as far away as Carlisle, Pennsylvania. These institutions were designed to remove Indigenous children from their communities, preventing Elders from passing down knowledge intended to ensure community continuity. Children in boarding schools were often required to perform manual labour and learn a service trade. At Carlisle, children faced hunger, punishment, isolation, disease, and harsh labour. Two Alutiiq girls, Anastasia Ashouwak and Pariscova Friendoff, passed away at Carlisle from tuberculosis.[116]

On Kodiak, the Baptist Mission opened an orphanage on Woody Island in 1893. Children from across Kodiak were brought to the orphanage — sometimes orphaned, sometimes taken from families — and grew up on Woody Island. Girls were expected to complete household labour alongside schooling; upon turning eighteen, they were encouraged to marry. Although the orphanage closed in 1938, other schools remained open and continued to operate under similar principles. Together, these mission and boarding schools functioned as tools of Americanization, an attempt at disrupting Alutiiq relationships to land and community and assimilating the people into a capitalist economy.[117] These institutions targeted the matricultural system, which sustained Alutiiq life and allowed for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge between women.

Despite the disruptions introduced by canneries and mission schools to Alutiiq society, Alutiiq women maintained subsistence labour as a thriving practice within their own terms. These practices did not disappear under colonial pressure but were sustained within Alutiiq families. For example, Maryrose Castillo from Old Harbor recounts that her mother taught her to sew skins and weave baskets, often alongside friends who gathered to work together. She also remembers hunting for foxes, rabbits, minks, and seals with her father and grandfather and being raised on Native foods, such as clams, salmon, seal meat, berries, and wild greens.[118] Maryrose's memories demonstrate how subsistence

116 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 123-127.
117 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 123-127.
118 Maryrose Castillo, 'You Could Go Out Hunting,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 2, no. 3 (1984): 46-48.

knowledge was not abandoned in the past, but remained part of everyday life, even as it was challenged. These simple acts of cultural preservation are also part of how everyday actions are acts of resurgence or resistance.[119]

Food preparation became another site where Alutiiq women maintained authority over their lives, adapting to the Russian and American ingredients introduced while continuing to use Alutiiq systems of nutrition. Along with traditional food systems, women prepared Russian dishes or incorporated American products into their cooking. In many cases, these foods were indigenized—for example, using salmon to make Russian *perok* or preparing Salmonberry jam for blini.[120] Jenny Zeedar recalls how her mother used bear oil as Crisco, mixing modern cooking with Alutiiq food knowledge.[121] These examples reveal how Alutiiq women asserted agency over food systems, blending new food methods with their own and maintaining control over their resources. Indigenizing food practices is a form of matriculture because women are sustaining communal life through everyday acts of adaptation.

Reproductive and Healing Practices

Women's healing and reproductive knowledge remained rooted in women's environmental systems, illustrating continuity in plant knowledge, midwifery practices, and women's responsibility for community wellbeing. Jenny Zeedar reflects that "they never used to have doctors" and that "our mothers took care of us themselves," highlighting her mother's knowledge of plants and their healing properties. Her mother boiled wild roses for tea and used different bushes called *wenicks* for skincare in the steam bath.[122] Alutiiq midwives continued to play a central role in community health. An *Illuani* magazine article on Alutiiq midwifery notes that midwives remained essential in villages around Kodiak, particularly because there was no doctor in Kodiak until 1938.[123] The steam bath functioned as a healing space and as a community gathering place for midwives and women. Even after the Community Health Aide Program was established in 1968, these roles did not disappear, but they were reconceptualized. Community Health Aids served as liaisons between villages and Western medicine. This work was rooted in the positions and tradition of the village midwife.[124]

119 Gina Starblanket, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, 3rd ed. (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2020), 8-9.
120 Peter Olsen and Nina Olsen, 'Recipe for Pirok,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 1 (1976): 95–97.
121 Jenny Zeedar, 'My Mom Used Bear Oil,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 2, no. 2 (1983): 48-50.
122 Zeedar, 'My Mom Used Bear Oil,' 49.
123 Dr. Bob Johnson, Annie Boskofsky, Kaba Chichenoff, and Christine Lukin, 'The Midwives Were Wonderful People,' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 1, no. 9 (1980): 82–85.
124 Mulcahy, *Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island,* 62.

The decline of breastfeeding in the twentieth century due to the rise of infant formula represents a rupture in practices historically rooted in women's bodies, nourishment, and reciprocal care. As Jenece Mordt argues, religious ideology, industrial ambition, and flawed science contributed to a cultural shift, "one where natural, ancestral practices were increasingly replaced by processed alternatives."[125] Mothers were encouraged to use formula because breastfeeding was framed as inconvenient and incompatible with working in the modern world. Mordt further notes that Indigenous mothers faced additional barriers, including the lack of paid maternity leave, inadequate access to lactation support, and cultural stigma around breastfeeding, often rooted in historical trauma.[126] The decline in breastfeeding ruptured Alutiiq reproductive practices. Yet Alutiiq women found ways to maintain reproductive knowledge within and against these pressures; midwifery persists, plant knowledge has been passed down, and the steam bath remains a site of community for women.

Ecological and Political Crises

A series of ecological and political crises, including militarization, natural disasters, and oil contamination, further reshaped Alutiiq women's ability to sustain their relationships with the environment. The first was the militarization of Kodiak during World War II. Amid growing anxiety about Japanese expansion in Asia in the 1930s, the United States began to increase its military presence in Alaska. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the bombings of the Aleutian Islands, construction on Kodiak intensified exponentially. Naval bases, forts, and roads were built, and soldiers, officers, and contractors arrived in large numbers.[127] Everyday life was reorganized around the possibility of an attack. Alutiiq families dug trenches in their backyards, participated in air-raid drills, and learned to use gas masks. Vivian Beukers, who was ten during the war, remembers bringing the gas masks to school and practising air-raid drills. She also recalls how everything was rationed, from nylon stockings to vegetables and butter.[128] As many Alutiiq men served in the war, women were left to manage households, care for children, and maintain subsistence practices under harsh conditions. Frieda Reft, a Karluk elder, recalls how her husband…

> …was a good skipper… so he had to go out to the Aleutians to run a tugboat that used to haul bombs. He was gone for fourteen months. During the war, we had to keep our windows so there would be no lights showing.[129]

125 Jenece Mordt, *The Formula Empire: The Hidden History of How Formula Replaced Breastmilk* (n.p., 2025), 10.
126 Mordt, *The Formula Empire*, 108.
127 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 134-137.
128 Vivian Beukers, ''If You Want to Shoot Me, You're Welcome to It!' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 2, no. 4 (1985): 40–49.
129 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 135.

The war added new restrictions and anxieties to women's environmental labour. Women, already responsible for feeding families and maintaining community well-being, now had to navigate all of their under conditions of military occupation, rationing, and the constant threat of danger.

The second significant rupture was the Great Alaska Earthquake of March 27, 1964. Measuring 9.2 in magnitude, the earthquake lasted for more than four minutes and triggered a tsunami that destroyed much of downtown Kodiak and its harbour. Vivian Beukers recalls fleeing to higher ground with her children, while her husband stayed in town (where martial law had been declared) to help in the aftermath. When she returned the next day to retrieve supplies, she encountered a man with a gun in her yard who warned her, "If you take another step, I'm going to shoot you." She remembers, "I was so tired. I was cold, I was hungry… I said, 'I've had enough for one night. If you want to shoot me, and take care of those kids, you're welcome to it,' and I kept walking."[130] Her account reveals that twenty-seven Alutiiq villagers lost their lives and several villages were permanently damaged or forced to relocate.[131] Betty Nelson of Afognak remembers the day as "the most horrifying thing I have ever experienced in my life," recalling that when she returned to her village, "all the familiar landmarks that we had grown up with were gone."[132] Like many Afognak residents, Betty and her family relocated to Port Lions, where new infrastructure was built to withstand future tsunamis. For (some) Alutiiq women, displacement meant rebuilding home and reestablishing community in a new environment.

The third major event was the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which released more than 10,000,000 gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound and along the Alaskan coastline. Oil contamination of Kodiak marine ecosystems for years killed fish, sea mammals, birds, and shellfish. Traditional food sources were considered unsafe, fishing seasons were cancelled, and many community members had to work as cleanup contractors to survive economically.[133] Marvin Bartleson Jr., a fisherman from Port Lions, reflects on the long-term impact of the spill:

> Some things have never gone back to normal, and never will after an event like that… It affected every aspect of our lives, our subsistence way of living, and people were afraid to eat anything, even deer, because they go to the beach to eat kelp for salt.[134]

130 Beukers, "'If You Want to Shoot Me, You're Welcome to It!' 40-49.
131 Crowell and Lührmann, 'Alutiiq Culture,' 66.
132 Betty Nelson, 'A Loss of Afognak in 1964,' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 3 (2003): 26-27.
133 Counceller, 'MiRikaan'saat: Americans,' 151-152.

The oil spill disrupted Alutiiq food systems in a way that Alutiiq women had not experienced before. Anxieties and uncertainties replaced the faith women had in their relationship with the land and water. The oil spill devastated the environment but also limited women's ability to fulfill their responsibilities within their communities. Together, these twentieth-century transformations showed how Alutiiq women's roles continued to be challenged by colonial economies and disasters. Despite these setbacks, they remained resilient and upheld their responsibilities to their communities and culture. Each of these crises was simultaneously attacks on the environment and an attack on the relationships and practices through which Alutiiq women sustain their communities.

CONTEMPORARY ALUTIIQ WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

This section demonstrates how Alutiiq environmental values persist through practice, material culture, and writing, and shows that women's environmental knowledge was not eliminated by colonialism but remains central to Alutiiq identity today. Roughly two thousand Alutiiq living on Kodiak Island continue to have knowledge about and/or practice these teachings, evidence that this knowledge was successfully passed down from generation to generation. Alutiiq women ensured that their children inherited Alutiiq traditions, even when this task was difficult and dangerous. Today, the Alutiiq connect to their past because of the women and men who preserved and transmitted these traditions.

Oral traditions continue to teach environmental values about reciprocity and help the community maintain ecological balance. The balance of hunting and gathering values is preserved through practice and oral tradition. One legend, *Cestun Unguwallriat Pililuki* (How the Animals Were Created), recounts how animals first came to Kodiak and emphasizes that the relationship between humans and animals has always been grounded in reciprocity. In the narrative, a woman impregnated by a star man gives birth to all the land and sea animals. When hunting later becomes necessary, it does not destroy the relationship between man and animal; instead, it affirms the respect between the two.[135] As Alisha Drabek explains, stories like this "establish a close relationship to human actions (and animals) and an interdependence that manifests in family terms."[136]

Material and embodied practices function as everyday actions where women share environmental knowledge, thereby sustaining cultural survivance by keeping the community's relationship with the land and its resources alive. Alutiiq women today

134 Marvin Bartleson Jr., 'A Terrible Tragedy Never Forgotten,' *Iluani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 4 (2004): 10–13.
135 Chya and Steffian, *Unigkuat,* 28.
136 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun,* 150.

continue weaving baskets from spruce root and beach rye, objects traditionally used to store food, fish, or water. Contemporary basket-weaving classes serve as a workshop to learn new skills and also as a communal gathering where environmental knowledge is exchanged.[137] Women also continue to create oil for traditional stone lamps from sea mammal fat, jewellery from fur, bones, or seashells, and to clean fish and sea mammals for traditional meals. Marie Skonberg, an elder from Ouizinkie, makes her own beaded headdresses and explains that "the more of us native people who know how to bead, or make beaded headdresses, the better off we'll be, as it's a symbol of what we are."[138]

Trish Abston-Cox shows how this knowledge is passed down through several generations of women: she learned headdress-making under the mentorship of Dee Dee Chya, Margaret Roberts, and her own mother, Virginia. These all were Alutiiq women who led efforts to preserve regalia and dance.[139] These headdresses are often worn at Alutiiq dancers' performances. Since the late twentieth century, Alutiiq dancing groups have experienced a revival across Kodiak. While dances were historically held at hunting festivals, they are now held at community celebrations. Cox was a founding member of the Kodiak Alutiiq dancers and now teaches both adults and children in Larsen Bay and Kodiak. She sees herself still as a student "learning with each and every headdress [she] makes."[140] Wanda Price, an Alutiiq dancer and teacher from Old Harbor, explains how today she dances "because [she doesn't] want the culture to be forgotten and to teach our children that our heritage is very strong."[141] Melissa Berns from Old Harbor extends these revived practices to skin sewing, basket weaving, and the creation of traditional regalia. She describes these practices as a spiritual journey which allows her to have "a glimpse into the past and history of my Alutiiq ancestors and [*which*] will provide me with the tools to move forward incorporating modern traditions with the skills of the past."[142] While raising her children, Melissa ensured that they were exposed to the dancing of their community. When cleaning hides given to her by hunters, she thinks of her ancestors' tools and aspires to document old techniques for future generations.[143] These women show how Alutiiq material practices embody the centuries-old reciprocal relationship between women and their environment.

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137 Drabek, *Liitukut Sugpiat'stun*, 150.
138 Marie Skonberg, 'Marie Skonberg and the Art of Beading' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no.3 (2003): 20-21.
139 *Trish Abston-Cox*, Alutiiq Museum, https://alutiiqmuseum.org/alutiiq-people/art/artist-gallery/trish-abston-cox. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
140 *Trish Abston-Cox*, Alutiiq Museum.
141 Wanda Price, 'They Put Your Culture Inside You,' *Illuani: Inside the Life and Culture of Kodiak Island* 3, no. 4 (2004): 16-17.
142 *Melissa Berns*, Alutiiq Museum, https://alutiiqmuseum.org/alutiiq-people/art/artist-gallery/melissa-berns/. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
143 *Melissa Berns*, Alutiiq Museum.

Contemporary reproductive and healing practices offer a more complicated picture than straightforward revitalization. Some practices, like the steam bath, persist as a part of daily community life; it remains an active space where women support one another through physical and emotional care. Margie Mete notes that the community has steadily reclaimed the Alutiiq term *maqiwik* over the Russian term *banya*.[144] Other practices, for example, midwifery, have largely been displaced by Western healthcare systems, and their survival has depended on documentation and transmission through scholarship, oral history projects, and community-produced materials rather than on an uninterrupted practice. Mete observes that although cultural revitalization is being cultivated on Kodiak, decolonization is a process as well as an event, and identifying and reestablishing Alutiiq health customs that became less visible following colonization remains ongoing work.[145] This article is itself part of that effort, bringing together in one place the reproductive and healing knowledge that colonialism sought to fragment and suppress, so that it remains accessible rather than lost.

The healthcare environment on Kodiak reflects this complexity. KANA, The Kodiak Area Native Association, founded in 1966, provides health and social services to Alutiiq communities across the Kodiak archipelago through a compact with the Indian Health Service under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975.[146] As a tribally governed organization, KANA has significantly greater community control than a facility operated directly by IHS, and its staff includes Indigenous healthcare providers who work to incorporate Alutiiq cultural values into care. Yet the integration of traditional healing within KANA remains limited. Mete notes that while a traditional healer was once available through KANA, that person has retired, and KANA clients who wish to access a traditional healer must now be referred to Anchorage.[147] Further, several Alutiiq individuals are recognized by the community for their healing abilities but are not formally acknowledged by KANA.[148] KANA operates within a federal funding structure that is overshadowed by IHS's chronic underfunding, Western medical frameworks, and the forced sterilization and discriminatory care that Alaska Native women across the country continue to navigate.[149] These limitations are federal in origin, and the effort to decolonize care is being carried out by the Alutiiq community.

144 Margaret Susan Draskovich Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization: Pathways to Holistic Individual Health and Community Wellness* (PhD diss., University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2021), 197.
145 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 28, 60-61.
146 'About,' Kodiak Area Native Association, https://kodiakhealthcare.org. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
147 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 60-61.
148 Mete, C*elebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 60-61.
149 Jane Lawrence, 'The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women,' *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 400–419.

Within this tension, Indigenous physicians like Dr. Elise Pletnikoff, Chief Medical Officer of KANA. represent a significant shift. Born and raised on Kodiak, Dr. Pletnikoff brings traditional values and relational care into clinical practice.[150] She delivers babies for families she has known for years, always asking after mothers before asking about symptoms.[151] Her presence signals that Alutiiq women's bodily knowledge and Western medicine do not have to be opposed, and that Indigenous healers within institutional medicine can begin to close the gap that colonialism opened.

Several more isolated villages continue to rely on Community Health Aides who provide prenatal and postnatal care and who serve as liaisons between their villages and the western medical world; many are also descended from traditional healers.[152] Broader Indigenous movements, including the Indigenous Rematriate Milk Medicine movement and the growing effort to de-taboo menstruation within Indigenous communities, offer frameworks for the kind of healing that remains to be done on Kodiak.[153] This points towards a future on Kodiak in which Alutiiq women's bodily knowledge is not only preserved in documents, but actively lived and practiced in the community itself. Traditional breastfeeding practices declined among Indigenous communities due to both colonial disruption and deliberate formula marketing, which portrayed bottle feeding as modern and sophisticated.[154]

Language revitalization is another arena in which women's knowledge-keeping is central. The Alutiiq language conveys ecological relationships in a way that English cannot. Alisha Drabek discusses her journey of learning the Alutiiq language as an adult, after her family experienced generations of separation from their language due to colonization. She shares how the word for sea or ocean is *imaq*, which also means 'a liquid contained inside' or

150 Michael Woestehoff, 'Celebrating Dr. Elise Pletnikoff and the Power of Representation in Native American Healthcare,' *Ellsworth*, https://ellsworth.solutions/celebrating-dr-elise-pletnikoff-and-the-power-of-representation-in-native-american-healthcare/. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
151 Woestehoff, 'Celebrating Dr. Elise Pletnikoff.'
152 'Midwife — Paapuskaaq,' *Alutiiq Word of the Day*, Alutiiq Museum, https://alutiiqmuseum.org/collection/Detail/word/345. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
153 Ariel Hansen, 'Rematriating Milk Medicine: Indigenous Breastfeeding Rates on the Rise,' *The Science Writer*, last accessed 12 December 2024, https://www.thesciencewriter.org/issue-1/rematriating-milk-medicine-indigenous-breastfeeding-rates-on-the-rise; 'Period Practices in Indigenous Cultures,' *Help a Girl Out*, https://helpagirlout.org/period-practices-in-indigenous-cultures/. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
154 Cecília Tomori and Aunchalee E. L. Palmquist, 'Racial Capitalism and the US Formula Shortage: A Policy Analysis of the Formula Industry as a Neocolonial System,' *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (2022): 961200; Carla Cevasco, "Look'd Like Milk': Colonialism and Infant Feeding in the English Atlantic World,' *Journal of Early American History* (2020); Hiliary Monteith, Carly Checholik, Tracey Galloway, Hosna Sahak, Amy Shawanda, Christina Liu, and Anthony J. G. Hanley, 'Infant Feeding Experiences among Indigenous Communities in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Aotearoa: A Scoping Review of the Qualitative Literature,' *BMC Public Health* 24, no. 1583 (2024).

‘contents.’ This word relates to the phrase *imartuq*, meaning ‘it is full,’ and *imaituq*, meaning ‘it is empty.’ This means that when you say *imasuugtua* — ‘I am sad’— the literal translation is ‘I am searching for my contents.’[155] This evidently shows how the Alutiiq worldview, language, and the ecological realm are intertwined. She is passing this language to her sons through Alutiiq names for stuffed animals, traditional lullabies, and a language playgroup.[156] Drabek follows in the steps of Alutiiq women before her who have passed knowledge across generations.

Subsistence practices also continued to be transmitted through women’s inter-generational teaching. In Margie Mete’s study of Alutiiq healing practices, one participant described how her mother took her children into the wilderness to identify plants, pick berries, and hunt, teaching them to say a prayer and give something back before each harvest. “They weren’t big teaching moments,” she explains, “but small teaching moments that you look back and you culminate, and you make a whole lifestyle."[157] This lesson is rooted in the reciprocity between Alutiit and the land. It echoes the creation legend presented earlier in this section, in which the hunting does not sever the relationship between humans and animals but affirms it through respect. This is the same logic the mother enacts when she teaches her children to pray and give something back before each harvest. The legend establishes this principle at the level of cosmology, and the small daily teaching moment shares it across generations. This demonstrates how oral tradition and daily practice reinforce one another.

Contemporary Alutiiq writing offers another form of evidence to explore the environmental values passed down, demonstrating how land and water serve as memory and archive, and how women are the knowledge bearers within this relationship. Abigail Chabitnoy, an Alutiiq poet, writes in her poem *Water Lines* that the sea appears as a relational being rather than an expanse or boundary on a map. Water functions as memory and archive as she writes, “what we preserve:: what we pass down:: what continues:: to be spoken:: into being.”[158] Women adopt the role of knowledge bearers in her poem, described as those who “hold the bottom of the sea to their breasts,” and who “keep/ she keeps in the water she keeps/ even among large waves.”[159] These lines position women as the stabilizing forces within relationships between the community and the

155 Alisha Drabek, 'Learning How to Speak with My Ancestors,' *Sierra. The Magazine of the Sierra Club*, Sierra Club, November 9, 2018, https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2018-6-november-december/last-words/learning-how-speak-my-ancestors. Last accessed 7 May 2026.
156 Drabek, 'Learning How to Speak with My Ancestors.'
157 Mete, *Celebrating Alutiiq Cultural Revitalization*, 166.
158 Abigail Chabitnoy, 'Water Lines,' in *Circumpolar Connections: Creative Indigenous Geographies of the Arctic*, ed. Liisa-Rávná Finbog, Joan Naviyuk Kane, and Johannes Riquet (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2024), 44.
159 Chabitnoy, 'Water Lines,' 48-49.

environment and as teachers of subsistence practices. By presenting water as memory and women as its stewards, Chabitnoy's work demonstrates that environmental Alutiiq values are not only being practiced but also being actively shared through story and art. The poem closes with a reflection about survivance: "to tell the story one survived/ to tell the story who survived/ tell the sea ship water down."[160] This ending reinforces the endurance of Alutiiq knowledge despite colonial disruption and the responsibility to continue carrying and sharing it.

CONCLUSION

Russian and American colonial regimes fundamentally reshaped Alutiiq women's reciprocal relationship with the environment by disrupting subsistence labour, regulating women's health, and redefining domestic and economic life. As this article has shown, these interventions challenged women's autonomy and diverted their environmental knowledge towards colonial economies through the fur trade, canneries, mission schools, militarization, and environmental disaster. These pressures did not eradicate Alutiiq women's reciprocal relationship with the environment; instead, women continually adapted and negotiated environmental practices within their families and communities.

Across the precolonial, Russian, and American periods, Alutiiq women remained central to subsistence labour, reproductive and healing practices, and the sharing of environmental values. Through food preparation, midwifery, breastfeeding, menstrual practices, material production, and storytelling, women sustained their cultural values grounded in reciprocity, even as colonial forces sought to control and change them. The evidence presented exemplifies how women's labour was not static or coerced, but rather how Alutiiq women exercised agency by choosing when to adapt and participate.

In the contemporary period, Alutiiq women continue this work through the revitalization of subsistence labour, material culture, reproductive and healing knowledge, and storytelling. As Cutcha Risling Baldy describes, this process is the work of (re)righting, (re) writing, and (re)riteing Indigenous epistemologies and recentering women as cultural and environmental knowledge bearers.[161] Sherri Mitchell's articulation of recovering heart-based wisdom further illuminates how these practices reflect a reassertion of women's authority and responsibility within their communities.[162]

160 Chabitnoy, 'Water Lines,' 50.
161 Risling Baldy, *We Are Dancing For You*, 11.
162 Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions*, 121-122.

By tracing Alutiiq women's environmental roles over time, this article demonstrates how colonial forces disrupted but did not destroy the relationship Alutiiq women have with the environment. Rather than cast as passive actors in the story of colonial destruction, Alutiiq women emerge as agents of cultural survivance whose environmental knowledge sustained community continuity under coercive conditions. Centreing these histories expands environmental and gender history by foregrounding Indigenous women's lived experiences and by recognizing matricultural systems as foundational to reciprocal ecological relationships.

Ultimately, this analysis also extends beyond the Kodiak Archipelago. Recognizing Alutiiq women's environmental knowledge as a living and adaptive value system challenges dominant environmental frameworks that continue to privilege extraction over reciprocity. At this moment of ecological crisis, these histories correct colonial narratives of loss and serve as a model for sustainable relationships with the environment grounded in responsibility and balance. At the same time, they illuminate how entangled environmental and bodily sovereignty is; colonial efforts to control land have always been connected to their attempts to regulate Indigenous women's bodies. The persistence of midwifery, breastfeeding, and communal care represents cultural continuity and reassertion of authority over land and life. Ignoring the interconnectedness of these two systems risks reproducing colonial frameworks that erode environment and bodily autonomy, but centreing them opens up possibilities for thinking about how they work together to sustain environmental and reproductive futures. Therefore, Alutiiq women's practices are critical interventions into broader discussions on environmental and reproductive justice.

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Matriarchal Beads:

The Resistance, Resurgence, and Reclamation of

Traditional Indigenous Beadwork

TAMMY WOLFE

Abstract

Beading, weaving, and sewing are Indigenous cultural traditions that have been practiced by many nations across the North American continent since time immemorial; ultimately, these practices carry significant Indigenous knowledges and belief systems. The impact of colonization on Indigenous women throughout the continent limited and reduced the function of their matriarchal roles within their communities. In turn, they have adapted, evolved, and gained a stronger sense of culture and identity through their traditional artistic practices of beadwork; this includes the transmission of knowledge, culture, and identity. Indigenous matriarchs have used the reclamation and resurgence of the traditional practices of beadwork as a form

of resistance and decolonization. This article looks to explore, understand, and interpret these issues from the position of a First Nation Ininiw Iskwew (Swampy Cree woman) lens, as the author is a proud matriarch originating from the community of Norway House Cree Nation.

Keywords: matriarchy, beadwork, Indigenous, colonization, decolonization

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Resumé

Le perlage, le tissage et la couture sont des traditions culturelles autochtones pratiquées par de nombreuse nations à travers le continent nord-américain depuis des temps immémoriaux; en fin de compte, ces pratiques véhiculent d'importants savoirs et systèmes de croyances autochtones. L'impact de la colonisation sur les femmes autochtones à travers le continent a limité et réduit la fonction de leurs rôles matriarcaux au sein de leurs communautés. Pour leur part, les femmes se sont adaptées, ont évolué et ont acquis un sens plus fort de la culture et de l'identité grâce à leurs pratiques artistiques traditionnelles de travail des perles, ce qui a contribué à la transmission du savoir, de la culture et de l'identité. Les matriarches autochtones ont utilisé la récupération et la résurgence des pratiques traditionnelles du travail des perles comme forme de résistance et de décolonisation. Cet article cherche à explorer, comprendre et interpréter ces enjeux du point de vue d'une Première Nation Ininiw Iskwew (femme moskégonne), puisque l'auteure est une fière matriarche issue de la communauté de la Nation Crie Norway House.

Mots-clés : matriarcat, travail de perles (perlage), Autochtone, colonisation, décolonisation

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of matriarchy is complex, particularly from the perspective that gender is a colonial construct which has been utilized to create disruption to Indigenous community structures through assimilation. For the purpose of this article, matriarchy is defined as an individual's leadership role and not solely inclusive of colonial female gender

identification; rather, matriarchy here is presented as a fluid concept that encompasses Cree cultural values such as relationship, unity, equity, and respect. These leadership roles are based within a cultural community that supports, mentors, guides, and takes action to build a stronger and more collective community. Scholar Kim Anderson explores the use and importance of roles within the community (rather than emphasizing gender identification of females) in her 2011 book *Life Stages and Native Women*. As a First Nations Ininiw Iskwew, I largely follow the Cree value systems which embody these ideologies, as they relate to the teachings I have gained through my lived experiences and ceremonial ways of life.

Scholar Marie-Françoise Guédon argues that we may avoid a great deal of confusion by adopting the following perspective:

> (a) [C]onsidering matrilineality as having to do with kinship, and matriarchy as having to do with governance (following Peggy Reeves Sanday's proposition), then (b) paying attention to the ways in which matriarchy is defined by the communities who use the term to describe themselves - regularly not as a mirror image of patriarchy but as an entirely different, less hierarchical system in which women play a central role while upholding the importance and value of all members of the society, including men. (2020, p. 5)

It is imperative to understand and allow Indigenous Peoples to assert their own ways of articulating their ways of thinking, being, doing, and seeing in relation to the concept of matriarchy and matriculture because Indigenous understandings are complex and differ significantly from Western Eurocentric ways of understanding. This, in fact, is part of the reclamation of matriarchal roles within our communities and broader society, leading to decolonization.

Indigenous matriarchs have systematically been the targets of an imposed patriarchal society introduced by European settlers and Eurocentric worldviews; assimilation through the process of colonization changed the course of transmission of Indigenous knowledge systems, culture, and identity. In turn, Indigenous matriarchs adapted and evolved to gain a stronger sense of culture and identity through their traditional practices, including that of beadwork, a traditional cultural way of life that has been practiced by many nations which holds important epistemological and ontological belief systems and knowledges. As Bowler notes, "Beading as epistemology advances the idea that through the process of beading, individual and subjective knowledge, memory, and experience are created and then stitched into our beadwork." (2020, p. 23)

As understood through the practice of traditional Indigenous beadwork, this article outlines the historical underpinnings of the loss of matriarchal roles in Indigenous communities, resistance attempts throughout the colonization process, autoethnography based on my own first-hand experience as the Indigenous Scholar-in-Residence with Ininiw and sub-Arctic beadwork in the Hudson's Bay Company collections at the Manitoba Museum, and the current resurgence and reclamation of beadwork practices made through social media. Despite facing adversities, Indigenous matriarchs have continued to break barriers in the fight to asserting and reclaiming their traditional matriarchal roles since colonization, effectively utilizing beadwork as a vehicle of resistance, resurgence, reclamation, and decolonization.

Background

For centuries Indigenous epistemological and ontological understandings and knowledge bases were passed on from generation to generation through word of mouth in the form of oral tradition, storytelling, and teachings given by their Elders and the Knowledge Keepers within their communities and nations. Beads were used in a multitude of ways: to represent stories, events, relationships, visions, agreements, identities and/or treaties. Beading is a time-honored tradition that predates colonization. (Marsden, 2004, p. 58)

The transmission of knowledges largely occurred by offering traditional stories or oral traditions through the process, creation. and wearing of beadwork. A single piece of beadwork held deep and significant meaning to the artist and their community; these stories and meanings, derived from their everyday practices, influenced its creation. Often, the work was integrated into items of necessity and usefulness. (Berlo & Phillips, 2015, p. 136) For example, scholar Naomi Adelson describes the way in which James Bay Cree mothers securely wrap and bundle their infants lovingly in *waasipisuutaan* (moss bags), a traditional item created for babies made from fabric or leather, often stuffed with moss and designed to replicate a womb-like environment that would keep them warm. (2000, pp. 87-88) These moss bags, referred to in Ininimowin (Swampy Cree) as *wáspison*, are hand sewn and often embellished with beadwork; each bead is placed meticulously as an indicator of the love, patience, and care for the individual for whom it has been created.

The use of woven and sewn items such as baskets, blankets, or clothing was of the utmost importance to various nations across North America; upon them their survival depended, as well as their culture, identity, and the passing to younger generations of their deeply-rooted traditional epistemological and ontological knowledge systems.

> Through the crafting of a beading basket or belt, a young woman would learn cultural knowledge, access spiritual connections and cultural values, and cement relationships with other women and the natural world. (Ray, 2016, p. 367)

These traditions would prepare a young woman to thrive in the often harsh climates of the northern and sub-Arctic regions, as well as being able to pass these traditions on to others.

Their clothing was not only sewn for the warmth and the protection that it afforded against the elements, but significant time and care was taken to make these useful items beautiful and appealing to the eye; this often meant embellishing them with beadwork. For example, in their 2015 monograph, Berlo & Phillips state that in the central sub-Arctic, Cree women often used moose hide for clothing that might also be richly decorated. (p. 172) The delicate and elaborate weaving and beading techniques that were practiced since time immemorial have been passed down throughout the years to sustain not only their way of life, but also their self-sufficiency.

At the initial contact, partnerships and positive relations were abundant between Indigenous groups and the incoming European settlers. These partnerships were mutually beneficial: Indigenous peoples began to rely on the new trade goods brought by European settlers and the settlers needed the help of Indigenous peoples for many reasons. Both sides were gaining something through the trade process. (Miller, 2000, p. 50) A well-documented example of initial friendly relationships is from the eastern region Haudenosaunee and the gift of the Two-Row Wampum Belt, which also connects to the significance and traditional practice of beadwork prior to the impacts of colonization. (Hill & Coleman, 2019, p. 343-344)

The Two-Row Wampum Belt was hand-beaded with white and purple shell beads, woven to set the purple beads in two separate lines; this wampum belt held and holds significant meaning to the Haudenosaunee peoples. Often referred to as the first treaty negotiated between First Nations peoples and the incoming settlers, as well as being a significant example of Indigenous resistance through beadwork, the beaded wampum belt represents the paths of both the Indigenous peoples and the newcomers as distinct and autonomous. The lines - which never overlap - tell a story of both groups of people being separate and living alongside each other in peace and harmony. (Muller, 2004, p. 18) The creation of this treaty agreement incorporates Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies to show the deeply significant and spiritual teachings which Indigenous peoples utilized in the creation of their beadwork.

> The Haudenosaunee and the Dutch agreed on three principles to make this treaty last. The first was friendship; the Haudenosaunee and their white brothers will live in friendship. The second principle is peace; there will be peace between their two people. The final principle is forever; that this agreement will last forever. (Deyhowähda·dih, n.d.)

The Two Row Wampum Belt holds a sacred agreement and shows the significance of oral tradition; it was not only a piece of art gifted to explorers.

> Wampum belts, made from small tubular shell beads woven into symbolic designs, were essential elements in Hodinöhsö:ni' treaty-making, which was based on the belief that wampum could capture the words and pledges made in its presence. (Hill & Coleman, 2019, p. 327)

This belief made the use of wampum critical to maintaining the oral memory of treaties for the Haudenosaunee. Scholar Melinda Gray (2017) asserts that:

> Woven in the wampum treaty belts is a history of politics and a complicated value system that owes its existence to beads. Wampum belts were worn in the past as a signal of social and political status among Indigenous peoples. Today they are a symbol of resiliency that reflect the political marginalization that Indigenous leaders have endured throughout the centuries after European contact. (p. 3)

As stated, this ideology continues to be shared; it is still evident throughout various Indigenous cultures, within their traditions, knowledges, and understandings. (Joly de Lotbinière, 1991, p. 91)

BEADED RELATIONS

Within traditional Ininiw culture, women were seen as highly respected life-givers because of their ability to create life and give birth to children, ultimately holding the communities' next generations within their bodies. This was understood as a special gift given to women by the Creator and contributed to justifying women's matriarchal leadership roles within their communities. Cree women held the right to govern and make decisions within the community, and were important leaders. (Brown, 1980) Essentially,

> Cree kinship ties are matrilineal and societies were matriarchal. Matriarchy is a comprehensive societal structure that prescribes more equitable values and roles within the community. (Greyeyes & Vipond, 2022, p. 13)

In her book *Life Stages and Native Women* (2011), Kim Anderson argues that Indigenous women's roles were of the utmost importance to governing the community. As respected Saulteaux Elder named Mosom Danny Musqua explains in their interview with Anderson:

> We never had any doubt that women were the centre and core of our community and our nation. No nation ever existed without the fortitude of our grandmothers, and all of those teachings have to be recovered. (p. 162)

The imposition of Western cultural and social structures shifted and changed the role of women in Indigenous communities, affecting not only women but also men, Elders, children, and gender-diverse individuals. The devastating loss of women's vital roles culminated with the need for resistance, reclamation, and resurgence of traditional practices of Indigenous knowledge systems in order to work towards decolonization.

Specifically, the overwhelming influence of a Eurocentric patriarchal worldview dismantled the traditional matriarchal roles of Indigenous women and impacted families, communities, and nations. Patriarchal society disempowers women and many Indigenous women became disconnected from this [matriarchal] way of knowing and were unable to pass this knowledge to subsequent generations. (Bowler, 2020, p. 1) Scholar Lana Ray (2016) states in her 2016 article 'Beading Becomes a Part of Your Life' that patriarchy has created a hierarchal structure that holds Indigenous women and their modes of knowledge production and transmission as less intellectual in comparison to males and, therefore, less valuable. (p. 366)

The beadwork-based transmission of traditional knowledge systems predominantly came through the women. "While both men and women wear beads and their manufacture is often a male activity, working with beads is generally categorized as women's knowledge." (Racette, 2008, p. 70) Furthering this point, scholar Carmen Robertson (2017) states:

> …collaborations and mentoring among women of the Plains were key aspects of such beadwork production in the past as well as the present. Sharing patterns and ideas, support, and community remain at the heart of beaded art practices. (p. 15)

Indigenous women have been passing on traditional knowledge of cultural practices such as beadwork for generations; ancestral knowledge has always been an integral part of Indigenous identity and culture and this was disrupted by colonialism.

Indigenous peoples in North America have a symbiotic relationship to their traditional lands which directly ties them to their cultural practices. Most, if not all Indigenous nations practiced some form of braiding, weaving, sewing, and beading preceding the introduction of glass beads in early contact through trading. These sewing and weaving practices developed over time based not only upon styles relating to Indigenous people's specific cultural knowledge, but the materials that grew naturally in their region and were available to them. Beads could be made from a variety of different natural materials, such as shells, stones, clay, copper, nuts, seeds, pearls, and animal materials such as hooves or horns, teeth, and bones. (Bowler, 2020 & Dublin, 2009, p. 263) To further this point, ecological knowledge of their territory and region influenced not only the creation of naturally-made beads, but also their way of life and spiritual practices; these are also closely tied to a nation's culture, identity and had a large role in the creation of their art. (Berlo & Phillips, 2015) For example, "Porcupine quill work, a sacred art form connected to the ceremonies, societies, and protocols of the Plains peoples, served semiotically as a direct signifier of the land, with quills culled from porcupines and dyes derived from plants and other natural materials." (Robertson, 2017, p. 16)

Moving into the sub-Arctic region, Cree women living in the James Bay area were highly influenced by their surroundings and not only put to use the natural materials available to them but found inspiration to create distinct patterns, shapes and techniques. Traditional knowledges stemmed from the lands upon which each nation lived and guided the transmission and practice of beadwork.

RESISTANCE

Glass beads were introduced by European and French explorers through trade with Indigenous peoples in the 1700s; this began the evolution and ever-changing ways in which Indigenous peoples would practice their traditions of weaving, sewing, and beading. More specifically, as Indigenous nations across the eastern and plains regions began to integrate the use of glass beads over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cultural and artistic expressions changed and adapted the new technologies to suit shifting identities. (Robertson, 2017, p. 16) Beads became a staple of trade between the explorers and Indigenous peoples, as new glass beads came in colors that were unavailable; popular colors included white, black, red, green, or blue. (Gray,

2017, p. 7) The adaptation of traditional methods of beading to new materials began; the quills, feathers, and natural pigments that adorned traditional garments were, for example, interspersed or replaced with glass beads, trade cloth, and new designs, (Robertson, 2017, p. 16) It was not unusual for the incoming European settlers to notice how Indigenous women took great pride in their appearance and their usage of newly introduced glass beads. The traders commented upon the care in which Cree women took in fashioning their hair in elaborate knots and plaits, painting their faces and adorning their garments and persons with beads and bangles." (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 21) Scholar Sherry Farrell Racette asserts that "Women's artistic work gives evidence to the critical role they played in integrating new materials and ideas, while simultaneously maintaining a certain stable and continuous core of ancient knowledge." (2009, p. 285) Beadwork became a form of resistance and an assertion of matriarchal roles.

Over time, the influence of the hierarchal patriarchal system that was implemented and imposed on Indigenous peoples through forced colonization and the assimilation process deeply transformed Indigenous communities and the traditional matriarchal roles of women, leading to widespread adaptation of cultural practices. European settlers did not respect the traditional matriarchal roles of Indigenous women, as they viewed men to be the stronger of the sexes and the leaders. In her 1980 book *Many Tender Ties*, scholar Sylvia Van Kirk states that "Fur trade writers articulate a view of women as being the fragile, weaker sex dependent upon the chivalrous protection of men." (p. 17) When government systems, policies, and legally documented agreements began to be implemented in the early stages of colonization, the impacts of a patriarchal society quickly became evident.

> The Indian Act of 1876 further emphasized patrilineal descent and legitimate birth as criteria for Indian status. These criteria were integral to European notions of the male-female relationship and the role of women in society. (Green, 1985, p. 81-95)

These government documents further strengthened European legal control over Indigenous peoples, which, in turn, further undermined the traditional roles of Indigenous matriarchs. This created further impediments to the passage of knowledge systems to the next generations.

Residential schools have a complex history and will only be briefly touched on here, as they are not the primary focus of this article. Their creation was a major factor in the loss of traditional matriarchal roles and connections to beadwork across North America. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission states,

> Residential schools were a systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples. (2015, p. 107)

Children were forcefully removed from their parents, most significantly from the nurturing and caregiving of their mothers, their culture, and communities. Unfortunately, Indigenous children captured by residential schools lost an understanding of their own culture and ways of being, creating confusion and the loss of identity. The lack of family connection adversely affected each and every child that was placed within a residential school.

> Aboriginal children learned to despise the traditions and accomplishments of their people, to reject the values and spirituality that had always given meaning to their lives, to distrust the knowledge and life ways of their families and kin. By the time they were free to return to their villages, many had learned to despise themselves. (RCAP, 1996, p. 223-224)

Over the course of time, in response to the abduction of their children and the assimilation process to which they were subjected, Indigenous matriarchs began to turn away from traditional practices such as beadwork. In 2017, scholar Melinda Gray argues in 'Beads: Symbols of Indigenous Cultural Resilience and Value' that "The trauma experienced was intergenerational and the impact is still being felt today." (p.14)

The many changes to the *Indian Act*, such as the banning of Indigenous ceremonies, further undermined the roles of matriarchs within their communities. This in turn, led Indigenous peoples to follow Western narratives and ways of being.

> Because of the harsh economic conditions that were created from colonial government policies and lack of access to land, beadwork became commercialized, bringing into question the innate cultural knowledge of the craft. (Ray, 2016, p. 365)

The transmission of knowledge about and an appreciation for the traditional practice of beadwork began to lose not only appeal, but during the period of known as the 'time lag,' the active creation of beaded items in Indigenous communities essentially stopped. (Berlo & Phillips, 2015, p. 248)

The rescindment of the federal ban on their ceremonies in 1951 allowed Indigenous communities to practice their culture openly once again without fear of persecution or

imprisonment; this included beading sacred items. However, the irreversible impacts of the residential schools were evident. A glaring example provided by Farrell Racette (2009) reports that a letter received from Brandon Sanatorium in 1959 detailed,

> I only have two Indian girls at present that will do beadwork. The Indians we have here do very beautiful embroidery, crocheting and knitting, but the younger generation do not know how to bead … they tell me their grandmothers can do it, but they themselves do not care to learn. (p. 299)

The passing of traditions to younger generations of matriarchs was significantly obstructed during this period. Research has indicated that trauma is passed on through parental bloodlines and may offer answers as to why this occurred. Scholar Renee Linklater shares within her 2014 book *Decolonizing Trauma Work* the following:

> Traumatic memory contributes to Indigenous people's experiences. In theory, Indigenous knowledge and contemporary research indicate that inter/multigenerational trauma is passed on through parental/institutional patterning as well as bloodlines. In Indigenous thought "blood memory" is the occurrence of an experience of those that have gone before us being embedded in our physical and psychological being." (p. 23)

However, if the theory of the genetic transmission of trauma holds true and blood memory carries trauma patterning, the theory also indicates, therefore, that blood may carry patterns of resiliency and strength which contribute to an actionable resurgence of lost or lagging traditions. Despite the devastating impacts of colonialism, many Indigenous women still have strong ties to their cultures and connections that gravitate them towards their matriarchal roles, culture, identity and knowledge systems. The creation of art in the form of beadwork may help to move them towards decolonization and the restoration of their traditional status and role.

RESURGENCE

In more recent times, many artists have used museum collections as a means to reconnect with their artistic legacy, and there they find objects that have preserved artistic principles, aesthetic standards, and techniques. These objects also tell stories. (Farrel Racette, 2009, p. 304) As the Indigenous Scholar-in-Residence at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, Manitoba, I was able to create my own piece of beadwork inspired by the Ininiw and sub-Arctic pieces of beadwork held by the museum within the

Hudson's Bay collection. I believe that my calling to beadwork is tied directly to my spirit connection as a First Nations Ininiw Iskwew and this ties together with my understanding of how I came to be given an opportunity to sit and visit with the collections of beadwork of the ancestors at the Manitoba Museum. As well, I am admittedly privileged to have firsthand experience attending and participating in the ceremonies of my people. This is a sacred gift; I have been honoured to carry sacred narratives comprised of complex and elaborate understandings of Ininiw cosmological connections to the cosmos and all living things through Indigenous ways of knowing.

The term *wâhkôtowin* (All My Relations) refers to Indigenous people's relationship to themselves, their kinship relationships to family and all human beings, the earth, the land, the water, the animals, the plants, the cosmos, and connections to ancestors and spirit. It identifies that all things are related and connected. The traditional knowledge I have been gifted by Ininiw Elders that I now carry in order to understand these connections is significant. It directly correlates with where and how I came to be involved with the Manitoba Museum where I connected with, studied, and visited the many beaded pieces, predominantly from the sub-Arctic regions, that are not openly on display to the public.

A specific sacred teaching gifted to me through ceremony encompasses Ininiw traditional knowledge systems and matriarchal wisdom; it describes how all things are connected within our lives, our purpose, or connections. Not only do they make us who we are, but they bring us to who we are to be within our lives, and even beyond to the spirit world. We are sent to Mother Earth in order to seek out knowledge to learn along our journeys, until we travel back to the spirit world. In the moments that I sat visiting with the beadwork and connecting to beads as I created my own beaded piece, using the collection as inspiration, I felt that I was sitting in ceremony with the beads, alongside my Ininiw ancestors, and alongside the Indigenous matriarchs who also carried this knowledge and have passed it on to me through their beadwork, despite the lack of physical meeting with them. Rather, I have spiritually connected with them through their beadwork.

I am not alone in this connection; well-known beader Jeanine Krauchi relates that their relationship with the Manitoba Museum has helped them regain the aesthetic standards of the past and the museum collections largely inspire their beadwork. (Farrel Racette, 2009, p. 305) My connection to my matriarchal Ininiw traditional knowledge systems and connections to ancestral beadwork within the museum is founded within these deeply rooted connections. Although I am largely a self-taught artist, I believe that the teachings

of these traditions are held in my blood memory and are carried through my spirit and the beads. The beads tell the stories of my connection to my ancestral matriarchs.
I have sadly been impacted by the legacy of colonial policies due to my mother's trauma during the so-called Sixties Scoop, which resulted in my own disconnection with my heritage. Nevertheless, through the practice of beadwork I have worked tirelessly to overcome the impacts of inter- and multi-generational traumas that have effected me and my family. Healing through beadwork supports the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness of an individual, and healing oneself connects us to not only our own wellness but shapes the way we can connect to community and the reclamation of matriarchal roles. Cree scholar Lakota Wood corroborates my experience, stating that beadwork is not only a method of healing and self-connection but also a method of storytelling that allows a physical practice of knowledge transmission. (2025, p. 27)
Healing through beadwork has allowed me to gratefully honour my leadership role as an Ininiw matriarch, wherein I use the gift of beadwork as a way to share my stories, teachings, what I gained through my experience at the Manitoba Museum, and the significant epistemological and ontological understandings which I have gained through ceremony. This is central to the resurgence and reclamation of matriarchal roles within our communities.

Ceremonial understanding, traditions, and ancestral ways of knowing continue to be practiced by Indigenous peoples and play a significant role in the empowerment of Indigenous matriarchs and their connections in their communities. The practice of beadwork at powwows has proven itself as a vehicle for knowledge transmission and the passing on of traditions from Indigenous matriarchs to their peers and younger women.

> Beadwork on regalia may represent temporality by harkening back to past patterns with traditional meanings while simultaneously evolving it with modern techniques and tools that show the continuity and future of the art form. (Gray, 2017, p. 19)

Although the effects of colonialism and patriarchy have struck matriarchal roles strongly, the practices and knowledges tied to traditional matriarchal roles are stronger. Dakota Cree scholar Paulete Poitras (2025) says the following:

> Beadwork is a necessary and living link to ancestry. The beadwork serves as a tangible and spiritual connection to their ancestors, mirroring the regalia of past generations and embodying their cultural heritage. Beadwork is for accessing 'ancestral,' allowing the speaker to connect with the wisdom and experiences of their ancestors through the act of creation. (p. 25)

Through family dynamics, communities, and their identity, Indigenous peoples have committed to resistance, and this resistance is seen within today's society and in the lives of Indigenous people from all walks of life. Indigenous women's traditional roles are no longer missing and left unacknowledged. Cree scholar Priscilla Settee (2001), celebrates the matriarchal roles of fifteen women in her book *The Strength of Women: Āhkamèyimowak*; this last term is a Cree word meaning "the strength that drives women to flourish and work for change within their communities." (p. III) One of the women, Lindsay Knight from the Cree community of Muskoday First Nation in Saskatchewan, practices her ceremonial traditions as a form of reclamation of matriarchal traditions. She describes her experience as follows:

> … as having strength beyond my own awareness sometimes and [I] find that I heal for my people and then take some of the weight for those that need help. I take no credit for this. It comes from another place. We are all given gifts from the Creator and when we find them, we are meant to use them. It is a responsibility and we do not have much control over the outcomes… I have always been humble and taught to give thanks. (as quoted in Settee, p. 68)

Her understanding comes from the ceremonial rituals and teachings that are gifted to one from Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and matriarchs within ceremony, which continue to support the healing and reclamation of matriarchal roles within Indigenous communities. Despite continued negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated throughout colonization and within society today, Indigenous matriarchs have taken control of their own identities and abilities to assert their traditional leadership roles and they use beadwork in their fight towards resurgence and decolonization.

As an Ininiw Iskwew who practices my cultural traditions, ceremony, and beadwork, I look towards other matriarchs to find inspiration, connection, and strength from those that have gone before me. Scholar Sherry Farrel Racette (2009) credits this to the work created by historic artists which sets the highest standards of craftsmanship and continues to inspire generations of contemporary artists. (p. 306) Indigenous women have reclaimed their traditional matriarchal roles in many ways with the use of beadwork, proving that they are a force to be reckoned with. Cree scholar Tara Kappo writes in *Mîskistahikâcimo: to tell a story through beadwork* that the influence of her familial matriarchs connected her to beadwork has been a catalyst for decolonization and the assertion of her matriarchal role. (2021, p. 47-52) The practice of beadwork is an important part of reclamation of traditional roles and matriarchs have stepped up to this challenge.

RECLAMATION

Today, the reclamation of Indigenous cultural practices, knowledge systems, and identity has begun making a buzz through the use of technology and social media, but reclamation has been an active focus of Indigenous peoples across North America for countless years. With the transmission of knowledge going viral through social media, the ability to learn, understand, and pick up information has drastically increased for many Indigenous peoples and an Indigenous renaissance of sorts has begun. Indigenous peoples are becoming educated on cultural knowledge, identities, and Indigenous beading practices in larger numbers and this has prompted people to connect in new and innovative ways. Scholars Amber Brown and Angela Knowles state in their 2022 chapter 'Holding Space for Future Matriarchs: Digital Platforms for Resurging Solidarity' that Indigenous beading has begun trending:

> …as a part of holding space for those who may be detached from beading teachings, Indigenous people such as Michelle Chubb (@indigenous_Baddie on Instagram/Tiktok), who is Nehiyaw/Cree, share tutorials on social media about how to bead and even make Jingle dresses… This work is done to allow for cultural reclamation and knowledge sharing. (Fellows & Smith, 2022, p. 260)

The reclamation of beadwork on global platforms has served as a crucial tool not only to allow others to learn this art form but also to gain fundamental teachings associated with their matriarchal roles as Indigenous people.

> Beading fosters communal engagement and relations and is a catalyst for convening collective cultural and social movement. While the materiality of land cannot be replaced, these engagements and relations can be fostered and nourished in online spaces, witnessed in the rise of Zoom beading circles during the Covid-19 pandemic. (Ansloo, 2022, p. 4)

The practice of beadwork is a symbol of Indigenous resilience and has been utilized to combat the effects of colonialism and the loss of matriarchal roles within Indigenous communities. This artistic resistance to colonialism is a form of decolonization. The use of beadwork with contemporary inspiration is the focus of bead workers in current contexts. Essentially, "a reaffirmation of Indigenous epistemological and ontological and foundations in contemporary times offers a central form of resistance to colonial forces that have consistently and methodically denigrated and silenced them." (Wilson, 2005, p. 255)

Beadwork is also being used to resist colonialism through its involvement in political messages such as *Land Back*, a well-known activist movement which often includes rematriation and Indigenous sovereignty. Activist bead workers use traditionally sourced materials such as hides, horse hair, dentalium shells, and unique details to represent and identify specific nations.

Bead workers are reclaiming their traditional practices is large numbers, which is making a significant impact on younger generations by continuing the transmission of knowledge systems, embodying Indigenous ways of knowing, epistemologies and ontologies; all of these lead to a reclamation of matriarchal roles. Contemporary bead artist Nadia Myre says,

> The production of re-imagined pieces epitomizes personal learning, re-skilling, as well as a system of knowledge transmission. Their creation allows me to restore the cognitive processes that have been the backbone of Native cultures; in revitalizing a material practice, I am performing a decolonial gesture and forging a cultural identity. (as cited in Robertson, 2017, p. 19)

As Lana Ray notes in her article 'Beading Becomes Part of Your Life, "Over the generations, Indigenous women have subtly and cleverly tapped into the power of beading to resist colonization and assimilation, renewing and maintaining Indigenous knowledge systems." (2016, p. 367) The holistic, intricate, and intentional understandings embedded in beadwork are deeply significant in how and why the transmission of knowledge is important to Indigenous peoples.

> The recovery of traditional knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization because for many of us it is only through a consciously critical assessment of how the historical process of colonization has systematically devalued our Indigenous ways that we can begin to reverse the damage wrought from those assaults. (Wilson, 2005, p. 257)

The practice and transference of traditional knowledge systems through beadwork is a valuable way that Indigenous peoples are reclaiming ways of knowing in order to begin to heal and resist colonial damage, contributing to decolonization processes, and reaffirming matriarchal roles in Indigenous communities.

CONCLUSION

Beadwork is an integral part of Indigenous traditions and knowledge-based systems since time immemorial, holding deeply rooted epistemological and ontological understandings. Indigenous peoples have been irrevocably changed by the impacts of colonialism throughout North America, creating a disconnection to their traditional practices and knowledge systems, as well as the loss of traditional matriarchal roles throughout history. Traditional practices, however, have not all been lost to history: beadwork has not only lasted the test of time, but the resistance to colonization embedded in the practice of beadwork makes lasting impressions on the lives of matriarchs, their intrinsic roles, and ultimately their communities. Beadwork carves out a path for the process of decolonization through the use of this beautiful artform because of the strong epistemological and ontological knowledge-based systems found within them.

As scholar Franz Fanon states in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, decolonization is a process in which the history of the colonized creates a new rhythm, a new generation, a new language, and a new humanity in order to becomes the focus and creation of liberation (1963, p. 2) Liberation of the matriarchal roles of Indigenous women from the assimilation process and the oppression of patriarchal Western society has been created through the use of beadwork. Decolonization has occurred not only through the resistance efforts and survival of beadwork, but through its resurgence, since decolonizing successes can be identified in the processes of reconnection and reclamation of beadwork by Indigenous peoples.

In essence, decolonization and the reclamation and resurgence of matriarchal roles continues to be moved forward through the practices of beadwork. Scholars Alfred and Corntassel (2005) assert that decolonization begins “with people transcending colonialism on an individual basis – a strength that soon reverberates outward from the self to family, clan, community and into all of the broader relationships that form an Indigenous existence.” (p. 612) Beadwork is a site of resistance to colonialism and its resurgence is a powerful contribution to Indigenous women’s reclamation of matriarchal roles within their communities. Beadwork is art as resistance to the impacts of colonialism; its reclamation and resurgence embodies and materializes decolonization.

About the Author

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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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From the Earth

TIA TIDWELL, MA

Abstract

This short lyrical reflection traces the layered meanings carried within my Inupiaq name, Puya—'from the earth.' Through memories of my aana *and her sister, I explore how names connect us to those who came before. The narrative moves between childhood recollections, the weight of intergenerational survival, and the sacred responsibilities of care at the end of life. In witnessing death and remembering survival, I reflect on how carrying a name is also carrying love, grief, and obligation across time. This piece asks what it means to be known by one's 'real name' and how names continue to release memory, presence, and kinship into the world.*

Keywords: Inupiaq, Inuit, naming traditions, family, matriculture

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Resumé

Cette courte réflexion lyrique retrace les significations superposées portées

dans mon nom inupiaq, Puya — « de la terre ». En évoquant mes souvenirs de mon aana *et de sa sœur, j'explore comment les noms nous relient à ceux qui nous ont précédés. Le récit oscille entre les souvenirs d'enfance, le poids de la survie intergénérationnelle et les responsabilités sacrées des soins à la fin de la vie. En étant témoin de la mort et en me souvenant de la survie, je réfléchis à la façon dont porter un nom revient aussi à porter amour, chagrin et obligation à travers le temps. Ce texte demande ce que signifie être connu par son « vrai nom » et comment les noms continuent de libérer la mémoire, la présence et la parenté dans le monde.*

Mots-clés : Inupiaq, Inuit, traditions de nommage, la famille, matriculture

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My Inupiaq name is Puya. I was told it means ‘from the earth.’ We are all from the earth though. I am named after my *aana*’s sister, who I only remember in death. Hers was the first death I attended; too young to keep still, I played on the floor under her hospital bed and wondered about the smallness of her body. Like a child, but weak and wrinkled. My mother, white, took the name I was given and inked it into my birth certificate. It’s on my driver’s license, my driver’s license which has somehow made its way back to the tundra of home. I lost it on a walk. I like to think of it, so formal, amongst the berries. My mother didn’t know that back then these names were still secret.

When we carry a name, we carry and are carried by the people that held the name before us. We love and are responsible for love, and other things. I’ve learned a few things about my namesake. She was joyful, quick to laughter, a little stern, good, strong. I am these things too. I know when she was a child her mother died after giving birth to a boy. Alongside her sister they tried so hard to keep him alive. Straining milk from rice, dripping the residue from spoons into his mouth. He made it a few weeks and was taken by death a few days before the rest of them were taken by the Indian agent.

You should expect rain and wind after the death of those we love. The earth spends time sweeping traces of the buried back into the earth with their body. Tender.

I have so many visceral memories with my *aana*, but as I think about relating to her as a sister I will tell of a time I acted terribly. My *aana*, owning and running a small store in our village was in town on business. I stayed with her at the hotel. Once night fell I

began to realize that my sister-cousin had a real doll. I began to cry, for sleep and a doll like the one my cousin held.

From the ingenuity that scarcity yields my *aana* crafted one expertly, with nothing but chlorinated hotel towels and rubber bands. Internally marveling at how much like a doll this white bundle was, I still cried. Eventually she walked me to a nearby store where I picked three dolls -- a white cat with a peppermint candy belly, a purple mouse peppered with sugared drops, and a pink dog decorated with jelly beans. Each held a corresponding scent. I still have the purple one today. Making sense of this now I think she blanketed me in the protection from hurt, real or perceived, that she could not have protected her sister from. I was used to lack at the time. And I don't remember another time I cried over something another child had. Making sense of this now I wonder if my namesake, younger sister, stole the chance to cry for something soft when their childhood was sharp hard edges.

My *aana* used to do manual labor on the weekends for the residential school that kept her captive. She used her earnings to buy clothing for herself and her siblings because the ones she came with were burned on arrival. She told me sometimes she would buy bubble gum for her young sister. Imagine that, at nine, sweeping, washing, digging, for the dignity of being able to place effervescent sweetness into the mouth of the one she loved and cared for. I am still intoxicated by the maturity and innocence that bubble gum represents to me. The way it, for a moment, floods every sense.

They survived this. And both lived to be Elders. Respected, in part, for surviving.
Between this and a whole life came the morning I woke to knowing it was time to be with my *aana* in death. I came home to her as her eldest granddaughter, but I also knew that I came as her sister. As a sister who has already experienced death and therefore knows how to soothe the dying.

Memory gone, my *aana* was the same person she has always been. A hernia pressed on her bladder. Pain made her face and words twist. Sometimes she remembered me and other times she didn't. But once, she looked into my face and said *ooo*, *my pretty baby*, *you came to be with me*. I've always been a pretty baby to her. Even though for the last five years she's held my empty belly each time she's seen me, out of love for a pregnancy that has long since been birthed. That baby carries the name of her partner, my *taata*, who died then, and triggered the slow deterioration of my *aana*'s mind. This is just to say that when I came, I wasn't ready for her to go, and when she left, I knew it was right.

He came to me in a dream. It was so good to see him. Happy as he was. Strong as he was. Squatting and putting hot rocks into a gut bag. Making *tuttu* soup for *aana*, he told me.

So joyful in her coming. He was ropey, rangy, eager.

He never knew how to cook, my aunts said.

Maybe after all these years he finally figured it out, I said.

Where I saw him the good kind of snow shadowed the ground around him. A nearby lake held a thick slick sheet of ice. I slipped through a round opening and found I could continue to breathe in the sharp water. Bubbles streamed upward around me and an Arctic char slid past. I was warm.

As her granddaughter I was scolded by my aunt for crying. *Keep your tears. She can feel them. Do you want her to stay like this?* I took to staring at a sinister looking child crafted snowman school project hanging on the wall when I felt losing want to well over. As her granddaughter I made promises to care for the children she loved and worried over. *You don't need to worry* aana, *I will keep them safe.* This task is one I am a little afraid I can't uphold.

As her sister I had the strength and stamina to stay. I organized and fed those drawn by love and fear to her side. As her sister I comforted. *It's okay, she will be with me now.* As her sister I stayed in bed with her, with one hand in hers and the other in a continuance of brushing her still full hair from her papery skin. And I sang. As I sang her white silver hair grew more and more black. Her *anyaq* said she was pretty-ing up for her honey, and laughed.

When I was a kid my *aana* used to sing vibrantly, full throated, waves of sound just ricocheting off the walls of the Klondike motel. She sang in Inupiaq. It always surprised me because every other time I heard her speak the language of our people it was a whisper. I am forgetting to say she did this in her sleep. She was asleep and completely still, emanating strength and power from beneath the polyester brown bedding.

I remember her telling me when I was a child that what she remembered most from her time in residential school was the sound of crying at night. Sleep brings her to shout the words they tried to kill. And there I was a child, lapping the milk of these sounds by her bedside.

My eldest daughter carries my *aana*'s name. Kivaaluk. And I have been caring for her for twelve years now. Because of the challenges she faces, I will care for her until I die. But anyways, when it came time to make sense of the hospice tackle box. Looking like a tackle box, and given to aid us in our efforts to tackle the paraphernalia of making death hurt

less, I already knew what to do. I could cut and crush pills and make judgments about the interactions and amounts within. It was always going to be my place to take care of the one who carries that name.

When she finally left us, it was a leaving and a coming to both at once. I welcomed her and said goodbye.

Tell me your name. No, your real name. This is what the children say, with repetition, with hunger. Tell me who you really are. When I was a child the names were a current under the surface. The raven sound of water bubbling beneath heavy ice. Now they are releasing, like methane from the permafrost. Whispering over the surface, matter released from sleep.

About the Author

Tia Tidwell is an Assistant Professor of Alaska Native Studies. She belongs to the Nunamiut people of Anaktuvuk Pass and is an interdisciplinary PhD candidate. Her research investigates cultural artifacts produced by settler society to understand foundational conceptions about land and belonging and the relationship between imagination and policy.

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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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A Meeting at Grandma's Camp (Selections)

LUCIE MARIE-MAI DUFRESNE, PhD

Abstract

This excerpt from a longer paper presents a detailed description of a 1998 'supper tour' to Atsua Ku, a First Nations fish camp on the Yukon River. This first-person narrative by the late Dr. Lucie Dufresne explores the negotiated identities and relationships of the inhabitants and owners of the fish camp with herself as the lone tourist to visit that day.

Keywords: Indigenous tourism, Yukon Territory, matriculture

Resumé

Cet extrait d'un article plus long présente une description détaillée d'une « tournée de souper » en 1998 à Atsua Ku, un camp de pêche des Premières Nations sur le fleuve Yukon. Ce récit à la première personne, rédigé par feu Dre

Lucie Dufresne, explore les identités et relations négociées des habitants et des propriétaires du camp de pêche, avec elle-même comme seule touriste à visiter ce jour-là.

Mots-clés : tourisme autochtone, territoire du Yukon, matriculture

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CONTEXT

Atsua Ku (Grandma's Camp) Riverboat Adventures is a three year old family-owned and operated First Nations business. It offers Yukon River boat tours and stays at a 'traditional' First Nations fish camp. These stays can include Native foods, cultural activities, nature walks, Native entertainment (songs, dances, storytelling), and overnight accommodation in turn-of-the-century double wall canvas tents.

The camp is located forty-five minutes away from downtown Whitehorse by riverboat. It is located on the northern bank of the river and occupies a fairly large plateau above the high water mark. The area is lightly wooded with spruce, willow, aspen, and birch predominating. The camp is set up in a cleared area overlooking a creek that runs into the river. This cleared area contains a cook tent, a wash stand, a smoking tent to process fish and game, two picnic tables, a large framework structure that can be covered with tarps to protect against rain or sun, a children's play area, and a central fire pit around which the storytelling and other cultural activities are held. The only permanent structures are the tent poles and frames which are made from tree trunks. Everything else is canvas tenting or blue plastic tarp. These are taken down when the camp is not being lived in. In the neighbouring trees are situated the (4 – 6 ?) sleeping tents and outhouses. Gravel has been put down to cover all walkways and the area around the fire pit. I was told that this was done to control the mud and to limit walking on non-gravel areas. This is a working food gathering and processing camp as well as a tourist attraction.

Atsua Ku is one of a growing number of First Nations private enterprises set up by individuals and families to take advantage of the large yearly tourist influx, especially of that number of tourists who are interested in 'wildlife adventures' or First Nations history. All of these venues are away from urban centres and most are accessible only by boat and only through a guide. Road access is limited and maps to their locations are non-existent. Access is one of the commodities you buy as you 'book' your adventure.

Two sisters own and operate this camp. Lin (*sic*), the eldest, is the cook and grounds manager. Dorothy is the bookkeeper, promoter, and workshop instructor. Their younger brother, Carl Sams, is the riverboat operator and woodsman. Other sisters also cook occasionally when a large tour group is being entertained. The current members of this family consider themselves as continuing in the footsteps of their grandparents who had used this site as a yearly fish gathering and processing site. Prior to this use, the site had been the Croucher Creek Wood Camp (fuelwood cutting and storage site) for the steam boats until the 1930s. I could not ascertain if the site had been a fish camp prior to being a wood camp. However, the Sams family now state that they are reclaiming their heritage and continuing in their grandparents' footsteps.

When the two sisters decided to set up this camp three years ago, they had to reclaim the land from poachers and clean up after more than thirty years of abandonment and misuse. The camp had been used as a 'party' site and occasional dump, and was littered with over ten truckloads of garbage, like discarded camp equipment and broken bottles. It was now a pleasant, clean, unpretentious, comfortable, obviously lived in and cared for site that was someone's home, and not just set up for tourist activities.

15 AUGUST 1998 VISIT

Later in the day I called my B&B and was told that the fish camp had called: I would be picked up at the boat dock. I walked to the boat dock and sat down to wait, since I was early. I didn't see any sign indicating that I was at the right place and no other person arrived to wait with me. There was no way for me to reduce the uncertainty of the situation, so I tried to wait as calmly as possible. Finally, a young Native woman in office clothes approached me and asked for me by name. She identified herself as being the camp's booking clerk and that she was there to greet me. I asked her if I was the only one this evening and she said, Yes. I didn't know what to make of this, so I asked her if this was usual. She replied, No, but the family is at the fish camp anyways and if I didn't mind being a guest at their family meal, I would be welcomed. I decided I had nothing to lose if I went. Finally the boat arrived and the young woman left.

Carl Sams introduced himself and invited me into the boat. He was dressed like most everyone in the area that didn't have an office job: jeans, check shirt, jean jacket, and visored camp. He also had on a life jacket and he had a large folding knife at his belt. He instructed me in how to put on a life jacket; that done, with me seated comfortably in the small flat-bottomed boat, we left the dock and proceeded down the river towards the camp.

Carl informed me that the river tour was a major part of the event and that he would be identifying for me sites of special historical, ecological, or cultural interest. He would also make sure that I would see plenty of wildlife, so he hoped I had brought a camera and binoculars. I thanked him, told him I would not be taking pictures, and assured him that I didn't need to take pictures.

Our trip took well over the forty-five minutes allotted. We discussed many of the sites he pointed out. I was also interested in the wildlife and appreciated the particularities of the habitat and ecological adaptation that he identified. We also lapsed into silence quite often as he would bring the boat more slowly towards a loon family or a coyote hunting on the bank. We seemed to relax into silence and eventually he would simply point towards something rather than verbally call my attention to it. Time seemed to stretch and neither one of us seemed to mind.

Eventually, we arrived at the camp and as we were greeted by Dorothy, Carl was quick to state to her that I had noticed the coyote we had observed and not him. This seemed important and startling information and he repeated it several times during my stay there. It seemed to mark me as unusual and somehow worthy of special attention. I came to understand later that the power of observation is a skill that is highly prized in this culture that teaches its children through example and rarely through formal teaching or question & answer.

After introducing me to the other people on site (five people: two sisters with one son each and their brother), Dorothy walked me over the grounds and brought me to an area behind the camp and more deeply into the forest. She showed me two small log cabins used by her grandparents as summer and winter hunting shelters. She spoke with pride of the resourcefulness and skill of her grandparents as they lived off the land. She also made a point of telling me that she had been born in one of the cabins and that they had been used as recently as her childhood (thirty years ago?). She showed me where she had found her grandmother's fleshing site where she dressed skins and smoked them. She showed me the stone scraper she had found when cleaning up the site. These were treasures and they identified her to herself (and to me) as a First Nation woman still attached to the land.

Interspersed with these comments were other decrying the sorry state of the cabins and the almost total vandalism of the buildings and their contents. This was recent; she said that when the site was abandoned, when it was no longer a wood camp or a working fish camp, squatters had moved in, especially during the seventies, and they had 'lacked respect' for the land and for the site. They had stolen, broken, or moved most of the belongings left in the cabins. They had broken trees and turned the site into a dump. They had 'lacked respect' and now that the family had reclaimed the site and cleaned it, her

grandparents would ‘know respect’ again. The theme of respect was becoming general, both during the boat trip and now, during the walking tour of the site.

My silence and my acute attention surprised my interlocutor; she asked more than once if I was interested in what she said and if I had any questions. I said that I enjoyed her presentation and that no, I had no questions. Finally, I did ask a few technical questions about skin processing techniques and she was surprised. She asked me where I had learned about processing hides and I said that one of my uncles in New Brunswick was an expert Micmac (*sic*) snowshoe maker and that I knew something about skin preparation from him. She was delighted at my interest and mentioned my interest to the others when we came back to the main area of the camp; we were not fitting each others’ expectations of tourists and tour organizers and cultural performers.

Because I was the only guest, the evening became much more informal than usual. I was invited to have supper with the family rather than eating by myself. I could be served supper if I wanted but I could also sit with them. I chose to sit with them and I’m glad I did. I would never have witnessed how this nation discipline their children or how they themselves eat the food they served me, had I not sat with them.

We had cariboo (*sic*) swiss steak with caesar’s salad (*sic*) with capers, bannock, and fruit salad. Chicken was also available if I didn’t want cariboo. I wanted cariboo. The food was excellent and there was plenty of it. I was aware that the menu had been tailored to western taste, but how the meal was served and eaten was very peculiar to me. First of all, I was the first to serve myself from a buffet table, then the others served themselves in what seemed to be no particular order. What became really interesting to me was the use of condiments; I have never seen butter used the way my husband uses ketchup: as a condiment on everything else. Butter was added to the swiss steak in large quantity as well as spread over the bannock, and all of them used it this way.

An interesting example of socialization occurred when one of the boys started playing with his food. His aunt asked him if he had suddenly become left-handed. When he answered with a surprised ‘No, why?’, she replied that he must have since he was using the wrong hands to cut his food and place it in his mouth. She then demonstrated the proper way while saying that, ‘Yes, eating with utensils was a difficult thing to do.’ This contrasted sharply with the reaction of a white tourist woman to her child’s behaviour at a local donut shop. She had slapped the child’s hand and ordered him to stop embarrassing her. I had heard that Native children were generally rebuked with gentle ridicule and now I had seen it happen.

After the meal, I was invited to learn a Native craft: making dreamcatchers. I was never told that this was a local craft, which it is not, but only that it was traditionally Native. Again, Dorothy took over. Once I said that I was happy to stay at the picnic table where we had eaten to now do crafts, she went to get her craft supplies and we got to work. I was offered no folklore to explain the object we were making. Rather, Dorothy and I started to have a quiet, friendly conversation about child rearing, family life, and the vagaries of both being women entrepreneurs. I had prefaced one of my questions to her with the information that I was a part-owner of a store and that it was 'rough' being in business in these economic times.

This was a fortuitous action because it seemed to give her something outside the evening's 'job' to talk with me about. It was as if we had a neutral ground where we could be friends; there was a distinct shift in our relationship. She was still in a didactic position with me learning, but the buyer / seller relationship seemed to disappear. We both knew economic hardship and we could now discuss the ' backstage' strategies needed to attract customers and present a saleable product. We laughed, we joked, we felt conspiratorial, we had common ground where we explored becoming friends. When she realised that I was having no difficulty making a dreamcatcher, she became wary until I told her that I used my hands alot and that I usually knitted and embroidered. A skill in one craft seemed to imply at least the possibility of skill in others and we resumed our conversation.

The extent to which we became friends became obvious to me when she took back the feathers she had offered me to finish my dreamcatcher, and she tentatively handed me another bag of feathers. Would I like some eagle down for my dreamcatcher? I was stunned. Leaving aside the illegality of a non-Native having in her possession an eagle feather, the cultural importance of the eagle for the Dene made it highly unlikely that it would be casually given away. I was speechless. Then I very quickly thanked her, took two small feathers, and added them to my dreamcatcher. I then securely closed the bag and gave it back to her, thanking her again. We looked at each other for a moment. Then she laughed and called for the guest book to be brought for me to sign. We were both grateful that the moment had passed. We were also grateful it had occurred.

When it was time to leave, the women hugged me, we joked about them staying with me in Ottawa when they would come to the Tulip Festival. The kids shyly waved and I entered the boat with Carl. Because it was getting late (the supper had lasted a good hour and a half longer than expected), we motored rapidly back to Whitehorse. The engine noise precluded conversation and there didn't seem much left to say. When we docked, Carl shook my hand, we both smiled, then I walked away.

About the Author

An anthropologist by training and a teacher by preference, Dr. Lucie Marie-Mai Dufresne was a long time sessional lecturer at the University of Ottawa in the departments of Classics and Religious Studies, Sociology and Anthropology, and Women's Studies. She received her BA in Anthropology from the University of British Columbia, and her MA and PhD from the University of Ottawa. She was an esteemed elder of the Canadian Pagan community and taught lace making and fibre arts at the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA – Kingdom of Ealdormere). Prior to embarking on her academic career Lucie performed and taught belly dancing as the acclaimed Jasmina Mehidi. She was one of the founding members of the Middle Eastern Dance Association in Ottawa.

Volume 5, Issue 1 Spring 2026 Interview 1

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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Personal Reflections on Finnish Matriculture: Transcript

KAARINA KAILO, PhD

[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

[*Introduction in Finnish*] Hello, everybody! My name is Kaarina Kailo. I am a Finnish scholar and self-made artist from Oulu, northern Finland, and I am very much interested in my life to promote an eco-socially sustainable future because I am very worried about the direction of the world right now. So, all my life, I have been writing and doing art based on peaceful, egalitarian societies and the past pagan cultures that were much more sustainable than the current patriarchal world.

01:33

I was born in 1951 in Helsinki, in Finland, and I was part of a big family; we were five girls and one boy. I think it was a very, very happy time both in our family and in Finland because we still had the welfare state that allowed people to have perfect long careers and to spend a lot of time with their family – something that is not that way anymore. My best memories are from the extended family island, where we had our summer cottage and where we spent three months every year and, really, the most important value – for my family and for most Finns – was the time spent with family, by a lake, taking saunas. That was the 70s, 60s, 70s kind of a lifestyle in the north.

In fact, in Finland, we have more saunas than cars; we are the country that has the most saunas, and where the core of our identity is the sauna, the bathing culture. In fact, that's where I have departed from, but I came back to this same culture because I started missing it after seventeen years in Canada and eight years in Switzerland. So those are my roots to which I wanted to come back.

03:21

I was very lucky because my father was a pastor and a writer, and he was able to spend three months on the island and work from there. So this allowed us to stay long periods in nature and my grandfather and grandmother were with us there, and my cousins. It was particularly my grandfather who was my role model because he knew a lot about our folk culture and he taught us so much about ecological ways of living and respecting nature.

He told us stories and he dressed up as a forest king trying to pretend that it wasn't him, but we all knew it was him. He had a beard made of moss and a crown, and pine cones, and some sort of a weird dress, so he was a creature from the forest who came to dance on a hill and then he would throw us gifts. We were all so happy as children when he appeared, and there was a little mountain, or I would say a hill, which had something like a door, so we always believed that he lived inside it. So all of this really triggered our imagination and I think that's why I got so interested in oral history and northern stories.

05:00

He was actually Swedish. In Finland, we have Swedish-speaking Finns and Finnish-speaking Finns, so my grandmother was Swedish-speaking, but my father didn't want us to speak Swedish because he was worried that we would not learn Finnish well. So I didn't speak it that much, but, anyway, it was part of my heritage and the stories were a mixture of Swedish and Finnish folklore.

My grandfather, for instance, told us that we should never throw hot water on the ground without first telling the little people that this hot water is coming. We couldn't pick rocks without considering that there might be ants or something living underneath them. So there was a lot of respect for nature and its little people that he taught us. It's quite interesting that he was the technical director of a paper mill, the kind of person that you associate today with these greedy, greedy people who just want money and profit and everything, but he was very different. He really cared about his workers and he had this sense of balance that really inspired me in every way, you know, having a balance in terms of working life and the love for nature and all living beings.

06:35

We always had to return the fish bones to the lake because he said that they would thereby

come back to life. He taught us to find stumps in the forest that had tar in it, and we were given fifty cents if we could bring one of those back. When you put it in the fireplace, it had this blue smoke and blue, no, not smoke, but blue flame. And it was this special kind of *bengali* which lasted for a very long time. So he had all this knowledge of survival in the woods that he taught us.

07:21

I really lament the fact that people don't know any of this information anymore. And, you know, it's all ecological knowledge, but it's not being taught. Because I was lucky enough to be taught all kinds of really wise things about the woods, you know, that's why I became obsessed with writing about them and writing my sauna books and my books on Finnish culture and heritage. Because I think that, you know, if nobody else is doing it, I have to do it because I was lucky enough to learn these things. But one trigger was also that when I spent those seventeen years in Canada, I identified mostly with the First Nations people because they were most like my culture, the northern culture. With them, I was taken to the sweat lodge and I realized how similar the sauna has been. It's no longer that way, but it has been when I started to study it. So we had a very similar gift economy where you give thanks to the elements and you remember the spirits.

08:38

You know, everything is animistic, you know, the fireplace is not just a mechanical thing, but you thank it and you talk to it. So there were a lot of similarities. And then I felt like, oh, I have to write about this, too, because people don't remember anymore. For instance, I give you one example: I was taken to a modern sauna establishment where they had automatic sprinklers in the ceiling. Engineers had calculated, you know, the moisture of the sauna so that you would not have to throw water on the rocks anymore. And they didn't realize, well, that's the whole ritual - you throw water on the rocks to remember the ancestors, you throw water on the rocks to express your hopes, to throw away your illnesses, and to send messages to the other world. So this engineer had no idea that it wasn't, for me at least, progress; it was something very strange because, you know, you lost your whole chance of having a ritual.

So the sauna culture is becoming very much market-oriented with design elements, design stoves, and design architecture, but the spirit is lost in it. What I'm trying to do is bring it back because of, you know, the knowledge that I have from the Native people and from my research.

10:17

My father died quite young; he was only fifty-six. And so my brother, who was only seven years old at the time, he grew up with a matriarchy because we were all girls then at that

point. He has told me that he really missed the masculine element. So I don't know if we did something wrong, but he's become very sweet and very egalitarian and very nice as a person. So maybe we did something right. And, you know, he's very nurturing also. So maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. But in Finland, of course, we were the first European country to give the vote to women and Finland is known for being one of the egalitarian welfare states in the world where there's a lot of equality. But it's kind of interesting equality because when I compare it with Canada and other countries, the women tend to want to be equal to men on the basis of patriarchy. So they want equal chances to make it in the business world and in the stock exchange, and things like that.

11:39

So there's a lot of honorary males among the women. And having been in Canada, where I saw a very different kind of feminism, you know, my job has been to kind of remind them about seeking a different kind of structure for women, which is not patriarchal and where femininity is appreciated rather than just, you know, being treated as equal. And where the feminine way of being, matriculture, all of those things would be shared by men and would make the society overall much more spiritual and equal in terms of relationship with nature and animals. That is happening a little bit, but compared with what I experienced in Canada, the Finnish women, I think, are a bit masculine. And that's maybe the price that we pay for having been equal, I don't know, and having always worked alongside with the men.

12:50

But one problem is that we are one of the most violent countries, which is paradoxical, and I don't know if it's because there is not enough statistics from other countries, because I find it hard to believe that a lot of the Eastern European countries would not also be as violent. But it is true that there's a lot of violence against women, and that's one of the reasons why I left, together with my sisters. Four of us left, and we thought it would be better somewhere else, and we realized it wasn't, but we thought the men would be nicer somewhere else, because we all experienced violence and belittlement. So this is why I think that being equal is not enough, and you have to take the power to change the whole society to make it completely different to patriarchy. And I have, you know, Native peoples in different parts of the world are my role model, because, well, in the case, in the best case, you know, the matricultures in Canada, the Mosuo in China, the Minangkabau, they are my role model, because they have found a way of living in peace and without male dominance.

14:15

So that is also something I write about, and I believe that the sauna has been our most egalitarian, peace-oriented institution, but it has also been colonized by patriarchy and Christianity. But now I'm finding the roots, that it's been the place of our most peaceful philosophy, and we still have a lot of sayings that show, you know, what a wonderful

matriarchal place it has been. But I'm very alone in writing about this, and some people mock me because they have trouble believing it, but I have the proof. I'm very obsessed with proving it, because I have found enough evidence that we have not always been patriarchal. I discovered, for instance, that our relationship with nature was much deeper than I realized. For instance, our language is worth being re-investigated from that point of view, because when we say we go picking berries or we go picking mushrooms, it's a transitional action. It's like we go into the berry and we go into the mushroom in our language, *mennä sieneen*, *mennä marjaan*, so we go inside the spirit of that thing.

15:46

I found out that we always used to thank the plants and the berries and give the first produce of a harvest back to the land. So I discovered that we had a lot of similar rituals and practices that I learned from the Iroquois or other First Nations. So I was really excited about these discoveries, and I was told that I'm just romantic, but I know I'm not romantic. I know that I found the evidence and, you know, language, you can't fool, the language is what it is. And there's a meaning if you, you know, if you have a language that says that you go inside the berry. And then also another similar thing is that we used to think that words are not just metaphors or vehicles for meaning; they have powers. So certain words could not be used because of their strong power charge. And that I found was also similar with native people. So certain words we don't say because we're scared that it will bring the phenomenon, like the bear. If you call the bear by its name, it will show up, and actually, I have been trying to call the bear like that, but it doesn't come. I'm a bit disappointed because I'm in love with the bears.

17:17

I found out that they are the most important spirit animal of women. So maybe it's a spirit animal then, you know, during the shamanistic period, but a lot of women in Finland are crazy about bears. It (*the sauna - ed*) is also a bear's den, you know, the symbolism is very much to do with the rebirth of the bear from the den and the bear seeking honey in the den, in the same way we cover ourselves with honey when we are in the sauna. So there's a lot of unrecognized elements from the bear mythology. The bear is a very important Finnish symbol in our culture. The same with sauna. And there's a word, *sisu*, which means persistence and perseverance. So these were words that were part of the ur-language of what we were conditioned with and to never give up and to persist, and so maybe that's why I've been so stubborn with topics that are not acceptable.

18:24

What I have been drawn to the most are the stories about Bera, Berit. It's a Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish name, which echoes bear, and she's a woman who goes berry picking and meets the bear in the woods and then decides to stay in the den with the bear. And has

children that are half furry and half human; there's a lot of these stories, which are quite humorous also, where sometimes the woman meets the bear and they say, let's wrestle a little bit, and the bear says, but we won't make any wounds. And the woman says, no, we won't make any wounds. We just wrestle. And then the woman falls and the man, the bear sees the vulva, and says, but you are wounded. You have a wound! Then the bear is scared and runs away. There's stories about women lifting their skirts and showing their sex and always the bear runs away and is scared. But there's many stories about telepathy between bears and women and they understand each other's language. But if the woman has a boy, has a son coming in the womb, then the bear will attack the future hunter.

20:19

So these are kind of variants of very many different stories, and I was very struck how similar they are to the stories that I heard in my classes in Simone de Beauvoir Institute when my Native students talked about their bear stories. So it seems to be a northern phenomenon, and, you know, it seems to be, well, with Barbara Mann, we have argued that the bear-woman stories are the oldest stories in the world, because they are so widely spread, because you find them almost everywhere. And, you know, I won't go into the academic stuff, but it's interesting that, you know, it's about the human-animal connection way before patriarchy.

It's patriarchy that enters when the woman is being rescued by the brothers and when they shoot the bear and all kinds of things like that. But there's a lot of depth in these stories, and I'm a bit overwhelmed to just talk about them because it's too much information. But those were the stories that I was very, very intrigued about, because there was definitely a different relationship between women and bears than between the hunters and the bears. The male stories are always about killing, and I couldn't identify with that. Even today, I'm horrified that they shoot the bears.

21:54

To be honest, I'm a bit worried about social media and its impact, because women have been assimilated to a great extent into the market economy and the beauty industry and all of that. But at the same time, I would say there's a growing number of young women and men who realize that we are in the midst of climate change and ecological crisis, and they are yearning for change and they're yearning for something different. So, you know, there's like two strong movements. There is the conservative incel movement of the young men who want women to become tradwives and be dominated. Then there's the red-green boys who want a different society. And, you know, it gives me hope that even though it's not as strongly in your face to see this new movement of ecologically oriented young people, it is there. That's the audience, that's the readership also that I'm interested. So I know my books are not bestseller type, because the publishers want something that is written in an easy style and it has sex and violence and all of that. And, you know, some of them have

complained that it's too esoteric what I'm writing about, but I don't care.

23:34

I've decided that I want to do what I can to bring back the old culture and the ecologically sane wisdom traditions and to talk about what I was taught by my grandfather. And to give hope that way. Also, I live myself here in the north in a house with a well and water; there's a creek next to my sauna. I have only wood-burning saunas. I can grow potatoes and fruit here. I'm totally self-sufficient if there is a crisis. And when I was stupid enough to try to sell my house when my husband died, I wasn't able to sell it because the young people didn't understand the importance of this kind of a place. But now, with all the threats in the world, actually the children of the owner of this house came to see me and said, well, you know, we might be interested in buying this house back when you're gone. I said, great, because this is such a safe place to live in, and you have the woods, the forest next to you, even though I'm only fifteen minutes away from the city.

24:59

So people are waking up; they're realizing that, you know, with the crisis now in Iran and Ukraine and everywhere, being self-sufficient in terms of firewood and water and everything, it's very, very valuable. And well water itself is just, you know, it's a miracle today because, you know, if anything happens, you have the means of survival. So there's hope.

I try to, in my sauna books, I talk in a big way, not only about sauna and what good it does to your soul and your spirit and your body, but about all the wisdom that surrounded it, because it was the place where the working class and the masters and everybody went together. And it was the place where you drop your masks and your ego and it created a community. All our celebrations are centred on the sauna. So we decorate it, we bring the nature inside and the flowers and everything and we haven't lost that. So whether it's midsummer or Christmas or Halloween, we remember the dead or we remember the past in the context of these rituals. So I'm trying to make sure that we don't lose them.

26:34

This is the place where we are the closest to nature and the weather conditions also have an impact. You know, it's dark for a long, long time from November till January, and that's like a hibernation period. I feel very creative during the dark period. I like it. Then in the summer, we have three months of, you know, of light, where the light almost doesn't go down. And that's very joyful also. And then, you know, we have vast masses of land here, so you can be, I can go for a walk with my dog and I don't see anybody. I'm not saying that I'm against people, but it's very sparsely populated. And so when I went to Berlin one day to a conference, I was just shocked because I was pushed around by people all the time and I

didn't like it.

But so, you know, the benefits of being here is it's silent. It's sometimes dark and you can see the stars and you can still see the northern lights. Actually, I have an Airbnb and I had some Japanese people staying here and they said they were scared because it was so quiet. They were not used to that kind of silence. Then they were just standing on the yard and looking at the sky and saying they've never seen the stars. So little things like that matter to me.

28:13

But if I had never left Finland, if I hadn't spent twenty-five years abroad in different countries, maybe I wouldn't have seen all of that because you have to go outside of your culture to be able to appreciate what you have. That's the reason I came back. I missed our culture and I was able to put my finger on what it was that was important, which I don't think would have happened if I had taken for granted everything that we're all about.

And of course, we have animals. We have the reindeer. It takes me two hours to drive to Rovaniemi, to Lapland, and the road is full of reindeer. You feel you're still in a nice world; it's not just skyscrapers and cities. It's a different atmosphere. And in the winter, it's just so beautiful. There's a whole lot of tourists coming now to Lapland because the trees are absolutely covered in snow. It's a very magical landscape here in the north.

29:27

Volume 5, Issue 1 Spring 2026 Interview 2

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index

Personal Reflections on Sakha Matriculture: Transcript

AINA VINOKUROVA

[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

[*Introduction in the Sakha language*] Hello, everyone; my name is Aina Vinokurova. I am from Yakutia, which is in Siberia. I am Sakha; my mother tongue called *Sakha tyla*. I was born in a small village named Kokui. I am the oldest in a big family; I have five siblings.

00:37

I remember my grandfather because he was living with us since I was, I don't know, very young, probably three or two years old because he was helping us. He was a professional hunter. I remember the smell of the snowmobile. I think it's not the snowmobile, it's just the gas, the smell of the gas, when he's coming from the outside. It was the best smell. I remember it like as a yesterday.

Yeah, and I remember that I spent a lot of time with my father because I was the eldest and probably he's trying to help my mom because we had such a big family. I spent a lot of time at school because my father was a teacher. I was hanging around with the teenagers; they taught me some bad and good things at school. [*laughs*] Yeah, and my grandmother, she was also a teacher. I spent some times with her. Oh my god, I spent a lot of time at school,

[*laughs*] now I realize that, before I even became a student.

02:00

When my mom died, I remember that a lot of our relatives would come to our home for cooking, you know, to help my grandma. So for me, I think my father and my grandparents from my father's side, they influenced my personality, I would say. My grandma, she's like my mom. She's now 86 years old, and being here in Canada, it's the most challenging part because she can't travel to Canada. And now, right now, I am also in that spot where I can't travel to my home country. So, yeah, when we have the FaceTime or phone calls, she's all the time asking me, when are you coming home? And it's just tough.

I think she's a person who always rooted to the education, that you have to be the best student in your class. It's coming from my grandma. We spent a lot of time studying at our home. It was painful because as a kid, you want to go and play outside. But my grandmother was very strict in terms of discipline and we always have our routine in being clean and tidied up. It's coming from my grandma. So I think as a kid, you sometimes have problem with that. But now I realize that, oh, that's why I am determined, and it's thanks to my grandma.

03:50

Then when I was 9 years old, my stepmom moved with us, and the first time was very challenging because I was the oldest in my family, and for me, the first year was kind of very challenging to accept new mom because I used to remember my mom. But I would say that my stepmom, she's a wonderful person. She's also a teacher and I think she shows that the true power of woman. Like, when you love a man, and it's not everybody can accept the fact that there is a man who has his own four kids and you're taking responsibility for that. I think it's coming from the big love passed over to my father and then to us. After that, they had two kids, my youngest brothers.

05:03

I would say that I come from a very traditional family in the sense that the father is seen as the decision maker. But at the same time, I know that the backbone and the heart of the family came first from my grandmother and then from my mother. I think a lot of cultures can relate to that; on the surface, people say 'the man, the man.' But if you go deeper and really talk about that, I think the true power comes from the woman.

In Sakha culture, we have a saying that every family depends on the mother: *Yal ijètinèn*. People judge the well-being of a family by the mother; not wealth in terms of money, but happiness, health, and harmony, they would judge that by the mother

06:09

Our people believe in power of nature. It's coming from my granddad because he was a professional hunter and a fisherman. So I remember that he used to take a nap and he, he would sing the traditional song. It was also one of my precious childhood memory. I don't remember the exact words, it's a traditional Sakha singing. It's called *toyuk* and we called it *tuoyar*, and sometimes he used it as a lullaby for us. I remember how he handled the hunt, for example, or fish. I think I've learned that you need to respect that and you need to share. If he would hunt something and it would be successful, we would share that with our extended family.

07:15

My father, he taught me how to fish, because during the summertime, we would go and fish. Fish is a main food for me, personally, and for my family. So we have a tradition, I think all my cousins and my extended family, the best food for us is fish. I think I am very proud that I can handle fish, and yeah, we live now in Saskatchewan, and I realized that Indigenous people here also really like fish. When I talk to them, I would say I'm proud that I can handle the fish, I know how to prepare the fish.

08:01

In my reality, in my environment, I used to see very powerful female figures. Most of the teachers were women; our village chiefs, as far as I remember, were also women. So in my world, I grew up knowing that you could be whatever you wanted. It did not matter, so, whether you were a boy or a girl. At school, I was a very active student; I was the President of my school and all the school presidents before me were girls, so for me, that felt normal.

But when I moved to the city for high school and lived with my grandmother, reality hit me for the first time. I realized that outside my village, things were different. It seemed like boys got more space, more attention, more opportunities, that was when I understood that I needed to be tough and fight for my spot.

09:13

I don't know exactly what it was like before colonization, but after colonization, wealth usually went to the boys, especially the eldest one. If you had a daughter, you had to prepare something for her to take with her when she joined another family. Today, in modern times, it is different; for weddings, for example, usually two families contribute together. But historically, after colonization, wealth and inheritance often went through the male line. I believe colonization changed the power dynamic.

At the same time, I believe that before colonization, Sakha families and other Indigenous communities in my homeland had a much more equal structure. I think women had the same amount of rights; the climate demanded it! In such harsh conditions, you had to use all the resources and skills that you had. You could not divide survival strictly into male and female work. If you ask responsibility from someone, then power comes with that responsibility. So I believe historically, it was much more balanced, maybe close to 50-50; after colonization, yes, that's changed.

10:43

One of the biggest resources from precolonial Sakha culture is *Olonkho*, our epic tradition; it is recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. I remember when that recognition happened: I was working in television at that time and it was a huge moment for us as a community. In *Olonkho*, we have epic stories about women; some stories have female main characters who fight for their families and for the Sakha people.

In our worldview, there are three levels of the world: the underground world, the middle world, and the upper world. A classic story line often has a human protagonist, either female or male, who fights for the people; the antagonist may come from the underground world while the gods from the upper world help the human overcome obstacles. So, yes, we have stories about powerful women who can fight, protect, and save lives.

12:00

When I started as a graduate student at the University of Regina, I realized that all the main characters in my stories are women. I made a short drama film with a young girl as the main character; the story was based on real historical events. My homeland used to be called a prison without bars; when people hear 'Siberia,' many think of the *gulag*, winter, ice, cold, and prison. My story was connected to those stereotypes. In the film, the girl has an argument with her grandfather; she says that they should not house the political exile. In our context, that is a huge protest, especially for a female character.

But my teacher at a film school in Vancouver said, she needs to do something active! She needs to do something active. And I thought, 'She already did, what do you want more?' For me, saying 'No' is already a huge action. That made me realize there is a difference between Western story models and my worldview. In my worldview, refusing or resisting, and saying 'No' can be a powerful action.

13:31

I also made a documentary about a nomadic family; they are Even, another Indigenous group from my homeland. I am partly Even from my mother's side, but unfortunately, I never knew that culture deeply and I don't speak the language. For me, the film was

personal. It was an attempt to connect with that culture and learn about Even people and their lifestyle. The main character is a mother who became a teacher so she could teach her children during migration. She wants to give her children options; they study while migrating, but, at the same time, they learn the way Even people have lived for the centuries. For me, that film was a small contribution to my culture and again, it centred on women.

All the women I met during my work as a journalist and a filmmaker are rock stars. It is hard to be a mother, but if you live a nomadic life, you also have to be tough. Some women are hunters; you have to know how to survive. Nowadays people may have snowmobiles or cars, but they do not have gas stations everywhere; sometimes you can stuck in the tundra or taiga and you have to know what to do. Men, women, and children all have survival skills. I can sound smart and I can read smart books, but that would not help me if I was stuck in the taiga or tundra. That's why I admire these people so much: they taught me a lot.

15:27

In those families, success depended so much on women, especially the mothers. Women knew how to hunt, fish, cook, ride reindeer, sew clothing, and make traditional boots. So much of survival came from women's knowledge and labour. I think harsh conditions affect the power dynamic in Indigenous families; in that environment, it does not matter if you are a male or female, everyone needs skills. I also remember being surprised when I visited an Even community and I saw that women had their own knives. For me, that was a strong symbol. It showed me that there was no simple hierarchy in their worldview: women had tools, skills, responsibility, and power.

For me, Sakha matriculture is not only about saying that women are important. It is about recognizing that women are the heart of the family, the keepers of discipline, education, survival knowledge, and emotional strength. In my life, that power came through my grandmother, my stepmother, the women in my village, the women in our epic stories, and Indigenous women I met as a journalist and filmmaker. The big picture may sometimes show men as the decision makers, but when you look deeper, the true power often comes from women. They hold the family, they hold memory, they hold culture, they hold survival, they hold life. That is what I carry with me.

17:30

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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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Personal Reflections on Tlingit Matriculture: Transcript

JUDITH RAMOS, M.A.T

[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

Gunalchéesh! [*speaks in Tlingit*] My name is Daxootsu; my English name is Judy Ramos. [*speaks in Tlingit*] I'm Raven moiety. [*speaks in Tlingit*] I'm from the Ku.éex' clan, which means the pink salmon people. [*speaks in Tlingit*] I'm daughter of the L'uknax.adi clan; that's the Coho Clan. [*speaks in Tlingit*] I'm grandchild of the Teikweidi or Brown Bear Clan from Áak'w River. I'm from Yakutat or Yakutat, Alaska, and I'm currently residing in Áak'w in Juneau, Alaska.

I am the daughter of Elaine Chew Shaa Abraham and George Milton Ramos. So that fully embeds me in the community of Yakutat or Yakutat. My grandparents are Olaf Abraham and Susie Bimner.

01:18

So growing up early, I have some memories of living in Yakutat when I was really young. My mother was a nurse, and my father was like a hunter-fisherman, and they had met when really young. My mother was promised to be married to someone else, and she was

engaged to someone else, but my father was kind of really charismatic and a very charming and good dancer, and so she fell in love with my father.

They're both Raven Moiety, which was not supposed to be that kind of marriage, so my grandfather had a potlatch to have people not talk about this marriage. But my grandmother still loved him because he was a great hunter, always providing for the family.

02:25

When I was like in kindergarten, our parents relocated to Cleveland, Ohio, so my father could go to a school where he could learn to be a good bookkeeper, and that was kind of a culture shock, going to Cleveland, Ohio. It was a really tremendous time.

There was a lot of riots going on, and I have vague memories of us looking at our skin color because we were trying to see if skin colour is going to be a factor, but then, lucky, we moved back, and we moved back to Sitka, Alaska, where there was a hospital there, and my mom could work at the hospital. And my father was a trained cook coming out of the military as a cook. He went to cooking school, and he cooked at Monash High School, and my mom talked him into working for Alaska Airlines, where we could get really cool benefits for flying, working for Alaska Airlines.

03:36

So I remember Sitka. But every summer, I remember going back home to Yakutat and living with my grandmother, and my grandmother was very sweet, and she was telling us a lot of stories about our clan history and migration and all that information. So I grew up, you know, berry-picking with her and picking seaweed up from the beaches, doing badly at learning how to cut fish, running a smokehouse, starting a fire in the wood stove. Then I would go back to Sitka because the schools were better there, and so we'd kind of migrate back and forth between Sitka and Yakutat. So I had an older brother and sister and then a younger brother, and so we kind of migrated back and forth between those communities, but we'd come back home to Yakutat when there was a potlatch or some event happening, we would come back to our village in Yakutat.

But Sitka itself was not really a Tlingit town either, but it was still quite a few Tlingit people living in Sitka. So we were pretty busy all the time. They had an Indian Ed program that was run in the Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall, so I would run down there and we'd learn different skills about our culture. But our main culture was through being around our grandparents and learning from our grandparents, so that's kind of some of the early memories of growing up between Sitka and Yakutat, Alaska. Very rich and happy time, and Yakutat's quite well known for its beautiful beaches, so just having the opportunity to kind of run, not wild, but we were not monitored as they do in today's communities. We had a lot of freedom to run around.

06:13

Even in Sitka, there was no fear of me walking to school for like half a mile; my school was half a mile away, walking to school and then running around downtown and just making sure we were home by dinnertime and start dinner before my parents came home. So we had a lot of freedom even in Sitka, Alaska, growing up.

In Northwest Coast cultures, the potlatch, or in our language, *a kui* we call it, is held for different ceremonies. It's part celebration, it's part ritual, it's part kind of affirmation of your clan. So if a clan built a house or raised a totem pole, we call them *kutia* or other things, we would have a potlatch and we would gather our clan to host it; we invite the opposite moiety as a guest or witnesses to a potlatch. So it would be part ceremony and part religious in a ways, but in these celebrations, there would be a lot of oratory and a lot of feasting and dancing and also there will be gift giving to the opposite moiety.

08:02

So it's a reciprocal gift between the two moieties. We would be invited to their potlatches and they would pay us and then we'd invite them. So it was a time of honouring each other because in our traditional society, your father would be your opposite moiety and your brother's children are opposite moiety and your grandmother's husband would be your opposite moiety. So we would sort of balance each other out between the two moieties.

The one that's still really practiced today is our memorial potlatches and we have a forty-day potlatch after a person dies and it's mostly just feasting and feeding the spirit before it departs. And then at a payoff party, we would host a big potlatch and there would be an exchange of mourning songs and so we'd come out and do the mourning and the clans would do it. We would do our mourning songs, the opposite clan does their mourning songs, until the mourning is done and then there would be your feasting and your dancing and your payoff.

09:36

So we pay off the opposite moiety for any services they rendered to your clan during the funeral. And also this part would be when you would bring out your children to be given their names and anybody that you wanted to adopt into your clan would also be brought out at a potlatch. So it had many different functions for a potlatch. So that's the ones that are most really practiced today are these kind of ceremonies.

I learned that in my mother's generation, they would have a piercing ceremony where when they got their ears pierced, there would be a dinner small ceremony and whoever pierced your ears would be paid off. They would also maybe get a tattoo.

10:33

And so we have this ceremony for young women when she comes of age; it's called behind the blanket ceremony. So when a girl first would go through her menstruation, she would be put behind the blanket and they would have her fast during the day. Then in the evening, she could have some little bit of water or foods like that, but it was a very sacred time. They believe that this is kind of setting up her life for the rest of her life where she would be taught things. It was her clan aunties and mother that would bring her food. But she would be taught a lot about, you know, getting up early or not talking much. So one of the things they did was they used to go out really low tide and they would select a rock to put in the mouth.

That refers to a raven myth, but it was to not talk bad about other people is kind of my understanding of that. But if you were wanting to be a good artist, then you would practice that and kind of wish for becoming a good artist for beading or weaving or whatever during that time period. So it was kind of like a time of developing your, ah, what kind of person or, you know, artist you wanted to be during your life.

12:25

So when that period was done, depending on, you know, how long she was behind the blanket, then she would be brought out at a potlatch and all her childhood things would be put away. And so they would drop the blanket and they would announce that she's a woman now and then there would be a feast. So like my daughter went through this ceremony and she was going through with her cousin Alison Bremner. What they really wanted was waffles, and so we served them waffles at their ceremony. They gave away some of their childhood toys and they also gave away, you know, candy and other things at the behind-the-blanket ceremony.

So this is a women's ceremony; we're trying to bring that back and trying to bring that back to our culture, a very important part of our ceremonies. We're building wellness camps and culture camps, and things like that where we're trying to host a part of the, that is, what we call a women's circle. And to share that kind of information with young women about how we used to have these traditional practices. It was not explicitly taught to us, but I did do kind of a small ceremony with my mother. We were living in Fairbanks and she kept me home from school and she did a small ceremony with me. They didn't really explain what exactly all of it meant; I just know I went through something like that.

14:22

So it was not explicitly explained to me when I was growing up about these ceremonies, but it was only something when my daughter went through it that they really talked about what it was all about.

Through the clan, the transmission of wealth is passed through the clan. And so in Tlingit society, you have a chiefly class. You had a commoner class and you used to have a slave

class. So a lot of the wealth is kind of held within the chiefly class in the name of the clan. So they're stewards of the wealth. The accumulation of all this wealth was part of the potlatch system, when you would bring out a lot of this wealth and redistribute it through the potlatch or *ku'i*. So this is a redistribution of your wealth and the teaching is the more you can give away, the more wealthy you were. So this idea of, ah, you're very wealthy if you could give away a lot of things.

15:46

So it's not accumulation like in the Western sense of goods, but giving away of goods and being able to hold a big potlatch and give away coppers and things like that. I was just reading a book on the Kwakiutl and one of the coppers were worth like five thousand blankets, which is amazing to me. So my dad always says like coppers like this size is worth like six slaves and this, you know, and then he always teased a little copper around his neck and that's worth a slave for a day.

But, you know, the accumulation of blankets that were given away at potlatch and the copper, the *chinos*, were a sign of wealth in our traditional culture. So we were wealthy as a clan because we had raw copper.

16:45

Stories that I heard is like women, if they saw the trader had beads, you know, she would say, I really want those beads and poke her husband and really make him get the beads and stuff like that. So women, you know, did kind of control the trading, but the men were the primary traders, but it was like the women sort of directed them to the trade. From the stories I've heard, they would tell them, kind of be in the background and direct the trade.

In Tlingit society, starting with the marriage system, there were arranged marriages. So my grandparents were arranged marriage because they were both in a kind of chiefly class. My grandfather being a chief and my grandmother being a daughter of a chief, and so they were arranged marriages. So, patrilocal: she went to live with her husband, so they would go live in their husband's clan house.

18:10

But when their son became of age, not of age, but as a young child, he would go live in his uncle's house because that was where he would be trained by his maternal uncle. And the women would be trained through their maternal aunties and uncles. So when a marriage was set up, they would try and select women that had, especially industrious as far as she was able to bring these artistic skills to the marriage, like being a good Chilkat blanket weaver or other things.

And so they would try to find women that were really good weavers and other things, and that would accumulate their wealth through her skills and things like that to the marriage.

So women, as far as to the food economy, besides her weaving and other skills she brought, she was one that really helped do the cooking and preparing of food. Men would go out and do the hunting and other things like that.

19:42

But there was also kind of a respectful balance between men and women as far as they would... Because they were opposite moieties, there would also be a respectful dialogue between the men and women in the marriage. So even though she was living in her husband's clan house, she still kind of controlled all the food and things like that. She would decide, you know, kind of control the whole household, it was kind of all under her control. And so like he would bring it home, and then from then on, he wouldn't have any say in that. They did have a really strong control over what was said, so they would tell the men what to say at the ceremonies, and then he would go out and be the spokesperson. But it was really the woman who made a lot of decisions in the background as far as...

The clan mother, they call them, and she was kind of the head of the, the female head of the clan, and they had a special term for her as the clan mother. So it was a very equal balance, I think, between the two, men and women in our society.

21:26

Yakutat is the furthest northern Northwest Coast culture village, so it's like the extent of the Tlingit settlement. And we were pushing sort of north into the Copper River area as Yakutat people, mixing with the Eyak, and we had Ahtna ancestors too, so kind of a mix of cultures. So we were, in our village, we were surrounded by glaciers and so our glaciers that were around us... we had to develop language and technology around hunting and glaciers, where they didn't really have that, maybe, except that the Huna had a little bit of ice hunting technology.

We also don’t really have cedar up in Yakutak; we have spruce, so we weren't big totem carvers. So we were sort of a little bit different up there because we didn't have cedar. And so we sort of adopted to our climate there, which is a little bit north of the cedar zone, which is very prominent in the Northwest Coast cultures is the cedar. But we still had access to salmon, but it was the most northern extent of the Tlingit settlements in Yakutak.

23:19

So there's a term in the U.S. Constitution, they call us Native Americans ‘merciless savages.’ So this is kind of a play on, ah, as Native people being called merciless savages in the Constitution. So I'm a merciless matriarchal savage. And so that's just a play on the colonial terms that were given to us.

Just the next generation, I think are tremendous. I would bring out our wonderful next Generation artists, and they're really kind of reclaiming the culture and just proud of who

they are. Especially I'm thinking about my own daughter, who's a social environmental activist and also a very wonderful artist, and just really balancing and being proud of who they are with her other friends that are, you know, challenging any kind of, you know, destruction or injustice they see happening.

24:33

Volume 5, Issue 1 Spring 2026 Interview 4

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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Personal Reflections on the Matriculture of the Siberian Soviet Union: Transcript

NADYA SHALAMOVA, PhD

[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

[*Introduction in Russian*] So my name is Nadzheda Shalamova, that's my full name. I go by my short name, Nadya, and I was born in the Tomsk Oblast, Russia, well, Siberia, Russia.

My family history...! So my great-grandparents were exiled to Siberia in 1930, 1931, during the Stalinist repressions. But they were teenagers, I would say, at that time, along with my great-grandparents. My great-great-grandparents. And they originally came to that Altai region in the early 1900s. I don't know how many listeners are familiar with the Stolypin reforms; it was a series of agricultural reforms in Russia, like around 1905. The purpose of that reform was to modernize, you know, Russia. Like a lot of Siberian territory was not really heavily occupied at that time.

01:22

So they ended up in that, they were allowed to buy land, establish their own farms, and pretty much do whatever they... [*laughs*] It's like western, like Wild West here, during the different settlements in the United States. So, anyway, they came there; most of the people who ended up in that little settlement were of the Ukrainian origin. So there were a lot of Ukrainians. So, like, my great-grandparents are, have Ukrainian roots.

But when they were exiled from what was at that time their home, again 1930s, I think my granddad was 1930, and my grandma was a little bit later, a year later, 1931. So they were exiled; they were put on the barge. It was a lot, a lot of people, there is no roof, nothing, you're just basically in the open air. And they travelled several days to this very remote place in Siberia and basically left on the riverbank to either survive or to die.

02:40

Lots of people died on that barge while they were travelling; just many people were, of course, just kind of completely not used to the circumstances in which they found themselves. But my grandparents - their family survived and luckily, I suppose, at that time, considering the circumstances, they ended up being sort of, you know, left, they were left near the native or Indigenous, small Indigenous people settlement, to kind of a village, I suppose you could call them.

My granddad always attributed those Indigenous people to their survival, because he turned out to be really good at hunting and understanding of the forest and understanding that really new and foreign way of life. Essentially, they were farmers, so they didn't know anything about hunting or mushrooms, berry picking, stuff like that. But by the time I was born, so this settlement that was now, that was kind of established with the people who were exiled from different parts of Russia, okay, at that time it completely merged with the native or Indigenous people.

04:13

By the way, that group of people was called the Khanty. This is where I first encountered as a child, some of the native Siberian or native Indigenous people. I did not actually realize that until way, way later, because everyone... There were people from all parts of Russia at that time, you know, and of course, there were this native Indigenous population, but there were also lots of people from other parts of Russia. Including actually, when I grew up, when my parents, especially my mom grew up there, including people like German people who were sent there after World War Two, those who were captured.

So the settlement where we ended up in was called Megion. It's kind of a small, now became a small village in the Tomsk Oblast. It's the region actually known for very rich natural resources, very diverse landscapes; it's kind of the southern part of West Siberian Plain, this is where it's located. And as I said, both my parents ended up in that place. They were teenagers at that time, but this is where they met. Okay, this is where they, yeah, this is where they got married, this is where they established their family. And I lived there until I was seven or just shortly before seven. So we left that village, my parents and my brother and me, we left for the big city.

06:07

That's a city that's called Tomsk, okay, basically to go to school because my parents and my grandparents always wanted to provide good education and the school that existed in the village at that time, well, was not enough, was not enough. So that's how I ended up in a bigger city. But what I do remember about that village is... Some of the memories that kind of stuck with me is that before we left, I remember kind of a lot of explosions on the other side of the river. Yes, and it's like you might be wondering why, but like maybe a decade or a couple before that, they discovered big deposits of natural gas and oil near that village.

I remember that we had to leave our house and our house was really close to the river because they did a lot of, I suppose, tests at that time on the other side of the river. I just remember all people would leave their house and we have to walk pretty far just to be in a safe location. That village exists today, and it's basically one of the largest companies in Russia. It's kind of the world's, one of the world's biggest exporter of natural gas called Gazprom. It's still there. And so that's kind of stuck to me, those explosions. But to me, to me, that village was like, I did not like the place, to be honest with you.

07:57

My mom, of course, and her sister and her brothers, they remember that place with a lot of warmth, right? And love. This is where their childhood, this is where my grandparents, their parents were. But to me, it was a sad place, I have to say. Because even as a child, I clearly remember how lives were ruined by exile. People who came from different parts of Russia, who had never been in the taiga, for example, this thick forest, they were exiled from cities, they were scientists, they were teachers, they were doctors. Yeah, a lot of people sort of lost their sense of identity. People froze to death in the taiga or in the marshes, people killed by wild animals.

So I remember that we had to bolt all the doors in the house because a wild bear would be walking on the streets of the village. And you would wake up to a tragedy, because someone who maybe wasn't very careful, or maybe was under the influence, let's say, or did not maybe lock their doors, that someone would be killed. It wasn't really a good place. It wasn't a very good place to me, for me. I don't go back there with like my memories thinking about, oh, you know... I think I had a good childhood because I had a lot of love in the family, but I did not really like that place.

10:08

I had to go back there after we left for sort of summer holidays, because that was a thing to do. Those families who were lucky enough maybe to have their parents living somewhere in the country, often children would be shipped over there for just good air, organic food, and safe environment. But I remember I dreaded those trips to the village because you had to travel on a boat and then on an airplane that was, I swear, was manufactured before World

War II. So they were very small, they were very stinky, they were very uncomfortable, and they flew really, really low.

So I remember looking out of the window, and I'm also prone to motion sickness. To me, it would be an hour of puking, essentially. But I remember, I look out the window and all you see is this taiga and marshes, you know, taiga and marshes. Yes, I did learn some things valuable things from my childhood there. But it's not the place that I remember with love.

11:45

I was in Tomsk, so I got there before, before I went to, before you went to school. So I was about seven years old. And I ended up in this city, as I said, Tomsk. This city is actually known, at that time, was known for its rich cultural atmosphere; it was, and still is, a home to several universities, community colleges, theatres, art galleries. I remember that every weekend, we would go to either to the movies, or a theatre play, or some kind of a sport event, or some kind of performance. So, I remember we were always busy.

At that time, my parents owned sort of like a condominium, I suppose you can describe it, in a newly constructed building that also located in a recently developed neighbourhood. There were a lot of new people there, everything was new and clean. And I think this provided us with a comfortable place to live, and a sense of stability during my childhood. But I did walk to school, as everyone else did; there were no school buses. And again, luckily, I did not live that far away. But I remember, school was not cancelled in winter when it was cold. So, we all became very tough, because we had to wait. I just, I remember that school was cancelled only when it was like minus 38 centigrade. If it's 35, 36, you go to school, and it's cold, and by the time you get to the school, you know, to school or to the building, you know, your eyelashes are frozen, and your eyebrows are frozen. So, yeah, it was, I don't know, I think maybe it was, it just made me tougher. So I always make fun of the school cancellations here in Milwaukee.

14:07

Yeah, you walked to school, and you walk back. Parents worked, so you get home all by yourself, and you get into the apartment where you are by yourself. You warm up some food, you do the homework. We only have one television program at that time. So, I think a lot of us, well, I read pretty much. That was my main kind of entertainment at that time. So, again, I felt, I think that for many years, I kind of felt comfortable in there and liked my life.

But when I was 14, a tragedy struck our family: my father went on one of the hunting trips and never came back. As far as we know, he perished in the taiga. He was the main bread winner, essentially, in the family. So, after he never came back, my mom became a sole provider. Naturally, my grandparents helped. But I remember the life changed, and life changed drastically. And those years also sort of coincided with the beginning of the

collapse of the Soviet Union.

15:38

I just remember, there was a widespread lack of food. We stayed, we spent a lot of time in lines for a grocery store, for example, for sugar or just for a lot of things. Essentially for everything, for everything. I also remember there were several years where people, including my mom, simply were not paid. So, there was absolutely no money. And luckily, again, luckily for us, like we were not, we avoided starvation because my grandparents, again, lived in the village, and they were able to send us food on those big trucks that travel from that village to Tomsk during the winter months. And we also, again, luckily our apartment had a really big balcony and we used it as a refrigerator.

So, you go to the balcony, I remember just to get food, meat, and all kinds of canned foods. And my grandmother would send us even a loaf of bread and things like that. But I do remember that it was a very tough time for a lot of people and I know that many people just did not have enough to, you know, did not have enough to eat.

17:12

I would say that I grew up with a belief and kind of encouragement that education was vital, was key for both men and women. So, getting higher education, going to college, for example, getting postdoctoral degree, or doctoral or postdoctoral degree was just clearly considered to be a mark of status and respect in the community. For me, I don't know, I, many people I know of my generation or even my parents' generation who are still alive often look back at the Soviet Union with a sense of nostalgia. And I know that many people remember it very fondly because there was free health care, free education, free child care, free... Any sort of a post school programs for kids were free. And seemed to have kind of both equal opportunities for everyone, including men and women, if we're just talking about genders.

I think for a lot of people, and I'm talking about women as well, those social benefits were definitely an important part of this daily life. And they contributed, I think, for many people to the feelings of security and stability. But I also remember that life in the Soviet Union was just a bit restrictive; as many other kids, I suppose, or younger people, I was subjected to propaganda. But I was always kind of a curious person that questioned a lot of things around me and just had a really keen sense of kind of double standards of those, especially people in power.

19:31

But when it comes to women of my generation, either before or during the Soviet Union, again, women had equal rights; we had the right to vote. The woman had the right to

divorce. Abortion was legalized. Women were encouraged to pursue careers, but in certain fields, I have to say, like teaching, medicine, maybe journalism, science, but, God forbid, engineering, because girls don't have apparently brains, the brains for engineering, or maybe law. The environment that I grew up in was that everyone went to college, or the majority of people went to college, and there was no distinction whether you're a woman or you're a man.

I would say that was a kind of a progressive stance on women's rights. But I also have to acknowledge that women definitely faced this kind of ongoing challenge of balancing their careers with domestic responsibilities because there was this definite pressure from society that expected women to handle the majority of housework, cooking, and especially childcare. Kind of a double burden, I would say.

21:06

That double burden meant that women often endured kind of long hours at a very maybe demanding job only to come home to a second shift, let's say, and to do household chores, make dinner, make sure kids are okay, homework is done, and things like that. So this is what I remember about women.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, probably even actually later, when this is kind of a new Russia, I would say, at that time, that a lot of women got the opportunity to pursue their entrepreneurial interests and a lot of women became very successful because like I said, in general, women were encouraged and many pursued higher education, not just high school or even community college, but many went to what got their master's, it was kind of a standard, I would say. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yeah, lots of women opened their own businesses, became successful entrepreneurs, especially again, if their husbands had connections, let's say. But yeah, a lot of I think, for a lot of women, it was kind of a welcome change.

22:30

Men and women could occupy the same position, but of course, a man would be paid more. But in terms of, like I said, there were certain professions, maybe where women considered to be like outsiders, right? Like, again, engineering was not for women. But women also work in construction, you know, women work in transportation. So, I don't know, I grew up with the sense that, yeah, I could be, I could go anywhere if I had the brain for it. Lots of women, you know, lots of women had their own careers, it actually was looked down, or frowned upon, if you were sort of a homestay mom. So, that wasn't something that... definitely was not an aspirational path for a woman.

I went to school, to college and grad school in Tomsk, so the city that we moved in after we left the village. I got into a program in linguistics, and I worked in, ah, it's called Laboratory

of the Siberian Indigenous People. Okay, that laboratory still exists, they still conduct linguistic research and I worked primarily… I did several field trips for the course of three years, each field trip was about a month, and I worked with a community, the Indigenous community known as Khanty, as I mentioned. This is the population, this is the native Indigenous people that my great-grandparents and grandparents encountered when they first came to that part of Siberia.

24:30

My linguistic research was, I don't know if it's interesting, it would be interesting to your readers or listeners. It was focused on the category of aspect, it's a grammatical aspect, you know, in the Khanty language. But I think that what I need to say is that I studied not just language, I studied the specific dialect of that language, one of the archaic dialects of that language, that was going extinct at that time and it had a very interesting kind of a grammatical structure. Surprisingly, you know, the dialect was almost like an independent language, because there were some other dialects of that language that were spoken in other parts of Siberia. But this particular dialect was very close to the Hungarian language - surprise, surprise! - like somewhere in Europe, right? And as I said, you know, that was, it had only a few speakers left.

I studied that language because, again, I had lived in that village, so I kind of really had a pretty good idea about where to go, who to talk to. My relatives still lived in that area, and it wasn't the first time… When I went on a field trip, it wasn't the first time when I just encountered the Indigenous people, so I knew about their life. I would say that my observations throughout those years were that the Soviet Union definitely kind of brought some technical and scientific knowledge and literacy, because everyone had to go to school, every Indigenous child, including Indigenous children, you know, they had to go to school, everyone had to learn how to write. An expectation was that you graduated from school, you have to do at least ten grades, I think this is what we're required to do.

26:51

But to me, as a linguist and anthropologist of that time, I have to say that the sense of identity, you know, that was lost; the sense of identity, cultural identity, linguistic identity, because again, women married Russian or a Russian speaking man. Remember, we're talking about the place where people from all parts of the Soviet Union had been sent to, not only during the Stalin's repressions, but also after World War II. As I said, there were Germans, there were Ukrainians, there were Belarusians, there were people from the Baltic, what used to be like called Baltic Republic. I heard different languages, and I grew up in different cultures, which I did not realize until I got to the United States, pretty much, that I was very comfortable with the cultural and linguistic diversity.

But I also know that the native culture pretty much did not survive; as far as I know, pretty

much the dialect is gone. I'm very proud of the work that I did and that I was able to document that language, actually had a couple of grants. One was, well, we actually received two big grants from the Russian Science Foundation for that work. We also got a grant from Carnegie Foundation.

28:32

The majority of Khanty people live in the northern part of Siberia, it's called the Khanty-Mansi territory. They maintain their cultural identity in the language. But this dialect was an isolate, so they were like a very, very small community of people. Of course, everyone was interested, and still is, in how come it is so close to the Hungarian language and not that close to the other dialects of the same language. And it's like really fascinating research. But because the community was so small at that time, they basically kind of got diluted in this Russian-speaking population. I do not think that it is viable or feasible at this point to completely resurrect that dialect in that particular place.

For Indigenous women, I think that some of them definitely took sort of advantage of this new educational opportunities, right? But that was a big, was a really dramatic shift in their way of life. So, while they pursued their education and embraced their new cultural identity, of course, many of them lost their language and also lost their cultural identity. I know that some of them… In Russian passports at that time, you were required to declare your national identity, I suppose, so I know that some Indigenous people would want to be declared as Russians, not Khanty, for example.

30:41

There was also a lot of stigma around Indigenous people because, again, their way of life was just very different from the mainstream way of life that Russian-speaking population or other cultures that came in there. They were, I suppose, more Russian or more Westernized, maybe, but I think it was one of the main reasons I did not continue to pursue this work. It was happening in front of my eyes, how the culture was dying.

When I have conversations like that, it makes me appreciate things I did not maybe see before, didn’t realize or didn’t value before. I think that that life gave me really good sense… a skill I would call adaptability. Adaptability, being able to adapt sort of quickly, assess your surroundings, your circumstances, and think ‘well, how can I survive?’ That’s one, but then not only ‘how can I survive?’, but ‘how can I flourish?’ I just remember that this was kind of a mantra that we had in my family, and especially my grandad, you just never give up! You just never give up. You toughen up. You can’t, because in those circumstances you can’t, because you’d be dead in a few hours.

32:31
So, I think that maybe this adaptability, and becoming tough, I would say, maybe tougher

than other women who happened to be or happened to grow up in softer circumstances. So there was that. I remember when I came to the United States, I actually came to California for the first time, I felt really really comfortable. People were speaking different languages; I mean, I couldn't understand Spanish at that time, but I was just very comfortable with diversity, basically. That's one of the things: to me, it's cultural diversity, ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity… There is no one correct thing; there are always multiple perspectives, right? You somehow need to find out a way to live there, right, and live well. So I think this is kind of the main takeaway for me.

33:45

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Book review:

Kaarina Kailo, *Sauna Culture, Sweat and Spirituality: On the Architectonics and Cosmology of Sacred Space*, Springer Studies on Populism, Identity Politics, and Social Justice (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025) pp. 410, $ 159.99 USD

reviewed by ELIZABETH ANN BARTLETT

Living as I do in the midst of both Finnish immigrant and Anishinaabe cultures, and where the two merge in the many here who identify as 'Findians,' I was intrigued by the description of Kaarina Kailo's book, *Sauna, Culture, Sweat and Spirituality*, as a

NB: This review was initially published with the blog *Feminism and Religion* on 2 October 2025, at the following URL: https://feminismandreligion.com/2025/10/02/sauna-culture-sweat-and-spirituality-on-the-architectonics-and-cosmology-of-sacred-space-by-kaarina-kailo-book-review-by-beth-bartlett/. Recognizing that book reviews serve to inform an interested readership about new works, the *Matrix* Editorial Collective is happy to reprint this contribution. Permission was requested to reprint the piece on 19 May 2026.

comparative exploration of Indigenous sweat lodges -- *madoodiswan* in Anishinaabemowin -- and Finnish saunas.[1] As an outsider to both cultures, I have no ancestral or traditional knowledge of either saunas or sweat lodges and I wanted to learn more about both. Kailo's book did not disappoint. What I hadn't expected and was delighted to discover was that Kailo connects both with ancient goddess religions, contemporary feminist spiritualities, and ecofeminism.

Kailo's book is a widely and deeply researched cross-cultural comparative study of the elements, practices, intentions, and spiritualities of sweat cultures ranging far beyond various Native American sweat lodge practices – Delaware Great Houses, Anishinaabe sweat lodges, Pueblo *kivas* – and the Finnish sauna, to Iberian/Galician saunas, Irish sweathouses, and Old Europe. As Kailo herself says, the value of such cross-cultural studies is the way they help to expand our thinking, enabling us to see things we might not have otherwise. She repeatedly says that she is looking for the 'affinities' among these various sweat cultures, rather than focusing on their differences, and she finds many. In the process, she reveals the role of sweat lodges, sweathouses, and saunas as sacred spaces of healing, restorative balance, connection with the spirits, rebirth and regeneration, women-centered spirituality, and Great Bear religions. Infiltrated throughout are her reflections on how reviving the widespread use of sweat cultures and saunas, and the woman and life-centered spiritualities at their heart, would provide an antidote to the current economic, ecological, and political threats to the world.

Her first few chapters focus on comparing and contrasting patriarchal notions of the sacred and profane, resulting in profound othering of women and subaltern groups ('profane' coming from *pro-fanum* – those kept outside the temple), with the inclusive, egalitarian feminist spiritualities in which no separation between the sacred and secular exists and divinity is immanental – the whole world. Here she also incorporates the work Marija Gimbutas, Riane Eisler, and others whose work uncovered the ancient goddess cultures of prepatriarchal times. She goes on to explore Indigenous views of the spiritual, among these being a spirit-oriented worldview; recognition of 'all our relations'; the sacredness of the earth; the infusion of spirit in all being – from flora to fauna to rocks and water; a gift economy; the cardinal directions; the spirits of earth, air, fire, and water and the sacred medicines of sweetgrass, sage, tobacco, and cedar.

[1] I live in Duluth, Minnesota, once known as 'the Helsinki of the North' because of having the highest Finnish population anywhere in the country when waves of Finnish immigrants moved here in two waves in the early 20th century. Sauna is celebrated here (and people will often correct the pronunciation of those who call it 'sawna,' rather than 'sowna'). This is the land of the Anishinaabe and the Native community here is very strong, especially since 1978 and the passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Act when Indigenous peoples here could restore and openly engage in their spiritual practices. Many Finnish and Anishinaabe married, thus the large population here of 'Findians.'

Kailo then goes on to explore the elements, practices, and spiritual aspects of sweat cultures in Indigenous America, ancient Iberia and Galicia, Ireland, Old Europe, and Finland in great detail. What emerges are striking commonalities. In nearly all instances, the sweat lodges and houses were built in the shape of a mound or beehive, with a small, low entrance, requiring the participant to enter with humility, and with a center pole connecting the heaven and earth. Among other shared features are the particular placement of objects; the importance of the cardinal directions; an emphasis on the connections of Earth and Sky – and a phrase she repeats often -- 'So above, as below;' paying respects to ancestors; the importance of water, fountains, and springs; fire as a purifying agent; the role of sweats and saunas in purification, healing, and the maintenance of order and balance; ancestor worship; shamanism and communication with spirits.

What I found particularly surprising was the importance of the bear – or the Great Bear Mother – in most of these cultures. As she explains it in detail in each of these cultures, it makes so much sense. With its cyclical pattern of hibernation and then emergence from caves in the spring with cubs, the bear is both example and symbol of rebirth and regeneration. In culture after culture, the bear is associated with spring, fertility, the return of the light, as are bear goddesses throughout the circumpolar North. Associated as they are with bears, bees and honey also are regarded as sacred.

But perhaps more important for Kailo's purposes of reinterpreting sweat cultures through a feminist lens, is the connection she finds of bear-worshipping cultures with women-centered goddess cultures, and the function of sweat lodges, sweat houses, and saunas in creating sacred spaces of rebirth and regeneration. She makes a strong and striking case that the very shape and design of sweat houses as mounds or beehives with small, low entrances mimic not only the bear's den, but also the maternal womb. To crawl into the sweat lodge or sweat house is to re-enter the safety and primal nature of the womb, and in that liminal space of darkness, drumming, chanting, and altered states of consciousness one is able to access the peace of Oneness with the universe, as well as one's unique path and purpose. One emerges then as one reborn. Hence the deep association with Goddess cultures centered around the sacred feminine and role of women in giving birth, as well as feminist spiritualities that seek to revalourize women's bodies and being.

In her conclusion, Kailo writes that she suspects that when provided with information about these ancient matristic elements of sauna spirituality, women might "feel empowered and identify with its neglected maternal aspects."[2] I certainly found that to be

[2] 384.

the case with myself. I had not been so immersed in these aspects of goddess spirituality since first reading Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, as well as many of Carol Christ's works years ago, and I'd lost touch with much of the empowerment and sense of the divine feminine that I had at that time. It was in reading Kailo's account of the Irish Sheela-Na-Gig[3] in particular, of how these figures were carved into the Irish sweathouses and later appear on the walls of churches, castles, town walls, and tombstones, but primarily medieval churches, so that all those entering did so under representations of women's vulvas – what Kailo calls "the gate of the womb"[4] -- that I wrote in the margins, "What would it have been like to be so empowered?" The text had brought me fully into the imaginary of living in a society and a spirituality that revered women, and it was deeply moving. What would it be like indeed? In her conclusion, Kailo suggests that this is precisely what we need, and that both Indigenous and ecofeminist spiritual views and practices would help to bring about a world of "balanced living, equality, ecosocial sustainability, peace and the gift paradigm."[5]

While being a highly detailed scholarly work which at times engages in academic debates with other scholars of sauna culture, Kailo's book is highly accessible. It is also greatly enhanced by the many photos and illustrations of sweat lodges, sweat houses, and saunas. The book provides the reader with a strong sense of sweat and sauna cultures' deep roots in matristic, women-centered and women-honoring cultures and spiritualities with values of interconnectedness, immanence, gifting, and reciprocity. Kailo makes a strong case that the sauna, in her words, "is the first religion, the first temple of healing and well-being and the matrix where peaceful, trusting relationships have been celebrated since the beginning of time."[6] It is an important read for these troubled times.

By Elizabeth Ann Bartlett
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[3] Kailo defines the Sheela-Na-Gig as the "collective name for carvings of naked females who appear in positions to emphasize genitalia." (274)
[4] 274.
[5] 386.
[6] 388.

Volume 5, Issue 1 Spring 2026 Pg. 130 - 137

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index

Book review:

Michèle Hayeur Smith and Alexandra Sanmark, eds., *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2025), pp. 192, £ 29.95

reviewed by LINNÉA ROWLATT

A co-edited volume from Michèle Hayeur Smith (Smithsonian) and Alexandra Sanmark (Highlands and Islands), *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives* is a wide-ranging investigation into the lives of women during the Viking Age. Along with the history of these women, the chapters of this extraordinary interdisciplinary work assemble and illuminate the Viking matriculture, which – broadly speaking – is defined as the system of symbols which pertained to women, the maternal, and the feminine, and which shaped social expectations of women and the opportunities available to them. The ten authors of this volume, each a recognized expert in their field, offer rich explorations of women's little-known contributions to and roles in Viking culture and society. However, I am not an expert in this field; therefore, after briefly describing the

contributions of each author, I review the edited volume for what it reveals about the Viking matriculture.

In their comprehensive Introduction (referred to as Chapter 1), Smith, Sanmark, and Kevin P. Smith (Smithsonian/SUNY) clearly articulate the research questions which drive the compilation: *Did women contribute to society only as caregivers bound to the home, or were their lives and roles more complex with responsibilities and opportunities that at times might have complemented, and at other times, supplanted their roles as caregivers and domestic workers? Can we find alternative and more 'masculine' public roles that women held than were assumed in view of past research?*[1] The answer to these questions is clearly positive and the book's focus on women's experiences outside of the traditional framework emphasizes the possibilities and opportunities that were available to Viking women alongside the gender-typical responsibilities of reproductive and domestic labour.

These uncommonly-examined topics include aspects of violence relating to women in the Old Norse legal system, Viking women as colonizers in Britain, women in trade and exchange, gender balance and cooperation in Viking Age households, the role of serving drink in choosing the hero, *Vǫlva*s and their tools, women's textile magic, and a biography of Friðgerðr Þorðardóttir, a Viking Age woman in Iceland. With such a wide range of topics, there is a risk that the volume could be shambolic. However, Smith and Sanmark have organized the chapters coherently, moving from legal codes to magic in an orderly manner and the flow of text reads smoothly. Of course, there is an intimate relationship in any cultural system between cultural meanings and social behaviours; Geertz himself might suggest, in this instance, that the Viking matriculture described, interpreted, and reflected Viking social reality – a model *of* reality - as well as prescribing and shaping Viking social behaviour - a model *for* reality. This edited volume is fruitful in both areas.

Models *Of* Reality: Women in Viking Society

In the second chapter of the book, 'Aspects of violence connected to women in the Old Norse legal systems,' historian Anne Irene Riisøy (South-Eastern Norway) investigates Old Norse laws concerning violence committed by women and the redress available to women for violence committed against them. In placing the focus on early Norwegian laws, this chapter balances a tendency to accept Icelandic legislation as normative throughout the Viking world. Exploring a variety of sources, including remaining sections of the *Frostathing Law* and the *Gulathing Law*, as well as offering comparisons with Icelandic law *Gràgàs*, Riisøy concludes that there were no formal legal distinctions made between women and men in the earliest Norse laws. Women who committed violence faced the same consequences as men, whether paying compensation to the victim or being killed as

1 P. 1

a permitted revenge; they also had to face the possibility of a public declaration of outlaw status and/or the need to pay fines to the monarch. Likewise, women as injured parties had the same rights to compensation and/or revenge as men.

Riisøy notes that Viking Age society was heavily stratified and that factors other than sex – social status, wealth, or personality, for example - may have been more determinative of the levels of violence committed by women than sex. Aggression was a cultural characteristic permitted to the Viking elite, along with violence or threats of violence, and more important than the sex of the perpetrator was the presence of family and allies who could defend their position in the social hierarchy. The honour culture of the elite was the same whether for men or women; there was likely a great difference in the scope for violence available and its compensation between an elite woman and a poor woman than between an elite woman and an elite man. This insight threads through the rest of the book, shaping not only our knowledge of Viking matriculture but, also, of the larger Viking culture.

Written by Shane McLeod (Highlands and Islands), the book's third chapter 'Migrants, conquerors, settlers: Viking women in Britain' reviews new evidence for the presence of Viking women in Britain during the first waves of invasion and the early acculturation period along with their migration within the British Isles between 793 and 1016 CE. Based on inferences and conjectures from archaeological and historical evidence, where the former outweighs the latter, McLeod offers substantial evidence for a high level of mobility among women. Mostly in domestic roles but also as rune carvers, practitioners of magic, and potentially as warriors (the evidence for this last is contested), they arrived in Britain as part of conquering armies and initial land settlements, and migrated throughout Britain, Scotland, and Ireland. Freedom of movement among women is a recognized marker of a strong matriculture, one where women are at liberty to develop their full human potential alongside domestic and reproductive responsibilities.[2] While McLeod notes that most Viking ventures were family enterprises in which women would have participated, Viking women in Britain also had the opportunity to step outside of domestic roles, whether permanently or temporarily, within a framework of cultural support.

In Chapter 4, archaeologist Unn Pederson (Oslo) explores the introduction of women as economic actors – tradeswomen, effectively – to the historical narrative of the Viking Age and summarizes recent findings to assert women's contributions as instrumental in the nascent market economy of the period. Despite Anna Stalsberg's seminal contributions to this subject from 1979 to 1991, particularly her argument that trade was not a gendered activity among Vikings, Pederson traces the presence of ongoing sexism in the field:

2 Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'From Matrilineal Kinship to Matriculture: Establishing a Canadian Agenda. Workshop Report,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 1(1): 2020, 81.

practitioners sometimes accept an implicit androcentric gender perspective even while there is a general trend towards gender neutral terminology.

Centring an examination of the hoard discovered at Haugen in the nineteenth century with support from more recent finds, Pederson largely bases her argument on the presence of weighing equipment (weights and balances) in many Norwegian graves confirmed as women's. A discussion of Viking women's associations with drinking vessels and the ubiquity of remains of such vessels in recognized trading centres leads to speculations about the role of women in trade. Specifically, Pederson asserts that knowledge of appropriate moments for certain types of trade, ease with local and foreign customs, and an ability to navigate the tensions of their own society means that Viking Age women may have assumed positions as arbiters, mediators, knowledgeable consumers, and traders with the power to dictate what constituted appropriate or fair deals. With this argument, Pederson positions Viking women as economic agents in their own right. This agency is, along with mobility, a core element of a matriculture where women are recognized as having the authority to dispose of resources as they see fit.

In the fifth chapter, Alexandra Sanmark and Tara Athanasiou (Highlands and Islands) explore the concept of gendered work and gendered space during the Viking Age and Norse period (750–1300 CE) with archaeological evidence from subsistence farming households in Scandinavia and Iceland. Carefully noting the difficulty of confirming speculation, the authors postulate that meeting their daily needs for subsistence was more important to Vikings and Norse people than gendered delimitations between activities. Nevertheless, some tasks were gender specific: textile production, for example, was carried out exclusively by women, as was milking the cow(s) and making dairy products. Similar to the discussion concerning women and violence in Chapter 2, though, a woman's social status seems to have been more determinative of the work she did than her gender.

Victorian beliefs that women should occupy the domestic, private sphere and men the public sphere influenced historical research into gendered spaces and early research on the Viking and Norse people did not escape this distortion; even as obvious a contradiction as the task of dairying taking place beyond the threshold of the house (above) eluded notice. Sanmark and Athanasiou provide further examples from the Sagas, laws, and archaeology to challenge this bias, asserting that the overlap and sharing of space – both private and public - by women and men of the period renders the suggestion of a gender division between public and private spheres unsupportable. It is more important, they state, to understand the cooperation between women and men which Viking Age and Norse households required to succeed.

These four chapters focus on social aspects of the Viking matriculture, revealing, clarifying, and speculating about the range of social behaviours that were available to women. That the matriculture supported women's mobility and trading activity, as well as declaring gender equality in the eyes of the law, suggests a matriculture where women's choices were greater than hitherto acknowledged. These descriptions of Viking women's cultural models of suitable social behaviour for women expand beyond reproductive and domestic labour into the economy, to which one can speculate that the relative ease of their mobility contributed. These clarifications further extend into subsistence farming, the core of Viking Age society, where gendered spaces and gendered activities are shown to have been less important than the sheer act of survival in a demanding environment.

Models *For* Reality: Women in Viking Culture

Moving into the Norse mythic-heroic tradition with Chapter 6, Karen Bek-Pedersen (Aarhus) probes the textual motif of special drinks offered by extraordinary women to exceptional men. Exploring the role as undertaken by Valkyries in Valhǫll, by Sigrdrífa with Sigurðr, and by goddesses and jǫtunn-women, Bek-Pedersen suggests that the offering of a drink to the man is the moment of choice; he is not chosen and then given a drink, rather, handing him the drinking vessel is the act of choosing itself. The ritualistic nature of this deed demonstrates feminine agency to no small degree, since it regularly precedes marriage or sexual relations between the two. Exploring the motif's antiquity, found, among others, in myths about the founding of Marseilles, Bek-Pedersen concludes that a crucial feature of the ritual is that the drink comes from the woman; he cannot simply take it, she must give it to him. The agency that this suggests and its symbolic aspects may not have translated into this level of agency for individual living women, but the author perceives the ritual as "a deep-rooted traditional view of the power of the feminine principle, whose role and function was still remembered and retained in old mythical-heroic imagery."[3]

In Chapter 7, Olof Sundqvist (Stockholm) restores a role as cult leaders of their community to women by analyzing a narrative about *gyðja* and *húsfreyja* Friðgerðr, found in the *Kristni saga*. Beginning with detailed clarifications of Old Norse terms for women cult leaders and the analytical terms for classifying religious leadership, Sundqvist presents the story of Friðgerðr and her son Skeggi, frames it with social and cultic contexts of the area (western Iceland) and period (the late 900s CE), and explores the elite status of the *húsfreyja* in some depth, along with her role in cultic leadership. Friðgerðr's behaviour is compared with that of two male cult leaders also mentioned in the *Kristni saga*, as well as

3 Karen Bek-Pedersen, 'Choosing the hero: Drink and the institutionalisation of heroism,' *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Michèle Hayeur Smith and Alexandra Sanmark (Oxford and Havertown: Oxbow Books, 2025), 117. EXPAND – check all authors' affiliations are included in text

that of the ritual specialist known as a *vǫlva*. Supported by some careful attention to translations of texts, the author concludes that it is highly likely that Friðgerðr held the role of *gyðja*, or cult leader, at her home in Hvammr during the late tenth century, whether in collaboration with her husband or alone in his absence. As witnessed by the *Kristni saga*'s author, she performed rituals at the *stalli/stallr* (ritual platform or altar), but does not appear to have provided the services of a *vǫlva*. As such, her position as *húsfreyja of* her household included access to the position of *gyðja* and, with it, ritual leadership; this was likely true of *húsfreyja* throughout Old Norse society.

Moving from the lady of the household to the ritual specialist in Chapter 8, 'The *Vǫlva*'s toolkit: Viking Age ritual specialists and the tools of their trade,' Leszek Gardeła (National Museum of Denmark) offers a survey of research on Viking Age magic and its women practitioners, the *vǫlur*. She goes on to explore the material remains of practitioners with a particular focus on their tools, especially their staffs and the miniatures found in their graves. She convincingly argues that Vikings considered magic staffs to be animated objects which, along with any particular *vǫlva*, may have required post-mortem physical suppression to keep them from activities after death (if they were not stoned to death and buried where they died). Gardeła asserts that placing stones on the corpse of a *vǫlva* and/or breaking or bending her staff, along with particular miniature items, are means of identifying the graves of *vǫlur* and encourages deeper interdisciplinary research in mortuary archaeology.

The final chapter of the book, 'Women's textile magic in Viking Age Iceland,' written by Michèle Hayeur Smith, explores the associations of women's creation of textiles with magic. She reminds the reader that although Viking society was patriarchal, women nevertheless had domains of supremacy and one of these was the necessary activity of creating and managing cloth. Strongly supporting known cultural associations made by Viking Age people between spinning, weaving, and magic with evidence from sagas and archaeology, Hayeur Smith concludes that both ordinary women – the women whose handwork clothed Viking people – and the *vǫlur* had access to textile magic that was based in the *nornir* (elemental female beings who sit at the root of the world tree and weave the fates of gods and humans). This access gave women not only a degree of personal agency, but, through goading, a lever of control over men.

Hayeur Smith also provides a certain conclusion to the volume in the last section of her chapter, where she reminds the reader of the patriarchal structure of Late Iron Age patriarchy in the Viking world. By calling up this structure, we are grounded once again in social and cultural reality (such as they may be understood from centuries in the future) and must acknowledge that the scholarship in this book serves to illuminate what has

been hidden through time and in scholarship: the lives of Viking Age women in a society oriented towards men.

Conclusions

Although patriarchal Viking Age society centralized men and their activities, and scholarship long copied this attitude, *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women* provides a clear outline of a Viking matriculture which extended beyond the domain of reproduction and domestic attentions to children and men. Equality under the law, relative freedom of movement, opportunities for trade, situational equality within the family unit, and access to religious authority (sometimes exclusive access) are known markers of a strong matriculture. The authors clearly state, however, that this matriculture was available primarily to women in leadership roles (elite women and *húsfreyja*), and that a woman's social status likely played a greater role in her personal freedoms than her sex. Which is to say, slave women or women who did not preside over their households as *húsfreyja* were unlikely to have access to this level of authority and freedom. Sadly, they were likely to be the victims of the Viking patriarchy more frequently: targets for sexual predation and assault, owned as chattel, and chosen to accompany dead elite men to the other world in funerary sacrifices – signs of a very weak matriculture.

Effectively, then, for a Viking Age woman to have access to a strong matriculture (societies can have more than one, just as they can have several religious subcultures) a woman may have needed to have won the birth lottery, so to speak, thereby establishing her in an environment where her family's status extended certain privileges to her, including the opportunity to demonstrate virtues such as strength of will, cleverness, or leadership. However, if men behaved like women, particularly weaving or practicing *seiðr*, they were deemed to be full of *ergi*, lost respect, and may have lost their lives. Throughout the book, authors give close attention to gender identities and are careful to note the difficulty of identifying non-standard identities from the archaeological record.

While this edited volume has some significant strengths, there are still some drawbacks. Notably, the book lacks an index; this absence makes cross-referencing similar types or pieces of evidence, locations, and themes across authors a challenge. The text itself can be difficult to understand at times, due to the in-text citation style selected by the editors (footnotes or endnotes might have been preferable) amid grammatical challenges posed by non-native English language writers.

Despite these limitations, however, this volume is still an extremely valuable contribution to scholarship in both Women's Studies and Viking Age Studies, as well as all the fields included in this interdisciplinary work.

About the Author

Linnéa Rowlatt, PhD, is the Managing Editor of the Network on Culture's flagship project, *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*. She has published a monograph, *Weathering the Reformation: Religion and Culture in Early Sixteenth-Century Strasbourg* (2024), and co-edited *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be* (2025).

Volume 5, Issue 1 Spring 2026 Pg. 138 - 140

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index

Book review:

Stephanie Guyer-Stevens and Françoise Pommaret, *Divine Messengers: the untold story of Bhutan's female shamans* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2021) 175 pp. $24.95 USD

reviewed by ANGELA SUMEGI

Written by Kunzang Choden, a prominent Bhutanese author, the forward to this book sets the tone for what is to follow: a celebration of the Bhutanese women who serve their communities as diviners, healers, and spiritual guides. The book is written primarily by Stephanie Guyer-Stevens, an award-winning journalist, radio producer, and community activist in collaboration with Françoise Pommaret, an ethno-historian and Tibetologist with a longstanding interest in the religious phenomenon known in Bhutan as *delom* (Tibetan *delok*). Pommaret, who has lived and worked in Bhutan since 1981, translated and edited the testimony of the women they interviewed as well as serving as a guide for Guyer-Stevens in making sense of her journey into the Buddhist world of the *delom*.

The word *delom*, predominantly associated with women, means one who has 'returned from the dead.' This is both an historical tradition as well as one that continues into the present day. Guyer-Stevens explains that, traditionally, a *delom* is understood to have died for some length of time during which her consciousness travels to the various Buddhist worlds of rebirth, most often the hell realms but sometimes also the paradises of the Buddhas. On her travels, she meets with the Lord of Death or other tutelary deities who instruct her in the workings of karma and its relation to Buddhist cosmology, which is to say, a preponderance of good deeds leads upward to rebirth in heavenly worlds and a preponderance of bad deeds downward to the hell worlds. During this period, which can be for many days, her body lies inert as if dead. Usually, Tibetan Buddhists leave the body for some time before cremation, or instructions not to disturb the body have been left, but at least one interviewee expressed fear that her body would be cremated while her consciousness was travelling. The *delom* eventually returns to her body, charged with relaying what she has seen and heard regarding the afterlife results of virtue and non-virtue.

Historical *delom* biographies, such as the one featured in the book, give gruesome and graphic accounts of the tortures of the eighteen hell worlds waiting for those who do terrible deeds. In sharing her personal experience, the *delom* reinforces basic Buddhist doctrine, but beyond that, the *delom's* experience sets her apart as an intermediary between the ordinary life of the people in her community and the cosmological worlds of rebirth in which they believe. She is regarded as having directly encountered the deities that most only see depicted on the monastery walls. She becomes someone, therefore, with special divinatory powers based on her intimate knowledge of, and communication with, the deities worshipped by the community.

Guyer-Stevens' personal reflections on her travels combined with atmospheric descriptions of Bhutanese culture, landscape, and people make for an easy and engaging read. She is clear that the book is not to be regarded in any way as an academic endeavour, but as testimony to the role and value of the work being done by the women they interview. The first third of the book establishes the religious context of the interviews in terms of Buddhist concepts such as karma, the use of the word *shaman*, and the meaning of *delom*, as well as various other related titles for women who offer divination services – *khandrom*, *rizam*, *nyendrom*. This section is written in broad strokes that can only offer a superficial overview of the topics. Nevertheless, it provides an important context for the interviews to come, and the bibliography offers good sources for further exploration.

In 2011 the authors interviewed the first of five women of west Bhutan; seven years later, they interviewed the remaining four and revisited the original interviewee. The interviews, some more detailed than others, reveal how the women came to be known in the way they are, the occasional rivalry that ensues regarding who is or is not an authentic medium, as well as folk stories associated with the cultural heroes and local deities. The women recount familiar

shamanic tropes of sickness or madness culminating in the realization and, in most cases, their self-proclamation of special status. In some instances, this status is authenticated by Buddhist authorities, but more often, the medium is validated by the people of her community who accept her as having divinatory powers and consult her on their problems.

The book contains translated excerpts from the biography of Sangay Choezom, an early eighteenth-century *delom* from eastern Bhutan. As the interviews unfold, however, it becomes apparent that the textual historical understanding of *delom* has, in the modern world, given way to a much broader range of interpretations and practices. Increasingly, the more renowned also gain international clients brought by tourist guides. Having experienced, through the efforts of one such local guide, the possession trance of a Bhutanese *pawo* (male medium) brought on through hair-raising drumming and dancing, I was a bit disappointed not to find an eye-witness account of a female possession ritual.

The present-day spirit mediums mentioned in the book operate under various titles, but all function as channels for the powers of other worldly beings, either through divination, healing, mind-reading, or possession. In profiling the women who provide such services for their communities, the authors fulfill their intent to honour and to shed light on those who, for the most part, function on the fringes of Buddhist hierarchy, yet who fulfill an important need in ordinary Bhutanese life.

While the work may not satisfy those looking for more in-depth ethnography or analysis, it provides a solid starting point for the study of ongoing interactions between Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs and practices in Bhutan and other Himalayan cultures. For those with a general interest in the subject, it offers a tantalizing glimpse into the lives of women who preserve and maintain a vibrant part of Bhutanese spiritual life.

About the Author

Angela Sumegi is Adjunct Professor of Religion at Carleton University, the author of *Dreamworlds of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), and co-editor of *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025).

Volume 5, Issue 1 Spring 2026 Pg. 141

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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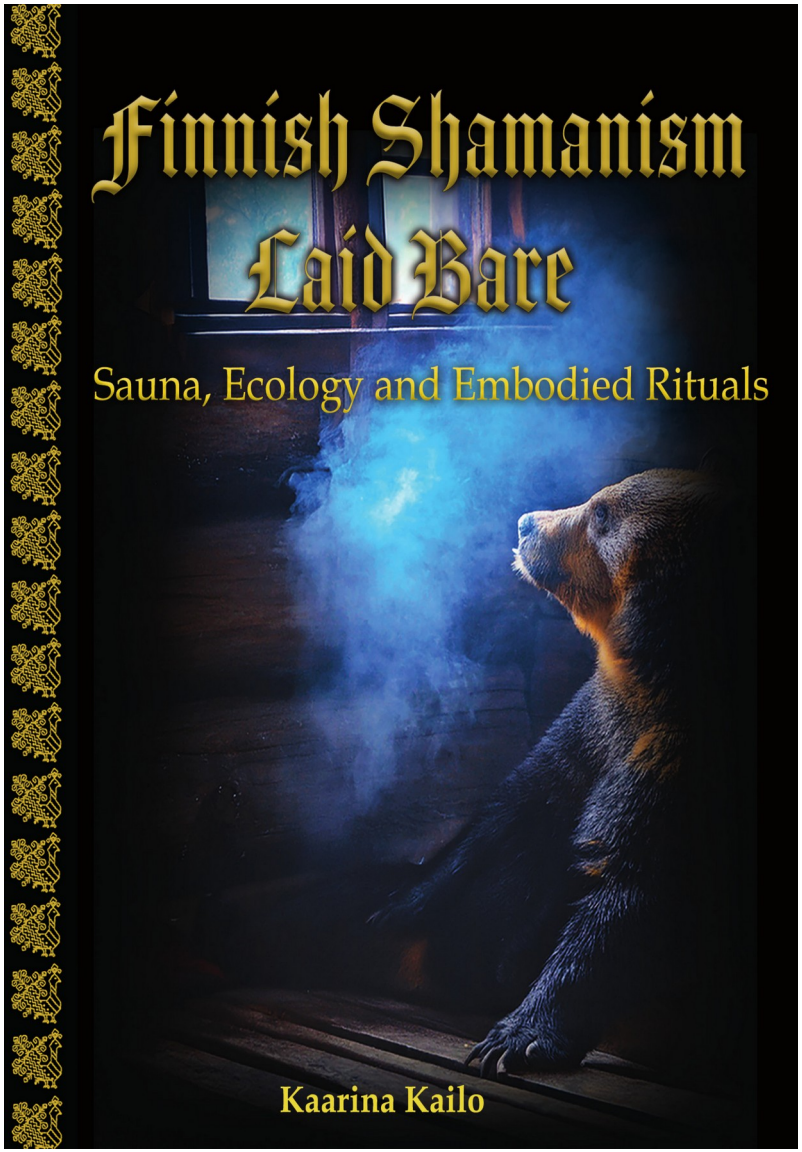

NEW BOOK RELEASE

Finnish Shamanism Laid Bare: Sauna, Ecology and Embodied Rituals

KAARINA KAILO, PhD

Bathing culture is picking up steam across the world, like a Bear waking up from its winter den. Kaarina Kailo's seventh book/anthology on the sauna introduces sauna lovers to a topic missing in sauna literature: the traces of a pre-Christian culture where women were in the ceremonial center. The book explores the matriarchal traces and shamanistic wisdom traditions of the sauna, revealed as the embodied Mother-house of birth, death and rebirth. Its rituals, songs and healing practices blend practical etiquette and sacred ecology. The book focuses on agrarian sauna rituals that were held during seasonal and life cycle events. They carry traces of the magic ecology of the past. In this study you learn about ecologically and socially sustainable beliefs that have been part of Finnish mythology and cosmology. Included are examples of the Finns' and Karelians' uses of imitative magic and the role of gifting relations with the spirit world. The book is aimed at anyone interested in getting the most out of sauna experiences and it has useful ritual knowledge for sauna therapists. It includes incantations, magic formulas, spells and prayers addressed to the elements and spirits. Practical instructions, medical advice, herbal knowledge and sauna rules are included to help bathers make the most of the sauna experience.

Dr. Kaarina Kailo, Docent of North American studies, is a cultural studies scholar and Finnish foremother of ecomythology/ecofeminism. Currently a Fellow of the European Institute of Archeomythology and part of the Creatrix Studies of the Mago Academy, she has held women's studies positions in Canadian and Finnish universities. She researches northern and Indigenous women's issues as a Fellow of the Finnish Academy. *The Woman who married the Bear* (Oxford UP), which she co-authored with Barbara Mann, received the Sarasvati award for the best non-fiction work in 2023 (Ass. for the Study of Women and Mythology). She is also a self-made quilt artist.

Cost: 25 €; free postage in Finland. Order at www.kaarinakailo.info