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### Book Review: *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics*

Edited by Maria *Shaa Tláa* Williams. Published by Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, paperback, 383 pages, USD \$25.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-4480-3

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For me, reading this volume is like coming home. As an Alutiiq/Sugpiaq (Alaska Native) researcher who recently relocated to Brisbane, Australia, it is a joy and an honor to review, *The Alaska Native reader: History, culture, politics*, edited by Maria *Shaa Tláa* Williams. This volume stands as a celebration of Alaska Native scholarship in its historical, linguistic, political, artistic, spiritual, scientific, and even culinary forms (see p. 360 for Daisy Demientieff's Best-Ever Moose Stew Recipe)! It is a treasure because it seeks to impact readers in a felt way – appealing to all of the places where knowledge lives including the mind, heart, belly, and soul. Each chapter prompted a different response ranging from pure joy to deep sadness, from rage to pride, from a sense of solidarity with other Alaska Natives to appreciation for my own particular culture, and from curiosity about what others are working toward to awe at what already has been achieved.

For those unfamiliar with Alaska Native peoples and cultures, *The Alaska Native Reader* offers an introduction to the geographies we inhabit and the stories we tell; to significant historical moments and contemporary 'sites of struggle' (Mead 1996); to longstanding cosmological and epistemological traditions and diverse forms of artistic expression. Yet, the *Reader* also serves an important role for Alaska Native readers in that it marks out how history has impacted who we are today and the various opportunities we have to live our cultures in dynamic ways. Through this volume, the editor and contributing authors do not say 'here is what you need to know about Alaska Natives' so much as they invite readers to encounter Alaska Native peoples at a range of times and places to pique curiosity and encourage even deeper engagement. They take us on a provocative journey through time and place, with section headings including:

- I. Portraits of Nations: Telling Our Story;
- II. Empire: Processing Colonization;
- III. Worldviews: Alaska Native and Indigenous Epistemologies;
- IV. Native Arts: A Weaving of Melody and Color; and
- V. Ravenstales.

This last section invokes the image of Raven, who serves as both Creator and Trickster for many Alaska Native peoples, and includes a range of contributions that the editor explains did not seem to fit well under the other four section headings – or "everything that Raven would approve of—humor, food, poetry, and real-life stories" (p. 338). On the surface, the volume appears to be ordered from pre-contact, through colonization and land claims negotiations, and into the knowledges and forms of expression that spur Alaska Native cultural renewal and revitalization. However, the cross-cutting themes related to remembrance and innovation highlight the idea that the truth about Alaska Native peoples lies both in where we come from and in who we are becoming.

Of all the chapters, Harold Napoleon's essay, "Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being" is the one that I return to over and over again as a powerful example of how remembrance is central to our regeneration as Alaska Natives.

Napoleon offers a sober and harrowing account of the intergenerational impact of colonization on our bodies, minds, spirits, and relationships; but also reminds us of the power we have as humans to take responsibility and begin to heal ourselves and our world. Napoleon describes the devastation that the 1900 influenza epidemic (originating in Nome) had in bringing about what is known to many Yup'ik people as The Great Death – wherein 60 percent of Yup'ik and Athabaskan peoples were killed in a very short period of time. He explains that when so many people die so quickly, cultures shift over night and surviving generations bear the scars:

Whether the survivors knew or understood, they had witnessed the fatal wounding of *Yuuyaraq* and the old Yup'ik culture. Compared to the span of life of a culture, the Great Death was instantaneous. . . . Out of the suffering, confusion, desperation, heartbreak, and trauma was born a new generation of Yup'ik people. They were born into shock. They woke to a world in shambles, many of their people and their beliefs strewn around them, dead. . . . These were the men and women orphaned by the sudden and traumatic death of the culture that had given them birth. (p. 129)

Napoleon goes on to describe the impacts of what has come to be described as post-traumatic stress manifesting in “self-destructive, violent, frustrated, and angry” (p. 137) behavior, even while the physical and material status of many Alaska Natives has increased over time. He argues that our crisis is spiritual in nature and that healing must come through “truthful dialogue from the heart” (p. 142) about the pain we have experienced and created, about our grief, about our loneliness, and about the hope we can find in one another.

In this way, Napoleon reminds us that our strength and ability to heal lies within us. And each chapter of *The Alaska Native Reader* provides a voice, set of ideas, perspective, or story that helps us to remember our cultural values and ways of being in planning for the future. Yet, these remembrances do not exist only in rural or past places. Consider that two chapters – James Fall’s “*Dena’ina Elnena*: Dena’ina Country: The Dena’ina in Anchorage, Alaska” and Stephen Langdon & Aaron Leggett’s “Dena’ina Heritage and Representation in Anchorage: A Collaboration Project” – describe the stories and memory held in Alaska’s largest urban area of Anchorage. The authors draw our attention to the ways that the Dena’ina people and culture have been invisible to those who now call this region home. Both chapters specifically note the fact that, until 2005, the one clear reference to the first peoples of the region was on a small sign in downtown Anchorage – underneath a large photo of Captain Cook – where “Tanaina Indians” were described as having been in the region for “no more than a few generations” until 1839 when “nearly half of the population of the native peoples living around Cook Inlet was killed in a terrible smallpox epidemic” (see p. 166, for example). However, through the cultural renewal efforts of the local Dena’ina peoples and other partners, several public displays have been developed around Anchorage to celebrate Dena’ina historic and contemporary culture – including the opening of the stunning Dena’ina Civic and Convention Center in 2008.

As discussed by the authors here, these advancements grew out of efforts to explore local histories and acknowledge the life ways of first peoples. And, as Indigenous scholar, Sandy Grande (2006) has argued in her discussion of the striking similarities between the images of the Trail of Tears and those of the masses of victims of Hurricane Katrina making the long walk to the Superdome, such efforts to acknowledge the displacement of our nation’s first peoples are an essential step toward addressing the challenges we face today. Larry McNeil echoes this sentiment in his chapter, “fly by night mythology: An Indigenous Guide to White Man, or How to Stay Sane When the World Makes No Sense”, when he draws a parallel between the terrorism of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the terrorism inflicted on Indigenous Americans since the time of early conflict (p. 280). Without such acknowledgement of the repeated cycles of devastation, we may be left to deal with the truth expressed in the oft-quoted words of American philosopher, George Santayana (1905), who said that, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p. 284).

The contributors to this volume are leading us in our efforts to renew our hopes and to remember to remember in seeing our ways forward. Young leaders like Evon Peter, Erica Lord, and Charlene *Khaih Zhuu* Stern, have contributed chapters sharing their perspectives on the various factors that impact Alaska Native development.

In “Undermining Our Tribal Governments: The Stripping of Land, Resources, and Rights from Alaska Native Nations”, Peter describes how four legislative moments represented in the Treaty of Cession (1867), the Alaska Statehood Act (1958), the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (1971), and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975) have positioned tribes and their peoples, limiting the extent to which Alaska Natives can steward our cultures and communities. He calls for the development of a “process of healing from colonization, reorganizing our institutions and political systems, and preparing ourselves for the future that we shall regain balance in our societies and with all our relations” (p. 183). In “America’s Wretched”, Lord takes issue with the often too narrow and simplistic media images of Alaska Natives and American Indians, noting that the expression of Indigenous identity is often much more nuanced and complex than has been portrayed by non-Indigenous, mainstream media. Both authors raise concerns about how Indigenous peoples have been othered – framed as separate from Whites and less than human by policy and pop culture. And, like Peter, Lord locates the solution in Indigenous peoples’ efforts to, “become part of the growing wave of voices, redefining our selves, our communities, and our beliefs” (p. 317). Also, in “Redefining Our Planning Traditions: Caribou Fences, Community, and the *Neetsaii* Experience”, Stern details the intricate coordination and planning that had to happen to corral caribou into fences as part of the hunting season and seeks to remind us of “our planning capacity” and ability to manage complexity (p. 47). In this way, the perspectives of these young leaders echo the earlier message of Harold Napoleon that we have the power to transform our realities through truth-telling, open dialogue, and the healing of our relationships.

Additionally, the chapters by G. Charles, W. Charles, Leonard, Furlow, Williams, Kawagley, Alessa, Kingston, McNeil, Cajete, and Engblom-Bradley feature the research of Alaska Native and Indigenous academic scholars. Their work seeks to document history and knowledges in an effort to foster more widespread consciousness about the factors that have shaped Alaska Native realities and to provide epistemological, linguistic, and political foundations that might inform community development initiatives. Kawagley’s, “A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit” is a seminal essay excerpted from a larger text that discusses the cosmogonic relationships across the natural, spiritual, and human realms that inform Yup’ik conceptions of success and responsibility. The chapters by G. Charles, W. Charles, and Leonard explain that in order to meaningfully and safely engage with epistemology and ontology, it is important to acknowledge how the relationships between people and places matter. Consider this quote from G. Charles’ chapter, “Cultural Identity through Yupiaq Narrative”:

*Yupiaq* ontology and epistemology as defined by the worldview of the *Ayaginar* family have their own theories and rhetorical categories and a self-evident philosophy of their own. These theories and rhetorical categories are best defined in their own linguistic and cultural contexts. To do otherwise would be to recreate the *Ayaginar* family in the image of the other. (p. 59)

So, not only does context matter, but so too does membership in families and communities. Leonard affirms this by highlighting the ways that her family and community relationships – as well as her experiences as a burgeoning Deg Xinan language speaker – add a richness to her own efforts in linguistic analysis, which stand in contrast to much of the published materials that do not take “underlying structures and [contextual] meanings” into account (p. 92). W. Charles’ chapter also describes how central Yup’ik language speakers are as insiders, or ‘organic intellectuals’ as Gramsci (1971) might say, in advancing efforts to teach Yup’iq in schools and university classrooms.

In this way, each of these groups of leaders reminds us that innovation and forward planning requires intimate knowledge of and relationships with our pasts. Chapters by Hensley (“Why the Natives of Alaska Have a Land Claim”), Banerjee (“Terra Incognita: Communities and Resource Wars”), and Williams (“A Brief History of Native Solidarity”) note how any development efforts must emerge from a clear sense of the genealogy of land claims and our relationships both to place and in places. While the chapters by Alessa and Eaton provide insights about how our cultures offer deep knowledge about the complex relationships that make up our world. In “What is Truth? Where Western Science and Traditional Knowledge Converge”, Alessa extols the values of Traditional Ecological Knowledge to embrace complexity in the natural world in ways that Western science is only beginning to acknowledge, and she reminds scholars and community leaders to see Indigenous knowledges as a site of strength. Eaton’s, “Kodiak Masks: A Personal Odyssey” details his journey of learning about traditional Kodiak mask making and the questions that emerged upon viewing the Pinart collection in France – one of the largest known holdings of Kodiak masks. Eaton wonders why so many of the Pinart masks are too large and too flat “to be danced” as masks would have been in Kodiak (p. 286), as well as why there are “no teeth, no fangs, no claws, no ears” representing the ever-present Kodiak brown bear (p. 293).

He concludes that the Pinart masks may have been carved for a “trunk show” and may not have been traditional in the sense of having been made to be used by Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people of Kodiak Island (p. 292). Armed with these insights, Eaton is leading efforts to revive Kodiak Island mask making in a way that the masks can be danced and will represent the important relationships to nature and spirit. In other words, Eaton’s efforts to learn about the history of mask making have shaped his current efforts to innovate and lead cultural renewal.

This is all to say that, as editor, Maria *Shaa Tláa* Williams has done a masterful job of both capturing the beauty of Alaska Native cultures and showing us the way forward through our stories, knowledges, and relationships as people of such special and unique places. In fact, my only critique is that I wanted even more! At some moments I found myself hoping to encounter some chapters about Alaska Native sociopolitical issues, such as those related to demography, health and education policy, energy, and economic development. Though so much is written in other forums on these issues (e.g., newspapers, policy reports, grant applications), it is rare to encounter Alaska Native writing on these topics in this kind of volume. So it would have been refreshing to consider Alaska Native perspectives related to these topics that consume many of our daily lives in conversation with the other chapters that center culture and place. However, I acknowledge how significant the selections for the current volume are and that it may have been as difficult to decide what to leave out as it would have been to decide what to include.

In sum, *The Alaska Native Reader* stands as an intriguing survey of writing about Alaska Native peoples and our cultures. Each reader will likely see different themes across the chapters. But, for this Alaska Native, what is so powerful about this volume is its consistent message about hope and the hope-fulness about being Alaska Native today. Each of the five sections of *The Alaska Native Reader* conveys this message in a unique way, playing on readers’ sense of the historic and the contemporary by tracing the genealogical links across what was, what is, and what is yet to be. The twin themes of remembrance and innovation offer inspiration about the vitality of our cultures and the responsibilities we have in our region to cultivate values of relationship, reciprocity, and stewardship. It is my hope that Alaska Natives and Indigenous peoples from around the world would find something of their own stories in this volume and be encouraged about the work we might do together to hold up our cultures and places as having significant value for all of our future generations.

## References

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