

Blurred Lines: A Personal Exploration of Identity, Alaska Native Corporations and Going Beyond the 'Incidentally Indigenous'

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Abstract

At its passage in 1971, the Alaska Native Claims and Settlement Act (ANCSA), was viewed as the most liberal and generous settlement ever achieved between the United States government and an Indigenous peoples. Forty-three years later it is evident that the ANCSA, though promising at the time, was intended to be yet another extension of colonialism. The ANCSA's provisions seek to control Alaska's indigenous peoples and their lands by denying their rights to hold title to their own lands. One such provision imposes regional and village formed corporations rather than peoples hold this right. In this paper I explore how these corporations have complicated notions of Alaskan Native belonging and identity through the formation of an entirely new classification of Alaskan Native: the corporate shareholder. Through an analysis of my own personal experience and Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel's concept of the "incidentally Indigenous" person, I analyze the production of the corporate Native shareholder. I argue that the formation of such an identity comes with many complications for Alaskan Native peoples dividing communities based on colonial constructions of "authenticity." While such identities may pose problems, such a category also presents a unique opportunity for increased cultural awareness and support of Alaska Native's decolonization and cultural revitalization projects. By confronting these identity issues, I hope to "blur the lines" of political-economic categories of identity and help others remember that for Alaska Natives, culture is not remembered but lived; and is not expressed through genes but through action.

Introduction

It is my hope that this essay will find a place within the hearts and minds of Alaska Native Tribal members and shareholders alike so that we might better understand one another and work towards decolonization in solidarity. The influences and worldviews that come with the Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs), conflict with Alaska Native worldviews, social structures, and in determining membership. However, the ANCs are unique and unlike any other American corporate structure in that they are tribally owned, and all shareholders are either Alaska tribal members or descendants of Alaska tribal members. It is in that fact that there is hope for the continuity and preservation of Alaska Native cultures and lands. Through the exploration of my own Tlingit heritage and identity, I hope to complicate notions of indigenous “authenticity”, which I believe is yet another colonial tool attempting to divide Alaska Native peoples from each other and from realizing goals of cultural continuity and community decolonization, both in Alaska Native village/urban communities and in communities of Alaska Natives diaspora. Through exposing key identity issues and problems that have developed from the ANCs I hope to disrupt notions of authenticity and confront the colonial mechanisms that seek to divide Alaska Native peoples and perpetuate processes of Alaska Native assimilation into white culture. Alaska Natives must resist these colonial mechanisms through educating our populations to understand their hegemonic nature and by reconnecting our peoples to our lands and cultures. It is my belief that if we can reconnect shareholders and enrolled members in culturally appropriate ways to better understanding their cultural heritage/histories and the

complex context of ANCSA, we can then begin a decolonization process of our peoples and of the corporations with increased awareness through education, social connections, and most importantly love and respect for our people and our lands.

Problematizing the Corporations

In 1971, after a long history of colonial efforts of Russia, and then the United States with the Alaska Purchase of 1867, Alaska Native's aboriginal claim to ancestral land was finally recognized "legally" with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Act (ANCSA). Unfortunately, this act simultaneously abrogated all aboriginal claims to their lands and the rights protecting Alaska Native subsistence practices on these lands, (Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes). The act was largely in response to longstanding tensions between Alaska Natives (who have always maintained their aboriginal claims to ancestral lands in Alaska), and settler communities/governments/corporations who sought to develop these lands in pursuit of economic profit and the "progressive" development of Alaska. More specifically ANCSA was driven, "in large part by the need to resolve aboriginal title claims that prevented the development of the North Slope oilfields and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline," (Linxwiler, 2007). ANCSA was a completely new approach to "settling" aboriginal land claims for the United States, and at the time was, "hailed...as the most liberal settlement ever achieved with Native Americans," (Berger, 1985). The act was unique in that it did not follow the practice of creating reservations, which was the case of the treaty process for tribes of the lower 48, but instead created 12 regional corporations. A 13th regional corporation was later

formed to address the claims of Alaska Native diaspora as they did not receive land but were included in the cash settlement distribution, and over 200 village corporations would receive over 45 million acres of land and nearly \$1 billion in cash settlement to be distributed amongst them, (Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes).

The implementation of the distribution of these funds would change Alaskan Native's identities forever, for it would require Alaska Natives of $\frac{1}{4}$ or more blood quantum to enroll in these regional and village corporations as "shareholders" in order to access these funds and later financial benefits derived from them. Furthermore, "the lands, assets and businesses are owned by the shareholders of the Native corporations," not by tribal members, or tribes themselves (Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes). Land preservation is of paramount interest for Alaska Natives for it preserves the possibility to continue traditional subsistence practices, art forms, and a spiritual holistic connection to place, which are all intricately connected to their traditions and cultures. These reasons made it imperative to enroll in the corporations in order to maintain some sort of control over their lands. For the Alaska Natives who enrolled, the title of "corporate shareholder" is now included in their identities as an indigenous person. For those who didn't, they relinquished the opportunity of participating in deciding how their ancestral lands will be preserved or developed. This opportunity subsequently was lost to their children as well due to a provision of the act granting that only Alaska Natives born after 1971 could only inherit shares. One exception to this were groups who had

been allotted reservation land in 1906 and chose to preserve their title to that land rather than follow the provisions of ANCSA, (Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes).

The issues arising from this act for Alaska Natives are extensive, and affect every aspect of an Alaskan Natives life, including how they might identify themselves as an Alaskan Native. I myself have experienced the pervasiveness of the Alaska Natives Corporations (ANCs), in my own life, and in my own struggle to define my identity. The purpose of this paper is to expose the identity issues for Alaskan Natives that emerge from the complex disarray that is the ANCSA and the ANCs, and to offer an alternative way of thinking about these issues in order to promote a greater inclusion of Alaska Native descendants in the struggle for decolonization and land preservation.

Issues of the ANCs: Capitalism, Culture and Identity

I personally belong to two corporations, Sealaska (regional) and Shee Atiká (Urban/local), as a “shareholder.” For these and all ANCs stock cannot be bought, sold, or publicly traded. They must be passed down to descendants through inheritance so that it remains in the ownership of Alaska Natives, (Sealaska.com, Sheeatika.com). This stipulation implies that; all Sealaska & Shee Atiká shares are owned by descendants of Alaska Natives, who have ancestral connections to land and culture in Alaska, regardless of blood quantum. One of the main fears of Alaska Natives living in Alaska on land owned by the corporations is the prospect of land sale and/or development for economic interests. Paul Ongtooguk illuminates this fear stating, “It is deeply troublesome, for example, that despite the hard-fought

battle for land ownership of some of our lands, over 700,000 acres of original ANCSA land have been sold by Native corporations. A decision to sell cultural lands by the present generation of shareholders deprives all future generations of this sacred legacy.” (2012). This fact suggests the economic interests of shareholders have begun to trump the cultural interests of tribal members living in Alaska.

A cultural/land-based connection is not always sought after by shareholders, or is unavailable to them if they have been dispossessed from their ancestral lands. This can produce Alaska Native descendants who maintain that aspect of their identity solely through the political-economic classification of “Alaska Native” that comes with being a shareholder, rather than through any sort of cultural/social connection to the tribes from whom they inherited that status. This political/legal compartmentalization of Alaskan Native identity results in the production of what Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel would refer to as an, ‘incidentally Indigenous’ person,

“there are many... ‘Native Americans’ who identify themselves solely by their political-legal relationship to the state rather than by any cultural or social ties to their Indigenous community or culture or homeland. This continuing colonial process pulls Indigenous peoples away from cultural practices and community aspects of ‘being Indigenous’ towards a political-legal construction as... ‘Native American’, [which is] representative of what we refer to as being ‘incidentally Indigenous’. (Government and Opposition, 2005).

Obviously the production of a person who is 'incidentally' Alaskan Native and who maintains no cultural or social connection to their tribe, but maintains the political-economic connection as a corporate shareholder, is problematic. The removal of Alaskan Natives from their homelands further complicates this problem because they have less invested in the preservation of ancestral lands and less opportunities to cultivate such cultural/social connections; positioning them to be more likely to support corporate endeavors that might result in their own economic gain regardless of the interests of their tribes or of land preservation. Another complication of this issue arises from the fact that you do not need to be tribally enrolled in order to own shares in an ANC. This can occur for many different reasons, all of which disrupt and distract from a greater possibility of cultural and social connectivity for Alaska Native shareholders.

Romanticized images of Indigenous peoples in their "traditional" or "pristine" state, coupled with the implementation of blood quantum requirements via legislative acts and social pressure has resulted in further cultural disconnection of Alaska Native tribal members/shareholders. The presence of blood quantum requirements and absence of any cultural knowledge requirements (besides the requirement to provide a family tree), in most tribal enrollment applications is evidence of the internalization of race-based ideologies within Native communities. Melissa Meyer examines this issue in her paper, *American Indian Blood Quantum Requirements: Blood Is Thicker than Family*,

"The Indians who populate the American popular imagination bear absolutely no relationship to real native people either in the past or in the

present. The imagery allows Americans and people over the world to sustain highly romanticized notions of Indianness. It encourages people with little or no cultural affiliation to claim Indian identity.” (Over the Edge, 1999).

Meyer makes a valid point, one that has plagued Indigenous communities since land was first allotted to Native Americans. Suddenly white people had something to gain by claiming to be Indigenous, causing communities to implement blood quantum requirements and creating a perceived necessity of nostalgic “authenticity”. Her point does not address the complexities arising from being an ANC shareholder, however, whose shareholder status gives them the political/legal “Alaska Native” identity whether they choose it or not.

For someone who is an ANC shareholder but not tribally enrolled, these notions of authenticity and romanticized images of Native Americans could deter a person from culturally connecting to their tribe because both white culture and Alaska Natives themselves deny that this person is a “real Indian”. It is my opinion that the romanticized, *racialized*, images of Native Americans and “Indianness”, have the potential to distract and dissuade ANC shareholders from wanting to cultivate cultural connections because they might not ever be able to fit in with that romanticized notion. These notions, coupled with fear of greed derived from the existence of economic benefits associated with tribal membership, also distract the tribes from decolonization and the potential of greater cultural continuity. These distractions are realized through western-derived ideologies of race in the form of such restrictions as blood quantum.

Being Traditional? The Unauthentic Nature of Blood Quantum Requirements

Prior to European contact, the Indigenous population of Alaska had enjoyed political and geographical autonomy and self-determination as sovereign Nations since time immemorial. An aspect of tribal sovereignty, which tribes maintain as an imperative exercise of tribal governance and self-determination today, is the political and cultural authority to determine membership within the tribe, (TallBear, 2003). Tribes today claim exclusive authority over tribal enrollment and determining membership but the presence of blood quantum requirements present in most enrollment applications suggests the influence of Western ideology and colonialism in determining such requirements.

It is also important to note that before European settlement, the very idea of 'race,' was as foreign to the indigenous population of North America as the Europeans themselves. This shouldn't be confused with common misconceptions of totally egalitarian Native governments. Alaska Natives, especially those living on the upper Northwest coast, had complex hierarchies and notions of social inequality. For my Tribe, Tlingit, membership was clan based and matrilineally inherited with two separate moieties, the Raven and the Eagle, (sometimes referred to as Crow or Wolf), as identity markers to facilitate exogamy practices. The second level of membership organization was the house level, which could refer to the physical house you were living in, (usually the winter village homes), or if the house grew too large and other houses were built you could live in a different house but still claim membership/affiliation to the primary house. Sometimes you could move into a different house, perhaps through marriage, and that would become part of your

identity, or you could move into a different house and maintain the identity affiliation of your primary house. It was very kinship-related but notions of kinship were not always so concrete. It was never just one person raising a child and so a child could have many mothers or aunts or grandparents who were not always biologically related, but each person contributed to the education of the child and the child gained a cultural knowledge through them that would cement their identity and membership in the tribe through their ability to participate in cultural activities (Dauenhauer, 1990). This is just barley touching the surface of the complex system Tlingit peoples traditionally used to determine “membership” and “identity”, which of course are English words, not Tlingit, and have colonial implications. The concepts that were not determining factors in Tlingit, and all other Alaska Native tribal social organization were; the color of ones skin, or the quantification of one’s blood.

The Single Story of Native Americans: Coming to Terms With My White Genes

In the United States identity is extremely racialized, yet claims of unparalleled diversity and a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds and affiliations are not uncommon. It has struck me that heritage plays a large role in United States society. The question, “What are you?”, is, in my experience, incredibly frequent and generally perceived as an acceptable question to ask a person. I am often the recipient of this question, and it has occurred to me that the reasons behind it have contributed largely to my anxieties when proclaiming my Tlingit heritage. My genes have chosen to phenotypically express themselves in the form of dirty blonde hair,

green eyes, and light-coppery skin tone. Whatever the reason behind that question, there is very rarely an interest in what makes me who I am as a person *culturally*. Why do I think the way I think? How has the knowledge of my ancestry contributed to my identity formation today? These, I know, are not the questions one seeks to find the answers to when asking, "What [ethnicity] are you?"

Being someone who is racially perceived as white, but culturally/legally maintains connections to my Tlingit ancestors, I am never genuinely accepted as telling the truth when I give my answer. When I am the recipient of this question I will always respond, "German and Tlingit". I never realized until recently how much I felt I needed to explain the second part of what I will call my, "ethnic-identity". More often than not I would precede that statement with, "I know I don't look it, but...", or "I may have blonde hair and green eyes, but...". It wasn't because I questioned this part of my identity at all, I responded this way through the learned experience of being doubted. I knew that the moment I responded with any answer other than something the speaker perceived as white, I would receive refute. In some cases people even laughed at me, as if my Tlingit family was some sort of imaginary lie that could not possibly be the truth because well, look at me, I am white.

My most memorable experience of being denied validation of my Tlingit heritage was in high school during one of my school soccer games. My Grandpa Frank and Uncle Larry came to support me, and during half time while I was all huddled up with my teammates and friends they asked one of the girls to take a photo of them with me. I can't remember the body language of the other girls but I

am sure there was some apprehension and confusion among the group. It was so natural for me to embrace my grandpa and uncle; family has a way of making you feel comfortable like that. We posed, smiled, the picture was taken, words of encouragement were given to me and my Grandpa and Uncle returned back to the spectators area with my other family.

My Grandpa and Uncle are out of hearing distance and one girl blurts, “Who *are* those people?”, as if the possibility of me taking pictures with some random passer-byers during a soccer game was more likely than for them to be somehow connected to me. I explained they were my family. The refute, “When you said you were native, I thought you were joking!”. I don’t know why those words hurt me so deeply but I am glad they were said because in that moment I was made aware of the oppressive and harmful efforts of hegemonic white culture’s notions of “authenticity”. This seems to be a pretty conceivable situation right? Taking pictures with family members? Only it never occurred to the other girls that I could have possibly been related to them at all. Two opposites of the racial spectrum, my grandpa and uncle with red-brown skin, long dark hair, dark eyes, and then me with blonde hair, light skin, and green eyes. This is a hard affiliation for white culture to rationalize as being as intimately connected as family. The girls I played soccer with, like most people in America, held romanticized images of what a “Native American” was supposed to look like. These images have been consistently perpetuated in the media, in retellings of the history of the US, in movies like *The Lone Ranger*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*.

These images, stories, historical maladies, and often downright lies, have contributed to what Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie would refer to as the “single-story” of Native Americans. Adichie argues in a TedTalk addressing “the danger of a single story”, that Western literature creates singular stories of non-Western (non-white), groups of peoples through power relations in which the Western author assumes the agency of a group/groups of people and, “[the] power not just to tell the story of a person but to make it the definitive story of that person,” (Adichie 2009), or in this case group/groups of people. Indigenous people in the United States are no stranger to this argument and we are in a constant battle against the misinterpretations and representations of our nation’s peoples by non-indigenous scholars/anthropologists/archaeologists. We are in a constant battle with the academy to reclaim the agency to represent ourselves. Adichie’s argument is somewhat lacking in that she fails to address the role of colonialism in the creation of a “single story” of a culture and community. I think she intentionally does this because she does not want to perpetuate the single story of Western colonization of the African states: Nigeria is not only its colonial history. In the United States we cannot deny colonialism’s role because in order for us to make sense of *why* a single story about a whole nation and culture can be accepted as truth, we have to face the reality of the role and power colonialism still has today.

Adichie’s realization of western hegemonic representations of what Edward Said has famously referred to as “the other” comes from a privileged position (she grew up on a college campus, mother was an administrator, father was a professor) in which she finds herself accepting single stories of non-african/non-Nigerian

“others” such as with Native Americans. Positions of privilege are not the norm in indigenous communities yet romanticized and racialized notions of the ‘Native American’ are constantly perpetuated in the mainstream and within indigenous communities themselves. The white culture “single-stories” of non-white others are so powerful they manifest within populations of privilege and poverty alike. The situation of “being indigenous” needs to resist the manufacturing of a Native American “single-story” especially, because it is politically and economically charged; our recognition as *Indigenous people* remains in the control of the very government structure and institutions that produce the single story of ‘The Native American’. We must struggle against the ignorant perceptions of white culture while our very political existence and autonomous nature is being threatened because of those perceptions.

The recognition of Indigenous nations on behalf of the United States as separate, quasi-sovereign political entities is integral to our existence as indigenous peoples today. Centuries of colonization, resistance, mobilizing, struggle, assimilation, reorganization, and self-determination have situated Indigenous peoples within our current context of separate but not fully independent nations within a nation. For Alaska Natives the situation is complicated even further with ANSCA, and the formation of corporations. The corporations do not replace tribal governments but exist rather as a component of tribal identity; both as wardens of the land, and by somewhat replacing the federal government’s role in its fiduciary responsibility by providing monetary support to Alaska Native shareholders. There is no corporate shareholder in the single-story of the ‘Native American’.

I won't deny my privilege as being ethnically identified as white. I would even admit that until I received the opportunity to take "diversity" courses such as American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington, I was tragically unaware of the privileges I enjoyed from being ethnically perceived as white, and even the privileges I have received from being politically/legally categorized as "Alaska Native". Fortunately my days of blind ignorance are over, and in all honesty I think my Tlingit heritage has denied hegemonic structures of white privilege from ever fully subsuming my consciousness.

I try not to blame myself for being so unaware. Growing up in an urban area, (Portland), going to a city-sponsored public institution, (Cleveland High School), without the opportunity to connect physically to my Tlingit community, (I have yet to go to Alaska), and with constant social pressure to "be normal", to "fit in", or in other words, "be white". The story of my heritage and my culture was being told for me. This story was not the product of my Tlingit and German ancestry. There was no Uncle Larry, my *Lingít tlein*, no Raven Clan nor the migration of my Great-Great grandparents to the United States from Germany. This story was a colonial effort to homogenize my experience and my self. It was a colonial effort, supported by the masses and their acceptance of the colonizers truths, seeking to disconnect me from my heritage, my people, my place.

That is not my story. I refuse to be confined to social constructions of racial identity. I will reconnect with my ancestors and my heritage. I will decolonize my family, starting with myself, and I will put forth the effort so that others might benefit from a world where ethnicity is a byproduct of culture and relations, not the

other way around. I will redefine this story but in order to do so, I have to recognize all contributing factors.

Race Fractions=Cultural Distractions, Moving Toward Inclusion

Confronting the Native American single story calls for addressing the racial binaries and contemporary racial discourses that exist for Native Americans. The past centuries of colonialism in the United States has resulted in intermarriage and indigenous-settler relations, and subsequently those relations had often produced children. As time progresses and native bloodlines become more diluted physical traits become more integrated. Often these children of mixed cultural heritage retain less of the traits of their native ancestors but retain their culture. These children make up a large amount of the people who identify as Native American today.

The single story of Native Americans comes with an added level of conflict; economic benefits derived from the fiduciary federal responsibility of the United States as a form of retribution for the theft of Native lands and the relentless assault on our populations and culture. Unfortunately, the story behind these benefits have been communicated to the public absent of their colonial context and in the form of words like , 'special status', or, 'Indian greed', or even the word 'benefits' is problematic and conveys some sort of economic advantage of "being native". Suddenly being 'native' is a desired quality, one in which people are willing to take advantage of in order to receive said benefits.

More importantly, what is failed to be communicated about Native Americans is *why*; why we still resist white culture, why we still resist assimilation, why we enter into any agreement whatsoever with the United States and accept monetary retribution or reservation lands via treaty processes or accept the formation of corporations to hold title to our indigenous lands. The reasons are simple, and yet somehow inexplicably complex to non-native outsiders; they are to preserve culture and land, and ensure the health of both for the future generations. It is not to preserve the phenotypes unique to our communities through blood quantum requirements.

Despite lacking some key theoretical concepts that are necessary to unravel the complexities of the 'Native American' situation, Adichie's TedTalk addresses some key issues and complicates homogenized ideologies of cultural/racial/geographical boundaries. I can see now, viewing her video again through a critical lens, that she is lacking these concepts. But to be honest the first time I saw the video I felt quite differently about it. I felt validated and recognized and I thought, "This is a video about me!" I do not fit the romanticized image of the Native American, I do not fit within the single story perpetuated in our media and in our schools.

I found myself wanting to dye my hair, go tanning, or perform other aesthetic alterations, in order to conform to these images. I felt this way for a long time, until I realized that having darker features was not going to magically make me a Tlingit woman. Perhaps identifying myself as Tlingit to outsiders would be more accepted if I had those features, but if I were to go to Alaska and present myself to a village

council without any knowledge of Tlingit culture, customs, traditions or world views, and say, “look at me, I am Tlingit,” they would not care what I looked like. I realize now that if I am going to profess my Tlingit heritage to the world as a key component of my identity then I have a responsibility to myself and to other Tlingit people to remember my elders and the people who have contributed this component. I have a responsibility to know Tlingit culture, to know the intricacies of the connectedness to land and place that birthed the complexities and richness of Tlingit social structures, artwork, and performance. I have a responsibility to understand my position as a corporate shareholder, and as a human being with real connections to people and place, and to know the colonial context of my position.

For others in my position, will they feel the same way? Will they choose to educate themselves about the historical and cultural meaning of the shares they own? Will they feel deterred upon learning that being a shareholder is not synonymous with being tribally enrolled and that many Natives will only validate them as a fellow native if they acquire tribal enrollment? (TallBear, 2009). If you are allowed to be a corporate shareholder, but do not have tribal enrollment, what does this mean for how you might identify yourself? For example, I was not tribally enrolled, but from a very young age I have memories of the “American Indian/Alaskan Native” bubble being filled in for me when I took state tests. Before I was ever conscious of the difference between being a shareholder and being tribally enrolled, the state was making this political-legal classification of my identity for me. Again, when I applied to college, I followed the lead of the Oregon State test proprietors and checked the “American Indian/Alaskan Native” box during the

application process. The colleges later contacted me, asking me to provide “proof of tribal affiliation”, to which I produced documentation of my status as an ANC shareholder, which they accepted as sufficient evidence of my affiliation.

It was not until college that I became aware that there was a difference between owning shares in a Native corporation and being enrolled in your tribe. I *was* one of those ‘incidentally Indigenous’ Alaska Natives, and worse yet, I didn’t even *look* like an Alaskan Native. The aspect of my identity, which had been communicated to me through the state and through educational institutions I attended, and which I had ferociously fought to prove to disbelievers because of the way I looked, had distracted me from the real cultural and social connections I sought from acknowledging my Tlingit heritage. And yet there was one thing that would always connect me to that heritage, that would remind me that I hadn’t been telling myself a lie my whole life, and that would lend me unfaltering support when I felt discouraged attempting to reconnect to my Tlingit heritage and maintain it as part of my identity: Family.

My Identity as a Tlingit/German Woman

My identity is the product of my own past experiences, those of my ancestors who came before me, of those who came before them, and of our collective geographical and social relations. I have always felt my Tlingit heritage as part of my identity. It was important to my mother, and to my family, to constantly remind me of this heritage and maintain awareness and respect for the elders of our family. I have also always felt my German heritage as part of my identity. Recognizing one

without the other would leave me un-whole. Perhaps it is because Germany is so far away from me that I have been drawn to Alaska, and to the ancestors who tie me to it. Perhaps it is an awareness of my position of privilege, as well as the social constructions that seek to strap me down and tell me, "No! You're white! You can't be both Tlingit and white!" Or perhaps it is just as simple as my existence; I have Tlingit heritage, and it has shaped my life and my path in life in every way.

The struggle, and beauty, of our generation, is to recognize these colonial forces, both historically and present-day, to talk about them, to voice them, to deny their hegemonic nature, and to learn about ourselves and the roles we play, or can play, in this world. My Great-Grandmother, Sequan Nelson (her Christian name was Flora Katherine) daughter of Jimmy Nelson and Annie Nakodojish, grew up on the Island of Killisnoo, Alaska. She was a child of 13, one of 3 children to make it to adulthood. Our family's affiliation is to the Deshuhittan clan, passed down to us through her. Sequan had eight children, two from my great-grandfather Norman Eakin; my Uncle Larry, and Grandpa Frank. She had already passed away by the time I was born but I have stories I know her by. My mother told me she would speak in Tlingit to her, and always had a special gift for each grandchild when she saw them. My Grandmother Shuryl, told me stories of her experiences eating seaweed straight from the ocean or drinking blood in ceremony after the fresh kill of an animal.

My Grandpa Frank moved to Oklahoma many years ago and so his presence in my life has been reduced by geographical distance, but I cherish the memories I have with him. My Uncle Larry, has been more present in my life. We love him dearly, even though his jokes are often inappropriate. My Uncle has been a great

source of my connection to my Tlingit heritage because he loves to talk. The journey of learning about my heritage has led me to understanding just how deeply colonialism has impacted my family. Some things are okay to talk about, like food, and jewelry. My Uncle has no problem talking, he just doesn't want to talk about the painful experiences of his lifetime, and that's okay. Understanding and recognizing the colonial processes that have produced my family's situation today is necessary if I am to be able to understand the complexities of my own identity.

Grandpa and Uncle grew up with 6 siblings who had a different father. Norman Eakin, my great-grandfather, would separate the older children from my Uncle and Grandpa, which must have hurt my great-grandmother deeply. One of the oldest children, Abe, became sick with tuberculosis and Norman kept him away from everyone else in the basement where he eventually died of the disease. When you hear stories like that, it makes it easier to understand why someone would drink. My great-grandmother was a beautiful woman but the circumstances in her life sometimes made it too hard to be sober. When my mother was only about 3 years old my great-grandmother, her grandmother, had to undergo major surgery. As she was lying in the hospital she made a vow that if she could just live to see her grandchildren grow up she would stop drinking. A gust of wind suddenly blew open the window of her hospital room and my great-grandmother took that as a spiritual sign. Sequan never had another drink.

Disconnection to the land is another important mechanism of colonialism. My Tlingit family was moved to Oregon, where most remain today, and the implications of an Alaskan Native being separated from Alaska are not something I will explore

deeply in this paper but something that should definitely be recognized as having an impact on the cultural continuity of Tlingit knowledges and traditions. Further separating my Mother and Aunties from their Tlingit heritage was the absence of my grandfather and Uncle for the better part of their childhoods and young adult lives. Fortunately they had my great-grandmother to keep them aware of their heritage during those years. She lived until my Mother was 19.

My mother was 9 years old at the time of the passage of ANCSA and it was my grandmother and great-grandmother who chose to enroll my mother and aunties and fill out the forms for their 100 shares of Sealaska and Shee Atika corporations. It was not a conscious choice of my mother to reconnect to her tribe via ANCSA, rather it was a choice made for her, one that I am grateful for because she in turn has made that choice for me. I know that my great-grandmother wanted to stay alive so that she might have a positive impact in the lives of my mother and aunties and maintain their cultural connection to their Tlingit heritage and to Alaska and in turn they would pass this on to their children.

I include this story to convey the various colonial factors that have contributed to my existence, but also to suggest that there are other, more important contributing factors like family, and love. The last two are the factors that drive me to learn about my Tlingit heritage and culture. My familial connection *has been* my cultural connection to the Tlingit people, because I was not provided with the opportunities to create them otherwise and colonialism prevented the traditional knowledges of our family to be passed down, as they should have been.

Bringing It All Together: Becoming a Culturally Conscious Shareholder

My ancestors knew that they would do whatever it took to preserve their culture, subsistence practices, language, and ways of knowing, and to pass these down to their children so that their children might do the same. They knew that every element of Tlingit culture and traditional knowledges; every song, each formline, each basket design; they all came from the land, and the survival of these knowledges was dependent on the survival of the land and their connection to it. They could not have predicted the complex mess that is the ANCs and ANCSA, and undoubtedly if they could have they would have been ferociously in opposition because the corporation has no connection to the land, the people do.

My ancestors were successful in their transference of ideologies of resistance and preservation. Most Tlingit peoples today maintain that land is central to their existence as Tlingit peoples and live knowing they would do anything to preserve their land and culture for future generations. Ongtooguk reaffirms this, "Our rich cultural heritages are anchored in the lands and waters that sustained us economically, socially and spiritually." (2012). It is crucial to the continuity of Alaska Native cultures and way of life to reconnect shareholders to cultural knowledges and worldviews so that they might better understand this land-based connection. I believe that if shareholders were more culturally connected and aware that they would either use their role as shareholders to make culturally informed decisions, such as advocating for the return of Native land to the ownership of tribal governments from the corporations; if they did not feel able to fulfill the responsibilities of being culturally connected and remaining accountable to their

tribes, it is my hope that a better informed shareholder would step down from that role and pass those shares on.

Conclusion: Suggestions for Reconnecting and Creating Accountability

Learning about my Tlingit heritage and culture has made me feel an immense accountability as a shareholder. If it were within my power I would facilitate the return of Native lands back into the ownership of the Alaska Tribal governments today. Unfortunately I do not have that power. I do have the power to attempt to expose these identity issues that come with being a shareholder, and with being an Alaska Native who has been dispossessed from the land and culture of my ancestors. I cannot believe that I am alone in these feelings and identity struggles. I have to believe that given the opportunity, others in my situation would choose to honor their ancestors.

If more ANC shareholders understood the historical context behind their dividend checks, or scholarships given from the corporations it is my opinion that denying their accountability to their tribes would be extremely difficult. Knowing what the past generations gave up in order for us to have these corporations, dividend checks, scholarships I cannot live without respecting that knowledge, and respecting the needs and wishes of the communities still living on Indigenous land in Alaska. The decision to comply with the terms of ANCSA was made because it was the only option left, the only compromise that promised the opportunity of time. Time to revitalize and re-educate our youth. Time to restore confidence in our people's hearts and in our relationships with the land. Time to understand the capitalist system so that we might beat them at their own game and maybe teach

them a thing or two along the way. Time to resist the colonial powers that promised erasure of our cultures and peoples, and maintain our connections with our land, because even though the corporations hold title, we still have that land. It has been 43 years and the corporations have not ceased to exist, nor have they relinquished control over the lands. What can we do with the next 43 years?

Sealaska Corporation, the largest of the 13 regional corporations, to which I own shares, has used its economic power towards cultural revitalization efforts through the creation of Sealaska Heritage Institute. Sealaska heritage institute offers programs in arts, language and culture, education, and cultural advocacy, (Sealaska Heritage Institute). This is really a great institute and step in the right direction for the corporations to actually serve the tribes they represent in meaningful ways. I have tried to look in to these programs for myself, but unfortunately they are all located in Alaska, which is not the easiest or cheapest place to travel if you live in the lower 48. For the diasporic communities separated from their villages it would be ideal to offer scholarships or grant funding to travel to Alaska for these programs or better yet funding to spend time in the villages.

Another thing that Sealaska does, which I am sure is not unique to them, is to send out newsletters. I have read these newsletters and they are often filled with extremely boring statistical information regarding the fiscal situation of the corporation or small biographies about new people they have hired on. These newsletters should be more inclusive of cultural information and events, this information should be cleared with the tribes as okay to share in that format before sending it out. Including culturally relevant information in corporate newsletters

will not only inform shareholders who live outside of Alaska about community projects, but will also help redefine how people conceive the corporations; they will not just be an institution of economic profit.

In order to address the enrollment issues, I don't think that every single shareholder should be given enrollment status in a tribe automatically. However, I do believe that a $\frac{1}{4}$ blood quantum requirement is limiting and conveys the wrong message to shareholders about what it means to have membership in a tribe. The blood quantum requirement should be repealed and instead there should be other provisions which would require someone interested in enrolling in a tribe to provide evidence of their *cultural* connection to the tribe, and a personal statement stating their reasons and stakes for wanting to enroll and how they plan on contributing to the cultural continuity of the tribe in the future. For Alaska Natives, with political issues and conflicts with the state, the numbers are not on our side. Increasing the population of enrolled members in a way that promotes accountability will also increase the likelihood of shareholder support. Perhaps Alaska Native villagers/shareholders should reach out to family members outside of Alaska to make connections with other shareholders in order to create a greater awareness of events that have cultural relevance. The Alaska Native diaspora must be included in the relations of Alaska Native peoples because of the stakes a shareholder has.

It might be an unrealistic goal to expect the corporations/shareholders to give the land back to the Tribal governments anytime in the near future, but that does not mean that we should not expect that their stewardship of the land is

aligned with the cultural continuity and land preservation goals of Alaska Natives who live in Alaska. This alignment could be realized by refocusing economic efforts towards sustainability projects and renewable energies. Both of these areas have great potential and investing in them is essential not only for the continuity of Alaska Native lands, but for our Earth.

These are just a few very basic suggestions that need further developing, but for the purpose of this essay I wanted to present these examples in order to show that there are options. We can imagine a world in which the shareholders make decisions not based on achieving the greatest economic gain, but on achieving the greatest cultural gain. Preserving the culture of Alaska Natives is intrinsically tied to the land, and it is going to take us all to make sure that the land is kept in Alaska Native's hands and away from greedy developers who only care for their own selfish economic gain. Together we can achieve these goals and create a better world for future generations, but only if we first realize that we are a part of each other. We must not forget that all we are is the relations we have. Lets build relations that promote decolonization within the ANCs and continue to cultivate a sacred sustainable relationship with our lands.

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