Alaska Native Literature
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In her American Book Award-winning memoir, Tlingit author Ernestine Hayes notes that while lawmakers and other experts continue to debate land rights and resource claims across Alaska, issues of ownership and belonging have long been understood quite differently by indigenous populations throughout the state. “Who our land now belongs to, or if land can even be owned, is a question for politicians and philosophers. But we belong to the land … This is our land … We can’t help but place our love there,” she writes (ix). Alaska received its name from the Unangan or Aleut people, who called it “Alyeska,” meaning “the Great Land” (Williams 1). The largest state in the United States, Alaska comprises more than 586,000 square miles and spans many ecosystems, from tundra to sea ice, and from boreal forests and coastal rainforests to wetlands, rivers, and lakes (“Alaska’s 32 Ecoregions”). Of the 562 federally recognized tribes in the United States, 225 of them are located in Alaska. The state is home to more than 127,000 Alaska Natives who live in over 200 villages and speak twenty indigenous languages (Williams 2–4). Alaska Natives comprise a diverse population that includes Iñupiat and Yuit Eskimos, Aleuts, and Athabascans, as well as Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Indians (Haycox xii).

According to oral traditions, Native peoples occupied Alaska for thousands of years before European contact, which began in the mid-eighteenth century with the Russian explorers. The United States later “purchased” the region in 1867, and in 1959 Alaska was granted statehood. Following the 1968 discovery of oil across the North Slope, the federal and state government entered a land grab in the hope of exploring and developing Arctic oil (Williams xv). Because indigenous Alaskans had not relinquished their land rights after statehood, the federal government had to negotiate a settlement. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), the largest land settlement at that time in U.S. history, was signed into law in 1971. ANCSA extinguished indigenous land claims in exchange for forty-four million acres and nearly one billion dollars to be managed through twelve regional Alaska Native corporations (Williams xv). In clearing the way for the construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline, the settlement act resulted in tremendous political and cultural upheaval that continues to have repercussions for Alaska Natives today.

Indigenous Alaskan writers have responded to these changes as well as other transformations brought about by histories of contact and conflict. In addition to addressing concerns about identity and community, Alaska Native literature has centered on sovereignty and cultural recovery, the meanings of place as well as resistance to assimilation and Americanization. While the name “Alaska Native” carries traces of the negative attitudes
about indigenous peoples often found in settler-colonial thinking, it is an accepted designation used by indigenous people throughout the state (Williams 4). The term has been employed strategically as a way of speaking about different cultural groups who frequently face common experiences within the colonial system. Tlingit scholar Maria Shaa Tláa Williams notes, however, that this language is undergoing a process of change, as words established by outsiders including “Eskimo,” “Aleut,” and “Indian” are being replaced with “self-designative terms such as ‘Yup’ik,’ ‘Yupiaq,’ ‘Iñupiaq,’ ‘Unangan,’ and ‘Alutiiq/ Sugpiaq’” (xiv).

Alaska Native literature is a diverse tradition that includes oral narratives, poetry, fiction, and memoir. Although histories of conquest and occupation have meant that some of this literature has been lost or destroyed, there have been efforts to recover the work, with several collections of Alaska Native oral narratives and other literature appearing in recent years. James Ruppert and John W. Bernet note that the act of collecting these text tended to fall into the domain of specific professional groups over the years. From 1870 to 1920, it was primarily missionaries who were involved in this effort. During the next four decades, anthropologists tended to conduct the work, while from the 1960s and on, linguists took up the project (Ruppert & Bernet 15). More recently, however, Alaska Native scholars have begun leading these literary recovery efforts and have taken over the production of knowledge and the role of expert.

With the state located far from major publishing houses, Alaska Native literature has tended to be produced by local or university presses. In 1986, for instance, the Alaska Quarterly Review, sponsored by the University of Alaska at Anchorage, put together a special issue on “Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers, and Orators” with a preface by Tlingit poet and scholar Nora Marks Dauenhauer and her husband, the late Richard Dauenhauer. Both of them served as Alaska State poet laureates and eventually edited three collections of Tlingit oral narratives and life stories. These volumes include Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives (1987); Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory (1990); and Haa Kusteeyí, Our Culture: Tlingit Life Stories (1994). Recent years have also seen an outpouring of Alaska Native poetry by writers such as Dauenhauer (Tlingit), Mary TallMountain (Koyukon/Athabaskan), Robert Davis Hoffman (Tlingit), and Joan Naviyuk Kane (Iñupiaq).

Indigenous Alaskan literature has gained increased national and international attention, partly as a result of the larger Native American Renaissance that developed across the Lower 48 in the late 1960s. Various exchanges allowing for the circulation of ideas between Alaska Native and American Indian authors helped generate excitement about literary production in the 1970s and 80s. As Ruppert notes, writers such as Joy Harjo, Geary Hobson, Wendy Rose, Joseph Bruchac, and others visited Alaska and gave public lectures across the state, which had lasting effects on audiences and authors alike (“Alaska Native Literature” 334). Leslie Marmon Silko, for instance, lived in Ketchikan for a few years in the mid-1970s where she wrote most of her novel Ceremony, while her short time in Bethel also shaped some of the writings in Storyteller (Nelson 248).

Today many new Alaska Native voices are coming into print, and various major publishers are becoming interested in signing on indigenous authors from the state. Memoirs such as Ernestine Hayes’s Blonde Indian and William Iggiagruk Hensley’s Fifty Miles from Tomorrow are gaining increased attention, due in part to the growing national interest in life writing and autobiographies in general. While a new awareness about Alaska Native literature has created important opportunities for indigenous writers and their communities, problems can also arise with this enhanced interest. The demands of the literary market place, for instance, may place burdens and restrictions on the types of stories indigenous Alaskan writers are able to produce as well as which voices get to be heard. Genre conventions shaping memoirs and autobiographies can also prove troubling in that they may value individuals over communities, placing inordinate worth and meaning on the life of single, isolated self.

Elected to the Alaska House of Representatives and the Alaska Senate and an influential figure who helped pass the indigenous land claims act, Hensley addresses these problems, noting that in his culture there is a “sense of propriety” that cautions against elevating oneself above others. Throughout his memoir Hensley stresses the ways it always “takes many people to create success” and credits other indigenous Alaskans who worked hard to ensure a better future for their communities (8). In a similar way, Ernestine Hayes uses autobiography not only to chronicle her childhood in Southeast Alaska, her travels throughout the West, and her return to the state as an adult, but also as a way of remembering stories her Tlingit grandmother told her about their kinship with bears, spiders, and other life forms, as well as oral narratives about how glaciers shaped their homeland, Lingít Aaní, and how Raven brought light to the people. Ultimately, both Hensley and Hayes place their life experiences in the context of these larger struggles for indigenous rights and survivance, whether it is through their work with legislation and other efforts at creating meaningful political change or through a focus on Alaska Native education, cultural revival, and storytelling.

In Blonde Indian: An Alaska Native Memoir, Hayes describes her coming of age in Juneau and the American West as an only child raised by a single mother and devoted grandparents.1 Born in 1945, the author never met her father and heard only partial stories about him while growing up. The title of her narrative comes from the light-colored hair she had as a child and from a song her grandmother used to share with her. “Blonde Indian, Blonde Indian,” her grandmother used to sing, while the author danced and sang along (5). Her grandfather, whose “white man name” she carried, was frequently away from the family for months at a time while fishing (5). Hayes remembers that when he returned home, he enjoyed baking for them, making biscuits in the oven of their wood-burning stove, and sometimes bringing the rare treat of butter for the family to melt on top.
The process of providing, making, and sharing food appears as a central focus of her memoir, an activity that is linked to the challenges of living under a colonial system and a capitalist economic order, which disrupted their relationship to the land and how they traditionally provided food for themselves. Hayes recounts the family’s subsistence hunting and fishing in Juneau. “In my grandmother’s house back across the channel,” she writes, “we ate deer meat and porcupine my uncles poached from land that once belonged to our powerful ancestors, the Kaagwaantaan” (10). Hayes remembers helping her family stay fed, walking along the edge of town “to the cold storage docks past men in yellow rubber suits cutting fish and throwing unwanted fish parts onto the wooden docks where I was often sent to collect the heads for that night’s boiled soup” (11). At her Aunt Erm’s house where she is sent to stay for a time, Hayes remembers that she “hauled wet seaweed from the beach to feed the garden, weeded the eager potatoes and carrots” while she fed the chickens and looked forward to all the “enchanted dishes” her aunt prepared (25).

When family members succumb to alcoholism, the author’s life starts to decline. The crisis becomes visible in the diminished diet that replaces beloved meals she once enjoyed after caregivers lose interest in cooking and other domestic labors. A diet based on subsistence hunting and fishing is thus replaced with processed foods purchased at the store, including canned milk, boxed cereals, “fried potatoes cut up with wiener nickels,” as well as canned corned beef “stirred into a frying pan and mixed with hot sticky rice … canned Spam with canned sweet potatoes … and hamburger served with dark brown canned gravy poured over rice” (33). At school, Hayes watches the white mothers prepare items for the bake sale – desserts “made of magic” (17) – while she dreams one day that she too will “cast sprinkles on enchanted cakes” (26).

The family’s transformed diet ultimately reflects a larger crisis of delegitimization facing many Alaska Natives and is representative of the larger colonial system that disrupts indigenous cultures across the nation as a whole. In *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food*, Allison Carruth examines the politics of the modern food system along with its failings, linking transformations in the development, preparation, and consumption of food to larger accounts of globalization and post-World War II American power (4–5). For Carruth, literature about food and diets offers connections between “social and interpersonal registers” as well as between “symbolic and embodied expressions of power” (5). From the development of agribusiness to issues of free trade, food justice, global branding, and the transnational networks that rely on “geographic and psychic distance between people and that profit on our enchantment” with “exotic” tastes and products (7–8), the modern food system becomes an important force to examine in making sense of post-war indigenous struggles across Alaska.

Throughout *Blonde Indian*, changes in the author’s childhood diet also foreground disruptions in the family’s relationships with each other and their community. She remembers the reciprocal food practices she learned from her grandmother. As they sit at the table enjoying a meal together, Hayes’ grandmother describes their cousin, the brown bear. She explains that if her granddaughter wanders too far from home and finds herself near the forest while picking berries, she should speak to her “unseen cousin” and say, “Don’t bother me, cousin! I’m only here for my share! I’m not trying to bother you!” (5). The stories provide the author with a sense of extended family. “I had no sisters or brothers and I had few friends,” she writes, but bears
were my cousins and the wind was my grandfather. … wild plants grew on the hill beside our old house, and a creek led up the mountain behind me, and seaweed and crabs danced in the ocean channel at my feet. I never questioned that I belonged.

Hayes remembers lessons too about harvesting food from the abundant life of the sea and the land in Southeast Alaska:

She taught me to dig fast for clams on the rich beach, watch for their squirting spit, run fast, dig fast, place my treasured clams carefully into a pail, fill the pail and carry it home, wet hungry beach sand sucking my untied shoes. Scrub the uncomplaining shells in fresh cold water. Watch her cook the sea-flavored clams. Drink the juice. If there is some butter left over from grandfather’s last visit, melt a little butter into the broth. Otherwise, maybe some seal oil. Eat the claims with seaweed and salmon eggs. Chew on some dryfish. … Then fresh berries I may have picked that very day, berries that my cousin the brown bear has so kindly allowed me to take from the edge of the forest, from where he quietly watched.

The passage calls to mind a poem that Tlingit author Nora Marks Dauenhauer wrote a few decades earlier about adapting to dietary changes that were gradually finding their way into her life. In “How to Make a Good Baked Salmon from the River,” Dauenhauer offers a recipe for adapting traditional ways of preparing meals to the realities now facing readers. The poet describes how salmon is best prepared when it is cooked at camp near the beach using a fire and a wooden stick. Knowing that many in her community no longer live in rural places or have access to these supplies, she concedes that the food may be prepared in the city in a kitchen with electricity and a black frying pan. Thinking how tasty fresh berries would be alongside the salmon, she again acknowledges limitations and welcomes other cooks to open instead fruit cocktail from a can (Droning Shaman 11–13). Growing up in an earlier generation, Dauenhauer struggled to negotiate changes in Tlingit diets, and thus for her a few compromises do not hurt the dish. By the time Hayes returns to Tlingit culture, however, the colonial system has made such dramatic transformations in the modern food system and in Alaska Native communities that it becomes difficult for her to make similar accommodations in recreating traditional meals.

Just as the colonial system diminishes the food traditions of her community, so it brings an educational system that is also damaging. Hayes’ memoir addresses her experiences attending what she calls “white people’s schools” where teachers did not value her culture (10). She remembers the basement schoolroom that houses “stiffly folded chairs … where dainty little girls and clean little boys stared at me when I entered, always dirty, always hungry, always late” (8). For a student who went on to become an award-winning writer, stories already made a strong impression on her. Hayes remembers the reading groups into which they are divided; Seagulls are the lowest and Bluebirds are the highest. She describes the books they read:

Dick, Jane, and Spot live in an oversized, brightly shuttered house with Mother, a yellow-haired woman with white skin and smiling red lips who waves a morning goodbye across the manicured lawn to Father, dressed in a business suit and stepping
into a shiny new car. … Dick and Jane and Spot frolic with a bright red ball in the sunny yard. Spot is a small, mostly white, frisky dog with a black spot around his eye. It is a clever, playful name. Dick neatly tucks his striped, colorful shirt into belted trousers. I sense that Jane is a Bluebird.

(10)

As a child, Hayes already notes the differences dividing the classroom. While “Bluebirds” move “comfortably and confidently” in the world, she remembers entering it “timid and alone,” even though she is one of the strongest readers in the class (13). Yet if Hayes senses that she doesn’t belong at the white people’s school, she knows she belongs to the land. “I would never be a Bluebird. Nor a Wren. Nor a Seagull,” the author writes, but takes comfort in her grandmother’s stories. “‘Never forget,’ she told me daily, ‘you are an Eagle. Not Raven. Not Seagull. You will always be an Eagle and a Wolf. You will never be a Bluebird’” (15). These stories provide a different value system, what Ruppert describes as an alternative epistemology that the colonial system has “repressed and supplanted” (“Survivance” 286). Thus, for Hayes, some of the stories her teacher reads to the class do not make sense. She especially remembers a perplexing tale about a princess and a pea. “What makes a woman so precious, so unusual, that she can confidently complain of a trifle, demand and receive such extraordinary favor,” she wonders (11).

When her mother enters a hospital in Seward to be treated for tuberculosis, Hayes is often left alone and unsupervised. She ends up being sent to juvenile and reform centers, spending time at Haines House and a missionary boarding school in Valdez. When her mother returns, they leave for California. For many years, Hayes wanders the Lower 48, “like a person in a strange dark forest. … It was a long time before I finally came back” (26). Blonde Indian chronicles her travels through California, Nevada, and Washington, tracing her experiments with the “back-to-nature movement” and the “back-to-jesus movement” (79). She is called Sister Ernestine and teaches Sunday school; she doesn’t wear slacks or makeup or any jewelry and doesn’t cut her hair, play cards, watch TV, or “say gosh or darn” (80). The author writes about a white man who told her he was Indian, which she believed. “I had no dealings in Alaska with people who claimed to be Native unless they actually were, and I had no reason not to believe him” (78). She has two children and later finds herself in an abusive relationship, facing physical ailments, depression, an attempted suicide, and eventually homelessness.

At age forty, Hayes realizes she needs to “go home now, or … die with my thoughts facing north” (111). The author enroll in college, earns an MFA, and works at the Naakaahidi Theater in Juneau performing Tlingit stories. She is eventually hired as a professor in the English Department at the University of Alaska, Southeast in Juneau. In the early years when she first returned to Alaska, Hayes is able to reconnect with her community through her work as a tour guide on ships that travel through the Inside Passage. Her position involves teaching visitors about the region and its indigenous people. As she explains to the tourists, some people believe that the rich and abundant land enabled the Tlingit to develop its complex art, “the yellow cedar carvings, red cedar bentwood boxes and house screens, stylized woven blankets, formline painting and design” (52). They believe the plentiful nature of Lingít Aaní enabled the community to develop an elaborate social order with its matrilineal society and its subgroups, the Eagle and the Raven, who adhere to a reciprocity and balance so that an Eagle traditionally marries a Raven, and when a Raven gets pierced ears, it is traditionally an Eagle who performs the task (53).
The author teaches visitors about the abundant nature of Lingít Aaní – the five kinds of salmon and the different shellfish inhabiting the waters. She tells of the many types of seaweed, which are collected in the spring to be used the rest of the year, often cooked with salmon eggs or enjoyed “dry like popcorn” (52). She describes the berries: “salmonberry, huckleberry, blueberry, raspberry, soapberry, cranberry, nagoonberry, Jacob berry, strawberry, thimbleberry” (52). As the author explains, “When the land was as it should be, there was enough for all the people, and all the bears, and all the eagles and gulls and ravens” (65). For thousands of years, there was enough for all the people; the problem is that new people came who wanted too much. A poem by another Tlingit writer addresses this greed. In his well-known poem, “Saginaw Bay: I Keep Going Back,” Robert Davis writes about resource extraction and developers who bulldoze forests across Alaska, leaving the land scarred and bare in their wake. “Some men can’t help it,” he explains, “they take up too much space, and always need more” (SoulCatcher 19; Kollin 144–46).

Hayes comments on the problems of those who want and have too much. One figure in her memoir describes the Exxon Valdez oil spill. “Why were they still in charge?” he asks. “They elbowed their way in to shit all over everything and then they elbowed their way in to tell everyone how to clean up all the shit” (122). People in the state soon become rich from all the workers who went north to Valdez to get paid big money to clean up all the oil all over everything from one of those tankers that spilled millions of gallons and destroyed in a few hours what everyone thought would take at least a few more years to ruin.

(121)

While she chronicles various crises and negative effects brought about by the colonial system, Hayes does not end her memoir on a note of despair. Instead, she concludes with the words of her grandmother. “Remember that the land is enspirited. It is quickened,” her grandmother tells her.

When as you conduct your life you chance to see an eagle, or a wolf, or a bear, remember that it too is conducting its life, and it sees you as well. ... When you remember this, and feel this, and know this, you will want to hug the land. You will want to embrace it.

(173)

In his narrative, Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People, William L. Iggiaagruk Hensley likewise chronicles a history of conflict and survival under the colonial system in the North. The author was born in 1941 near the shores of Kotzebue Sound, less than thirty miles from the Arctic Circle, ninety miles from Russia, and fifty miles from the International Date Line (11). As a child, Hensley faced hardships that led him to be adopted by his mother’s uncle, and like Hayes, he spent part of his life outside Alaska, in his case attending boarding school in Tennessee and then university in Washington D.C. While he struggled with issues of identity and belonging, Hensley eventually became an influential figure in state politics and in securing land claims for Alaska Natives in the early 1970s.
While official maps call his hometown Kotzebue, the people who have lived there for thousands of years know it as “Qikiqtaruk,” meaning “small island” (11). As Hensley explains, the land presents many challenges; the winters are nine months long, and when it becomes really cold – around 50 or 60 below zero – the people describe it as “itralliq,” meaning “bitter cold, so cold it hurts” (16). In this weather, any exposed skin quickly turns white, a sign that frostbite has set in. If someone manages to work up a sweat in that temperature, the person is likely to freeze the moment his or her body starts to cool. Hensley grows up knowing there was “very little room for error” under such conditions and thus maintains a respect for the land (16). “There are few people in America who can say that their forebears were here ten thousand years ago. That is a powerful feeling,” he writes (18). The knowledge “that your ancestors played with the same rocks, looked at the same mountains, paddled the same rivers, smelled the same campfire smoke, chased the same game, and camped at the same fork in the river gives you a sense of belonging,” he explains. At any moment, one “might unearth an ivory harpoon head or a flint scraper” and suddenly realize that these items are objects that one’s “forebears used millennia ago” (18–19).

Because they occupy a relatively isolated region, the indigenous people of Arctic and subarctic Alaska have often experienced a different colonial history from other indigenous groups in the United States. As Yup’ik scholar Shari Huhndorf points out, across regions in the Far North indigenous groups engaged in various forms of political resistance, but did not partake in straightforward warfare with colonizers. This was partly because Europeans arrived in the region in smaller numbers and over a more gradual time period compared to other parts of the United States. Also, because the region was regarded as nearly uninhabitable by the colonizers, interest in the Far North was mostly consigned to resource extraction in the form of fur, minerals, and oil (Huhndorf 101).

In his memoir, Hensley recalls this history of colonial contact and remembers growing up at a time when some white establishments displayed signs that read “NO DOGS OR NATIVES ALLOWED” (213). He also remembers contact with populations from Outside – the name that is given to anyone not from Alaska. As a boy, Hensley looked forward each year in late summer to the arrival of the North Star (a ship out of Seattle) that would appear off the shore of Kotzebue, bringing people as well as goods that traders would sell across the region (65–67). The author recalls the circulation of cultural products, including motion pictures, which played at Archie Ferguson’s Midnight Sun Theater. Hensley and his friends either paid the twenty-five cents to see the new movie or slipped in underneath someone’s parka if they didn’t have enough money (62). “Westerns were our favorites,” he recalls. “Hopalong Cassidy, Tex Ritter. … we would really get into the wild western – the fancy horse tricks, the quick draws with the six-shooters, the brawling and the falling off balconies. And the fierce Indians” (62). It was many years before he realized how he and his friends managed to internalize the racial politics of the colonial system. “We took the bait Hollywood gave us,” he explains, “and sided with the ‘good guys.’ We were unaware – entirely – of the fact that our own people had considerably more in common with the Indians than with their onscreen enemies” (62).

Later while writing his memoir, Hensley begins to make connections between his life and “the story of a hundred thousand Alaska Natives of every tribe, spanning several generations … families and cultures in danger of being obliterated by change, disease, and cultural upheaval” (9). Partly due to his community’s isolation and because there were no transnational political organizations linking the Inupiat with indigenous groups elsewhere,
Hensley didn’t make these connections until much later. “I often wonder what might have happened in our world had we been more aware of the catastrophes faced by our fellow indigenous peoples, beginning in Jamestown four hundred years ago,” he writes. “Could we have forestalled the negative effects of disease, alcohol, starvation, and people with superiority complexes?” (230).

As a boy, Hensley attends the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) school in Kotzebue which, like other such schools, aimed to assimilate indigenous Alaskans into American life. Because the school only operated through the eighth grade, if students wanted to continue their education, they had to attend boarding schools elsewhere. At his Baptist boarding school in Tennessee, Hensley befriends another athlete who is Cherokee and who invites him home to North Carolina; there he learns for the first time about the struggles of the Cherokee and the Trail of Tears. He goes on to study at George Washington University where he and his new friend Hank Adams, an Assiniboine-Sioux, attend the 1963 March on Washington (105).

Upon his return home in 1956, Hensley enrolls at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, but finds he needs a job in order to pay his living expenses. He ends up working one summer on the controversial “Project Chariot.” In the 1950s and 60s, the nuclear scientist Edward Teller supported “peacetime uses of atomic energy” and developed a project with the Atomic Energy Commission to create a deep-water harbor along the Arctic coast near Kotzebue by detonating up to six thermonuclear bombs. The project would have been situated in the middle of Iñupiat lands. Had the Atomic Energy Commission gone forward, the explosions were estimated to be 160 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and were guaranteed to have catastrophic effects on the environment as well as the Iñupiaq community for generations to come. Iñupiat along with various environmentalists eventually leaked information that helped stop Project Chariot. Because major state newspapers were generally in support of these developments, Alaska Natives also started their own paper. In 1961, Tundra Times, led by Iñupiaq Harold Rock, helped to foster closer ties between Alaska Native groups and later played a role in passing the indigenous land claims act (Hensley 102; Andrews & Creed xxii–xxiii). In his memoir, Hensley confesses that he likes to believe his crew may have contributed to the demise of Project Chariot. That summer, his team managed to complete only half of the holes they were supposed to drill because their equipment could not cut through the dense shale (102).

A key moment in Hensley’s political awakening comes in the wake of his family’s dispossession. After statehood, the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) decided to send surveyors to Kotzebue to establish lots for individual sale at public auctions. “We did not think of straight lines and pieces of paper as describing our relationship to the land. We had lived on it, gloried in it,” he writes. “Thousands of years of our heritage lay just under the surface, and the bones of our ancestors were there among them” (108). When officials discover oil under the surface of the land, more changes arrive in the region. Hensley notes the ways that oil has actually long served at the center of Iñupiaq culture. “For millennia, the Inuit had been aware of oil seeps in the North Slope of Alaska, and had used them for their own fuel” (151). He explains that a “thousand generations of our forefathers powered their bodies and fed their dogs and kept iglus warm with seal oil, whale oil, and walrus oil. Seal oil practically runs in our veins” (150). Throughout history, indigenous Alaskans have had a complex relationship with populations who desired oil. The demand for fuel, for instance, originally brought Europeans to Greenland, where
in “just a few hundred years, the whales were virtually wiped out in that part of the world” (150). Likewise, whalers from New England hunted with such intensity that by the late 1800s, both whale and walrus populations were almost killed off, causing widespread starvation among the indigenous peoples in the region. In 1865, the discovery of crude oil in Pennsylvania led to the deep decline in whaling along with the economic stability of many Alaska Native communities (150–51).

Struggles for land rights and resource development thus become important issues for Hensley. When he enrolls in a constitutional law class at the University in Fairbanks, he has the opportunity to research the legal issues surrounding Alaska’s lands (111). During his studies, he learns that the 1959 Act of Congress admitting Alaska as the 49th state indicated that the United States never won any land from Alaska Natives in battle or through treaty. Because Alaska Natives had not relinquished their land rights, they retained aboriginal title to the land, a discovery that becomes the legal basis for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (112–13). Hensley plays an influential role in passing ANCSA and runs for public office. Later in his career, he becomes involved in setting up the Inuit Circumpolar Council, a transregional and transnational organization that helps unite the Inuit of the polar world, an important development for the political and cultural futures of indigenous peoples across the Arctic (210).

The anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan has noted that Alaska Natives have often faced what she describes as a particularly American form of Orientalism that depicts Eskimos in particular – and one could argue indigenous Alaskans in general – as an unchanging and premodern people frozen in time, the embodiment of the prelapsarian origins of western culture, the epitome of nature, and the purest form of “essential man” encountered by modern society (Freeze Frame xi). In their memoirs, Hayes and Hensley provide different understandings of indigenous Alaskan identity. Their texts offer an important corrective to settler-colonial understandings of Alaska’s Native peoples, while countering misconceptions about its indigenous inhabitants as a premodern people occupying a past and dying world. In the process, their memoirs note affinities and connections that Alaska Native communities have with indigenous peoples across the nation and the world. Indeed, this continued recognition and study of shared histories is likely to inform the literary production and political labors of Alaska’s indigenous populations for years to come.

Note

1 Although Blonde Indian is marketed as a non-fiction memoir, Hayes includes a parallel fictional narrative alongside her life story. As the author explained to me in email correspondence, current systems of genre classification do not fully describe the diverse narrative practices many Native American writers currently employ.

Works cited


——, email correspondence with the author. 13 January 2015.


