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HUNTERS IN THE GARDEN: YUP'IK SUBSISTENCE AND THE AGRICULTURAL  
MYTHS OF EDEN

By

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Thesis

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for the degree of

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Hunters in the Garden: Yup'ik Subsistence and the Agricultural Myths of Eden

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Yup'ik writers and Yup'ik subsistence offer valuable challenges, parallels, and alternative models to mainstream nature writing's discourse surrounding human relationships to the land, a discourse that carries an inherent agricultural bias. An introduction to western Alaska's Nunivak Island provides context for Chapter 1, which demonstrates the fluidity of cultural, geographical, and historical margins through discussion of the works of Yup'ik journalist John Active and historian and ethnographer James Clifford. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Yup'ik subsistence centered around the community of Bethel, Alaska, then subjects mainstream nature writing, represented mostly by Wendell Berry, to critiques supplied by Canadian anthropologist Hugh Brody, who asserts that "Western" discourse carries traces of the myths of Eden and the curses of the book of Genesis. Chapter 3 returns to the geography and stories of Nunivak Island before detailing the contributions that Yup'ik writers like Oscar Kawagley and John Active have to offer back to the prevailing discourse, contributions that stress the importance of sharing and kinship and stress the dangers of commodification.

Table of ContentsHUNTERS IN THE GARDEN: YUP'IK SUBSISTENCE AND THE AGRICULTURAL  
MYTHS OF EDEN

INTRODUCTION: “OUR KNOWLEDGE WILL BE GREATER”—SUBSISTENCE LESSONS FOR AN AGRICULTURAL WORLD	1
CHAPTER 1: MARGINS AND ENDS, CENTERS AND BEGINNINGS—THE “REAL PEOPLE” ON THE NEXUS OF PLACE AND IDENTITY	10
CHAPTER 2: FISH CAMPS AND FARMS—YUP'IK SUBSISTENCE CONFRONTS NATURE WRITING’S GREEN THUMB	34
CHAPTER 3: BEYOND THE END—YUP'IK GENEROSITY AND THE DANGERS OF ACCUMULATION	63
EPILOGUE: EATING MY WORDS IN ALASKA	98
Works Cited	102

INTRODUCTION: “OUR KNOWLEDGE WILL BE GREATER”—  
SUBSISTENCE LESSONS FOR AN AGRICULTURAL WORLD

**Background, Context, and Motivation**

In *The Other Side of Eden*, Canadian anthropologist and filmmaker Hugh Brody examines stories from Genesis as pervasive myths of a highly agricultural people. Agriculture and its myths have spread rapidly across the globe during the 10,000 years since their inventions, but Brody points out that not all cultures are agricultures, and not all myths center on exile from a lost garden:

Beyond the lineages of Noah are those for whom Genesis is not the creation: the humans who live by hunting rather than agriculture....Archeology and anthropology have their own creation stories. According to these, hunting peoples have a claim to the earth that reaches back a hundred times further than that of the farmers whom the biblical God created and cursed. (115)

Recent popular work by writers like Jared Diamond, Charles Mann, and Richard Manning has focused on agriculture’s story of global conquest over the subsistence hunting, gathering, and fishing cultures that predominated throughout 99% of human existence. Their books trace the rise of agriculture back to accidents of geography, or explore variations of what Diamond labels the “guns, germs, and steel” that enabled agriculture’s worldwide dissemination. Brody adds “myth” to the list of mechanisms of conquest, and examines how surviving subsistence cultures continue to face conflicts with agricultural ideology and practice.

Hunter/gatherer cultures have survived aggressive invasion by agricultures mainly, Brody observes, in regions beyond the margins of arable land. Many of these margins (and consequently, many extant hunter/gatherer cultures) exist in the world's Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. One such place is the vast, watery delta country of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers in western Alaska, home to mainly Yup'ik and Cup'ik peoples. Subsistence hunting and gathering is still a major part of Yup'ik life and the regional economy, accounting for at least half of the food consumed in regional households (Kawagley 48). According to state fish and game surveys, some communities in the region have recorded annual per capita harvest rates of 1100 pounds of fish and game (Barker 8).

I live in Bethel, Alaska, the regional hub of Yup'ik country. Although I am from Colorado, not Bethel or the region, I have lived there off and on for about seven years, and I consider it home. After seven years in Missoula, Montana, I moved to Bethel and worked for several years as an advisor and adjunct instructor at a small branch campus of the University of Alaska, and it was in hopes of someday returning as a faculty member that I returned here to Montana to finish graduate school and write this thesis.

Like many other indigenous communities, Bethel sits on or outside many margins, not just margins of arable soil, but also margins on maps, cultural margins, economic margins, and margins of language. Yup'ik country is remote even by Alaska standards, and singular in many ways even in a state marked by singularity.

Brody's book joins the roar of voices engaged in questions of human relationships to the land, voices that approach the questions from disciplines and categories bearing many names: nature writing, environmental literature, environmental history, eco-

criticism, the wilderness debate, deep ecology, natural history. Many recent and popular works, like Richard Manning's *Against the Grain* or Charles Mann's *1491*, have focused (often damningly) on agriculture's role in determining indigenous fates, or on deconstructing stereotypes about and detailing the complexities of the relationships between historical indigenous American peoples and their lands.

Other mainstream voices urge local and sustainable food production, connection to place and community, and a coexistence with "wild" lands that includes both their use and their continuance. These characteristics sit at the core of many subsistence cultures, as do beliefs about the interconnectedness of all living things that parallel the foundations of Western ecology. However, when the mainstream voices speak, their urgings toward environmental responsibility are instead often couched in the metaphors of agriculture, in talk of gardens, Edens, Arcadias, and farms, metaphors and language that not only ignore entire ways of life, but also recapitulate the agriculture-caused problems they propose to solve. And when nature writing does not ignore subsistence cultures, it is often openly hostile to them, condemning subsistence practices such as whale hunts.

In Bethel, I witnessed and learned much that would challenge the environmental discourse I had grown accustomed to in Montana, but also found many parallels I believed downstates environmental discourse would find piercingly relevant and exciting. The invisibility of those parallels in the mainstream discourse is the trigger for this paper. Upon returning to Montana and diving headfirst back into the texts for my environmental studies and ecocriticism courses, I found that many of the voices of mainstream nature writing operated under mechanisms that invalidate the contributions of subsistence

hunting cultures and obscure the parallels between Western environmental discourse and indigenous ecologies.

The people of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta have their own voices addressing human relationships to the land. The agricultural legacy of mainstream nature writing sometimes results in a denial, erasure, or marginalization of these indigenous voices. However, from the margins, Yup'ik subsistence, places, and texts offer valuable challenges, parallels, and alternative models to prevailing discourse surrounding human relationships to the land. In addition to exemplifying the values of connection to place and community, subsistence also offers the subtle values of resource sharing, kinship, and the avoidance of waste or surplus.

The three chapters to follow interrogate Yup'ik country's margins, examine the agricultural oversights of mainstream nature writing, and explore the ideas of Yup'ik writers about human connections to the land. Each chapter is grounded first in discussion of a place in western Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, including the town of Bethel and specific places on Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea. These opening "palimpsest" sections (the concept of palimpsest will be discussed in more detail in the next section of the introduction) precede most of the textual analysis in the chapters and include relevant personal experience. People and places provide the motivation for this project, so I found it natural to include them.



### Some Considerations of Voice

May all my errors take their places and make little noise doing it!

--a traditional Yup'ik story ending

In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, ethnographer Keith Basso explores the literal Apache connection to landscape through the names and stories attached to places, where wisdom comes from learning the features of the landscape and the stories and names associated with them. Basso uses the Apache connection to place to demonstrate how human relationships to landscape are fundamental to culture, and he further asserts that these relationships merit further study (and soon, given the accelerated rate of global cultural loss) if cultures ever want to understand each other.

The project Basso envisions is both communal and cross-cultural, looking beyond both the isolationist solipsism of much “nature writing” and the proprietary boundaries surrounding much indigenous scholarship: “Relationships to places are lived most often in the company of other people, and it is on these communal occasions—when places are sensed together—that native views of the physical world become accessible to strangers” (109). Connections to place are enacted both intra-culturally and inter-culturally, and the borders of understanding can open to “strangers.” Basso’s perceptions call to mind James Ruppert’s term “mediation,” which describes the “artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses epistemological frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other” (3). Ruppert’s view of mediation assumes that good often comes from exposure to and enrichment from some

form of “other.” Ruppert’s ideas are reinforced by the words of Yup’ik elder Paul John, one of the founders of the modern day village of Toksook Bay. John has often been willing to play the mediational part of an ambassador to the non-Native world representing Yup’ik culture. John says, “I urge and push that we, especially those who are working with the people, work toward a better understanding of the Yupiit and the kass’at [white people]...if we integrate the teachings of the Yupiit and the kass’at, our knowledge will be greater” (Fienup Riordan *Hunting* 107).

For the Apache, according to Basso, place is essential not only to the construction of the cultural and political, but to the construction of the personal as well. The experience of a place is not only indelibly “shaped at every turn by the personal and social biography of the one who sustains it,” that experience of place also shapes the person in turn, triggering self-reflection and associations to “other places, other people, other times” (55). I would add “other texts” to Basso’s list of potential associations, and “other stories” as well. People experience places as complex intersections of geography, story, personal experience, and history, and places contribute layers and associations back to people, themselves the locations of intersections of much the same kind.

The overlap of landscape, cultural history, textual presences, and personal history combine to form what eco-critic David Oates calls “palimpsest.” Palimpsest literally means an erased or over-written manuscript on which the tracery of earlier texts can still be read, but metaphorical meanings have been appropriated by fields as diverse as genetics and postcolonial criticism. According to Oates’s version,

[Humans] build our experience of nature as a kind of palimpsest, a blurred record of many passings. Personal memories, family histories, myths and dreams and

tales, language itself, even the ancient body-language coded into legs and lungs and cells: these make strata uncounted, sweet as baklava, rich as meadows, persistent as bedrock. (6)

Like Basso, Oates sees the experience of place and the natural world as a cumulative layering, prolific and rich in associations. He likens this complexity both to the intricate and ultimately inscrutable interrelationships of ecological systems and to the history of human ideas and texts. As an example, he traces how the influence that Hindu texts had on Thoreau traveled back to India a century later to influence Gandhi when he was inspired by “On Civil Disobedience” (Oates 267-269).

Oates extends his metaphor into the structure of his book; *Paradise Wild* overlays and punctuates chapters of discussion of environmental writers and issues with occasional intersections from Oates’s personal experience and personal geography. For example, from discussion of his own sexuality Oates moves to various indigenous attitudes toward homosexuality and then toward intersections between queer theory and ecocriticism. The book recognizes and celebrates the layers of spatial and personal history and motivation that underpin most academic writing concerned with nature or the environment (or, I would argue, most writing).

I hope the examples of Basso and Oates serve to qualify and justify the following practices in this text, itself the intersection of innumerable texts, places, and experiences: I intend to sometimes treat places as texts. I will make observations and assertions about cultures to which I do not belong. And occasionally I will offer personal experiences to the reader, or intrude into the exegesis with the personal “I.”

These methods are the best way I know to do justice to the places that led me to my topic, namely the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta country of western Alaska. This area is predominantly Yup'ik country, also Cup'ik, Cup'ig and Athabaskan. They are places and people who did not ask or approve me to speak for them, so I will try not to. Instead, I am speaking as someone who has long valued nature writing and the environmental values I found there. However, my experiences in Alaska with Yup'ik subsistence required that I rethink those values. Nature writing and the often-judgmental environmental movement it reflects did not seem to make room for Yup'ik voices or consider them important. Moving back and forth between college in Missoula, Montana and jobs in Alaska required a constant reevaluation and repositioning, and this project arose out of a need to reconcile or at least put into dialogue the distinct land ethics I wrestled with in both places.

In a public policy paper titled “Self-determination, Citizenship, and Federalism: Indigenous and Canadian Palimpsest,” Joyce Green offers another metaphor of palimpsest, as “the superimposition of Canadian colonial policies respecting Aboriginal peoples on the permanent foundation of Aboriginal reality that persists despite earlier policies designed to eliminate all such traces” (1). Indigenous knowledge and worldviews survive despite colonial attempts at erasure, such as boarding school policies that took children away from their communities and forbade them to speak their own languages. Yup'ik country shares a similar post-colonial palimpsest. On such ground, it is perhaps naïve to assign positive or even benign value to cultural exchange, exchange that often meant (and still often means) attempted erasure of indigenous reality, as Green notes.

However, I am proceeding on the assumption, informed by Basso and Ruppert, that culture does not exist in a vacuum, and that some good can come of exchange and mediation, even in tricky postcolonial landscapes where genuine attempts do not always guarantee authentic results. If I make mistakes or cross boundaries in pursuit of that good, I would like to offer in apology the sentiment voiced in a traditional phrase added at the end of many Yup'ik stories: "May all my errors take their places and make little noise doing it!" (Fienup-Riordan *Echo* 20).

CHAPTER 1: MARGINS AND ENDS, CENTERS AND BEGINNINGS—THE “REAL  
PEOPLE” ON THE NEXUS OF PLACE AND IDENTITY

**Palimpsest: Iqug (The End), Nuniwar**

Standing on the furthest, peninsular promontory of cliffs that marks the westernmost point of Alaska’s Nunivak Island, the students and instructors in our group are careful not to get too close to the edge. Three hundred feet below, seals roll in the surf of the Bering Sea, and large flocks of harlequin ducks, puffins, long-tailed ducks, and murre bob on the waves. Behind, the treeless tundra of the island stretches into the fog, punctuated in the brief summer by countless low-growing, hardy arctic poppies and other wildflowers. The effect of the treeless heights is compounded by the vertigo of continental exposure. Aside from the Aleutian chain and several other more western points in Alaska, the whole continent lies at our backs. Russia sits only 500 miles away, as close as the nearest highway back in Anchorage. Hawaii is more or less due south. This point marks the western edge of the region I have come to call home, the vast Yukon-Kuskokwim delta country of southwest Alaska.

Maps identify the point as Cape Mohican, named after a ship that wrecked there, the ship itself named for a tribe that lived on the other side of the continent, 4,000 miles away. To the Cup’ig people who live on Nunivak Island, though, the point is known as Iqug, or The End. To them, Iqug was near a traditional seal-hunting, bird-hunting, and egg-gathering camp. Even today, families from Mekoryuk, the only remaining village on the island and home to just over two hundred people, still descend the cliffs on ropes

braided from strips of walrus hide to gather eggs and hunt birds on the cliffs crowded with nests.

The Cup'igs are a small group within the larger Central Yup'ik people, an Eskimo culture whose traditional and current territory centers around the deltas of the massive Yukon River and smaller, but still giant Kuskokwim River. The term "Eskimo" deserves a moment of examination, as it reflects what anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan sees as an almost deliberate hunger of outsiders for misinformation about northern peoples. She explains that two misconceptions persist: that the term is pejorative and means "eaters of raw flesh," and that Eskimo peoples themselves universally now prefer the term "Inuit." The word Eskimo actually derives from a Cree word meaning "snowshoe-netter," and Inuit refers to the large set of Canadian and Greenlander Eskimo peoples to which many other Eskimo peoples, like the Yup'iks, do not belong.

Anthropologists refer to the family of cultures and their languages that spans from eastern Siberia down to the Aleutian Chain and across the north through Canada and Greenland as "Eskimo" or sometimes as Inuit. However, the peoples that make up that group each have their own names for themselves. Some, like the Yup'iks, or YUPIIT (meaning "real or genuine persons"), occasionally use the term "Eskimo" to refer to themselves or aspects of their culture, while Inuit is the preferred general term in Canada and Greenland (Fienup-Riordan *Essays* 5). As the website for the cultural heritage office of the Cup'ig village of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island explains, "We are called Eskimo by Westerners. Although this is a term that some disapprove of, it does not bother us. There are many 'Eskimo' groups, so nowadays we prefer to be identified as *Cup'ig*" ("Cup'it" 1).

Under several names, then, and spread out in more than 50 villages, over 30,000 people live in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, a region the size of Pennsylvania. Most of the villages are predominantly Yup'ik, although the population of Nunivak Island is Cup'ig and speaks a dialect very similar to that spoken by the Cup'ik inhabitants of the villages of Chevak and Hooper Bay on the coast. Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Cup'ig speakers can converse without difficulty, and the regional population is often described using the larger designation of Yup'ik. Past certain points upriver on the Kuskokwim and Yukon, the villages become primarily Athabaskan.

None of these communities is connected to Alaska's road system; people travel on commercial small aircraft for big trips, or get around locally by boat in the summer and snowmachine in the winter. The nearest big city, Anchorage, itself a West Coast city, sits 400 miles to the east of Bethel, the delta's area hub, while Cape Mohican is about 150 miles further west.

As will be discussed in more detail preceding Chapter 2, the Yupiit people of the villages of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta are the largest indigenous group in the United States still occupying their traditional lands, speaking their native language, and living a subsistence lifestyle (Fienup-Riordan *Qanruyutait* xxii). However, the region is undergoing rapid cultural change and has at least its share of problems. As Yup'ik scholar Oscar Kawagley writes, "The outside perception of villages as quaint places where people live a romanticized lifestyle persists because we are unwilling to admit that many of our villages are little more than ghettos by conventional Western standards" (105). The region couples the highest cost of living in the country with some of the lowest average incomes. Alcohol abuse is widespread, and with continuing changes to



traditional diets, the rate of increase in type II diabetes is epidemic. Some villages are still without running water or sewage systems, while others frequently run out of essentials such as fuel oil or propane (supplied by barge) long before the end of winter. Social services such as hospital care and emergency law enforcement are largely unavailable in many villages, and unpredictable weather paired with reliance on small airplanes for transportation often delays the arrival of emergency flights or the State Troopers from hub communities such as Bethel, sometimes for days.

At around 6,000 people, Bethel is by far the region's largest community, a commercial, transportation, medical, and administrative center. Three or four jets fly into Bethel each day from Anchorage and back again; the town is both an intermediate city in its own right and the gateway to the big city. Bethel houses the regional hospital and headquarters of the local health care corporation, the region's biggest employer, and is also home to the area's largest school district and a rural branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the Kuskokwim Campus.

Our group is on Nunivak Island through the Kuskokwim Campus Summer Science Field Program, a National Science Foundation-funded program that gives regional high school students the opportunity to take college science and technology courses over two weeks at a remote camp on the island. Nunivak is a 1.1 million acre classroom complete with dormant volcanoes, abundant marine and bird life, roving herds of muskoxen and reindeer, and plenty of signs, living and historical, of the people who were and are a big piece of the island's ecology. During their time on the island the students will explore the coastline in kayaks (or qay'ars, in Cup'ig), backpack across the island to see the bird rookeries and the massive cliffs of Iqug, and tour the sod house

remnants of ancient villages. Notable field trip encounters will include a dead humpback whale, herds of muskox, and unmapped archaeological sites. Some students will assist the camp cook, Ira, in butchering a reindeer that wandered conveniently close to our camp. An academic advisor and adjunct instructor at the Kuskokwim Campus, I am along for the ride as a camp counselor and academic support staff person.

Our camp is at an ancient harbor, the site of two abandoned villages, Ellikarmiut and Qimugglugpagmiut, divided by a small river. Maps name the place Nash Harbor. NIMA (Nunivak Island Mekoryuk Alaska) Corp., the island's native corporation, has set up a summer camp on the Qimugglugpagmiut side in an economic effort to promote ecotourism on the island. Twelve regional and over 230 village Native corporations were established in 1971 under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which claimed state and federal title to Alaska Native lands. Between them, the regional and village Native corporations formed under the act retained 44 million acres of land and were paid about one billion dollars. Residents of Mekoryuk, then, are shareholders in both the regional corporation for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Calista Corp., and their village corporation, NIMA.

The Nash Harbor site has been in use for thousands of years; Ellikarmiut was wiped out in 1900 by an epidemic, but Qimugglugpagmiut was a thriving traditional Cup'ig village well into the twentieth century and was not abandoned until 1959, when the Bureau of Education closed the Nash Harbor school due to low enrollments and forced children to attend school in Mekoryuk (Griffin 131-132). Today, the Nuniwarmiut still use Nash Harbor as a seasonal seal hunting camp and as a herding site for the island's semi-domestic reindeer (Griffin 176).

The lead instructor at this year's camp is University of Alaska archaeologist and professor of Rural Development Rick Knecht. He is teaching a biology course called the Natural History of Alaska, with a strong spin toward human adaptation and ecology. Rick has another purpose here, to investigate the site's potential for excavation at the behest of NIMA, which wants to build a museum and cultural center in Mekoryuk. Rick worked with native corporations in Kodiak and in the Aluetian Islands to establish museums there, and NIMA is hoping he can do the same for Nunivak.

A week before, Rick gave our students, mostly regional Yup'ik and Cup'ig high schoolers, a lesson in artifact excavation. The sod house sites of the old village of Ellikarmiut sit on a bank that is eroding onto the beach due to rising sea levels and winter storms. Artifacts literally stick out of the bank, or crumble out and get buried in the sand or taken by the ocean, the erosion exposing and claiming several thousand years (at least) of history. Students fanned out along the bank, instructed to look carefully but touch nothing. Soon Rick had led them through the excavation of several shards of pottery, a stone uluaq (ulu knife), and a walrus ivory dogsled runner. Then came a beautiful tool, an elegantly carved bone gut scraper decorated with an ancient circle and dot motif signifying eternity.

Meanwhile, I saw a student, ignoring directions, pull a protruding bone out of the bank, then, realizing it was an obvious artifact, quickly stick it right back in. She gave me a guilty look and called Rick: "Could this be something?"

It took him five minutes to excavate correctly what she had pulled out in a second, an arc of crumbling metal hafted into a smooth ivory handle. Impressed, the instructor gave a short lecture on the value of iron and iron blades in indigenous trade networks

immediately following contact with Europeans. Then he explained what was so special about this particular blade: the markings of the metal indicated it was a pre-contact knife, cold-hammered with stone from a nail or spike found in driftwood carried from Russia or Japan by the same ocean currents that make Japanese glass net floats common finds on Alaskan beaches today. On treeless Nunivak driftwood had been an important commodity, and still is.

Someone had recognized the value of the strange material embedded in the driftwood or perhaps poking from the ashes of a cook fire. That person had patiently and no doubt arduously pounded the metal flat and fashioned it into a useful shape using nothing harder than stone. I imagine he or she went through a rock or two in the process. Perhaps the process happened at Ellikarmiut itself; it is a good place for making knives. The name means “whetstone place,” or more specifically “people of the whetstone place,” for deposits of a fine silt stone the people used to sharpen their slate (and later metal) blades. Before it rusted away, the cold-hammered blade must have been a beautiful, useful, and highly desirable tool.

However, that desirability was to wane considerably. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, after metal trade goods had become common, Nuniwarmiut (“Nunivak people”) elders discouraged and even forbade the use of metal blades, especially for the killing or dressing of caribou. The use of metal blades by visiting hunters from the mainland was believed to be a factor in the declining caribou populations on the island, perhaps because of increased efficiency, but also perhaps because metal was believed to offend the spirit of the harvested animal (Griffin 105). The Nuniwarmiut chose against metal blades even though they considered them to be superior to their own slate knives, an incredibly

restrained choice when viewed through the lens of the present mainstream American culture's voracity for new and improved technology.

Yup'ik scholar and University of Alaska Fairbanks professor Oscar Kawagley refers to the historical Yup'ik preference for materials that were local and inoffensive as "soft technology": "Their transport and hunting and trapping technology made use of natural materials that were recyclable and did not offend the creatures whose lives they had to take to live" (55). The story of Nuniwarmiut rejection of metal blades demonstrates the importance of soft technology beliefs.

It is possible that the knife the student found sticking out of the bank was discarded due to cautionary measures surrounding metal blades; it would certainly explain how it ended up in a midden despite the incredible labor and care with which it was crafted. For a simple artifact and an example of the most basic of tools, the knife straddles some complex cultural territories.

### Boundaries, Borders, and Identity on the Edge

Between knife blades, continental margins, tribal territory and knowledge boundaries, and cultural and technological borders, there are getting to be a lot of edges in this narrative. The knife we found touched me as an edge on the edge, suspended between two historical eras and indeed two worlds. Yet its very existence proves that they are worlds that are not and never have been totally separate. The lack of separation is also hinted at by the plastic and fiberglass kayaks that white instructors use at Nash Harbor to teach Yup'ik teenagers to paddle; the boats are modeled after designs invented by Eskimo peoples, and the beach here held full racks of driftwood-and sealskin-qayaqs

within recent living memory. Repeated accounts of sailors from European whaling ships mention the disconcerting event of traveling under full sails at a good clip and being passed by Eskimos in kayaks, riding the surf. The Europeans were not the only ones with highly-developed technology.

Nunivak Island and Yup'ik country in general sit on many edges and margins, as does Alaska itself, the land of superlatives, of firsts and lasts. Besides forming the knife edge of the continent, Alaska is the penultimate and largest state in the U.S., the last frontier, the land of extremes of temperature, light, and wilderness. These extremes position parts of Alaska on the margins of human habitation, where survival requires elaborate adaptation to the environment. And at least partially due to its isolation and climatic extremities, Alaska, particularly Yup'ik country, balances on the geographical and chronological trailing edges of encounters with European peoples and retention of traditional indigenous lifestyles. Even Nunivak, more accessible than most of the delta country because of good ports and easy ocean access, was not "discovered" by Europeans until 1821. When Edward Curtis visited Nunivak on his final photographic voyage in 1927 he documented a thriving, highly-traditional village at Qimugglugpagmiut ("people of the big bad dog") at Nash Harbor, just across the stream from Ellikarmiut.

Anthropologist Dennis Griffin notes in his book, *Ellikarmiut: Changing Lifeways in An Alaskan Community*, that on Nunivak Curtis had little need to practice his frequent photographic routine of posing his indigenous subjects in traditional clothing they no longer wore, pursuing traditional activities they no longer pursued: the Nuniwarmiut (Nunivak people) of Nash Harbor in 1927 were still living and dressing in largely traditional ways (25). As Griffin says, "Due to their geographic isolation and delayed

Euro-American contact, the Nuniwarmiut were able to maintain their traditional lifestyle until the mid-twentieth century, with relatively little impact from the forces converging on Alaska Natives elsewhere” (1). Curtis’s photos show a people still living in semi-subterranean sod huts made of driftwood and sod, depending heavily on the qay’ar (Cup’ig for kayak, Yup’ik is qayaq) and dogsled, and practicing a subsistence lifestyle.

For the Nuniwarmiut, the west side of the island occupies a specific point of demarcation: Qimugglugpagmiut, “people of the big bad dog,” one of the villages at Nash Harbor, is the site of a well-known Nuniwarmiut origin story. In the story, a woman from the mainland marries a dog. Ashamed, the girl’s father exiles her to Nunivak Island, paddling her there in his qay’ar. The dog swims across to the island and finds her there, and they have puppies which eventually turn into men, the original inhabitants of the island (Himmelheber 35-37). Qimugglugpagmiut is both the literal site where the story occurred and the family name of the people created there.

The origin story of Qimugglugpagmiut perhaps informs another noteworthy edge that Nunivak Island sits on, that of the region called Beringia. Whatever one believes in the vast and contentious debate regarding the origins of people in the “New” World, there is plenty of evidence to support that people moved across the Bering Strait via land, ice, or water during the recurrent ice ages 35,000-10,000 years ago. As Brody mentions in *Living Arctic: Hunters of the Canadian North*, this archaeological evidence is supported by the oral history of some Eskimo peoples, which records their arrival in Arctic Canada and describes encounters with the people they met there (25). Which direction across the strait that people moved, and whether those same populations spread throughout the continents via a narrow ice-free passage along the Yukon River valley down through the

ice sheets covering Canada, are different stories not entirely applicable to this narrative. But because Nunivak is a volcanic island set against a flat, silt-formed river delta background, chances are that both its relief and its situation on the southern edge of the migration corridor made it an attractive destination for travelers heading east from Asia (Bandi 49). In fact, the name Nuniwar translates as “to go camping or build a camp” (Kiokun 1), lending possible support to the idea that the island has long served as a staging area for travelers and seasonal migrants. Placed in this context, western Nunivak figures in origin stories that western science has devised as well as the origin stories of the island’s inhabitants.

Another key factor that made Nunivak and its nearby mainland backdrop attractive and receptive to people was the proliferation of marine life, waterfowl, and prey animals in the region. According to anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, “Prehistorically this abundance supported the development and spread of Inuit culture, and some cultures have called the Bering Sea coast the ‘cradle of Eskimo civilization’” (*Qanruyutait* xxi). Additionally, Fienup-Riordan, quoted in Oscar Kawagley’s *A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit*, notes that the pre-contact Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta was home to the largest circumpolar Eskimo population in the world (12). These are significant distinctions in that Eskimo cultures, speaking extremely similar languages and displaying many of the same cultural adaptations to their environments, spread from western Alaska to Greenland across much of the Arctic and even today occupy the largest ethnic territory in the world (Nelson xii). The Yup’iks and Cup’igs are only two of these Eskimo cultures. In this context, Iqug, The End, could occupy a wholly different margin, an Eskimo Plymouth Rock. The beginning.



Shortly after the find of the cold-hammered knife, when the students had drifted away to examine a deposit of uiteq, or red ochre, further down the bank, I continued examining the bank with Rick. “Look at this,” he said, pointing to a stack of flat rocks beneath a rotted driftwood timber. I could not figure out what it was, following up on similar recent identification failures involving, among other artifacts, a stone sinker, pumice abrader, wooden net float, ivory harpoon toggle, and stone lamp. I was later to completely redeem myself by triumphantly identifying and finding on the beach a two-and-a-half-foot ivory usuk, or walrus baculum. Everyone else had just walked right past it. A baculum is a penis bone, a physical adaptation possessed by species that need them because their opportunities to mate are often brief and dangerous. This need is a fine point you will understand if you have ever tried to mate with a walrus.

Rick smiled. “It’s a foundation, a corner,” he said, then turned to answer a student question. I looked a long time at the cornerstones for the long-buried dwelling. For some reason this detail more than any of the other human artifacts made me consider the lives that had been lived at Ellikarmiut, and how intensely connected they were to place. Although I did not know it then, Yup’ik conceptions compared the sod house to the womb, with the skylight as the umbilical opening and the subterranean entrance passage as the birth canal (Kawagley 20). The sight of the buried foundation allowed me to make a similar original, generative connection. I no longer saw the buried house as part of a vanished past, or as an artifact, but instead as a place of origin, a source of life and possibilities.

Most of Nunivak’s 1.1 million acres are part of the National Wildlife Refuge system, and the bird cliffs on the island’s south side have been set aside as a Wilderness

Area. In the lower 48 where I come from we are conditioned to think of wilderness as lands outside the scope of human use. But Ellikarmiut, Qimugglugpagmiut, and Iqug are all intensely human places. It is impossible to walk the cliffs along the island's western coast without finding reminders of heavy inhabitation and use: old trails, artifacts, cairns, the grassy pits and rotting wood of collapsed sod houses, and the stone markers of graves, some marked with favored objects of the deceased, metal teapots or driftwood kayak paddles.

Joan Hamilton, a Cup'ik elder from the coastal village of Chevak and the curator of Bethel's Yupiit Piciryarait Cultural Center and Museum, came to speak to a class I was teaching to first-year students at the Kuskokwim Campus. She went around the room and asked the students their names and where they were from. All of them were from villages in the area. Then she told them, "Where you're from is something no one can ever take away from you. Many people in America aren't from anywhere anymore. Sometimes I meet young kass'aq (white) people here and ask where they are from, and they tell me 'Bethel,' because they live here. I tell them, "You're not from Bethel, you're from Minnesota or someplace.' But you students, you will always know where you are from."

### **"Yup'icity' on the Margins of Alaska**

#### Cape Cod and Cape Mohican: Mashpee and Yup'ik Identities on Opposite Coasts

Despite their geographic distance but because of broad colonial patterns, the complex web of margins upon which Nunivak Island and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta are situated can perhaps be contextualized by the case of the Mashpee people of Cape

Cod, all the way across the continent and at the other chronological end of the continuum of European contact. James Clifford's essay, "Identity in Mashpee," from his 1988 *The Predicament of Culture*, details the 1976 federal suit of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council for 16,000 acres of the town of Mashpee located on Cape Cod, proverbially known as "Cape Cod's Indian Town" (277). The suit's success depended on the Mashpee proving a continuous tribal identity since the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock nearby over 350 years before, a problematic task in that the tribe lacked a surviving language, formal political system, or clear and separate religion (289). Also, during the town's whaling history "Indian Town" became more polyglot as Mashpee intermarried widely with sailing peoples from all over the world, with the result that they did not appear racially homogenous or especially "Indian" (278).

The Mashpee did not conform to the stereotype of the "vanishing Indian"; instead of vanishing, they were appearing seemingly out of nowhere, from within a culture that perhaps thought it had subsumed them. For Clifford, both the Mashpees' difficulties and successes in establishing their tribal viability suggest that marginalized communities and stories provide new possibilities for the concepts of history and Native identity. He calls for a re-envisioning of identity that would abandon dichotomies and boundaries in favor of an interactive nexus, with the result that "stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological" (344). Under such a concept the subject need not position herself on one side across boundaries dividing "Indian" from "non-Indian," "traditional" from "progressive," or "resisting" from "absorbed." Rather, identity sits somewhere in the boundary-crossing itself, in relational transactions of exchange and

intersection. Identity is located on a web instead of a line, and the possibilities for the site of identity include all the intersections that create the web.

Clifford quotes Marshall Sahlins in naming the gateways to broader concepts of identity and history, and his paraphrase and quotation is worth keeping: “By focusing on the peripheral places, the neglected ‘islands of history,’ in Sahlins’s words, ‘we...multiply our conceptions of history by the diversity of structures. Suddenly there are all kinds of new things to consider’” (344). Places on the periphery, neglected places, fuel generative instead of reductive iterations of history and identity. Stories from the margins defeat linear and simple explanations of history. With enough context, a simple cold-hammered steel knife from an eroding bank on a remote island in Alaska may not tell a simple story about cultural change, about absorption or resistance, or about margins or centers.

The Mashpee occupied a margin in plain view, on Cape Cod, one of America’s iconic places (and interestingly, the location of almost a whole subgenre of American literature and regional nature writing stretching back to Thoreau and including such well-known names as Henry Beston, John Hay, and even arguably Herman Melville). Mashpee reemergence into plain view and their claims for tribal rights were one demonstration why “a troubling uncertainty was finding its way into the dominant image of Indians in America” (Clifford 284). Mashpee people did not fit Indian stereotypes, and their court case was one of many Indian assertions of power across the country in the seventies and eighties that did not fit stereotypes. As Clifford says, “To many whites it was comprehensible for Northwest Coast tribes to demand traditional salmon-fishing privileges, but for tribes to run high-stakes bingo games in violation of state law was not” (284). Because the Mashpee were litigious, racially diverse, and active members of their

communities and the modern world, they did not fit mainstream American conceptions of Indianness that viewed Indians first and foremost as people of the past. Remaining Indians were seen as “survivors, noble or wretched” (284). Clifford says that these stereotypes leave little room for actual, present-day Indian people: “Native American societies could not by definition be dynamic, inventive, or expansive” (284). Real-life indigenous people, people who change and thrive instead of nobly disappear, cannot be accounted for under these stereotypes.

Yup’ik country and Yup’ik history differ vastly from Cape Cod and the history of the Mashpee, but they share similar territory on the margins of the national consciousness. Many of the conclusions Clifford draws from the story of the Mashpee could apply to Yup’ik history and territory as well, although for different but related reasons. Without setting up binaries, it is interesting to position a locale such as Nunivak Island on the other end of a spectrum from Cape Cod. The two places straddle opposite ends of the continent. The Wampanoag were one of the first indigenous peoples of North America to experience the effects of contact with and colonization by Europeans; the Cup’it of Nunivak were one of the last, some three hundred years later. Cape Cod served as a point of entry for Europeans coming to the continent, while Nunivak quite possibly served as a point of entry for much earlier migrants from Asia. The hallmarks of culture and tribal identity that the Mashpee had difficulty demonstrating in the empirical proving-ground of court are facets of life that many Yup’ik and Cup’ig people take for granted: native language, discrete communities, traditional subsistence and land use, and the continuance of ceremonial and spiritual practices such as dance, art, and tradition. The Yup’iks also have formal recognition from the federal government in the form of

incorporation, although they have sovereignty issues of their own (see Chapter 3).

However, despite these differences, Yup'ik and Mashpee people do share a position on the margins. Neither conforms to stereotypes of what mainstream America believes it means to be Indian or, in the case of the Yup'iks, Eskimo. And like the story of the Mashpee, the Yup'ik story has the potential to “multiply our conceptions of history,” or identity, or even our conceptions of human relationships to the land.

Examples of the ill fit between Eskimo stereotypes and Yup'ik realities can be found in editors Susan Kaplan and William Fitzhugh's introduction to *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, a book illustrating and discussing the mostly Yup'ik artifacts gathered by Edward Nelson in his Bering Sea expeditions of the late nineteenth century. In their introduction, the editors state that at the time of Nelson's expedition, most of Europe's conceptions of Eskimo culture “came from contact with groups occupying the top of the continent from Bering Strait to Canada and Greenland” (13). This contact had been going on, at least in the case of Greenlanders and the Inuit of the far Eastern Arctic, for some nine hundred years (13).

The Eskimo people of the far north lived in a harsh environment, “an unforgiving icy wilderness where starvation or death was a constant threat, where winter darkness reigned for months, where life was sustained by luck, ingenuity, and perseverance against inimical fortune” (13). However, this dramatic far northern land, the land of the iglu and the polar bear, was not the same land as that occupied by the mostly sub-arctic Yup'ik of the Bering Sea. The geographic isolation of the low delta country where the Yup'iks lived (an isolation discussed at more length in the following chapter) concealed their existence from Europeans, who did not suspect that the region housed “two-thirds of the

Eskimo population of the territory and nearly a quarter of the Eskimo population of the entire world” (13).

Kaplan and Fitzhugh go on to point out that Bering Sea Eskimos lived very differently from Arctic Eskimos. Their villages were larger and more stable, their houses were made of logs and sod or planks, and their economies were flush with the abundance of fish, marine mammals, migratory birds, and other game in the region (13-14).

However, these singularities could not overcome the accumulated European conceptions of Eskimos as the occupants of a harsh land of perpetual darkness and ice.

The editors note that these misconceptions still abound:

Surprising as it seems, the lifeways of Eskimos of this region of Alaska today continue to be poorly known to the public, whose attention remains largely fixed on the walrus and whale hunting Eskimos of North Alaska and their distinctive ivory carving, as well as on the Canadian Inuit who for many years have been featured in general education programs and films and whose soapstone carvings and prints are widely distributed. (14)

In addition to not conforming to stereotypes derived from more northern peoples (and even then often incorrectly), modern Yup'iks also frustrate stereotyped expectations by being a modern people who live in today's world and depend heavily on modern technology. As Alaskan critic Susan Kollin notes in discussion of a Disney filmmaker, for Lois Crisler “The Eskimos....improperly fit the role of the pristine Noble Savage even as they seemed improperly civilized. As she noted, they hunted animals with rifles rather than with ‘native weapons,’ a move that signaled their fall from harmony and marked their cultural degradation” (113). Stereotypes are thus capable of damning the Alaska

Native no matter which choice she or he makes, as backward and primitive on one hand or fallen and degraded on the other. However, in the right hands even stereotypes have the potential to open up possibilities.

Active Translation: John Active and the Nexus of Modern Yup'ik Identity

Yup'ik journalist, elder, and advocate John Active of Bethel has been published in anthologies of Alaska Native literature, but he is more well-known around Bethel as the long-time voice of the Yup'ik news on KYUK radio, or for his columns in the newspaper the *Tundra Drums*. Active plays with Alaska Native stereotypes in his essay, "Yup'iks in the City," published in Ann Fienup-Riordan's *Hunting Tradition in a Changing World: Yup'ik Lives in Alaska Today*. Active describes his traditional upbringing in a Bethel already burgeoning with cultural change and recalls his first trip to New York City at the age of forty-eight. Active also recounts the experiences of living for a while in Alaska's largest city of Anchorage (complete with tales about the challenges of sometimes-illegal urban subsistence hunting and gathering), and gives plenty of examples of playful cultural exchange with curious and misinformed *kass'aqs*. One anecdote tells of a meeting with elderly tourists visiting Alaska from New York:

Geoff introduced me to them as being a genuine Eskimo from Alaska. 'Prove it,' said the elderly man. 'How do you build an igloo?' 'Heck,' I said. 'You have to go to Hollywood for that. We Eskimos don't build igloos.' I turned the tables. 'You say you're from New York. Prove it by saying, 'Please don't poo-wah coo-wah-fee on my doo-wag.' He proved it, and I educated him about the igloos.

(182)



Active defuses stereotypes with the tools of humor, education, and table-turning. His cultural transactions with *kass'ags* assert cultural identity by making it more complex rather than through simplification or reduction. Each exchange reveals his identity as a modern person of the world (in this case, “Please don’t poo-wah coo-wah-fee on my doo-wag”) while affirming real cultural connections divorced from stereotyped expectations (“I educated him about the igloos”). The sense of identity has multiple locations to speak from, multiple intersections in Clifford’s “nexus.” Grounded in what he likes to call his “Yup’icity,” he is free to occupy widespread rhetorical locations from the *kass'ag* world, a world to which he also belongs.

Active’s technique is similar to what literary critic David Moore refers to as “translation.” Moore discusses the character of the Navajo medicine man Betonie from Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*, a character whose hogan contains an overwhelming mix of ceremonial objects, many traditional and many collected from the modern, white man’s world. According to Moore, “Betonie’s hogan insists on being one of many centers—an insistence that itself is the healing process of authentic translation, drawing other centers—translated as margins—into his people’s own” (8). Active’s writing displays a similar insistence.

Another of Active’s stories recounts a question-and-answer session with New York schoolchildren, who, like the Anchorage *kass'ags* of his acquaintance, have the tendency to ask him two questions in a row. Active explains that “We Yupiit are known for thinking about an answer for a moment before responding to a question” (182). *Kass'ags* grow impatient during this cultural “pause period” and move on to their next

question. Active explains that his method for dealing with this phenomenon is to answer the first question after they ask the second question:

The first question was: ‘Is it true that Eskimos like to eat raw meat?’ The kass’aq would become impatient while I thought of a proper answer to their question, and before I could answer they would ask me a second one: ‘Do you Eskimos get along well with white people?’ I would answer their first question first: ‘Oh, we like to eat them cooked but on occasion will eat them raw if frozen.’ (182)

Again, the humor in the exchange at first masks its complexity and mitigates Active’s mild rebuke of the stereotypes and cultural assumptions under which the kass’aq are operating. It is their impatience and rudeness that causes the misapplication of Active’s first answer to their second question, suggesting that relishing cooked and frozen kass’aq is how Eskimos get along with white people. But in addition to being the punchline, Active’s reply also works as a perfectly serious answer to the first question, an answer that both debunks a stereotype and matter-of-factly claims ownership of a real cultural practice.

Active’s slippery yet somehow entirely grounded rhetorical persona operates out of Yup’ik country’s location as what Clifford called a “peripheral place.” Because Active’s home territory is little-known, because it is alive instead of vanishing, and because it is popularly misconstrued due to mainstream Eskimo stereotypes, it is the kind of place with the potential to “multiply our conceptions of history” (344).

It is worth wondering just who the “we” are that Sahlin’s—via Clifford—“our” refers to. Whose conceptions are multiplying? Perhaps the contributions of peripheral places have the potential to multiply the “we” as well, to make it more polyvocal and

contingent. Again, it is worth asking as well, peripheral to whom? The peripheral does not perceive itself as a margin, but rather as a center. A model that denies marginality in favor of a nexus of infinite possible centers would indeed multiply the possibilities for speaking in the plural.

Of course, it is quite likely that for many occupants of so-called marginal places, multiplying conceptions of history is not the highest priority on the daily to-do list. As Active's example demonstrates, margins can be useful places to occupy for lots of reasons. The ignorance of other people has great potential as a tool. Sometimes a lack of attention to one's homeland and way of life can help guarantee its continuance, especially in the context of colonialism. Clifford notes that one possible reason the Mashpee had a hard time proving continuous tribal identity is that, like lots of other tribes, they may have intentionally kept a low profile during the many periods of American history when the dangers of tribal status outweighed the benefits (309).

If Hugh Brody is correct, existence on the margins beyond potential large-scale agricultural use has been the main factor protecting the world's surviving hunting and gathering cultures from aggressive agricultural imperialism. In this context, the continuance of Yup'ik cultural strength derives partly from the fact that the richness of Yup'ik country was not easy to convert into the commodities that Europeans wanted. Margins can be safe places, and the neglect of the mainstream can empower the "peripheral" centers on the nexus. The character of Betonie in *Ceremony* voices a similar sentiment:

'(The white people) keep us on the north side of the railroad tracks, next to the river and their dump. Where none of them want to live.' He laughed. 'They don't

understand. We know these hills, and we are comfortable here.’ There was something about the way the old man said ‘comfortable.’ It had a different meaning—not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land. (Silko 122-123).

When the whites declare land to be without value, it regains and acquires value to the original owners of the land, and connects them to a source of power. As Moore notes, Betonie “describes his position in time and space prior to the arrival of the whites, sitting in his center, ‘Where none of them want to live’” (14). When mainstream culture views a place as marginal, it frees up new centers, new intersections on Clifford’s nexus, for the people who live there. It is from intersections like these that remarkable voices like John Active’s emerge. The margins and edges and firsts and lasts that proliferate in Yup’ik country, way, way over on the other side of the tracks, generate an exponential wealth of new centers. Indeed, as Clifford quotes Sahlins, “There are all kinds of new things to consider” (Sahlins 72).

Active makes a similar point regarding the occupation of new territory outside of stereotypes:

People from other areas ask if we Alaskans live in igloos and eat whale blubber. An Alaskan responded by asking if all Lower Forty-eight’ans live in wigwams, travel in covered wagons, and eat buffalo meat. The point is that we Native Alaskans, like everyone else, evolve and change with the times, and so does our culture. (179)

Active addresses some of the cultural changes and evolutions he has seen in his lifetime and acknowledges that not all of them have been positive. He clearly demonstrates that

the Bethel of today is not the same Bethel he knew as a child being raised by his grandmother, Maggie Lind (Tan'gaucuar), a well-known Yup'ik storyteller (231). However, he demonstrates that change itself should not be viewed as negative simply because it violates stereotypes that expect Indians and Eskimos to remain static in a rapidly changing world.

The next chapter will begin in Bethel and examine the Yup'ik subsistence that is very much alive and well there. Subsistence fishing, hunting, and gathering are marginal lifestyles and means of food production from the viewpoint of America's agricultural society, but like the margins of identity explored in this chapter, the margins of land use and food production also suggest "all kinds of new things to consider."

CHAPTER 2: FISH CAMPS AND FARMS—YUP'IK SUBSISTENCE CONFRONTS  
NATURE WRITING'S GREEN THUMB

**Palimpsest: Mamterilleq, A Place of Many Smokehouses (Bethel, AK)**

In *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons From Another Species*, Freeman House writes about the history of salmon and people in the Pacific Northwest:

Humans lived on the northwest coasts of North America for thousands of years in a state of lavish natural provision inseparable from any concept of individual or community life and survival. Human consciousness organized the collective experience as an unbroken field of being: there is no separation between people and the multitudinous expressions of place manifested as food. (769)

House correctly identifies the connection between indigenous cultures, place, and food, but like many nature writers who celebrate pre-contact indigenous relationships to the land, he gets part of his tense wrong. Although salmon-dependent cultures have diminished or disappeared in much of the Northwest, it is not accurate to say they “lived” for thousands of years dependent on the natural abundance of salmon and the land. Some cultures still live that way.

I first came to Bethel, Alaska for a summer job in the year 2000 after my first year of graduate school. In Missoula, Montana I had worked for some time at agencies that served adults with developmental disabilities. I liked the work and found it instructive, challenging, and humbling. As a personal care provider my job was to help challenged people achieve what they wanted in their lives, a daunting responsibility. A college friend

who ended up in Bethel got me in contact with their local disabilities service agency, and they gave me a summer job at a local group home.

I was hired to help eight clients—the developmental disabilities community insists on using the awkward terms “clients” or “consumers” to refer to the individuals being served—go out to fish camp. The Yup’ik name for Bethel, Mamterilleq, means “Place of Many Smoke Houses,” and fish camp is still a huge part of summer life for the 30,000 Yup’ik people who live on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, and indeed for Alaska Native people all over the state. James Barker notes in his book *Always Getting Ready/Upterrlainarluta: Yup’ik Eskimo Subsistence in Southwest Alaska*, a photographic essay of Yup’ik subsistence, “There may be no more powerful impulse in the Yup’iks than the desire, when the weather turns warm, to leave the village and set up fishcamp” (93).

Yup’ik people, like many Alaska Native peoples, experienced less directly confrontational conflicts with European colonizers than most Lower 48 indigenous tribes. As with other extant hunter/gatherer cultures around the world, only the fact that they lived in a harsh climate and ecosystem unsuitable for agriculture or the extraction of natural resources saved them from the common indigenous fates of displacement or even genocide. Also, as Yup’ik anthropologist Mary Pete says in her foreword to Barker’s book, Yup’iks (or the YUPIIT) as a group came into sustained contact with non-Natives more recently than other Alaska Native peoples, both because the shallow sea along the river deltas provided poor access to deep draft vessels and because the area lacked the large populations of whales that drew Europeans to much of the Arctic and sub-Arctic (8).

Despite these mitigating factors, Yup'ik people did not escape devastation by epidemics of European diseases, nor the attention of missionaries and their eventual boarding schools, factories for cultural assimilation. However, perhaps because of the reasons mentioned above, Yup'iks experienced cultural loss to a lesser degree than many other Native cultures in Alaska (or North America). Yup'ik people still live on their vast ancestral lands. Native corporation lands and allotments in the area sit alongside and within the 19 million acre Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and adjacent 5 million acre Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, one of the largest contiguous chunks of public land in the country. Water makes up a third of the landscape of the delta country, creating literally millions of small lakes, ponds, sloughs, and estuaries. This shallow, watery country combines with plentiful sub-Arctic summer sunshine (about twenty hours/day at the peak of the summer) to create a vast solar basin, a factory for plants, insects, and microorganisms, the basal blocks of the food chain. This local abundance attracts migratory populations of animals to the delta, notably fish, marine mammals, and the millions of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other migratory birds that gather on the delta to feed and nest. Meanwhile, the watersheds of the Yukon and Kuskokwim, the two biggest rivers in Alaska, provide spawning habitat for massive runs of the five species of Pacific salmon.

Sixty percent of the human population spread across this vast area still speaks Yup'ik (or the dialect Cup'ig) as a first language. And the economy of the region still revolves around subsistence. According to Mary Pete, former head of the Subsistence Division of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, "Subsistence output in the region is among the most productive in the state—annual per capita harvest rates of 1100 pounds



of wild fish and game have been documented for some communities in the region” (Barker 8). Not to overstate the math, that comes to almost three pounds of food per day per person over the course of the year.

As Yup’ik journalist and cultural advocate John Active of Bethel says, “Our subsistence lifestyle IS our culture. Without subsistence we will not survive as a people. We Yupiit are different from many other Native groups in Alaska” (186-187). Subsistence serves as the locus for the strength of Yup’ik culture, and the source of its distinctions. Active’s confident assertion of difference is borne out by the demographics: the Yupiit are the most numerous Alaska Native group, and Yup’ik is easily the strongest Native language in the state in terms of number of speakers and percentage of the population who is fluent. In fact, despite a much smaller population base, Yup’ik trails only Navajo in number of speakers among American indigenous languages, and only Navajo and Inuktitut in North America north of Mexico. The Yupiit are the largest native culture in America still living on their ancestral lands and practicing a subsistence lifestyle (Fienup-Riordan *Qanruyutait* xxii). Despite these markers of cultural strength, the subarctic Yup’ik culture is lesser known in mainstream American culture than the more northern Inupiat and Inuit “Eskimo” cultures, or the southeastern Alaska Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida cultures often superficially familiar to tourists.

Although, as Active points out, subsistence has special concerns for the Yupiit, other Yup’ik voices assert the importance of subsistence to all Alaska Native cultures while reinforcing Active’s assessment of the centrality of subsistence. As Yup’ik elder, journalist, and politician Robert Nick, writing in his column for the *Delta Discovery* (one of Bethel’s two regional newspapers along with the *Tundra Drums*), emphatically states,

Wonderful peoples of all nationalities who have chosen to live in the Alaska Native homelands, if you can read and understand the language that I am using to write this, I implore you to understand, comprehend, and learn, subsistence hunting and fishing is.... will always be the KEYSTONE, MAINSTAY of sustenance and very survival of all inhabitants of rural Alaskan communities. For this purpose native tribes were the sovereigns who managed nature's trust. (1)

Nick not only frames subsistence as the crucial component of Yup'ik culture, he also explicitly (and with gentle humor) addresses the statement to non-Native outsiders who might be slow to get the point (such as urban Alaska legislators, who frequently are).

Important subsistence foods harvested by the Yupiit include salmon, moose, caribou, herring, waterfowl, seals, walrus, beluga whales, pond greens, and several varieties of superabundant berries, including the ubiquitous tundra blueberry.

Missionaries did not manage to curb the Yup'ik subsistence lifestyle, although there were attempts to make the Yupiit farmers and even reindeer herders, complete with imported reindeer and Lapp herders from Lapland. However, missionaries did manage to effectively contain the subsistence lifestyle by converting seasonally migratory communities into fixed villages. Although Yup'iks still travel widely to harvest food and resources like firewood, they no longer move with the seasons. Except for fish camp.

#### Dryfish Days: Encounters With Fish Camp and Yup'ik Subsistence

Fish camp persists on the border between the Yup'ik traditional and modern lifestyles. The main product produced at fish camps is still dried and smoked king and red salmon, or dried herring out on the coast between the mouths of the Yukon and

Kuskokwim where salmon runs are less accessible. The salmon dryfish and strips are still dried on wooden racks and smoked over green cottonwood, alder, willow, or poplar. Dryfish will keep indefinitely, although the preferred modern method is to store it in Ziplocs in the freezer. Herring are still laboriously gutted by hand, then woven by the gills into large drying mats made of beach ryegrass and draped over driftwood drying racks. However, the Yup'iks now fish out of aluminum skiffs with outboard motors instead of sealskin qayaqs, and their drift and set nets, though still often hand woven, are made of nylon line and plastic floats instead of seal tendon and driftwood. VHF radios are ubiquitous in village boats and homes, and handheld GPS units are becoming extremely popular.

In the summer the river near Bethel is alive with boats, and fish camps line the banks of the river above and below villages and tributary rivers and sloughs. Many camps consist of just drying racks, plywood processing tables, a smokehouse, and a tent, but many have multiple smokehouses, cabins, and steambaths, and some family camps resemble miniature villages. At least one camp within walking distance will have cleared alders and willows and put up a basketball hoop to keep the kids occupied. Camps in the summer are busy with people at work, playing children, and the arrivals and departures of boats. In June and July the drying racks display vivid orange slabs of expertly cut king salmon. Finished, dryfish looks like fish jerky, oozes rich oil as you strip the flesh from the skin with your teeth, and tastes delicately of smoke and salt.

That first summer I drove a boat, set and pulled net, hauled fish, and inexpertly helped process them under the tutelage of Mary Jordan and Lucy Pavilla, two of my Yup'ik co-workers. The simple harvest of fish could be a full-time job in itself, especially

during the strong runs of chum and silver salmon. Silvers (or coho) run so plentifully most summers that many fishermen only put out half their drift net for fear that they will catch so many fish as to sink and lose the net. It is not uncommon to catch fifty or more salmon (each weighing 12-15 pounds) in a single half-hour drift from an open skiff.

Despite this abundance, nothing was wasted: egg sacks were made into fish-egg soup or dried to dip in seal oil, as were the fleshy backbones. King salmon heads were buried and fermented to dig up later and eat as the delicacy tepuq. And despite the fact that the Bethel and Wade Hampton census bureaus in the region register some of the highest costs of living and lowest average incomes in the United States, there is no need for a food bank in Bethel: any “catch” is widely distributed to relatives and extended family, and sharing food is the rule, especially with elders or the unfortunate.

Much of my work went into helping the clients get ready to go out in the boat and to camp, including assisting them into hip boots and float coats, assembling medication and toiletries, and packing food, emergency gear, and fishing and boating equipment. Part of my job was to assist the clients in doing their part at fish camp—all of them helped out in some way or another, no matter their level of disability.

Like most group homes, the Malone Home had some tough and fairly severe cases. Three of the clients were completely non-verbal and needed some degree of assistance in ADL, or activities of daily living: eating, getting dressed, going to the bathroom, and performing hygiene. Several residents tended to hit other people. Some hit themselves, or tried to ingest things that were not good for them. Others were high-functioning and very social, spending large parts of their days unsupervised out in the community. All of them were of Yup'ik or Cup'ik descent.

I mention their variety and some of their problems and limitations to add emphasis to the following observation: all of the Malone Home residents loved fish camp, and when we were there, they experienced almost no problems. Nobody hit anybody, nobody got angry with anyone else, and everyone was eager to participate in the dozens of fish camp tasks: catching salmon, cutting fish, hauling water, brining and hanging fish, cutting wood and tending the smokehouse fires, making coffee, clearing weeds and brush, and barbecuing fresh reds or kings (always along with some hot dogs). Individuals severely disabled enough to have trouble feeding themselves independently sat on log rounds and dipped freshly cut strips into brine to prepare them for hanging, or helped pack finished fish into Ziplocs. Some of the more high functioning clients had spent time at fish camp while growing up, and they excelled at fishing or at cutting fish. One old man who occasionally came with us was an especially tireless and expert fisherman. Jocum was a magician at extracting salmon hopelessly disentangled in the net, a task I often managed to botch, causing delays. The man rarely spoke and sometimes became disoriented or forgetful, so my co-workers and I were alarmed one day after unloading from the boat to see him pull up his hip boots and wade into the river. As we started to go after him, he plunged his arm into the water and pulled out a thrashing 15 pound sockeye salmon, holding it by the gills, then turned and gave us a rare, million-watt smile.

I spent two summers helping to run the group home fish camp, and eventually moved to Bethel full-time to take a job for the same agency as a case manager. The clients in my caseload were spread out in remote villages across the delta, and I traveled by small plane to visit them, their families, and their communities. Many clients and their

families confirmed what I had noticed about our clients in Bethel: what people wanted most, and what most integrated them into the lives of their families and communities, was to participate in subsistence. So our agency hired “subsistence mentors,” people from the community, often relatives, who helped the clients participate in hunting, fishing, and gathering. The timesheets I signed each week (which required activity descriptions) read like a subsistence calendar from another time. Clients picked berries, shot seals, gathered herring eggs laid on kelp, collected drift wood, snared hares, dug clams, fished for huge halibut in small open skiffs on the Bering Sea, jigged through the ice for pike and tomcod, set fish traps or nets beneath the ice of frozen rivers, and hunted ducks, geese, cranes, swans, beaver, moose, caribou, muskox, muskrat, ptarmigan, and walrus. Many timesheets showed time spent distributing subsistence food to elders and relatives. In the fall women searched the tundra for mousefood, the caches of tiny sedge tubers stockpiled by mice, voles, and lemmings for the winter ahead.

I mention all these work experiences at length for a couple of reasons. That my jobs overlapped with Yup’ik subsistence gave me entry into experiences and a world for which I had no cultural frame of reference. Even a life of avid fishing and hunting downstates did not prepare me for an encounter with a subsistence economy. As an adult in Montana, hunting had given me a much deeper appreciation of food and a desire to know where it was coming from. Yup’ik culture had that desire encoded into its every fiber. The women I worked with would start to dream about salmon and fish camp weeks before the salmon arrived, even before break-up on the river. During my first summer in Bethel I realized that nothing in my life could ever mean to me what the arrival of the salmon meant to the Yup’iks. The simple equation anthropologists use to define culture is

people plus place plus time. To someone raised in a pop (or market-driven) culture, an encounter with a subsistence culture on native ground, even a struggling and damaged culture, was an impressive and daunting experience.

Yup'ik people with developmental disabilities respond to subsistence activities with joy and pleasure, in ways that diminish their problems and disabilities and reinforce their humanity and their connections to other people. One thing I took away from working with the disabled is that there is little difference between disabled people and the rest of us, the supposedly "normal." All people enjoy the opportunity to participate in their own livelihoods, especially when that participation is reinforced by and encoded into a long cultural tradition. Denied that opportunity, it is not just the disabled who feel dislocated or frustrated.

I moved to Bethel from Missoula, Montana, where I had been a student at the University of Montana. Both the university and the larger community in Missoula are hotbeds of environmental awareness and thinking, home to national conservation organizations, regional natural resource management agencies, and countless local grassroots environmental groups. It is almost impossible to live there and not acquire at least a working awareness of Western environmental issues.

Yup'ik subsistence, though, was something I had not heard of in Missoula. Northern indigenous hunting was not discussed as a viable connection to place, possibly because indigenous hunters in Alaska and Canada use snowmachines and sometimes hunt wolves, both considered no-nos in the Montana green community. But the local, participatory, and respectful subsistence I witnessed around Bethel seemed extremely

relevant to the issues with which Missoula struggles so intently. The food harvested (or “caught,” as the Yup’iks say) around Bethel costs the land so very little.

Why, then, did the environmental movement seem capable only of talking about gardens and organic farms?

### **“Cursed is the Ground”—the Agricultural Legacy of the Myths of Eden**

#### Toward Nature Writing: The Genesis of Agricultural Metaphor

The title of Canadian anthropologist and filmmaker Hugh Brody’s *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World* refers to the world’s lands outside of the scope of agriculture, lands too cold, dry, watery, or rugged for cultivation. It is mostly in these places, Brody claims, that hunter/gatherer cultures have been able to survive or resist the aggressive territorial expansion of agricultural peoples. Many of these regions exist in the Arctic or sub-Arctic, and Brody has done most of his research and work in conjunction with Inuktitut, Dunne-Za, and Innu peoples in various parts of northern Canada.

According to Brody, the twin imperatives of agriculture and aggressive mobility are pervasively encoded in the languages, cultures and myths of Judeo-Christian peoples. Specifically, Brody interrogates the Eden stories of Genesis as directive foundational myths of a newly agricultural people, where we see “God’s insistence on both farming and roaming” (76).

The Cain and Abel story, for example, can be viewed as an enactment of the transition from hunter/gatherer cultures to farming cultures. Abel is a herder, and pastoral



cultures are often viewed as transitional between hunting/gathering and farming. Cain, the farmer, grows jealous of the favor Abel finds with God, partially due to his easy subsistence and the meat it provides, and so Cain slays Abel. Like many encounters between agricultural and hunter/gatherer peoples, the conflict between Cain and Abel is bloody and unwarranted, but it ends, paradoxically, in success for the aggressor Cain and his farming descendants.

God responds to the transgressions of first Adam and then Cain with a series of curses and decrees: their offspring will flourish, but they will be doomed to heavy toil working the earth, exile from their homelands, and soils full of weeds.

The curses first appear when Adam eats the fruit of the forbidden tree, and God issues the following decrees:

Cursed is the ground for your sake;/ In toil you shall eat of it/ All the days of your life./ Both thistles and thorns it shall bring forth for you,/ And you shall eat the herb of the field./ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread/ Till you return to the ground. (Genesis 3.7-19)

In addition to enduring these curses, Adam and Eve (herself cursed to painful childbirth and subjugation to her husband) are cast out of the Garden of Eden. This exile is compounded when Cain slays Abel, and God tells Cain, “When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on earth” (Genesis 4.12).

Brody illustrates how these curses come true for farming peoples through the nature of agriculture, which imagines itself as stable and connected to home but is in actuality aggressive and rootless, constantly needing new or better land. The ubiquity of

agriculture across the globe depends on the tension between a strong urge for settlement coupled with the submerged foreknowledge of eventual exile:

This success is built on opposites. On the one hand, a passion to settle, on the other, a fierce restlessness; a need to find and have and hold an Eden, alongside a preparedness to go out and roam the world; an attachment to all that is meant by home, and an overriding commitment to a socioeconomic system, to some form of profit rather than to a place. The agricultural system is a form of settlement that depends upon, and gives rise to, the most pervasive form of nomadism. (87)

Brody argues that although hunter/gatherer cultures are thought of as nomadic, it is in fact agricultures that have fulfilled the curses of Genesis and spread across the globe in search of new lands. Hunter/gatherer cultures tend to rely on detailed knowledge of place, and although they may move seasonally, they are much more attached to their territories and generally stay put (90). And as Brody emphatically states, the myths of Genesis do not apply to hunting peoples who are strangers to both agriculture and exile (101).

Agriculture has emerged in the last ten thousand years, just a tiny fraction of our time as hunter/gatherers, and has brought violence, disease, displacement, loss of subsistence, and often extermination to hunter/gatherer cultures occupying the world's arable lands. The fates of many of these vanished indigenous cultures are well known and much lamented, often better-known and recognized than the cultures of currently thriving indigenous cultures. The bison culture of the Great Plains tribes has been heavily mythologized in American culture, for example, and as a result the average American can tell you the Siouan word for bison. How many know the Yup'ik word for salmon? (I admit I do not).

While mostly lost modes of indigenous subsistence are idealized, pervasive prejudices against and misunderstanding of surviving hunter/gatherer ways of life still prevail. For example, as Alaskan-born and-raised literary critic Susan Kollin notes in discussion of the Alaskan films (such as *White Wilderness*) and journals of Disney filmmaker Lois Crisler, Alaska Native hunters are sometimes portrayed as cruel or “unsportsmanlike” in their taking of game, or reviled for using the same modern technology everyone else uses. The portrayals of cruelty were especially hypocritical, considering that cameramen on *White Wilderness* were asked to hurl lemmings off of cliffs to obtain shots approximating the animals’ legendary mass suicides (Kollin 112-113).

More frequently, modern indigenous hunting and gathering is simply ignored or overlooked. Brody posits that the prejudices of agriculture are so rooted in myth, language, and ritual that they are difficult to overcome. As an example, Brody gives the cultural and literary icon of the family farm. The small farm evokes images of continuity, closely-knit family, strenuous but satisfying chores, home-produced and cooked food, and orderly fields and livestock complemented by woodlots and benign wildlife, “the gentlest aspects of material culture and the prettiest, most controllable of nature” (83). However, this gentle, stable vision of the family farm sits alongside a “fiercer and more archetypal form,” that of order under attack from wilderness. In this guise, the family farm requires constant labor to reshape the land to human ends and protect it from invasion by wild plants, weeds, vermin, and sometimes other people (84-85). This iconic combination of an idealized, gentle cultural home and a fortress to be built and defended has been a contributing guarantor of agriculture’s cultural dissemination, but it also helps

to explain the pervasiveness of agricultural metaphors and modes that overlook the existence of other ways of life.

Cultures that work the soil see the farm or garden as the only possible source for human productivity. As Brody puts it, “Agriculturists have much difficulty imagining a human socio-economic system, other than a few inchoate, animal-like wanderers, existing in the ‘wild’ beyond” (100-101). To return to Kollin’s example, when Crisler encountered technologically modern and savvy Alaska Native hunters in the wilderness she was filming, she represented both the wilderness and the hunters as degraded and threatened. For example, Crisler laments Inupiat hunters’ use of rifles instead of “native weapons” and frames the Inupiat as an invasive threat to the animals she and her husband are filming in the “wilderness” (112-113). The citizens of agriculture hold the rest of the world to standards they do not require themselves to meet.

This unconscious, ideologically-rooted agricultural bias is manifest in the metaphors and tropes adopted by much mainstream American “nature writing.” Nature writing stands as perhaps the least problematic term to describe sometimes disparate, sometimes overlapping modes placed under general headings such as natural history, environmental writing, and green literature; occasionally I will use the umbrella term “nature writing” also to cover examples of more specific disciplines such as environmental history, ecocriticism, and environmental cultural studies. The use of the general term serves convenience despite the recognition that no single term can do justice to a heterogeneous and vast discipline housing widely various writers and ideas.

Susan Kollin, an environmental cultural critic, describes nature writers as “that group of individuals who traditionally offer their work as a step toward solving the

environmental crisis” (28). Although Kollin perhaps narrows the category too severely, her definition proves useful because nature writers often betray their agricultural biases through prescriptive models and metaphors. For example, two of the most-revered nature books in the last two hundred years, *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac*, center on a bean patch and a Wisconsin farm, respectively.

The pages that follow will show how writers couch their solutions to environmental problems in agricultural language, and how sometimes their solutions recapitulate the agricultural models at least partially responsible for the environmental problems they seek to solve. Even the critiques of agriculture betray traces or re-enactments of the agricultural Genesis myths as detailed by Brody. And these agricultural models and metaphors fail to include or consider cultures outside the agricultural frame of reference, cultures with urgent stakes in the issues being discussed, cultures to which gardens or plows mean nothing.

#### Man’s Ancient Lot: Wendell Berry and Farming’s Moral Imperatives

Much popular and recent nature writing focuses on the working of the soil as a prescriptive metaphor for appropriate human interactions with the land. The metaphor of the garden shows up particularly often, both as a “Western” art with principles applicable to ecology and as a description of the relationships that Native Americans had with the land. In either case, gardening metaphors demonstrate the pervasiveness of the language of the myths of Eden and preview on a smaller scale the mythic self-perceptions of the small farm.

Those whose works frame Indians as large-scale gardeners of the landscape include activist and EarthFirst! co-founder Dan Dagget and science journalist Charles Mann. Dagget's *Gardeners of Eden: Rediscovering Our Importance to Nature* calls for a participatory inhabiting and shaping of the landscape partially modeled after the land management practices of pre-contact Native Americans, "the earlier Gardeners of Eden" (135). Similarly, Mann concludes the bestselling *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* with the insight that if nations wish to restore the American landscape, "they will have to create the world's largest gardens" (326). Mann and Dagget emphasize common Native American practices such as widespread burning to demonstrate that Native Americans shaped their environments to suit their needs, likening the use of such tools to gardening on a massive scale.

Bestselling writer and gardening columnist Michael Pollan and ecocritic Frederick Turner come to similar conclusions regarding the application of a gardening ethic to American land issues, but their gardening ethics are derived from Western sources more than observation of Indian practices. "The Idea of a Garden," the keystone chapter in Pollan's *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* calls for a "gardening ethic" of land management based on the lessons that Pollan and other gardeners learn in their own backyard gardens (190). As detailed in "Cultivating the American Garden," Turner's conception of "the planting of the American garden" is broader, and involves the incorporation of the best of the world's artistic and cultural traditions, creations of "the true artists of Eden," into current practices of land management and aesthetic transformation. Chief among these useful traditions is the "art of gardening" (49-51).

The continuing presence of gardens in writing about the environment demonstrates that the myths and metaphors of Eden that Brody identifies still occupy a primary space in the American consciousness. Like Dagget, many writers still link gardens with Eden, and although Dagget, Pollan, Turner, and Mann all reject the Manifest Destiny idea of the North American continent as an unpeopled Eden before the arrival of Europeans, they retain the conception of America as garden, as land which humans control and assume the responsibility to make productive. To reiterate one of Brody's concerns from above, it is a conception of land-use that leaves out the people of many indigenous cultures to whom gardens and Edens are not applicable terms.

The seemingly innocuous agricultural metaphor of gardening shares many similarities with another agricultural model familiar to nature writing, that of the small farm. Like the garden, the small farm is often framed as a gentle and harmonious method of interacting with the land that offers moral as well as ecological benefits. The small farm recreates the garden on a larger scale in that it is offered as a prescriptive universal metaphor for interactions with the land without consideration of who it might exclude.

Of all the current mainstream nature writers fixated on the model of the small farm, Wendell Berry sticks out as the most obvious example (and clearest heir to the tradition of Thoreau's bean patch and Leopold's Sand County farm). A Kentucky farmer, Berry is also an essayist, novelist, poet, and academic whose work has been singularly and steadily focused on agriculture in America for over 40 years. Berry has earned Guggenheim and Rockefeller fellowships as well as numerous other awards for his work, which celebrates traditional and place-based methods of agriculture, promotes small-scale subsistence farming closely allied to models and methods borrowed from nature, and

critiques large scale agribusiness, “which looks upon the farm as a ‘factory,’ and upon farmers, plants, animals, and the land itself as interchangeable parts or ‘units of production’” (*Gift* 114).

Although extremely important and profound on many levels, Berry’s work consistently reflects several of the Brody-identified characteristics of agricultural myth and texts. Starting with the often-quoted dictum, “Eating is an agricultural act,” Berry not only explicitly fails to set a place at the farmhouse table for non-agricultural modes of production, he also equates farming with humanity and frames agricultural land-use as a moral imperative. As part of such a system, the small farm becomes a homeland to be defended at all costs with the weapon of sacred hard work.

Berry’s “I begin with the proposition that eating is an agricultural act” comes from the essay “The Pleasure of Eating” from the book *What Are People For?* (145). This bald statement can be immediately put into perspective by the words of an Inuit boy and hunter named Salluviniq from *Resolute in the Canadian Arctic*, quoted in Brody’s *Living Arctic: Hunters of the Canadian North*: “I would like to say a few words about this land. The only food I like is meat” (62). The meat that Salluviniq references comes from hunting, not agriculture, and the land that Salluviniq ties directly to meat is not the domain of the plow.

Hunting and gathering are not the only forms of food production erased in Berry’s statement, and some of the omissions are surprisingly obvious and mainstream. For example, Berry’s concept of eating leaves out the meals of the millions of people who rely daily for food on the marine environment that covers 2/3 of the globe, an



environment that in many coastal areas such as estuaries exceeds the productivity per acre of any farmland in history and rivals that of the tropical rain forest (Morrow 3).

If eating is an agricultural act, then it is the domain solely of humans (and arguably livestock). Hunting cultures might consider this a glaring omission. Richard K. Nelson has quoted an old Koyukon hunter as saying, “Each animal knows way more than you do” (108). In traditional Yup’ik culture, as documented by anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, animals were regarded as “nonhuman persons” or as the possessors of “covert personhood” (*Essays* 167). Berry’s iteration thus not only excludes other human means of food production, but a lot of the rest of the global food chain, as well. Clearly, the statement is not just an inaccuracy; the inaccuracy itself betrays a myopic ideological assumption that neglects ecological systems of thought that extend to a more-than-human world.

Berry’s statement is perhaps mitigated if examined as a rhetorical tool aimed at a mainstream American audience hugely dependent on agribusiness and too far divorced from the sources of its own meals. However, as a critique “The Pleasure of Eating” also fails to acknowledge any but agricultural solutions to the agricultural problems identified. Towards the end of the essay, Berry gives a numeric, prescriptive list of how to “eat responsibly.” The suggestions include gardening, preparing one’s own food, eating locally, and knowing the origins of the food one eats (*People* 149-150). Most of these suggestions can be tailored to any means of food production, but Berry takes pains to identify them as solely agricultural. For example, in urging people to grow their own food, he claims, “Only by growing some food for yourself can you become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to

offal to decay, and around again” (150). Yet clearly gardening and farming are not the only ways to acquire and know plant food. Many of the hunter/gatherer cultures Berry ignores could provide admirable examples of the values he urges, values of local and personal food production. Salluviniq, the Inuit boy quoted above, speaks from an older and longer-sustained system than the agricultural tradition Berry evokes, and from a system that recognizes just as many subtleties of the cycles of ecology of food and their effects on food as Berry’s agriculture. For Salluviniq, place and food are inextricably linked, in just the sort of relationship to the land Berry calls for, but Berry’s definition fails to accommodate Salluviniq’s subsistence or his culture.

Berry’s omissions could be construed as unintentional if they were not compounded by explicit imperatives that are both agricultural and moral. For Berry, a Christian who has written extensively about the compatibility of Christianity and environmentalism, good farming is not just a means to the end of the environmental crises caused by agribusiness, it is also the destiny and responsibility of mankind as decreed by God.

The most naked statement of a moral imperative comes from the essay “The Making of a Marginal Farm,” which Berry ends with the warnings that good farming is not easy and that the calling exposes the farmer to the transitory nature of the land, where “the earth does indeed pass away.” In this particular case, the earth is passing away on Berry’s farm due to erosion caused by unsustainable environmental practices upstream. However, he uses erosion to launch a generalization where the earth “passes away” because the individual’s tenure on it is impermanent and conditional. Berry concludes the essay, “To spend one’s life farming a piece of the earth so passing is, as many would say,

a hard lot. But it is, in an ancient sense, the human lot. What saves it is to love the farming” (736).

Berry directly equates farming with humanity and portrays the farm as humankind’s only ancient inheritance and destiny. The statement not only ignores the million years humans spent as hunters and gatherers before the brief advent of agriculture, it also implies that other “lots” than farming lack humanity.

Berry’s brief conclusion is not far removed from God’s decree to Adam: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread/ Till you return to the ground.” The essay’s conclusion succinctly echoes several of the curses of Genesis, including heavy toil, an emphasis on farming, and multiple forms of implied exile. That the earth is “passing away” suggests that it is perishable, a place that will someday be lost. The “human lot” of farming is partially damned by the necessity of hard work and the impermanence of the land. It is an enterprise in need of salvation, a fallen calling, but it can be saved by embracing it as the human destiny and by loving the act of farming. Berry’s stoic acceptance of the flawed project of farming shows all the symptoms of Brody’s diagnosis that “Faith in agriculture is somehow beyond question, a faith about faith itself” (*Eden* 157).

In *The Gift of Good Land*, Berry explores the idea of the small farm in a series of essays originally published in periodicals like *Sierra*, *The New Farm*, and *Organic Gardening*. Like the ending of “The Making of a Marginal Farm,” the essays in *The Gift of Good Land* occasionally expose Berry’s blinders regarding the nature of agriculture and humanity. Remarks such as “It is the good work of good farmers—nothing else—that assures a sufficiency of food over the long term” again pair morality and farming in an

exclusive relationship of food production (124). Likewise, Berry universally prescribes gardening and raising livestock as methods of local food production available to anyone, and he does so without specific consideration of place. Again, Berry's exclusion of other means of food production is probably simply negligent, and it is by no means malicious, but it nonetheless exposes the strength of agriculture's mythic self-perception as the sole, morally-decreed source of human productivity.

Throughout the essays in *The Gift of Good Land*, Berry promotes agricultural solutions to problems that he perceives as caused by agribusiness. Agribusiness and the small farm are antithetical in Berry's configuration of events, opposite instead of allied modes of production. Rejecting the dominant practices of agribusiness, Berry searches for examples of best practice embodied in forms of agriculture he considers largely lost, often in an inaccessible past: the use of horse-drawn equipment, for example, or the diverse farming methods used by the Amish. Berry's version of American agriculture thus also mirrors the Eden myth as interpreted by Brody: the people have been exiled by agribusiness from their true home, the small farm, but can still reclaim some share of paradise through hard (but loving) toil and good husbandry on the remaining, "marginal" lands.

For Berry, the moral imperatives behind farming impel the endurance of its difficulties, or even make the difficulties moral imperatives in and of themselves. As Brody says,

...accepting the relentless need to remake, with Herculean efforts, a land of forest or marsh or rocks or sand into patchwork of pasture and fields; knowing little comfort and no respite from hard physical work; setting pleasure at the far end,

the distant terminus, of a journey of hardship; *making the endurance of the hardship a religious achievement*—here are characteristics and abilities that have secured the family farm its place in almost every kind of climate and landscape.

(*Eden* 87) [italics mine]

Farmers accept hardship and endless work not just as consequences to be endured due to the moral act of farming, but as moral and sacred acts themselves. The harder the job gets, the more virtue is ascribed to it. For example, in the essay “Home of the Free” Berry celebrates “one of the heaviest of (his) spring jobs: hauling manure” (*Gift* 187). He comments, “I made my back tired and my hands sore, but I got a considerable amount of pleasure out of it” (187). Berry describes similar pleasures in putting up alfalfa and in using a hand (rather than a power) scythe. And in essays like “Family Work” and “Horse-Drawn Tools and the Doctrine of Labor-Saving,” he proclaims the value of good work and portrays work as a commodity being diminished or cheapened by the tools and methods of agribusiness.

To be fair, Berry champions simpler forms of labor mostly because they are more direct and less wasteful than the heavily petroleum-dependent labor devices employed by agribusiness. Berry voices moral injunctions to work hard on the farm that perhaps do not trace tangled roots back to agriculture’s mythic inheritance. However, these environmental injunctions to hard labor sit alongside “the good work of good farmers—nothing else” that is a moral directive springing from mankind’s “ancient lot” of farming.

Of course, work is a component of all forms of production. For example, the title of James Barker’s *Always Getting Ready* refers to the necessary vigilance and attention to the seasons that trigger work in Yup’ik subsistence. However, some scholars have

pointed out the fallacy that industrial agriculture gives humans more free time.

Pioneering work done in the sixties by intellectuals like James Woodburn, Richard Lee, and Marshall Sahlins demonstrated “that the routines of the hunter-gatherer way of life allowed more leisure time than those of agricultural systems and secured a good supply of highly nutritious food for most people most of the time” (Brody, *Eden* 123). Hunter-gatherers have to work, but farmers must work harder, and only in agriculture is labor viewed as an end in itself, a redemptive and mandatory pursuit.

What starts to become clear in Berry is that the family farm in nature writing (and even the larger American literature) is frequently located as threatened ground. For Berry the main threats include agribusiness, technology and changing American values. The work of the farm then serves not only economic, environmental, and moral purposes, but also as a form of defense. Work is the means of joining battle against the forces that threaten the farm in what we have already seen Brody call its “fiercer and more archetypal form” (Eden 84).

The idea of the family farm as a fortress to be defended hints at just how real and omnipresent is the possibility of some form of exile. Farming peoples view the family farm as the lodestar of stability despite the fact that it is frequently portrayed in danger of being lost. The farm recurs in various contexts as a last stand, an Alamo for a value system that is continually reenacted. It does not matter if the enemy is agribusiness, technology, or wayward values; or, in other incarnations of the same story, drought, Indians, storms, the Depression, blight, farm children lured away by the big city, subdivisions, or grasshoppers. The work will be hard and heroic, but the farm can never be placed safely outside the threat of loss.

The threatened farm occurs in many guises and iconic examples: in the quasi-children's books of Laura Ingalls Wilder, for example, some of the many enemies of the farm include Indians, wild animals, and weather. Adele Crockett Robertson's acclaimed Depression-era memoir *The Orchard* recounts the author's battle to save the family orchard through brutal work in the face of economic pressures, encroaching vacation homes, apple thieves, and potential disasters of weather or blight. Similarly, David Mas Masumoto's 1995 *Epitaph for a Peach* details the writer's struggle to save an heirloom variety of peach left behind by agribusiness forces that prefer shelf storage and color to flavor and juiciness. Masumoto manages to portray his farm as threatened by market forces despite the fact that his land in the arid San Joaquin Valley of California is heavily subsidized by unsustainable irrigation.

The agricultural characters in stories such as these accept the loss of a farm as a satisfactory, bittersweet ending for the story, one that opens up new frontiers. (After Robertson eventually lost the family orchard, she vows never to eat another apple) (*Orchard* 232). As Brody says, "The urge to settle and a readiness to move on are not antagonists in the sociology of our era; they are, rather, the two characteristics that combine to give the era its geographical and cultural character" (*Eden* 87). These contradictions recall Brody's discussion of the family farm's dual mythic configurations as both the gentle, stable source of life and the site of a "fierce energy and restlessness" (*Eden* 83). Agriculture serves as the highly dynamic instrument of change but visualizes itself as profoundly conservative.

In the end, Berry cannot see his way out of the agricultural contradictions he entangles himself in. His endeavor is cursed with sweat, weeds, and attacks from various

enemies, but it is his (and by extension, our) moral and human responsibility to endure these misfortunes and even enjoy them a little. Near the end of *The Gift of Good Land*, a book promoting an American return to the small farm, Berry includes an essay entitled “Seven Amish Farms.” The essay catalogues Berry’s visit to Amish country to talk to people and review their farming methods. He likes what he sees very much. Berry commends Amish farms for their small scale, diversity of production, soil-building practices, mostly organic fertilizers, cost-effectiveness, non-reliance on machines in favor of horses, and existence as family-and community-supported enterprises.

Amish farms satisfy all of Berry’s requirements for good farming, including the moral imperative. Against the bottom-line approaches of agribusiness he posits the moral, Amish approach: “Suppose, on the other hand, that you have an eighty acre farm that is not a ‘food factory’ but your home, your given portion of Creation which you are morally and spiritually obliged ‘to dress and to keep’” (*Gift* 259). Berry credits this moral imperative for the impressive achievement of the Amish communities that “have doubled their population *and yet remained agricultural communities* during a time when conventional farmers have failed by the millions” (258). Unlike the populations of most communities, the Amish are still creating exactly what Berry is calling for: new small farmers.

However, Berry’s Amish sources acknowledge that with all these new farms, “there is ‘a lot of debt’ in the community—‘more than ever’” (256). In the face of this debt, Berry offers a litany of the conditions that make new small farms possible:

With a start in factory work, with government and bank loans, with extraordinary industry and perseverance, with highly developed farming skills, it is still possible



for young Amish families to own a small farm that will eventually support them.  
(256)

This list of conditions necessary for obtaining a farm “that will eventually support” the farmer is fairly hefty, but it is clear that Berry considers them a small price to pay for meeting the moral imperative to obtain “your given portion of Creation which you are morally and spiritually obliged ‘to dress and to keep’” (259).

The small farm is agriculture’s vehicle for getting that “given portion,” even if it has to take it. The agricultural system of which Berry is a direct descendant did in fact take its portion, not receive it, from indigenous peoples across America and the globe, peoples with other claims to the land and other ways of using it. Within this historical and legal context, “The Gift of Good Land” was not a gift at all. It could just as easily be called a theft.

Nature writing is not without its awareness of these wrongs, and as Berry’s vehemence toward agribusiness demonstrates, the dominant discourse is far from unaware of the agricultural roots of many of our present problems. However, these awarenesses chronically fail to include interrogations of the pervasive agricultural myths that nature writers such as Berry continue to employ as solutions instead of recognize as contributors to the problem. And so long as the Genesis imperatives of an agricultural way of life, an aggressive mobility, and accumulative land ownership continue to be encoded in the dominant discourse, other important ways of life, including Yup’ik subsistence, will not find their places in the dialogue.

A responsible discourse has the obligation to respond to its margins as well as to its center. As Brody says, “Hunter-gatherers constitute a profound challenge to the

underlying messages that emerge from the story of Genesis” (*Eden* 89). If, as Berry’s example illustrates, some very mainstream environmental literature perpetuates those agricultural “underlying messages,” then it stands to reason that the dominant discourse has much to learn from subsistence cultures like the Yup’iks. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty, co-founder of both the groundbreaking ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, says, “An ecologically-focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is our most important task” (xxiv). The following chapter will engage some Yup’ik writers in the hopes of raising consciousness and adding some voices to the potential dialogue.

CHAPTER 3: BEYOND THE END—YUP'IK GENEROSITY AND THE DANGERS  
OF ACCUMULATION

**Palimpsest: Nuniwar, Iquum Inaullra, Old Woman's Cache**

Chapter 1 discussed the peninsular western point of Nunivak Island that the Nuniwarmiut know as Iqug, The End, and demonstrated that even a terminal margin such as The End can also be a beginning. The fluidity of the concept is shown even by the Cup'ig name for the place, Iqug, which besides “The End” is also the Cup'ig word for the toggle that attaches the line leading from a harpoon to its sealskin float or buoy. In this context, the landscape feature Iqug is not a fragile and isolated extremity, but an anchoring point, a site of attachment.

If it is possible to get more literal than the meanings of words, then The End is not the end in an even more literal sense. Beyond Iqug, The End, or actually on the very extremity of it, juts a steep pinnacle of stone covered in the nests of seabirds, attached back to the cliffs of Iqug by only a narrow and precipitous isthmus and surrounded on all sides by sheer, broken cliffs falling away to the Bering Sea. This spire is Iquum Inaullra, or Old Woman's Cache.

The name refers to a story about an old woman who did not want to share her food. Rather than share, she would straddle the narrow neck leading to Iquum Inaullra, inch her way out to the pinnacle, and hide her food and other belongings out among the bird nests. Joe David, a Mekoryuk elder who lived at the Nash Harbor village of Qimugluggpagmiut as a boy (and who returned there last summer as elder-in-residence

at the summer science camp where I worked), explained what he remembers of the story: “Old Woman, she was so stingy, that is why she make a cache at that point....When the old lady goes to her cache at the point, she put her one leg on one side and the other leg on the other side and so on” (1). David also recalls that the tapering point of Iqug that ended, then flared again to the smaller point of Iquum Inaullra, was copied in a popular Nunivak qay’ar (kayak) bow design, with the smaller point past the end possibly serving as a towing or tether point (1). The geophysical features of Iqug were more than just rocks and cliffs; they were also the repository of layer after layer of cultural reference and story. Such multiplicity testifies to an intimate, interactive connection to and knowledge of the land.

Outside of the story of the Old Woman’s Cache, it is difficult to find Yup’ik or Cup’ig people unwilling to share food. Yup’ik hospitality, food-sharing, ritual gifting, and potlatch-style festivals and feasts have made lasting impressions on outsiders since the days of the early explorers and missionaries. In the article “Original Ecologists?: The Relationship Between Yup’ik Eskimos and Animals,” anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan discusses how Yup’ik ritual food sharing frustrated early Moravian missionary John Kilbuck on the lower Kuskokwim River: “All during his career Kilbuck continued to complain that in their ceremonial distributions, the Yup’ik people acted as if there were no tomorrow.... Kilbuck and his cohorts fought long and hard against what they viewed as impractical and ‘irrational’ generosity, failing to understand the larger social need these distributions fulfilled” (*Essays* 174-175). Even the threat of impending shortages did not stop the Yupiit from sharing, and sharing all they had.

Today, Yup'ik feasts, potlatches, and “throw parties” (where small gifts are tossed to the gifts) remain common, just as distribution of the catch to relatives, elders, and others remains ubiquitous. Kwigillingok elder Frank Andrew describes the continuing tradition of distributing the catch:

In my village down here, when their provider arrives with animals, thinking of their neighbors, they divide up the catch. And when they are done, they call their fellow villagers to come and get a share. They are still practicing that tradition in my village today. They divide the whole animal up for all the village residents.

And it is their tradition to give away a person's first catch. (Fienup-Riordan *Yup'it Qanruyutait* 91)

“First catch” distributions or reasons for potlatch can extend from the catch of the first seal or migratory birds of the season to a young boy's first hunting catch or a girl's first berries gathered (Barker 130). Although ritual sharing occurs frequently in such relatively large-scale contexts, it extends through the daily acts of Yup'ik people and households. It is rare to visit a Yup'ik home without being offered food or coffee, and almost any gathering of people involves food, even in non-traditional arenas such as the office.

One example of Cup'ig ritual generosity is the recently-revived Qusngim Kevga, or Reindeer Messenger Festival, in Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island. Nunivak has the distinction of possessing the region's last remaining reindeer herd. Reindeer, or domesticated caribou, were introduced to western Alaska around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century as an attempt to engage Alaska Natives in commodity agriculture. The introduction, which came complete with Saami (or Lapp) reindeer herder tutors from

northern Scandinavia, happened largely through the efforts of Presbyterian missionary and United States General Agent of Education Sheldon Jackson (Griffin 107-108).

Generally speaking, the introduction of the reindeer industry was short-lived, though traces of Saami culture can still be found in certain Yup'ik and Cup'ig villages today. However, the Nuniwarmiut had lost their wild caribou populations by the 1880s (due to the depredations of visiting mainland hunters) shortly after the introduction of firearms to the region, and they have embraced herding as a part of Nuniwarmiut culture. Local herders are legendary for performing their duties on foot and lightly-provisioned across the island's 1500 square mile expanse of boggy tundra, forbidding lava outcroppings, and precarious coastal cliffs. Local pride in Mekoryuk's herding heritage shows up in the village high school's choice of mascots, the Herders. The now-annual Reindeer Messenger Festival displays Mekoryuk's reindeer pride at the same time that it brings back the tradition of hosting visitors from (relatively) nearby villages for a celebration of sharing, music, and dance.

In an article on the festival for the regional newspaper *The Delta Discovery*, editor Ted Horner noted, "In olden days, before the traders, missionaries, and the eventual parade of government agencies, the people of Nunivak Island used to travel to the mainland of Alaska in skin boats powered by sail. During times of celebration, other camps and settlements were invited to the island to feast, dance, and exchange gifts" ("Brink" 1). Considering that Akularar, or the Straits of Etolin, the ocean expanse that separates Nunivak from Nelson Island and the Alaska mainland, spans 16 highly-exposed and strongly-tidal miles, large-scale crossings were not ventured lightly. The crossing still is not undertaken lightly today with large boats and outboard motors. Festivals that

involved such travel were massive undertakings, and still are today, when most travelers arrive by expensive flights in small airplanes. Visitors who commit to such expense and trouble were and are rewarded by reciprocal commitments from their hosts. As Nunivak artist, mask-maker, and carver John Oscar recorded, during the initial 2002 Qusngim Kevga, “nearly one hundred reindeer were given to mainland performers” (1). Most of the performers were probably dancers, as it is dance that festivals such as the Reindeer Messenger Festival revolve around.

Even where missionaries like Kilbuck experienced difficulties in halting ceremonial sharing, they were historically successful in many areas at banning the practice of Yup’ik and Cup’ig religion, including the all-important yuraq, or “Eskimo dance.” Such was the case on Nunivak, although the Nuniwarmiut were one of the last area peoples to hold on to their dance traditions, ceasing only in 1937 despite the fact that earlier missionaries “rounded up the traditional dance drums and other ceremonial artifacts and tossed them in the ocean” (Horner 1).

The revival of Qusngim Kevga and of traditional dance on Nunivak Island demonstrates that the message of the cautionary tale told by the landscape at Old Woman’s Cache is still alive and well. Just as there are stories and lessons beyond The End, historical endings and terminations are not always final. The drums that were silenced in 1937 are beating again.

Pamyua! (Encore, or Again)—Nuniwarmiut Kassiyurtait Dance Again

The 2002 Reindeer Messenger Festival witnessed the first public performance of Nuniwarmiut Kassiyurtait, the Mekoryuk Dancers, and the first dance festival on the

island since 1937. The performance was the culmination of an undertaking that involved more than five years of preparation and the revival of traditional songs and dances caught on videotape when performed by legendary Nunivak elder Kay Hendrickson, who had since passed away (Horner 3).

As Nuniwarmiut Kassiyurtait drummer, dancer, and elder Sam Smith tells the story, in the mid to late 1990s community members, high school students, and leaders from Nuniwarmiut Piciryarata Tamaryalkuti, Mekoryuk's cultural heritage office, all began to push for a revival of traditional dance in Mekoryuk (Drozda 1). For the office, dance joins other cultural revitalization projects including the creation of a Cup'ig dictionary, a Nunivak Island Place Names Project, a traditional qay'ar (kayak) building, and a study of traditional cod, salmon, and subsistence use.

Smith explained in an interview with Robert Drozda and Ted Horner of the newspaper *The Delta Discovery*, "Even though Cup'ig dancing [had] stopped, the spirit lived on, because men continued to make ivory and wooden masks for sale. And our mothers, they continued to make reindeer beard dance fans.....My father was a Native missionary [Covenant Church] and he continued to make beautiful wooden masks. And sometimes he sings Native songs while he's working on masks" (1). Masks and dance fans were integral components of Cup'ig and Yup'ik dance, with masks, often depicting animals, especially possessing great power and significance. (One variety of mask, the nepcetat, was said to rise to the dancing angalkuq's [shaman's] face of its own volition and often had to be pried from the wearer's face) (Fienup-Riordan Agayuliyararput 53). So while dancing itself might have ceased in the villages, the tradition survived in the manufacture of dance regalia and in the songs people remembered and passed on.



When Smith and other Mekoryuk residents interested in reviving dance sought a starting point, they had to improvise. They interviewed Hendrickson in 1999 shortly before he died, and videotaped the elder (who was photographed as a striking young man by the ethnographer Hans Himmelheber during his visit to Nash Harbor) singing fifteen songs and performing the dance moves for three. The videotaped performance served as the template for the group to begin building their repertoire of songs and dances. Next, the men built drums through a process of trial and error. Old photographs confirmed oral tradition that maintained Nuniwarmiut hoop drums with their walrus hide covers were twice the size of mainland drums traditionally covered in sealskin. The group built bent-wood hoops and covered them with the same nylon material they had recently used to build replicas of traditional qay'ars (Horner 3). The nylon is more versatile than walrus hide, which responds temperamentally to changes in temperature and humidity and requires constant tuning. Finally, the group recreated traditional dance regalia, including reindeer beard headdresses for the women, while “three men were adorned with the traditional headgear depicting walrus, puffin, and reindeer” (Oscar 1).

The initial group included a wide variety of interested individuals, including many young people around high school age. There were elders like Smith, while the youngest member was four-year-old Rueben Richards, who danced along with the group by himself in a corner at practices until they invited him to join (“Kassiyurtait” 1-2). Yup'ik and Cup'ig dance performances are typically non-restrictive—audience members, including children, are welcome to join in during performances, and some children acquire prodigious reputations as dancers while still quite young.

By the time of the Reindeer Messenger Festival, the group had prepared two songs. On the opening night of the ceremony in the high school gym, elder George Williams welcomed the crowd and presented them with a traditional Reindeer Messenger Stick in a formal sign of invitation and welcome. Seasoned dance groups from nearby Nelson Island villages Tununak and Toksook Bay opened the dancing with well-known songs and dances. Then it was the Nuniarmiut Kassiyurtait's turn. Ted Horner wrote of the performance:

The crowd erupted as the group proudly entered the gymnasium. Following their first song, the applause was loud and long. If there was any question about the future of Eskimo dancing on Nunivak Island, it was answered in the silence following the clapping, when a single voice yelled, "Pamyua!" (Encore, once again) and the drums beat on. (3-4).

The Nuniarmiut Dancers drew a similar reaction several months later in March of 2003 at Bethel's annual Camai Festival, a huge four-day event that draws scores of dance groups from across the region, the state, and even the world. The crowds at Camai (which translates as "welcome") were awed by the Nuniarmiut's massive drums, beautiful regalia, and highly-traditional songs, and the group was a festival favorite.

Since 2002, the Reindeer Messenger Festival has become a growing annual tradition with a reputation that has spread throughout the region and state. Visitors attend to watch or participate in the traditional dancing, or to go to the popular fiddle-band dances. Some bring coolers and take advantages of discount prices to buy reindeer quarters for their freezers; customers have the option of selecting a live animal and

assisting in its butchering. And as always, such festivals offer the opportunity to see old relatives and friends, or make new ones, or meet ones people did not know they had.

The story of Qusngim Kevga and the revival of dance on Nuniwar sits on a nexus itself, a convergence of the traditional Cup'ig culture of generosity, the island's recent history of contact with European culture and forces of change, and the backdrop of a land that continues to speak to its people.

Joe David, the Mekoryuk elder who lived at Nash Harbor as a boy, concluded his recollection of Old Woman's Cache with a personal reflection: "I was only nineteen years old and I got married to beautiful lady named Esther Noatuk. And that was the last time I was there" (1). Personal meanings and memories accrue on the land along with the meanings accessible to the collective.

However, these personal interactions with land and resources are increasingly mediated by outside forces. For example, in 1980 the southern half of Nunivak Island (including Iqug) was taken out of Wildlife Refuge status by the U.S. Congress and declared the Nunivak Island Wilderness Area, despite objections from the Nuniwarmiut. Joining them in their opposition to the designation were the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and 15 other state and federal agencies. Wilderness designation places restrictions on land use, and after the designation the Nuniwarmiut faced increasing regulation of their traditional subsistence practices (Griffin 179-180).

So while the Yupiit and Cup'it still live close to the land, they do not always agree with outside ideas of how to protect it. After discussing the sometimes troubled relationship between Yup'ik people and the forces of environmentalism and

conservation, the following discussion will engage some individual Yup'ik writers and voices on issues related to the land and human relationships to it.

**Sharing the Catch: Kinship, Yup'ik Ecology, and the Way of the Human Being**

“In and Out with the Tides”: Yup'ik Encounters with Western Environmentalism and Conservation

The introduction to James Barker's *Always Getting Ready/ Upterrlainarluta: Yup'ik Eskimo Subsistence in Southwest Alaska* was written by a Yup'ik woman from Stebbins named Mary Ciuniq Pete, an anthropologist, the former head of the Alaska Fish and Game Subsistence Division, and the current director at Bethel's Kuskokwim Campus (where she was my boss). In the introduction to Barker's book, Pete notes that while the last half of the twentieth century saw increasing intervention by non-Native federal and state agencies in the subsistence and land-use practices of the Yup'ik and Cup'ig people on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, area residents played active roles in planning and in providing input to agencies.

Pete points out that the process exposed many differences between Yup'ik and non-native ideologies:

....these negotiations reveal differing philosophies about relationships among people and between humans and natural resources, between the Yup'ik world view and western science and wildlife management. The chasm is wide and deep, and Yup'iks view what is at stake as their most important challenge. The basic western scientific tenet that wildlife can be managed draws incredulity from some

Yup'iks; humans should not be so presumptuous and arrogant lest animals and fish make themselves scarce. (10)

In the Yup'ik view, animals and fish are sensitive beings that possess agency in whether or not they allow themselves to be seen or harvested. Attempts to interfere with or manage them can give offense. This contrasts starkly with Western notions of wildlife or fisheries conservation, where intensive management and interference are viewed as requirements for saving scarce populations.

In the last several centuries since the arrival of Europeans to the North American continent, formerly massive populations of animals and fish have indeed “made themselves scarce” (or been made scarce, depending on the point of view) in many places. But western Alaska is still a site of relative abundance: it abounds in fish, birds, mammals, ocean, open space, rivers, and remote lands. This fortunate abundance unfortunately often locates the region as contested space. There are a lot of opinions about how that abundance should be managed, used, or conserved.

Differences between “Western” and Yup'ik conceptions of relationships to the land, resources, and other people often manifest in misunderstandings and disagreements. Considering that they have been the primary historical land managers of a region that supports some of the continent's largest remaining populations of fish and wildlife, Yup'ik people have a somewhat dubious relationship to the environmental community. Similarly, government agencies and environmental organizations that work to perpetuate the same resources that Yup'ik people depend on often enjoy less than stellar reputations among the Yupiit themselves. Despite the fact that they share many parallel aims and (as

we will see later) even some parallel views, Yup'ik and Western ecologies often fail to enjoy mutual respect.

As we discuss the relationship between Yup'ik people and the environmental movement, we must remember that because neither the Yupiit nor environmentalists are either uniform or static, the chapter will necessarily rely on some generalizations. However, the discussion will move back in the direction of the specific through readings of various Yup'ik writers and their discussions of issues related to the environment.

Ecological Yupiit or Not? Yup'ik Ecological Praxis Engages Theoretical Environmentalism

The epilogue to Shepard Krech III's highly controversial book *The Ecological Indian* cites the example of the Yupiit in support of the author's thesis that "many indigenous people were not conservationists" in the Western sense of the word (213). Krech gives several examples of Yup'ik practices and beliefs that appeared to clash with the values of Western conservation:

The Yupiit of southwestern Alaska, for example, thought that the more meat they consumed and shared, the more they would have; that animals would regenerate infinitely as long as they received proper respect from men; and that animal populations declined from a lack of respect not overhunting [sic]. (213)

Each of Krech's examples is a semi-accurate (or semi-complete) reflection of Yup'ik beliefs, but his use of them is necessarily simplified and one-sided. For Krech, the examples are first and foremost beliefs that are false or mistaken. He is not interested in the beliefs and their attendant practices as components of complex worldviews and

systems of right action, nor as examples of a system of ecological thought that has a much better track record of sustainability than Western conservation.

In the words of Yup'ik professor Oscar Kawagley, "As with other indigenous groups, the worldviews of traditional Alaska Native peoples have worked well for their practitioners for thousands of years" (8). The Western tradition of conservation cannot claim a similar record of success (even if one generously tosses in an affirmative on the massively unresolved issue of indigenous culpability for Pleistocene extinctions). Krech attributes the abundant wildlife early Europeans encountered on the North American continent to low populations of indigenous inhabitants, but not all scholars share his low population estimates. In fact, the closest thing out there to consensus would average much higher. For example, Charles Mann's chapter in *1491* on the controversies regarding "New" World demographics says that "the High Counters seem to be winning the argument, at least for now" (133).

Krech draws his examples from Ann Fienup-Riordan's aforementioned 1990 essay "Original Ecologists?: The Relationship Between Yup'ik Eskimos and Animals." Riordan's essay detailed Yup'ik beliefs regarding animals and hunting and documented the emerging conflicts that resulted when those beliefs did not coincide with those of the federal Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, both immensely powerful and active agencies in the region. For example, many Yup'ik elders believe that catch-and-release sportfishing is disrespectful to fish and say that it is unethical to play with your food in such a manner. The teams of bird biologists that flock to coastal areas of the delta every summer to study the massive populations of nesting waterfowl and other birds encounter similar contradictions: when they tell villagers over-

harvest and egg-gathering are contributing to the decline of bird populations, the villagers reply that the populations are declining because the biologists disrespectfully handle and band birds, or disturb nests without observing the proper ceremonies, caution, or care (*Essays* 186, 178).

Krech oversimplifies Fienup-Riordan's conclusions: he neglects to include her discussion of Yup'ik injunctions against waste, and declines to clarify that Yup'ik beliefs urging consumption as a guarantor of future plenty emphasized complete use and distribution of accumulated stores, not a glut of limitless harvest (*Essays* 169, 173, 174-175) However, like Krech, Fienup-Riordan believes that attempts to align Yup'ik traditional values with current principles of conservation and ecology derived from Western science are at best problematic. The problems remain regardless of whether the attempts are by outsiders with stereotypes about Native people living in harmony with nature, or by Yup'ik people themselves, who sometimes seek a simplified version of their past practices to contrast with the European system of relations to resources that has caused so many changes in Yup'ik ways of life.

As an example of the latter, Fienup-Riordan tells of Yup'ik hunters who testified before a meeting of Alaska Fish and Game biologists that in the past Yup'ik people never wasted fish or wildlife and never established ownership of territories or the animals and resources that they contained. In another venue, the hunters would likely have painted a different and more complex picture of traditional Yup'ik land-use rights and territory, or of the complexities of waste and harvest issues. However, as Fienup-Riordan points out, "...those testifying concentrated on certain aspects of Yup'ik tradition to the exclusion of others in an effort to distinguish their view from what they see as the



proprietary and impersonal view of non-natives” (*Essays* 190). Compared to non-natives whose economic systems focus so intently on accumulation and ownership, the hunters claim, the Yupiit did not really own land or waste resources.

Fienup-Riordan is also careful to point out that Yup’ik beliefs and practices are not static. Many Yup’ik people are beginning to incorporate Western scientific evidence into their beliefs about animals and the land. And even since the time of Fienup-Riordan’s article, agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (which manages the 22-million acre Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge on which much of Yup’ik and Cup’ig country sits) have increasingly taken Yup’ik knowledge and points of view into consideration in making management decisions, sometimes hosting elder conferences for the purpose of soliciting input and expertise (“Update” 30). Unfortunately, this exchange is not always equal, and the hegemony of state and federal agencies that regulates daily life in the region often assures that the Yupiit are leveraged to take and accept more ideology than they are allowed to give in return. Fienup-Riordan puts it nicely:

At present, many Yup’ik people are working to reevaluate their traditional rules for living. This is a conscious effort today more than ever before. In their words, they feel that they are being “treated like tom cods, in and out with the tides.” The twentieth century has brought huge changes. At the same time, they are far from dismissing their rich tradition as noninstrumental in their daily lives. It behooves those bent on writing about their culture and legislating their lives to likewise refrain from such a dismissal. (*Essays* 191)

Fienup-Riordan is correct that the consideration of the “rich traditions” of indigenous peoples should not be restricted to the peoples themselves, but should also be undertaken

by policy-makers and interested others. However, such consideration on the part of policy-makers is rarely guaranteed. Indigenous peoples often lack the power structures to force their views on policy-makers. Because of federal and state game laws and enforcement, Yup'ik hunters are forced to take non-Native views of game management seriously. Only rarely are legislators in Juneau and Washington similarly compelled to seriously consider the import of Yup'ik views. Perhaps (as will be discussed shortly) the issues of sovereignty that are still being resolved in Alaska will eventually place the tools of legislation and policy-making more securely in Yup'ik hands.

Krech throws out the baby with the bathwater: because Indian ecological practices and beliefs did not (and do not) always conform to the tenets of Western conservation, the idea that Indian peoples were conservationists is false. For example, if Plains tribes sometimes killed bison just for choice cuts of meat and left the rest of the carcasses to rot, then their ecology was not an example of conservation, despite the fact that they managed their environment to support millions of bison, or that their general cultural practices minimized waste and the accumulation of surplus. Under Krech's formulation, any example of non-alignment with (somewhat rudimentary) notions of Western conservation disqualifies the entire comparison. However, one benefit of the immense controversy generated by Krech's work (and one that he intended) is that many scholars are continuing to research and address the specific histories of Indian interactions with their resources, histories that Krech only glosses.

Perhaps because they are glosses, Krech's portrayals of indigenous ecology and even Western ecology are sometimes uninformed or incomplete. For example, Krech, Fienup-Riordan, and others notice an apparent discrepancy between Western wildlife

biology and the beliefs of some indigenous cultures (including the Yup'iks) that harvest and sharing of animals actually increases their numbers and availability. Fienup-Riordan says, "The Yup'ik people held that the more game they would consume the more they would have" (*Essays* 174), a point that Krech seizes upon and links to overhunting in the quotation that opens this section.

However, in the essay "Myths of the Ecological Whitemen" from *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, a book of essays from various voices on the concerns raised by Krech's book, anthropologist Harvey Feit points out that in some cases, Western wildlife biology is starting to validate specific indigenous claims about the intensive harvest of animals that Krech calls "overhunting." Feit cites studies that show that in some species of animals and fish, populations respond to intensive harvest by increasing birth rates, and thus knowledgeable managers can indeed manage the fecundity of a certain population through intensive harvest (68-70).

Feit is careful to say that the phenomenon is not the rule among animal populations, but he does quote a biologist to the effect that intensive harvest capitalizes on "population compensatory responses" universal to "all living resources" (70). By Western wildlife biology's current understanding, intensive harvest will not always result in increases in animal populations, but the principle behind it could theoretically be applied by knowledgeable managers to achieve consistent results, especially if the managers rotated the areas of their harvest, a technique that Feit notes has been observed in some indigenous hunting cultures (69). Some examples of non-alignment between Western and indigenous ecologies could arise simply because Western knowledge of indigenous lands is still playing catch-up. However, Krech ignores the possibilities of

Western science's limitations and places the burden of proof solely on the indigenous side: if indigenous peoples fail to fit cookie-cutter Western notions of responsible land use, then their own ecological practices must be flawed.

The current environmental movement often makes judgments under similar, exclusive terms. Northern peoples like the Yup'ik and Inuit who still live a subsistence lifestyle closely tied to harvest of animals, birds, and fish are especially subject to scrutiny and judgment. They are likely to be dismissed by "downstates" environmentalists for a host of possible offenses centering on issues that are highly polarized in the Lower 48: the use of modern transportation like snowmachines and boats with outboard motors (despite the fact that the areas where they live have no roads), the hunting or trapping of predators like wolves that are endangered elsewhere but exist in abundance in their regions, isolated but highly-publicized failures to comply with game laws, and of course, the killing of cute seals.

Partly because of misunderstandings or judgments like those listed above, Alaska Natives are likely to bring their own prejudices about environmentalists to the table. Like many other indigenous groups, the Yupiit sometimes experience conflicts with environmental groups possessing strong opinions about land-use issues in indigenous territories. Susan Kollin frames the conflicts between environmentalists and Alaska Natives with several considerations. First, Alaska Natives frequently view environmentalists as extensions or incarnations of the state and federal agencies that since ANCSA (the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971) have increasingly mandated their subsistence practices and daily lives. Just as in their dealings with powerful resource agencies, "...many native leaders had to contend with white environmentalists who

operated with their own, culturally-specific ideas about nature” (123). The Wilderness Act of 1964 specifies that lands designated as Wilderness Areas be places where “the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” The language of the Act reflects colonial, manifest destiny framings of the American continents as empty and unoccupied, untouched and virgin. However, when Alaska Natives ceded their lands under ANCSA, the agreement specified that they would retain their subsistence rights in the lands that would become federal and state parks, preserves, and wilderness areas (124). Environmentalists sometimes apply already-flawed Lower 48 conceptions of wilderness to Alaska issues.

Also, some Native peoples make the case that when they are expected to manage their lands and resources to Lower 48 environmentally-friendly standards, they are being asked to help solve problems they did not create and sacrifice economic comforts that people in the rest of the country take for granted (Kollin 139). The compulsions to cooperate can be overwhelming; sometimes decisions having to with native lands or territories are made against the will of the Alaska Native people who live there. Environmentalists frequently have better access than native groups to the institutions, policymakers, and Western scientists that make the decisions.

The arrogant certainty of outsiders intruding in local issues can approach what the geographers Richard Schroeder and Roderick Neumann call “manifest ecological destiny” (Kollin 130). According to the geographers, manifest ecological destiny is “a naturalized ecological mandate that drives environmental organizations and their donors to assert control over remote areas in new ways. As with the original manifest destiny doctrine, environmental interventions are imbued with moral certitude; supported by

science, they purportedly restore balance and equilibrium to a troubled planet” (Kollin 130). Thus, outside environmental organizations are capable of becoming heavily invested in the fates of wildlife or landscapes in the North without considering the humans who live there. Hugh Brody quotes several Inuit elders from Pond Inlet as saying that “the Qallunaat [white people] care more about polar bears than about Inuit children” (*Eden* 96). Environmentalists wanting healthy public lands and populations of animals in the North might start by considering the health of the communities and peoples that exist there.

Of course, environmentalists are not the only (nor the most dangerous) outsiders capable of exerting pressure on the decisions made about Alaska Native lands. Because so many Alaska Native communities have few jobs and high levels of poverty, they are susceptible to what Robert Bullard calls “environmental blackmail” (Kollin 146). Multinational corporations promise jobs and economic benefits to communities and regions in exchange for the extraction of resources such as fossil fuels, precious metals, or timber. Such offers always make for difficult decisions, but the difficulty is compounded in regions where some existing communities possess only a handful of jobs, lack amenities such as indoor plumbing and running water, and struggle to meet the costs of providing utilities like electricity to populations who have the lowest incomes and highest costs of living in the country.

These situations are further complicated by political concerns in the wake of the relatively recent Alaska Native Settlement Claims Act of 1971, where sovereignty and representation issues are far from resolved. Kollin observes, “Some native corporations across the state have fared rather well, but others have faced bankruptcy....The corporate

model introduced by ANCSA has brought with it new forms of ‘institutionalized competition’ between Native peoples that had not existed before and that violated a standard belief in forging reciprocal relations with the natural world” (147). Struggling corporations compete with successful neighboring corporations who pay massive dividends to shareholders, sometimes leading the weaker corporations to desperate economic measures in efforts to show profits and issue dividends. Also, many Alaska Natives view the ANCSA settlement as an attempted extinguishment of further rights, continuance, and sovereignty of their people. In his chapter “Akiak and the Yupiit Nation,” Oscar Kawagley quotes the chairman of the Yupiit Nation, a tribal government created by three Kuskokwim River villages that has been at the forefront of post-ANCSA sovereignty issues: “The Yupiit Nation views the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act as a genocidal and termination act” (41). Incorporation of existing tribal government structures through a one-time payoff denies the perpetuity of Native peoples and exposes their lands and resources to the leveraged threats of economic imperatives. Resistance to these limitations and problems continues in the courts and in the everyday efforts of villages and regions.

Examples of potential multinational corporate threats are not far afield. Currently, Calista Corp., the Yukon-Kuskokwim area regional Native Corporation, is collaborating with Barrick Gold to put a massive cyanide leach gold mine at Donlin Creek, a headwater stream of the Kuskokwim River. Many Calista shareholders (regional residents at the time ANCSA was passed with one quarter or more Alaska Native blood, and sometimes their descendants) are against the project and feel powerless to stop it. Obviously, there are many concerns about placing a mine in a watershed that supports

some of the largest subsistence salmon harvests in the world. However, the project is currently in the permit process and is at this point more likely to happen than not.

Kollin makes the observation that U.S. scientists and policymakers often seek answers to environmental problems from within the systems that caused them, “disregarding local knowledges and understandings of the natural world” (130). Kollin continues, “Yet if the environmental crisis, as Joni Seager argues, ‘is a crisis of the dominant ideology,’ then U.S. policymakers and environmentalists might best be served by abandoning some of the old ways of thinking and focusing on efforts to find new ones” (130). The science and technology that have contributed to so many environmental problems are often blindly relied upon to fix them, and the possibility of limitless progress and development is never questioned. Of course, the “local knowledges and understandings” that might offer alternatives to the dominant ideology often are not “new” ways of thinking at all, but ways that predate the “old” Western Enlightenment ways that are not working.

Some excellent examples of such “local knowledges” are evident in the works of Yup’ik writers and voices. Examined collectively, their writings offer alternative ecological and environmental values to a dominant ideology that is badly in need of assistance. The alternatives offered sometimes run parallel to the alternatives of the dominant ideology, but they spring from different worldviews and different value systems. The temptation exists to attempt a program in direct reverse to Krech’s, looking for examples of alignment between Native and Western ecologies and checking them off with satisfaction. However, it may be that the differences between Yup’ik and Western



ecology are just as telling as the similarities, and that Yup'ik views have as much to teach through what they reject of Western views as they do through what they accept.

#### To Catch a Blackfish: Avoiding Waste as a Sign of Respect

John Active opens the essay “Why Subsistence is a Matter of Cultural Survival: A Yup'ik Point of View” with a story told to him by his grandmother, Bethel storyteller Maggie Lind. In the story, a blackfish (a small fish caught by the hundreds in underwater funnel traps) examines four Yup'ik camps along a stream he is swimming up. At the first three camps, he notices people being careless with their food. The people leave uneaten scraps on the ground, or toss them to their dogs, which are similarly careless. In one camp, there are fish caches full of rotting fish, which are wailing and weeping.

The blackfish bypasses the fish traps he sees near each of these three camps, exclaiming “I will not swim into this man's fish trap,” then listing his reasons, which include not wishing to have his bones thrown about and stepped on or to be eaten by children who play with their food (“I am not a game to be played with”). At the camp with the rotting fish, the blackfish explains his decision to swim past by saying, “I don't want to be wasted. I'd rather be shared with others in need” (182-183).

Finally, the blackfish sees a camp where the people eat carefully, wasting nothing, and treat the bones of the creatures they eat with respect. “Overjoyed,” he swims into this man's fish trap, looking forward to being eaten carefully and disposed of respectfully (183-184).

Active interprets the story for the reader with his characteristic directness. He says the story was his grandmother's “Yup'ik way of teaching me to be careful with

subsistence foods. I think you get the point. If you are wasteful you will become unlucky during your hunting and gathering because the animals will stay away from you. Might be a fable or might not” (184). In the world of the story, the blackfish possesses agency; it can choose who catches it. However, the agency is limited by the fish’s overall goal, which is to be eaten and disposed of with respect. The individual acts of humans have consequences that are rewarded or punished by the individual acts of animals. The resultant system minimizes waste and promotes human respect toward the sources of food.

Similar injunctions against waste can be found in the words of Yup’ik and Cup’ig elders collected in Fienup-Riordan’s book *Yupiit Qanruyutait: Yup’ik Words of Wisdom*. *Yupiit Qanruyutait* is simply a collection of statements from many elders on a variety of topics. Fienup-Riordan’s later work is less expository than her earlier work and instead more collaborative. She prefers to let her sources speak for themselves as much as possible, and the later books often include the text in both Yup’ik and English through collaboration with the Yup’ik translators Marie Meade and Alice Rearden. Specifically, the text urges elders to recall what their elders told them when they were young. The resulting form of address often starts with “they told us,” “they said,” “they say,” or so on, an attributive and humble form of discourse that locates wisdom not within the individual speakers but in a collective and continuous knowledge.

One recollection from recently-deceased Kwigillingok elder and famed qayaq builder Frank Andrew echoes the concerns of Active’s story. Andrew explains that the elders made a distinction between those who were careful with their food and those who were careless and wasteful. He gives the specific example of blackfish bones, and

explains that those who treated them carelessly could experience reductions in their hunting skills (89). In a similar vein, Theresa Moses of Nightmute describes how she was taught to avoid waste through processes of accumulation, even of small items that might by themselves seem worthless: “They also told us that if we did not throw the skin of one bird away whatsoever, that we would eventually have enough for a parka...They never discarded things but were grateful for a man’s catch, took it, and made it into something” (89). Worthless objects are made valuable through slow accumulation; one is reminded again that this is the culture that hunts small whales but also gathers mouse food.

Yup’ik attitudes toward waste do not dovetail exactly with the concerns of Western conservation or culture. The blackfish in Active’s story is not concerned with population dynamics or escapement quotas; rather, it wants to be respectfully treated, a treatment that happens to involve the minimization of waste. Similarly, the story does not stress a “waste not, want not” ethic, and as a “fable,” it is very different from the story of the grasshopper and the ant. For the Yup’ik, the purpose of avoiding waste is not accumulation, but demonstration of respect to food sources in order to ensure their continuance.

“The Way of Being a Human Being”: Kinship, Ecology, and the Proliferation of Interrelation

The idea at the very base of the Western science of ecology is that all organisms in a system are related to each other. The actions of any one organism or species affect the others or the whole. Western land ethics are an extension of this sense of interrelatedness. In the section “The Land Ethic” from *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo

Leopold claims community as the basis for all systems of ethics, and defines a land ethic as a simple inclusion of the non-human world in the community: “In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (204). Informed by Western science and impelled by alarming losses of wildlife and ecosystems that he brilliantly details in the section “Good Oak,” the land ethic Leopold described, where “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community,” would become the template for twentieth century Western environmental thought.

Oscar Kawagley points out that Yupiit worldviews (as well as those of many other indigenous groups) exhibit a similar belief in the interrelatedness of all beings and things: “[Yup’ik] worldviews were dependent upon reciprocity—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. All of life is considered recyclable and therefore requires certain ways of caring in order to maintain the cycle” (9). The maintenance of the cycle depended upon right action toward and correct relationships with all living things.

Yup’ik writer Harold Napolean from Hooper Bay says this system of right action that served the web of interrelationships was called “*Yuuyaraq*, ‘the way of being a human being’” (4). The belief that the entire world was invested with spirits meant that all actions were spiritual acts toward the maintenance of harmony with relatives, other living beings, and the world. Napolean says:

*Yuuyaraq* defined the correct way of thinking and speaking about all living things, especially the great sea and land mammals on which the Yup’ik relied for food, clothing, shelter, tools, kayaks, and other essentials. These great creatures were

sensitive; they were able to understand human conversations, and they demanded and received respect. (5)

Animals and other resources possessed agency regarding their participation in the cycles of harvest, but that agency could be regulated through the proper actions and attitudes of human beings. Napoleon continues, “*Yuuyaraq* prescribed the correct method of hunting and fishing and the correct way of handling all fish and game caught by the hunter in order to honor and appease their spirits and maintain a harmonious relationship with them” (5). Stability and harmony derive from proper interactions between people and the resources on which they depend, and such interactions define the essence of humanity. The Yup’ik system placed immense responsibility on human beings, and placed them as well into a complicated nexus of relationships to negotiate and protect.

The strong Yup’ik senses of interrelatedness extend into very inclusive and elaborate systems of human kinship. Kawagley mentions that “the Yupiaq term for relatives is associated with the word for viscera, with connotations of deeply interconnected feelings” (11). A Yup’ik first-year student once opened an essay for my class with the statement, “I am from the coastal village of Tununak. Everyone in my village and the neighboring village is my relative.” She was not making a generalization, but meant instead that she had specific kinship relationships to the hundreds of people in question.

Yup’ik children are still frequently named for recently-deceased elders or relatives, and are believed in some sense to be their reincarnations. This practice is one way in which kinship networks are extended, as babies essentially acquire an extra set of

relatives upon being named. As Kawagley says, “Thus, a ‘new relative’ was made whether blood related or not” (20).

The belief that all beings possessed an indestructible *iinruq* (spirit or soul) extended to the non-human world and meant that animals and fish had to be harvested and used with respect, or when that *iinruq* returned in another animal it would not allow itself to be caught (Napolean). This system of returning human and animal *iinruqs* allowed for an infinite and ever-growing number of connections among living beings. These Yup’ik kinship notions prefigure Western scientific models of the cycles of ecology and the elements. Just as the circulation of molecules of water and organic matter through endless repetitions of global cycles assures that I have breathed at least some of the same molecules of air or drank at least some of the same molecules of water as Shakespeare, Yup’ik kinship traced far enough back assures that all living beings are connected.

The Yup’ik college students I worked with in Bethel came to college from across a region the size of Oregon. Nevertheless, when meeting each other for the first time it usually took them only a few seconds of speaking together in Yup’ik to determine how they were related to each other. The situation would then most likely be explained to me in the simplified version: “She’s my cousin.”

When all people are related, and all animals familiar, the obligations toward right action are strong. Reciprocity and consequence are easy concepts to understand for those who live close to the sources of their food. Under the principles of Western ecology, the way that organisms relate to each other is through mechanisms of exchange and

interdependence. Similarly, right action in the Yup'ik worldview also dictates and regulates the sharing of the catch.

“It Will Be Replaced By More Than Was Given”: Sharing as Ecological Practice

A belief system that sees identity as partially “recyclable,” to use Kawagley’s term, necessarily focuses more on group and community than on the individual. Active connects the strong group emphasis of Yup'ik society with the cultural practice of sharing:

When Western society came to Alaska, its most devastating contribution was the concept of individuality. Individuality is not the Native way. We Yupiit were taught that hunting and gathering together and sharing our bounty was the way to go. Our custom of feasting and potlatching proves this. Previous civilizations placed emphasis on the agreement of the group and acquiring personal meaning from participation in those groups. We gained a sense of security and belonging in living this way, the very ingredients missing in the lives of so many *kass'ags*.  
(Fienup-Riordan *Hunting* 178)

Sharing arises out of group identity and is potentially threatened by “the concept of individuality.” *Kass'ag* lives center on the pursuit of individuality, but ironically miss out on the sense of “personal meaning” only available through group participation, as well as feelings of security and belonging. Active’s diagnosis of the deficiencies in non-Native lives seems rudimentary but is at the same time difficult to deny.

Kollin argues that one reason Alaska Natives sometimes reject the green movement is that a focus on the individual is encoded into mainstream environmentalism

and its roots in the tradition of “dominant American nature writing” (56). Nature writing distrusts consensus and community, instead placing authority in lone voices from places empty of other people. Thoreau’s spare cabin in the woods, Abbey’s desolate trailer in Arches, and Berry’s anachronistic Kentucky farm all exist as vehicles of isolation and alienation that invest their respective speakers with the ability to make personal judgments and speak individual truths.

Kollin claims that Native environmentalism, on the other hand, views exile as something to be avoided at all costs and attempts political action through community solidarity instead of through the antisocial critiques of lone advocates: “Indigenous environmentalism also resists understanding the subject and agent of nature writing as a solitary individual in retreat and instead concerns itself with the collective community” (56). Her observation is borne out by the many stories in Yup’ik oral tradition that detail the experience of an individual’s exile, banishment, or accidental separation from his or her community, often followed by an eventual return. Exile is a horror to be escaped, not a pleasure to be sought.

Active identifies sharing as the cultural marker that locates and authenticates group identity. Customs centered on sharing prove the extent of Yup’ik reliance on collective and cooperative conceptions of identity. Sharing serves as the hallmark of participation and belonging in a group. Active diagnoses a failure to achieve this group identity and security as a primary lack in non-Native existences, and the implication is that non-Natives fail to properly share. Active is not alone in identifying sharing as a crucial component in maintaining Yup’ik culture and relationships to animals and the land.



Kawagley views sharing and ritual gifting partially as ecological adaptations that facilitated the Yup'ik semi-nomadic life, where too many possessions or stores could become dangerous burdens. However, he also acknowledges that these ecological consequences could have been derived through spiritual motivations related to the Yup'ik worldview, not just from practical concerns. He says, "They realized the value of sharing when they understood that to have little or nothing is to treasure everything, and it fits very nicely into their ecological mindset. They found that to restrict wants was to always have enough, and they created ways to enjoy to the utmost that which they had" (19). Such a system might mean the occasional endurance of scarcity or even famine, but both times of scarcity and times of plenty were experienced collectively, and the end result was "to always have enough."

Traditional Yup'ik sharing frequently focuses on the neediest members of the community. As Kawagley notes, "Particular attention was given to elders who did not have offspring for support, to widows with children, and to orphans" (10). The motivations to give to those in need were not purely altruistic. Kawagley continues, "The gratitude of these less fortunates was considered powerful 'medicine' that led to good fortune in future hunts. The more one gave, the happier one would be, and the more likely one would lead a long and satisfied life" (10). Sharing connects inevitably back to the relationships between people and animals, serving not just an interpersonal purpose but an ecological one as well.

Kawagley's observations on sharing are reinforced by the statements and stories of the elders in Fienup-Riordan's *Yup'it Qanruyutait*. Frank Andrew tells the story of a nukalpiaq (successful hunter) who refuses to share the first seal he catches in the spring

with the hopeful and expectant women in the camp. The hunter then fails to catch another seal all season long. The next year, the man eagerly shares his first seal and goes on “to caution younger hunters, revealing his past experience and telling them never to be stingy with their catch” (39). Failure to share could bring negative personal consequences but also negative collective consequences, as the community depended on the success of proficient hunters.

Sharing with the needy produces a cumulative effect; instead of diminishing what one has, giving makes more. Andrew elaborates, “They say because of the overwhelming gratitude [the recipients of sharing] felt, they push the animals toward the hunter. That is why some say, ‘Anirtaulluk, amlenminek cimingeciqualria (Anirtaulluk, it will be replaced by more than was given)’” (95). Like the cumulative proliferation of kinship bonds, Yup’ik sharing is generative and creative rather than restrictive and limiting.

#### “For Us to Eat”: Yup’ik Ecology Evaluates Methods of Exchange

Active makes an important distinction between sharing and Western forms of resource distribution or exchange, forms that can be reductive and create loss. After relating the story of the blackfish, Active relates another story from Napakiak elder Jimmy Chimegalria, who tells the events of a friend’s dream. The man dreamed of drift-netting for salmon on the Kuskokwim River, fishing for a very long time without catching a single fish. Finally the man catches a salmon, but the fish is “nothing but skin and bones.” The fish speaks to the man:

“Look at me,” said the fish. “I am skin and bones. This is because your people have been so wasteful. There is coming a time when fish will be scarce to you.

The people have begun to use us to become rich” (probably referring to the commercial fishing industry). (Spatz 184)

Harvesting enough to share brings success at subsistence, but harvesting enough to sell creates scarcity, and not just because commercial use of animals and fish often wastes more than subsistence use. Animals and fish don't exist for accumulation, but for sharing and consumption. Commercial harvest denies the animal or fish the opportunity to be eaten and disposed of locally and respectfully, or to be shared with those in need.

The fish continues, “We fish were not put on earth to be used this way. We were placed here for you to eat. Look where it has led you. You fish us only to make money and some of you fish us only for our roe and throw the rest of us away” (184). Although it has waned recently, there used to be a profitable Japanese market for Kuskokwim and Yukon River chum salmon harvested solely for their eggs. Active notes that since the time of the man's dream and the salmon's warning “there was a chum salmon crash on the Kuskokwim and commercial fishermen were broke for a whole year” (185). Wasteful harvest causes shortages and grieves the salmon, not so much because of over-harvest, but because commercial use and sale defies their intrinsic purpose. Active reiterates, “Elders say fish return to the rivers for a purpose: for us to eat. Not to make money off of, but for subsistence purposes” (185). The essay further ties commercial use of resources like salmon to stealing. By treating salmon like commodities, human beings relinquish their rightful claims to them.

Biologists might argue that salmon have their own reasons for spawning beyond providing food for people, or that the reasons for declines in fish populations might have more to do with over-fishing than with a lack of respectful treatment. However, Active's

version of the truth forces people to take responsibility for the resources they depend upon. Both Western ecology and Yup'ik ecology see humans and animals enmeshed in a complex web of interrelationships. Active does not pick any fights with Western science, and Kawagley's and Napoleon's versions of Yup'ik worldviews, ecology, and kinship stress the same points that Leopold insisted upon: all creatures are related, humans are only a part of that system, and accordingly they must treat the world with care and respect in order to maintain it. It is not Yup'ik ecology and Western ecology that are at odds, it is Yup'ik ecology and Western values, or Western methods of exchange. Fish return to the rivers to be shared and eaten, not to be sold for profit. As Active says, "A cash economy and stealing are not a part of our culture. Subsistence is everything to us. Our traditions teach us this" (185).

### **Conclusion: The Return of the Salmon and the Illusion of Endings**

Whether it is part of Yup'ik culture or not, a cash economy has arrived on the delta of the Yukon and the Kuskokwim, and it does not appear to be going anywhere. However, although it continues to face threats and changes of many kinds, the Yup'ik subsistence economy does not appear to be going away, either. Shortly after the ice breaks up on the Kuskokwim near Bethel this spring the smelt will run upriver, and Yup'ik people will fish for them with dipnets, knowing that the arrival of the big king salmon will follow not many days behind, and that fish camp is fast approaching.

Perhaps the cash economy fails to pose a significant threat to subsistence precisely because of the immense web of relationships that connect the Yupiit to the land,

to other living creatures, and to each other. As the cycles of ecology, these relationships are subject to alteration but not eradication. A system that views life as recyclable rather than accumulative can never witness an end, and when every stranger is a cousin if you follow enough connections, it is hard to be alone.

On December 31, 1998, John Active wrote a column welcoming a new millennium for Bethel's other newspaper, the *Tundra Drums* (many argued that '99 marked the true millennium since the first year was 0). The article begins with a humorous take on the impossibility of escaping the network of Yup'ik connections: "I moved to Anchorage for six months to get away from the Eskimos, but things don't change because I kept running into them at Wal-Mart, K Mart, and at the local city parks, competing for goose eggs" (Fienup-Riordan *Hunting* 273). Even an urban setting cannot deter Yup'ik people from pursuing subsistence in whatever forms they can find it.

The eve of the millennium does not much worry Active, although it provokes reflections on the changes the century had brought to the Yup'ik people, changes they had managed to survive. He even mentions that sometimes unwelcome changes turn out for the better, quoting an old Yup'ik saying, "*Akertem kingyaraakut* ('The sun turns its head toward us before it sets')" (273). Then Active welcomes the new century and bids goodbye to the old one. Like the stories of Iqum (The End) and Old Woman's Cache, his words testify to the fiction of endings and to the indestructible continuity of relationships:

Let the millennium come if it wants. We'll make it, and as we Yupiit say to someone who is leaving the country for good, *Tua-ingunrituq* ("It is not the end"). *Tangerciqamken cam iliini* ("I'll see you again sometime"). *Piuraa* ("Be as you are," "maintain"). (273)

## EPILOGUE: EATING MY WORDS IN ALASKA

**Three Springs**

At the end of May my girlfriend and I will leave Missoula for Alaska, the fourth time I have made such a May journey. The spring that will be winding down in Missoula will just be getting underway in her hometown of Bethel, and if we are lucky we will arrive in time for breakup on the Kuskokwim, an event that triggers a huge barbeque along the river which almost the whole town attends. In early June the Bethel tundra will green up at an astronomical rate and the sky will fill with the honks of geese, the croaks of cranes, and the wonderful whirring whistle made by male snipes in their diving mating displays. In the subarctic, spring and fall are the shortest seasons but times of highly accelerated change; in spring southwest Alaska gains more than 7 minutes of daylight each day, and the rates at which plants, birds, and animals conduct their business follow suit.

During the third week of June I will accompany a new group of students out to Nunivak, which in its coastal extremity thaws out a little later than inland Bethel. The icebergs will still be melting in Nash Harbor, and I will watch yet another place green up under the spell of spring. The muskox will have scraped against boulders and tundra tussocks to rub off another winter's coat of qiviut, their fine, downy underwool, and the students will gather huge tufts of it on the tundra, ballooning their pockets full of wool for later presentation to Mekoryuk elder weavers. And on the lagoon behind our camp at Qimugglugpagmiut, the long-tailed ducks will be making their constant and distinctive

calls, a haunting sound that I can hear in my mind any time I want, one of Nuniwar's many small gifts. In the stream that leads past camp to the lagoon, I will catch Dolly Vardens, or the occasional pink salmon flushed in with the tide, and we will eat some of them.

I am excited to get back closer to the Yup'ik subsistence lifestyle and the learning opportunities it offers. Active was on to something in his distinction between subsistence and commercial use of resources. In the essay "The Oil We Eat: Following the Food Chain Back to Iraq," Missoula journalist and author Richard Manning notes that the grain agriculture most of the modern world relies upon for food did not become dominant because it was the best way to feed people, but because it was the best way to make some people wealthier than others. The domestication of grain made food storable and transportable in a way it had never been before. Archeological skeletal evidence shows that early farmers were less nourished and more often diseased than hunter-gatherers living at the same time. However, digs of early grain farming communities reveal some houses larger than others, those attached to granaries. Manning says, "Agriculture was not so much about food as it was about the accumulation of wealth. It benefited some humans, and those people have been in charge ever since" (2). Grain was the original capital.

The myths of Eden have helped disseminate the class division of agriculture. Genesis reserves a special emphasis for grain agriculture, if we remember God's curse to Adam: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread/ Till you return to the ground." God decreed not just the practice of farming grain, but the dispersal of the practice as well. Consequently, subsistence farming cultures across the world, most of which relied on

diverse, complimentary, sustainable crops and practices, have often joined hunting and gathering cultures as the victims of invasions by the forces of commodity agriculture.

Grain monoculture does not mean food for all; it means sweat and bread for the multitudes and money for a select few. The possibilities for commodification inherent in grain itself amplify with the application of modern technology, creating a system designed to create commodities instead of food. In its current incarnation, grain agribusiness feeds gruel to 2/3 of the world and spices it with periodic famine (another of grain monoculture's characteristic gifts), while it feeds rich nations like ours a steady diet of grain sugar and grain-fed protein and fat. Meanwhile, the methods agribusiness uses to produce grain destroy the land and the planet. Berry eloquently points out agribusiness's sins even while he himself cannot manage to resist agriculture's seductive mythic rhetoric, and he is emblematic of a green discourse that seeks agricultural solutions to agricultural problems.

Agriculture has denied many people the opportunities to see the productivity possible under other systems of using the land, to witness salmon runs in large, undammed, and unpolluted river systems, or massive herds of wild grazing animals on large tracts of unfenced range not under the plow. Even those who criticize current systems of agriculture privilege farming as the sole productive method of feeding the peoples of the world. When I try in discussion with friends or fellow students to even describe Yup'ik subsistence culture, people reply, "Well, we can't all go live as hunters and gatherers." This statement is true, just as it is true that Yup'ik culture in Alaska is no longer independent from the agribusiness economy and diet, or from the petroleum dependency that subsidizes it. However, the reverse of what people tell me is also true:



we cannot all live the way we are living now. We cannot continue as agriculturists stressing the planet to its limits. We can live this way for a while, those of us in the United States and the “developed world,” but the cost is extracted from our resources, our ecosystems, and from people much poorer than most Americans all over the world.

In the households of Bethel, people are still sharing their food, as people do everywhere. However, in Bethel it is still possible to witness and imagine what the world would be like under system of production based on distribution and kinship instead of accumulation and individuality. Soon, the salmon will return to feed the people. Let’s eat.

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