

Subsistence is Greater Than Sustenance: Developing a Framework to Interpret the
Continued Colonization of Alaska Natives

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Madelyn Irene Poehlein has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics-Environmental Studies.

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Introduction

The Yupik people of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska are the “People of the walrus.”¹ They inhabit a small island in the middle of the Bering Sea where their lives have been “intertwined with the walrus since ‘time immemorial.’” Delbert Pungowiya, president of the Native Village of Savoonga, succinctly portrays the gravity of the effects of climate change and contamination on his people when he says, “The total loss of our identity is on the line.” When I visited Gambell and Savoonga, the two villages on St. Lawrence Island, the connection of the Yupik to the walrus, and also the bowhead whale,² was palpable. Walking around the villages, recently hunted bowhead whale skeletons measured up to my body at chest height, the last bits of meat left on the bone shriveling up in the sun. Entering people’s houses, the strong scent of ocean wafted from large freezers in what we might call a “mud room,” used for storing walrus to eat throughout the year. One family shared whale meat with me and the fatty, rich flavors took over my taste buds.

After the meal, the grandmother showed me an intricate doll she made, ivory face and hands extended from a thin seal skin garment. The delicate hands loosely grasped a long spear—the doll was a hunter. Hunters no longer use traditional weapons for various reasons, metal skiffs replace skin boats making it easier to travel increasingly long distances to find sea ice where the walrus can be hunted. More than

¹ The quotes used here come from a series about life on St. Lawrence Island in the Anchorage Daily News from summer 2017. This article is called, “For two Alaska villages, walrus remain essential. As sea ice disappears, can it last?”

² The Yupik people also eat bearded seals, the eggs of murre, and plants that they gather.

losing a source of sustenance, the potential loss of traditional subsistence foods is intimately tied to the decline of Yupik language and lifestyle. Yupik is only spoken on St. Lawrence Island and is still widely utilized as the main form of communication. Additionally, hunting traditions are depicted in many styles of Yupik art and dance. The Yupik language has around thirty words for different types of ice and snow but younger generations will not learn the words if these types of ice no longer form. Similarly, art and dance traditions will be difficult to teach if younger generations cannot watch hunting and food preparation activities.

Former military and naval bases on the St. Lawrence Island, put in place as part of the defense system set up during World War II, brought contamination from heavy metals, chemical used in building products, and oil used to generate power for the bases. Due to the expense of shipping it off the island, much of this contamination remains, along with an unprecedented spike in cancer rates among community members of both Savoonga and Gambler. When I visited the villages, the Agency for Toxic Substance Disease Registry (ATSDR) was reporting back to the community on a study they conducted trying to determine whether or not increased cancer and birth defect rates were connected to the leftover military contamination. After seven years in progress, the study concluded that the increased health problems were due to a 53% smoking rate among residents. Initially, I did not know how to respond. Talking extensively with the ATSDR scientists about both their work and their lives, I began to trust them. So why—if the individuals behind it had good intentions—did the study seem to purposefully exclude environmental harms from its results?

The organization I worked for over the summer of 2017, Alaska Community Action on Toxics,³ has proven that walrus, whale, and fish eaten as subsistence foods on the island are contaminated, along with the humans who eat them. With extensive experience working on environmental issues with Alaska Natives, my colleagues immediately questioned the study. How were they so sure? Only through the extensive research I have conducted throughout this thesis project have I been able to solidify my opinion. I argue that the study was not inconclusive due to the bad intentions of individuals, but due to a larger system that has internalized and made natural ongoing colonial practices. Ignoring Indigenous knowledge and failing to understand the importance of intact subsistence resources are underlying trends both central to the inconclusiveness of the study and prevalent throughout the history of settler colonialism.

The seeming dismissal of the Yupik subsistence way of life follows a greater trend. Environmental destruction from capitalism tends to lead to fewer resources for subsistence economies, and communities are forced to resort to whatever subsistence strategies are still viable (Nash 1994, 7). But, when I asked if they would stop eating their traditional subsistence foods due to contamination, many residents of Savoonga and Gambell said they would risk the health impacts to retain their lifestyle. This is but one in a series of contradictions I began to notice throughout my experience on St. Lawrence Island. What does it mean that Native people in remote Alaska are facing the

³ Visit the Alaska Community Action on Toxics website, www.akaction.org, to find out more information on the work the organization does with the people of St. Lawrence Island.

tangible, devastating effects of climate change before those who benefit from the development that caused the very warming and pollution? Second, what does it mean that the Yupik people are being told that the only explanation for their community's increased cancer rates is that they are smoking too much? Lastly, what does it mean that subsistence foods contain known contaminants but the people of St. Lawrence Island continue to eat them for cultural and spiritual reasons? In this thesis project I begin to decipher the greater trends that manifest in a disregard for the Yupik subsistence way of life in order to begin to theorize the contradictory reality I observed in Alaska.

Alaska is widely known as America's Last Frontier, or the "last unspoiled area on the North American continent" (*New York Times* 1973). Hearing about the state growing up on the West coast of the United States, I imagined the Alaskan frontier as a site of "breathtaking wilderness" and "extraordinary scenic beauty" (*New York Times*, 1973). I have now been there and can certainly verify that these statements are true, but thinking about Alaska as simply a vast, stunning, and empty frontier fails to acknowledge the complex history and expansionist assumptions behind this image. Degradation of the Arctic environment has particularly high stakes due to its fragile ecosystems and charismatic megafauna habitat. Even more pressing, allowing the natural beauty to mask the displacement and inhabitation of Indigenous people on these lands risks deeming colonialism in North American resolved.⁴

⁴ I borrowed this concept from Indigenous critical theorist, Jodi Byrd, who **asserts that the risk of leaving questions of sovereignty and land rights unanswered is the risk of deeming colonialism in North American resolved** (2011, xxxvi).

The stakes of my project are twofold; the consequences of continued colonization of Alaska Natives and their lands, and the general risk of allowing unquestioned colonial practices to proliferate and continue to enact violence on people globally. Moreover, in this thesis I argue that, despite images of purity and beauty, Alaska remains a site of Indigenous erasure and continued colonization today. This mirrors a greater contradiction within the United States. How can a nation founded on equality before the law simultaneously rely on the past and current genocide of Native peoples? The ideal of equality under the law is complicated by the settler state that attempts to draw Alaska Natives into its Western, capitalistic values, ultimately leading to the decline of their subsistence way of life. Indigenous identity ultimately becomes restructured through artificial attachments to “colonial myths,” wherein Indigenous peoples begin to strive towards Western values and inclusion into the settler state.

Attempting to process the contradictions that arose from my experience, I explore similarly contradictory stories that have shaped the relationship of Alaska Natives to the state of Alaska. My interrogation of contradictory stories answers two questions: First, what type of colonialism is present in Alaska? Second, how are present manifestations of colonialism linked to environmental degradation? To begin, I discuss nuances surrounding the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), arguing that the relationship between Alaska Natives and the state that was defined by this act continues to oppress Indigenous people and facilitate the long term settler colonial project of Indigenous erasure. Next, I build upon my exploration of ANCSA through a case study of the debate surrounding drilling in the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), arguing that environmental degradation is integral

to continued settler colonialism. Then, I bring postcolonial studies, settler colonial studies, Indigenous critical theory, and ecocritical theory into conversation to discuss themes that weave through these stories ultimately theorizing the structures behind the contradictory reality I experienced on St. Lawrence Island. Theorizing my own experience, I answer my final question: How is the ideal of equality before the law complicated by the settler colonial state?

Defining “Colonial Myths”

Rey Chow’s concept of the “ascendency of whiteness” describes the ways that the condition of being white and enjoying nationalist privileges has made whiteness seem neutral and inviting of racial minorities into the same reality (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 10). Leading to an ideology of assimilation, the “ascendency of whiteness” manipulates Indigenous people through “colonial myths” into a submissive position where they are told that by emulating white values, they can gain acceptance into, and possibly even fulfillment within mainstream society (Alfred 2005, 23). “Colonial myths” are artificial attachments of Indigenous people to particular ideas of meaningful change that are bound up within the colonial state. For example, solutions such as self-government, land claims, economic development, and legal recognition ultimately create new bureaucracies and forms of government based on the colonial model, maintaining the dominance of the settler colonial state (Alfred 2005, 30). In *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Alfred argues that the current form of assimilative imperialism is more difficult to target than more overt colonization. Alfred asserts that Indigenous attempts towards change are “bound up in and unable to break free from limiting logic of the colonial myths that they claim to oppose,” internalizing state attempts towards assimilation as a new reality (2005, 34).

Due to the naturalization of colonialism within our everyday lives, Alfred calls for the bringing forth of an “Indigenously rooted voice of contention, unconstrained and uncompromised by colonial mentalities” in order to challenge the artificial attachments to oppressive “colonial myths” (Alfred 2005, 33). Alfred specifically

argues that Indigenous people need to reject “colonial myths,” but writing as Native feminists, Angie Morrill and Eve Tuck state, “Resist that which makes me a ghost and you a monster” (2016, 15). Through this call to action, the authors acknowledge the perceived identities of the “colonized” and the “colonizer,” drawing out the tropes of both Indigenous people as ghosts, and Settlers as monsters. Acknowledging that there are artificial attachments to colonial legacies within both Indigenous and Settler mentalities, throughout my thesis project, I interrogate all attachments to “colonial myths” in order to expose the continued settler colonial practices that occur in Alaska today.

In her book, *The Transit of Empire*, Jodi Byrd connects the continued settler colonial practices of assimilation within the United States to their global repercussions. She writes, “As Indigenous scholars have argued, inclusion into the multicultural cosmopolis, built on top of Indigenous lands, does not solve colonialism: that inclusion is the very site of colonization that feeds U.S. empire” (2011, 10). Moreover, she argues that current continued manifestations of settler colonialism within our “multicultural, multiracial democracy” provide the U.S. the economic and material resources to “cast its imperialist gaze globally” (2011, 122). As such, inclusion into the colonial state, beyond harming Indigenous peoples and imparting a harmful ideology of hierarchy and domination, contributes to the proliferation of similar imperial practices beyond our borders. The ideal of equality under the law is complicated by the settler state due to the contradiction that Indigenous peoples are being incorporated into the very state that is simultaneously founded on their past and current genocide (Arvin,

Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 16). I join these theorists in exposing contradictions of the settler state through telling stories that interrogate manifestations of continued colonization in Alaska.

ANCSA and Continued Settler Colonialism

The particular process of settler colonialism in Alaska differed from the typical image of violence that characterized westward expansion in the contiguous United States. Deviating from the rapid displacement of Indigenous peoples required by the invasion of settler colonial society, Alaska was initially developed through absentee exploitation of natural resources (Whitehead 2004, 215). Although the specific progression and practices of settler colonialism in Alaska differed from the contiguous United States, the same imperial ideology of “progress” and “development” undergirded the process. The lack of explicit violence towards Indigenous peoples ultimately allowed the imperial ideology to proliferate in a more insidious fashion. The slow, structural proliferation of this ideology of domination ultimately makes it easier for “colonial myths” to saturate Indigenous and Settler mentalities in Alaska today. I will first discuss the specifics of ANCSA, then interrogate the notion that ANCSA was a civil rights success. Ultimately, I will incorporate theory to argue that, through adopting a corporate configuration, ANCSA redefines Alaska Native identity and continues settler colonial practices.

What is ANCSA?

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act⁵ (ANCSA) passed by Congress in 1971, determined the legal relationship that still exists between Alaska Natives and

⁵ United States. 1972. *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act*⁵. P.L. 92-203, December 18, 1971. Anchorage: Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission for Alaska.

their traditional lands. Before ANCSA was decided, all 375 million acres of the state were held by Alaska Natives under aboriginal title. Aboriginal title, often known as group or tribal title, is established by continuous occupancy of a place for an extended period of time, but can be alienated by the federal government or Congress. Under aboriginal title, Indigenous people have the right of “exclusive occupancy,” but the federal government maintains the exclusive authority to convey land titles (Case and Voluck 2014, 54). Following the discovery of the vast oil field at Prudhoe Bay, the federal government finally decided to clarify the more than 100 years of theoretical uncertainty about the legate status of Indigenous peoples in Alaska (2014, 165).

In order to transport the oil from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez for distribution, the government would need to build an 800 mile pipeline, cutting across land held under aboriginal title by Alaska Natives. Thus, in order to gain complete ownership of the land, congress needed to extinguish aboriginal title. Section 4 (b) of ANCSA states, “All aboriginal titles, if any, and claims of aboriginal title in Alaska based on use and occupancy, including submerged land underneath all water areas, both inland and offshore, and including any aboriginal hunting and fishing rights that may exist, are hereby extinguished” (United States 1972, 690). Beyond extinguishing aboriginal title, ANCSA also shaped the future of Alaska Native’s relationship to their lands and subsistence resources.

Unlike in the rest of the United States, Native land claims in Alaska were not resolved by creating reservations. Instead, ANCSA created twelve Regional Corporations, enrolling all Alaska Natives eighteen years or older as stockholders in

their region of permanent residence (1972, 691). Additionally, each Village Corporation⁶ received their allotted lands and monetary compensation under the Act only after they organized “as a business for profit or nonprofit corporation under the laws of the State” (1972, 694). Ultimately, 45.7 million acres of Alaska were distributed among the twelve Regional Corporations, along with \$1 billion divided among enrolled members as stock (Case and Voluck 2014, 170). Additionally, the urgency with which Congress passed ANCSA speaks to the lack of consideration of the impacts the corporate system would have on subsistence resources. The first line of the act states it’s objectives as to “provide for the settlement of certain land claims of Alaska Natives, and for *other purposes*” (United States 1972, 688). Additionally, the act expresses an “immediate need” for the settlement of Native land claims, and that the settlement should be “accomplished rapidly” (United States 1972, 688). After a century of relative uncertainty surrounding Native land claims, the urgency in the language used in the law certainly suggests that the government’s desire to extract natural resources from Indigenous lands expedited the process.

Backed up by their extensive analysis of the legal relationship between the United States and Alaska Natives in *Alaska Natives and American Laws*, David Case and David Voluck state that the intent of ANCSA was “pretty clearly aimed to rapidly incorporate the Alaska Natives into the mainstream of the American free market economy and its values” (2014, 188). Additionally, Thornburg and Roberts state how the enactment of ANCSA promoted private property, individualism, and wealth

⁶ Village Corporations are smaller groups within the twelve Regional Corporations.

accumulation (2012, 204). Douglas Jones, one of Alaska's U.S. senate staff claimed that the goal of ANCSA was "a kind of normalcy, business as usual" approach to dealing with the issue of Native land claims (Case and Voluck 2014, 189). These statements show how the United States offered solutions to land claims that explicitly conflicted with subsistence ways of life, shaping Indigenous identity into a configuration found more favorable by the settler state.

Case and Voluck call attention to the trend that federal Indian law is generally prompted by state, federal, or private efforts to acquire Indigenous resources (Case and Voluck 2014, 54). ANCSA followed this trend when the discovery of the vast Prudhoe Bay oil field on the North Slope of Alaska prompted congressional action to quickly resolve the Native land claims (Case and Voluck 2014, 35). As exemplified through my experience on St. Lawrence Island, subsistence is at the core of Indigenous identity and culture. Thus, the construction of Alaska Native society decided through ANCSA exemplifies government attempts to not just acquire land, but also to steer Native identity towards a capitalistic framework, ultimately at odds with subsistence lifestyles.

Was ANCSA a Civil Rights Success?

Although I argue that ANCSA ultimately perpetuates settler colonial practices, the law was initially achieved largely through willing participation of Alaska Native people, exploiting previous insecurities to further American colonialism. Historically justified widespread distrust of the United States government by American Indians and Alaska Natives proliferated from the legacy of breaking treaties and exploiting people

and lands. Fed up with the unequal political relationship between the United States government and Native Americans, when ANCSA offered the corporate approach, Alaska Natives saw it as an opportunity to grow economically and prosper rather than remaining reliant on the government (Thornburg and Roberts 2012, 210). Tensions among opinions exemplify that, although willing participation of Native people was essential in the passage of ANCSA, many Alaska Natives were skeptical of the impacts the law would have on their lives.

In her summary of testimonies given by Alaska Natives prior to the passage of ANCSA in 1971, Ann Feinup-Riordan (1984) identifies the tension between subsistence based economies and the cash economy. Arguing against ANCSA, a representative in the Alaska legislature named Willie Hensley stated, “there are many groups throughout the state who would rather be assured of continued use and occupancy of their traditional lands than accept a penny from the Federal Government” (Feinup-Riordan 1984, 14). Clearly, Hensley advocated for the rejection of the cash economy, preferring to use and occupy traditional lands for subsistence. Emil Notti, the president of the Alaska Federation of Natives at the time, stated that “just as the territory needed land to make the transition from statehood, the Natives need land to make the transition from a subsistence to a wage economy” (1984, 16). Notti advocated for the necessity of land, but framed it in terms of using that land to transition into a cash economy, exemplifying the tension that arises when both economies coincide.

In Feinup-Riordan’s words, this tension stemmed from a desire to prove that Alaska Natives “had the ability to manage corporations, run their own businesses and

all in all successfully join mainstream America.” (1984, 27). Ultimately, although there were differing opinions among Alaska Natives, when viewed in the correct historical context, the incorporation of Alaska Native societies into corporate entities clearly continued the process and structure of settler colonialism in the United States. As I explained above, after many years of being subjected to “poverty and powerlessness,” Alaska Natives wanted economic self-determination and freedom from government reliance. Thus, those who desired the corporate approach were bound up within “colonial myths,” striving towards solutions that ultimately conflicted with subsistence economies.

Among the general public, ANCSA was heralded as a civil rights success that improved the trust relationship between the federal government and Indigenous peoples. Analyzing ANCSA within the greater historical and legal context of Alaska, it becomes clear that many intricate processes helped to form understanding of the law as a civil rights success. From the time it was purchased from Russia until statehood in 1959, there was extreme lack of governmental structure in Alaska. Passed in 1884, the Organic Act provided a governor and a federal district judge, but forbade the territory from establishing a legislature, creating counties, and applying land laws (Gruening 1955, 351). Even with this new governmental structure in place, the governor was given virtually no powers or funds. With the dearth of government funding, money and development came to Alaska by way of absentee capital investors who were largely interested in developing gold, copper and salmon resources (Haycox 2002, 162). The

absentee investors relied on the lack of legal and governmental structure to maintain their free reign over the natural resources.

Ernest Gruening, the governor of the Alaskan territory from 1939-1953, saw the lack of governmental structure and financial support as a problem for settlers. He was concerned that it was challenging for the settlers to gain legal access to land, and thus difficult to earn a livelihood in the territory. Gruening's concerns eventually took hold as more settlers began to move west to Alaska after statehood in 1959. Absentee investors and settlers became the only two voices in statehood and land debates. Thus, Alaska Native voices and perspectives on land designation, governmental structure, and natural resource extraction were not considered. In fact, prior to ANCSA, the legal status of Alaska Natives was very uncertain. Settler society at the time tended towards the erasure of Indigenous presence.

As previously discussed, aboriginal title as a land designation exists in a place of immense tension. On one hand, aboriginal title upholds the federal obligation to protect Indigenous rights to use their lands. On the other hand, the federal government possesses the power to extinguish aboriginal title. Thus, designating land through aboriginal title relies on the inherently unequal political relationship⁷ that has historically existed between the United States government and American Indians. So, although Alaska Natives technically held "exclusive occupancy" over their lands, their

⁷ American Indians and the United States government remain in a "common law" relationship, meaning that the rights of Indigenous people are derived from judicial precedent rather than statutes. Additionally, the United States has plenary power over Native American communities and their members through the Indian Commerce Clause and the Supremacy Clause leading to an unequal political relationship upon which Native Americans are compelled to comply (Case and Voluck 2012, 5 and 20).

voices were systematically unheard. This systematic erasure began with the failure of the Alaskan government to distinguish Alaska Natives from settlers in law until 1905. Following the legacy of Indigenous erasure in Alaska, when ANCSA was passed in 1971 it was heralded as a civil rights success because it granted Alaska Natives “ownership” of land that could no longer be alienated by the federal government.

Viewed through Alfred’s lens where persistent ideologies of settler colonialism today transform Indigenous identity into a legal construction of the state, the failure of the Alaskan government to designate Native identity in law may seem like a positive. To be sure, my critique of the failure to legally distinguish Alaska Natives from settlers is based on the trend of Indigenous erasure at the time. The tension here can be reconciled through historical specificity. The imperial ideology of progress and development functioned through the center/margin, core/periphery, settler/native, inclusion/exclusion binaries. In the early days of the Alaskan territory, Indigenous people were seen as existing in the margin or periphery, excluded from settler society. Thus, in early law, the lack of distinction of Native Alaskans served as an erasure of their presence and inhabitation of the lands.

Then, as post World War II decolonization efforts began to break through the strict binaries, the United States began to shift towards inclusion, drawing Indigenous peoples closer to the center. Now critiqued by Indigenous critical theorists, inclusion ended up morphing Native identity into a legal construction of the state. The legal designation of tribal identity, through legislation like ANCSA, began to anchor Alaska Natives into the ideological structure of settler colonialism. Inclusion initially broke

through the strict binaries that structured imperial ideology, but constructing Indigenous identity through Western ideals ultimately recreated the process of erasure with a seemingly benevolent touch.

Analysis

Applying theoretical approaches to the specificities of ANCSA previously discussed, it becomes clear how the United States government provided Alaska Native communities the means for economic development, hoping to quickly and seamlessly assimilate them into mainstream American society. In *Define and Rule*, Mahmood Mamdani comes to understand the indirect rule state as “a quintessentially modern form of rule in a colonial setting” (2012, 1). The indirect rule state has an intense preoccupation with defining and managing difference, manifesting in a shift in language from exclusion to inclusion (44). As I have shown, ANCSA rapidly incorporates Alaska Natives into the state’s economic structure. For example, today Alaska Native Regional Corporations and larger Village Corporations hold around 25% of Alaska’s economy (Case and Voluck 2014, 198).

Speaking from his perspective as Onkwehonwe—meaning original people in the Mohawk language—Alfred states, “The implication of the economic development approach is integration into the consumer culture of mainstream capitalist society, which is the defeat of the possibility of ways of life associated with Onkwehonwe existence” (2005, 23). Integration of Alaska Native communities into the corporate structure defined through ANCSA perfectly exemplifies the economic approach.

Moreover, Alfred asserts that economic development solutions are offered precisely because they are ultimately useless in the struggle of Indigenous peoples to survive (23). Conflicts arise from the commercial exploitation of subsistence resources, sure to occur once Alaska Native identities become tied to the corporate, capitalist framework set forth through ANCSA. As such, Indigenous identities aren't just *defined* by the state but are *shaped* and *ruled* by it as well.

Speaking of countries with colonial legacies, Alfred writes, "Imperial evil is so well disguised and deeply denied in these countries [that] the burden of persistent colonialism has become mundane and internalized" (2005, 25). In their article Thornburg and Roberts cite Dean Neu, who theorized the proliferation of Western values through practices such as religion and medicine as "softwares" of imperialism (2012, 207). Compared to "hardwares" of colonialism like ships and guns, "softwares" of imperialism facilitate indirect rule. Again, using Alfred's concept of colonial myth, "softwares" of imperialism inculcate Indigenous existence with artificial attachments to Western values. Returning to Mamdani, indirect rule states, such as the United States, rule with the ambition of shaping the subjectivities of the colonized, defining Indigenous existence so the state can then maintain rule through "softwares" of imperialism (2012, 8).

Speaking as an Indigenous writer and activist, Alfred highlights that revising and renaming colonial relationships does not erase either their historical or tangible existence. He states, "We have mistaken the renaming of our situation for an actual reconnection with our lands and cultures" (2005, 33). In this case, renaming land

claims as “resolved” through ANCSA’s economic development approach does not actually erase the trauma inflicted through the seizure of traditional lands. Returning to the concept of “colonial myths,” ANCSA morphs Indigenous identity into a legal construction of the state through fabricating the desire for economic development and its associated Western values, ultimately limiting processes of change and proliferating the ongoing practices of settler colonialism (2005, 34).

ANWR: Environmental Degradation as Covert Colonialism

The 19.3 million acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) on the North Slope of Alaska was established in 1960 and is further defined in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act⁸ (ANILCA) of 1980. The purpose of Section 1002 of ANILCA was,

To conduct an inventory and assessment of the fish and wildlife resources of the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; an analysis of the impacts of oil and gas exploration, development, and production, and to authorize exploratory activity within the coastal plain in a manner that avoids significant adverse effects on the fish and wildlife and other resources. (United States 1980, 81)

Additionally, Section 1003 of the Act states that production of oil and gas from ANWR is prohibited until authorized by an “Act of Congress,” but the assessment mandated by Section 1002 certainly foreshadows future exploration and development. When Congress passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act on December 22, 2017, the foreshadowing within ANILCA came to fruition. One provision of the tax bill opens up the area to drilling and energy development, finally settling one of the longest controversies in U.S environmental history (Pullen 2018).

Through my exploration of the ANWR drilling debate, I will build upon my argument that ANCSA maintains settler colonial relationships by incorporating Alaska Natives into a corporate structure. First, I will discuss multiple Alaska Native and non-native perspectives in the drilling debate. Then, I will connect the harms to human health and the environment through resource extraction to continued settler colonial practices that simultaneously harm subsistence lifestyles. Through this story, I will

⁸ United States. 1980. *Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act: Approved December 2, 1980, P.L. 96-487, 94 Stat. 2371*. Englewood, Colorado: Information Handling Services.

argue that environmental destruction is integral to continued settler colonial practices in Alaska.

The ANWR Drilling Debate

ANWR spans five subarctic and arctic ecological zones and encompasses the most ecological diversity of any protected circumpolar area in the world. There are forty-five species of land and marine mammals, and many charismatic megafauna including polar bears, wolves, and caribou (Kaye 2006, 3). If Alaska is the last frontier of the United States, ANWR is certainly the last “unspoiled frontier” within it. To many, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge exemplifies a condition of pristine wilderness as stated in the Wilderness Act of 1964 as an area “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man” (Kaye 2006, 4). In the consciousness of many environmentalists in the United States, even though they may never set foot in ANWR, its existence taps into a nostalgic symbolism of our country’s pristine wilderness.

Although ANWR is usually thought of as pristine and untrammelled, multiple populations of Alaska Natives inhabit the area, using the wildlife for their subsistence economy. Additionally, some Native communities have the potential to economically benefit from their mineral and oil rich land if it becomes open for drilling. Although the stakes of the drilling debate are high, I am less interested in arguing for which side of the debate is “correct.” Binarism, or the mode of thought predicated on pairs of opposites, stems largely from imperialist logic and Western attempts to establish

dominance through hierarchy⁹ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 24). Thus, thinking about the ANWR debate in the framework of right and wrong sides hides much of the nuance and reinforces imperialistic logics. Rather, I will focus on teasing out the artificial attachments to “colonial myths” that influence both sides of the debate in order to analyze how the debate in general reproduces settler colonialism within the United States. I will consider Native and non-native opinions for and against drilling, teasing out the motivations and artificial attachments behind their claims.

One Alaska Native group called the Iñupiat live along across the North Slope of Alaska, including among the coastal plain of ANWR known as the “1002 area.” Their communities are already supported by oil companies who bring jobs, infrastructure, and funds along with their oil exploration. Additionally, as a part of the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, the Iñupiat tribe benefits economically from any oil and mineral profits. In contrast, the Gwich’in people live outside the Refuge, but are spiritually connected to a group of over 160,000 caribou known as the porcupine caribou herd, whose calving ground lies within the 1002 area of ANWR. As described in an article in *The Atlantic* from December 2, 2017,¹⁰ though the Gwich’in don’t own land in the 1002 area, their lives and identity would be severely compromised by drilling in the porcupine caribou herd’s calving ground. They call the calving ground “the sacred

⁹ As previously explained binaries useful to imperial projects include center/margin, core/periphery colonizer/colonized, settler/native, West/non-West, inclusion/exclusion, developed/undeveloped and civilized/uncivilized to name a few.

¹⁰ The article cited is titled “The GOP Tax Bill Could Forever Alter Alaska’s Indigenous Tribes” by Robinson Meyer. It came out in *The Atlantic* during the debate surrounding whether or not to include oil exploration in the 1002 area of ANWR in what has become known as the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 that was signed into law by President Donald Trump on December 22, 2017.

place where life begins” because it has been a central element of Gwich’in identity for 20,000 years. Speaking of the Gwich’in, the article states, “To many of them, drilling in the calving ground isn’t just an attack on the Gwich’in way of life. It’s an attack on the Gwich’in.”

Contrary to what many people may assume at first glance, there are many Alaska Natives in support of oil and gas exploration in ANWR. In a short piece in the Alaska Journal of Commerce from October 8, 2017, Matthew Rexford, the president of the Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation spoke out about the Iñupiat’s desire for drilling in ANWR.¹¹ He states that Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, an organization with twenty-one members from across the Arctic Slope region voted unanimously to pass a resolution supporting oil and gas development in the 1002 area. His argument centers on the ability of the oil companies and the Native corporations to work together to ensure optimal outcomes for the people involved and the environment. Backing up his previous point, Rexford says, “The oil and gas industry supports our communities by providing jobs, business opportunities and infrastructure investments; and has built our schools, hospitals and provided other basic services most Americans may take for granted” (2017, 2).

In his statement, Rexford addresses the tendency to leave Native voices out of such debates in favor of acknowledging opinions of those who are hundreds, or even thousands of miles removed from the issue. Certainly, the United States has a history of

¹¹ Rexford was also mentioned as a voice supporting ANWR drilling in *The Atlantic* article previously mentioned.

lawmakers and politicians making decisions for Native peoples, but simply taking his statement at face value risks overlooking a nuanced history of attempts to assimilate Alaska Natives into the settler colonial state. It risks overlooking “colonial myths” that continue to guide Indigenous peoples towards valuing inclusion into mainstream society.

The Alaska Native Regional Corporations analyzed through my discussion of ANCSA, have been explicitly called out as covert methods of exploiting the Indigenous peoples. In her short piece “Alaska: Oil and the Natives,” Native rights activist Winona LaDuke argues that the fact that Native lands were given to for-profit Alaska Native Corporations was not an accident. She states, “This was not so different from the ‘termination era’ which liquidated assets of many Native communities in the lower 48” (2003, 30). The termination era that LaDuke speaks of was characterized by overt violence and dispossession, but colonization in Alaska continues to be carried out through covert methods, relying on “colonial myths” to maintain Alaska Native desires towards economic independence and incorporation into mainstream society.

Unsurprisingly, non-native opinions on the ANWR debate are embedded with naturalized processes of settler colonialism as well. Non-native opinions for oil and gas exploration in ANWR argue that oil independence is central in the project of national security. Countering this argument, non-native opinions against oil development in ANWR argue that the threat of climate change brought on by further development is detrimental to our national security (Sovacool 2006, 195). At first glance some argue for oil and gas exploration and others against, but both frame the argument with

national security rhetoric, working together to bolster the values of safety within the nation state that has enacted so much violence on people in these very areas. Valuing equality and security within the state ultimately reproduces colonialist state power, following the greater tendency framing justice in terms that ultimately coincide with the expansion of the nation state (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 10). As with ANCSA, the incorporation of Alaska Natives further into the nation state and its values is exemplified through the ANWR drilling debate.

Environmental Degradation: A New “Logic of Elimination?”

As Coulthard and Alfred,¹² both note in their works, under postmodern imperial conditions, “‘oppression has become increasingly invisible; [it is] no longer constituted in conventional terms of military occupation, onerous taxation burdens, blatant land thefts, ect.,’ but rather through a ‘fluid confluence of politics, economics, psychology and culture’” (Coulthard 2014, 58). The incorporation of communities into for-profit Regional Corporations intricately tied Alaska Natives to a capitalist economic framework. Then, the ANWR drilling debate—just one of many controversies surrounding extraction of resources on Native lands— creates conflict within and among tribes, dividing community support towards common goals (Standlee 2006, 11). The United States has left behind overt violence, instead forming intricate economic

¹² Glen Coulthard’s work, *Red Skin White Masks* and Taiaiake Alfred’s work *Wasáse* have both been very influential in my research. Coulthard works as a professor in the First Nations Studies Program at University of British Columbia and Alfred works as a professor the Indigenous governance and political science at University of Victoria. The two scholars use each other’s ideas heavily in their work. The quote shared here is Coulthard quoting Alfred’s *Wasáse* in *Red Skin White Masks*.

and political structures that incentivize resource development, creating division within Alaska Native communities.

At this point, the idea of settler colonialism as a “logic of elimination” is integral to my argument (Wolfe 2006, 387). In his influential article Wolfe writes, “In its positive aspect, elimination is an organizing principle of settler colonial society rather than a one-off occurrence” (2006, 388). Thus, the debate surrounding ANWR and the push for oil and gas exploration cannot be separated from the overarching settler colonial project of the United States that relies on the elimination of Native societies. Similarly, Native Feminist authors Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill establish settler colonialism as a persistent formation wherein settlers will do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there.¹³ They write, “Within settler colonialism, it is exploitation of land that yields supreme value. In order for settlers to usurp the land and extract its value, Indigenous peoples must be destroyed, removed, and made into ghosts” (2013, 12). Following the adoption of Native societies into a corporate model through ANCSA, the ANWR debate continues the “logic of elimination” through incentivizing the degradation of subsistence lifestyles through environmental exploitation.

Richard Glenn, a central figure in *The Atlantic* article, member of the Iñupiat tribe, and executive vice president of the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, takes the

¹³ Although their article, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” focuses on settler colonial constructions in general, they mention some strategies employed against Indigenous peoples to establish and maintain the settler colonial nation state that are specifically relevant to practices in Alaska. These strategies include the designation of land reserves and the bestowal of land only to Alaska Native corporations (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 12).

approach that his tribes' whole region is holy land, but his community needs the infrastructure that inherently results in some development. Specifically, he states, "Even the place where we built a sewage lagoon for our village is sacred land—but we needed a sewage lagoon." This reaction, although read as simply pragmatic in this case, stems from larger assimilation into ideologies of development and improvement that are produced by imperial legacies.

To be sure, I am not putting forth the essentializing argument that Native communities must not develop their resources or establish infrastructure. Instead, I am exploring what constructions many have influenced tendencies towards development and environmental degradation. Returning to the idea of imperial ideology, Beinart and Hughes classify imperial thinking as that of more intensive utilization of land, improvement, and progress (2010, 13). Additionally, Murphy asserts that environmental degradation was integral to both the ideological and physical projects of imperialism, arguing that the proliferation of ideas like rationality and efficiency disguise the colonial legacies that were predicated on ideologies of development and improvement (2009, 13).¹⁴

Returning to Chow's concept of the "ascendancy of whiteness," whiteness is normalized and Indigenous peoples and other minorities are given the "opportunity" to take part in the nationalist privileges that dispossess similarly "othered" peoples globally, "naturalizing and maintaining settler colonialism in the United States" (2013,

¹⁴ Wolfe (2006) also addresses the ideological justification of settler colonialism within this framework of imperial thinking as colonizers thinking that they could use the land in a more efficient manner than the Indigenous peoples.

10). Alaska Native Corporations promoting oil and gas development on their land is an example of this theory in practice. Alaska Natives are welcomed into the seemingly neutral white, corporate structure where they justifiably want to provide economic wealth for their communities. These desires are understandable given the poverty and hardships they have faced since the beginning of settler colonialism in the United States, but seemingly neutral incorporation into the extractive destruction of their natural environments maintains the covert settler colonialism characterized by Coulthard and Alfred.

In his statement addressing Alaska Native approval of oil and gas exploration in the 1002 area, Rexford also draws upon the argument that if the Iñupiat are in support of and involved with the oil and gas activity in Alaska, they can take part in “seeing that any and all development is done in a manner that keeps our land and subsistence resources safe” (Rexford 2017, 2). This statement overlooks the adversarial relationship between development and subsistence, and speaks to the seeming neutralization of the privilege of “safe” development. Oil development inherently harms the health of both humans and the environment, and the siting of injurious development projects is never neutral.

Although I don’t agree with all of his argument, Benjamin Sovacool¹⁵ succinctly describes the many environmental harms that are inherent to oil extraction

¹⁵ Sovacool’s article is titled “Environmental Damage, Abandoned Treaties, and Fossil-Fuel Dependence: The Coming Costs of Oil-and-Gas Exploration in the ‘1002 Area’ of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.” Although he discusses environmental harms very well, his argument is centered on preserving the “pristine wilderness” of ANWR, an end goal that I find less convincing. Additionally, through his argument he develops a binary between development and said “pristine wilderness” that occludes many nuances and complications behind those two classifications.

beyond the common oil spill rhetoric. The 1002 area is more sensitive than other areas of the refuge because it lies on the coastal plain where there are fragile wetlands and thin permafrost layers. He lists the many potential environmental harms:

Operational drilling fluids, used to lubricate the cutting bits during drilling, contain toxic substances such as bentonite, borehole cuttings, chemical and polymer additives, engine coolant, unused cement slurry, biocides, furacants, lubricants, and emulsifying agents. Additionally, the maintenance and operation of pipelines, storage facilities, and oil rigs could release drill cuttings, flocculated bentonite, cementing chemicals, toxic organic compounds, aluminum silicate beads, and dense sledges composed of crude oil, paraffin, asphaltics, reservoir material, radioactive material, and drilling mud into wetland habitats. (2006, 190)

This long list of destructive processes continues for four more pages, drilling home that the idea of “safe” oil and gas exploration fails to acknowledge the effects of daily environmental harms on the health and wellbeing of Alaska Natives. Applying concepts from the field of environmental justice, the toxic environments produced through oil and gas exploitation follow a larger pattern of polluting minorities in the United States, backed by a global trend of disproportionate environmental degradation.

Crystal Bartolovich begins to address inequalities stemming from oil development, acknowledging that on a global scale, oil disproportionately benefits a small portion of humanity. Similarly, the costs are also unevenly distributed, often falling heavily on those who derive little or none of the benefits (2016, 224). The term “environmental racism” has gained traction to describe the tendency of environmental harms to disproportionately fall upon non-white people. According to Melissa Checker’s book *Polluted Promises*, in the United States, roughly 50% of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in communities containing at least one uncontrolled toxic waste site (2005, 13). Tying Wolfe’s “logic of elimination” into the

idea of “environmental racism,” development practices that harm Alaska Natives and their environments cannot be seen as anything but continued settler colonialism.

This reality is backed by a global trend where—due to the settler colonialisms that continued in the global South even after the administrative colonialism of the European empires was dismantled—the global South now bears the brunt of the economic and environmental needs of the global North (Byrd 2011, xix). As previously stated, Byrd even acknowledges that the continued colonization of American Indians and their lands “provides the United States the economic and material resources needed to cast its imperialist gaze globally,” connecting the threads between the domestic inequalities and those that exist on a global scale (2011, 122). Although not all disproportionate environmental harms are due to settler colonialism, the imperial ideology of development and progress undergirds these processes. Specific to Alaska Natives, “colonial myths” of striving towards mainstream society convince tribal members of the benefits of oil development. On a broader scale, seeming equality before the law does not exclude the tendency towards continued colonization of Native peoples.

Theorizing My Experience on St. Lawrence Island

Westward expansion within the United States is usually thought of within the category of settler colonialism. Specifically, settler colonies are those where invading Europeans annihilated, displaced, or marginalized Indigenous peoples. Specific to the category of settler colonialism is the control over land through mass migration backed by violence (Hixson 2013, 7). Patrick Wolfe uses the term “logic of elimination” to conceptualize the inherently eliminatory nature of settler colonialism (2006, 388). Glen Coulthard contributes that the eliminatory settler-colonial relationship is characterized by domination that continues to “facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (2014, 7).

Through frontier rhetoric, Indigenous peoples have often been evoked as past tense presences that “are destined to disappear with the frontier itself” (Byrd 2011, xx). Differentiating from the postcolonial assertion of colonialism as a past event, Indigenous critical theory joins ongoing conversations about sovereignty, power, and indigeneity to ultimately insist upon the continued presence of colonialism as a structure. Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill address how colonialism is often understood as a historical point far behind that to which our society has progressed, but that centering settler colonialism with bodies of literature that discuss gender and race expose the still existing structure of settler colonization (2013, 9).

Coulthard articulates that practices of dispossession rely as much on the productive character of colonial power as the coercive authority of the settler state (2014, 152). Similarly, Wolfe articulates that settler colonialism cannot simply be

characterized through dissolution of Indigenous societies but through the organizing of settler colonial society (2006, 388). Fitting into my reliance on “colonial myths,” Wolfe suggests that through settler colonialism, previous ways of Indigenous life must not just be displaced, but replaced with artificial attachments to settler society. This phenomenon is explicitly exemplified in the ANCSA and ANWR case studies. First, Native Alaskans were dispossessed of their traditional territories, entrenching their societies into the mainstream economy through the distribution of cash to Regional Corporations. Then, they were incentivized to develop resources on their own lands and encouraged to strive towards inclusion into settler society through material wealth.

According to Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), imperialism is the practice, theory and attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 46). More generally, power relations of conquest, resistance, and dispossession comprise the greater ideology of imperialism (Beinart and Hughes 2010, 4). Stemming from the tendency of Western thought to establish hierarchical relations of dominance, the construction of binaries was a prominent ideological tool used to legitimize imperial processes. The binary of center/margin—also manifesting along the bifurcation of core/periphery and developed/undeveloped—led to the justification of violent hierarchical relationships between the colonizer and the colonized.¹⁶

Such relationships were established both literally through dispossession of those on the margins and metaphorically through the power of “othering” maintained

¹⁶ I realize that I am using another binary to describe the harmful binaries that existed. This contradictory realization speaks to the dominance of binarisms within imperial ideologies.

through imperial discourse (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 30). The physical act of colonialism relied on the binary of civilized/uncivilized that established frontiers as a justifiable boundary used to “distinguish one space or people from another” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 107). Through imperial logic, St. Lawrence Island certainly exist on the margins, distinguished from mainstream society through the idea of the frontier, and ultimately susceptible to the “othering” maintained through binaries. This “othering,” or devaluing of Yupik health and ways of life, manifests in the experience of being told that smoking is the only reason for their health problems. Additionally, values of progress and development proliferated through imperial ideology “other” subsistence economies, justifying the projects of Indigenous erasure and capitalist development.

As becomes apparent through analyzing ANCSA, the “othering” of Indigenous peoples throughout processes of imperialism and colonialism¹⁷ encourages attachment to policies that promote incorporation and inclusion into the nation state. Alfred asserts that current solutions to the legacy of colonialism are offered through “economic” and “legalist” approaches, both of which are incorporated into ANCSA. These approaches manifest through economic integration of Indigenous peoples into the consumer culture of mainstream capitalist society, or entrenchment into the state system as citizens with rights defined by the constitution of the colonial state (2005, 23).

Aligning with Alfred’s arguments, Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill suggest that Indigenous concerns are not about achieving formal equality or civil rights within the

¹⁷ Additionally, Indigenous peoples were always cast into the margin, periphery, undeveloped, uncivilized, excluded, colonized side of the binaries produced through imperial logic.

nation state because this form of justice paradoxically coincides with the expansion of the very nation state it supposedly resists. More explicitly, the invitation of minorities into the nationalist privileges of being white effectively naturalizes and maintains settler colonialism in the United States (2013, 10). Inclusion into the “privileges” of the nation state is epitomized through the attitudes towards military occupation on St. Lawrence Island. The presence of the military bases on the island prompted young men to join the military during the Vietnam War, bringing patriotic associations to the people. When I visited, I saw elderly men still wearing hats they received when fighting in Vietnam. Ultimately, the entrenchment of patriotism in their communities originally made it difficult to see the harm the military was inflicting.

Since the late 1970's, the term postcolonialism has been used to discuss the cultural effects of colonization. In her article, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” Anne McClintock argues that the category of postcolonialism prematurely celebrates of the pastness of colonialism. Overlooking the harm of binaries risks “obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power” ultimately being haunted by the very imperial ideology it seeks to dismantle (1992, 85). Additionally, creating a colonial/postcolonial binary suggests that decolonization resulted in in a wholesale rejection of colonialist values and imperialist ideologies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 64). Detailing current structures of settler colonialism in Alaska through the ANCSA and ANWR stories, it becomes clear that relegating colonialism as past history only disguises continued colonial practices. Moving into a postcolonial era where the modern state seeks to create equality before

the law, “colonial myths” continue to force Indigenous people to strive toward approaches that reinforce the very colonial states that were originally founded upon their erasure.

Another postcolonial category termed “internal colonialism” attempts to define the exploitation of a periphery of a previous colonial state. Murphy writes, “In many formerly colonized countries, so-called post-colonial governments are pursuing national development strategies which exploit their peripheries and can be labelled ‘internal colonialism’” (Murphy, 24). Through internal colonialism, a dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony (McClintock 1992, 88). Indigenous critical theorist, Jodi Byrd critiques this seemingly productive lens through which to view continued colonization of Indigenous peoples within “so-called post-colonial” countries.

“Internal” as a modifier to colonialism became a category through critical race and postcolonial theory (Byrd 2011, 124). Internal colonialism is often employed in the United States to describe “how racial and ethnic identities create economic and political disparities” (2011, 134). Moreover, internal colonialism becomes analogous to race and class differentials within a nation state. Byrd asserts that this turns colonialism into an “empty referent that can be claimed by any marginalized group” and serves to forget the specific dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the United States (137). Ultimately, employing the category of internal colonialism constructs the U.S. as a multicultural nation struggling with legacies of racism rather than a colonialist power that has and continues to be engaged in the project of territorial expansion (125).

Colonialism cannot be used as an empty referent when, as I have shown through case studies in Alaska, its current consequences are tangible and continue towards the settler colonial project of Indigenous erasure. To be sure, race certainly factors into environmental contamination, as exemplified in the disproportionate siting of toxic waste sites in non-white communities, but it is not the only factor in these sitings.

Many ecocritical theorists argue that imperialism is inseparable from the history of global environmental change, although in different ways. One relationship is characterized as environmental causation. This is the idea that environmental factors such as climate, water, natural resources, and soils influenced imperialism and patterns of colonization (Beinart and Hughes 2010, 8). Others assert that environmental change in many places was hastened by the key forces of empire, capitalism, and industrialization (2010, 12). Lastly, Nixon, and Murphy have characterized global conservationism as a new form of imperialism. More specifically, that contemporary environmental policies continue to manage colonial subjects and colonize nature (Murphy 2009, 14). After my experience and research, I argue that environmental degradation is integral to proliferation of imperial ideologies and continued settler colonial practices in Alaska today.

Regulation and commodification of the natural environment was central to the processes of both settler and non-settler colonial states (Beinart and Hughes 2010, 3). According to Huggan and Tiffin, "Postcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on

which those projects historically—and presently demand” (2006, 6). Ideologies and physical manifestations of imperialism and colonialism were predicated on development and improvement, facilitated through technological mastering of the material environment. According to British imperial thinking, more intensive utilization of land and resources to facilitate improvement and progress had both an economic and moral purpose (Beinart and Hughes 2010, 13). Murphy explicitly points to the Western obsession with material mastery, alluding to the fact that environmental degradation was integral to both the ideological and physical projects of imperialism (2009, 12). Western tendencies towards development and exploitation of natural resources are at odds with the continued integrity of subsistence resources that are central to the St. Lawrence Island Yupik and many other Alaska Native groups. Thus, continued systematic environmental degradation persists as a present “logic of elimination.”

Conclusion: Subsistence is Greater Than Sustenance

Within the United States today, subsistence economies exist in harsh tension with mainstream capitalist society. Subsistence economies are threatened to be consumed by both policies of inclusion towards Indigenous peoples, and continued degradation of their environments and subsistence resources. But, as I have argued through my thesis project, subsistence is greater than just sustenance. Subsistence contains elements that revolve around sustenance, but is also intertwined with elements of culture, language, and identity. Losing a subsistence culture does not just result in food insecurity, but in a loss of identity and cultural values.

Throughout my thesis, I raise questions that tease out contradictions inherent within the idea of equality for all that rests upon a settler colonial project. What does it mean that subsistence foods contain known contaminants but the people of St. Lawrence Island continue to eat them for cultural and spiritual reasons? How did ANCSA come to be seen as a civil rights success? Do continued settler practices through environmental degradation exist as a new “logic of elimination?” Just as my stakes were twofold, my conclusion will take a similar form. Alaska Native and non-native readers must question preconceived notions of their realities and attachments to the construction of those realities. Future policies must take into account the history of settler colonialism in Alaska and its current attachment to degradation of subsistence resources. Moreover, “technofixes,” or surface level solutions to ongoing problems in society that reinforce those very problems, must be rejected.

On a broader scale, I hope readers that are interested in my contribution to theorizing colonialism have already realized that colonialism hides within challenging contradictions that are easily overlooked. In order to combat these ongoing processes, we must draw out contradictions and preconceived notions, ultimately deconstructing the very conditions through which original colonial harms proliferated. Ultimately, this manifests in confronting continued attachments to “colonial myths” that allow the United States to engage in similarly violent practices globally. Personally, bringing together postcolonial studies, settler colonial studies, Indigenous critical theory, and ecocritical theory allowed me to create a theoretical framework through which I can analyze future policies and state actions. I hope to soon enter the field of environmental justice, being sure to utilize my critical framework to stop reproduction of settler colonial practices through contemporary environmental movements and policies.

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