

Gwichyaa Zhee-A Climate Summit Journey

By Julianne Warren, drafted and vetted, 2019

Fairbanks, 2018

The ribboning patterns of aurora—like colorful dreams—help hunters predict springtime routes of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, David Smith tells us. Smith is a Gwich'in hunter from Vashraii K'oo (Arctic Village). His is one of fifteen villages of the unified Gwich'in Nation, a branch of Athabascan people. The villages dot the migratory path of the animals—one of the last healthy barren ground herds left in the continent. Twice a year, the Porcupine Herd performs the longest terrestrial migration on Earth. They rumble to and from their traditional calving grounds across the current political boundary between the U.S. and Canada. The calving ground is a coastal plain—a 110-mile long and relatively narrow twenty to forty-mile-wide band of tundra between the Beaufort Sea and Brooks Range. This plain is known by the Gwich'in People as Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit or “the sacred place where life begins.”

The Gwich'in People call themselves Caribou People, intertwined continuously with one another nutritionally, culturally, and spiritually for thousands of years to the present. Iñupiat tribes also have long depended on the health of the Porcupine Herd interwoven with their lifescape. Mere decades ago, the U.S. Government named the Herd's calving grounds the “10-02” area of The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Neither Gwich'in nor Iñupiat Nations, though, ever ceded these and other ancestral lands to Russia or to the U.S. In other words, the State of Alaska, including the Refuge, is land stolen from Indigenous Peoples. Another threat has been looming for over thirty years—the theft of fossil hydrocarbons from under the 10-02 area, which would do grave injury directly to this land. Burning more oil and gas into Earth's atmosphere also would steal more cold from the Arctic, further melt it, further destabilize the habitability of the whole warming planet. This standing threat of Refuge drilling was re-ignited by the incoming Trump administration.

It is good to respect the caribou bulls traveling with the herd, Smith continues, because they are teaching their young where to go, what to expect. It is better to kill a lone bull, he explains. Smith is

practicing his personal narrative of caribou entwinement, in a safe space. It is May 2018. He is sharing with those gathered for “Arctic Refuge Advocacy Training” in Fairbanks, Alaska. I am attending this intensive workshop on the history, politics, and avenues for defending Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit from oil and gas drilling. The two-day advocacy workshop is led by the Gwich’in Steering Committee [GSC] Executive Director Bernadette Demientieff, with support from Trustees for Alaska attorney Brook Brisson and Sierra Club Our Wild America Campaign representative Alli Harvey. Participants are seated at tables under the flag of the Gwich’in Nation—sky blue with a round red planet silhouetting the face and antlers of a caribou who is standing erect, nose stretching upward. We sit in David Salmon Hall. The Reverend Chief Dr. David Salmon, according to Gwichyaa Zhee (Fort Yukon) Chief Steve Ginnis, had advised: “Never underestimate an Athabaskan because they know more than you think.”

Smith ends his story at the training event with a challenge intended for non-Gwich’in listeners from Alaska to Washington, D.C. and beyond. Come visit him in Vashraii K’oo. Come walk on Gwich’in ancestral homeland. Maybe even encounter some caribou. Anyone who does so, Smith insists, will understand why the inseparable Gwich’in ways of life and the sacred coastal plain supporting them must be defended. Later that day, I ask, again, what non-Gwich’in people like me could do to strengthen alliance with his Nation. Smith repeats, come visit his Nation’s Land.

In the summer of 2019, I do so. I travel to attend the first Arctic Indigenous Climate Summit in Gwichyaa Zhee (Fort Yukon), hosted by this small city, the GSC, and Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments. Gwichyaa Zhee is Demientieff’s home village. Her mom, Betty Flitt, also on the GSC staff, and Demientieff’s grandfather, Daniel Horace, are Gwichyaa Gwich’in. This place is about one hundred miles south of Vashraii K’oo and ten miles north of the Arctic Circle.

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Circle City, 2019

On June 10, I leave Fairbanks extra early in the morning because I love morning. I feel nervous and excited. I drive this part of the journey alone to give myself space in which, as an introvert, I crave to contemplate. I go three hours up the Steese Highway, changing from pavement to dirt road, climbing up

Eagle Summit and back down. I stop on the Steese for a porcupine, quills-folded and bear-like, sauntering safely across the road in front of me. About an hour along the highway, I pull aside to admire a rainbow springing from spruce-green forest disappearing into grey billows. Then, more up and down the mountain into Circle City. This is the end of the road at the bank of the *chų gąjį han*, the white water river—that is, the Yukon. From here, the Yukon Flats stretch to the horizon to the north, west, and east. From a bit of nearby land jutting into the water I hear nesting geese knelling up a storm. The road here is the best drive I have ever taken. I feel lucky to be alive, and to be alive right here and now.

Since I am so early, I have several hours to wait in Circle's boat launch area for a few other Fairbanksan colleagues and friends to arrive. These include Betty Flitt, whom I love to be around, as well as other GSC staff, including two young women-Rina and Julia. I am a newcomer to Alaska. I've lived in Fairbanks, ancestral Lands of Tanana Dene, only six years. I am of Frisian and Welsh ancestry, and was born in the U.S. East Coast. In the past year, since the GSC Advocacy Training, I've continued deepening community relationships and my own self-transformation. Besides the help offered by GSC, I've attended decolonizing and other activist-training workshops held by Native Movement and Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition. I've also continued collaborating with FCAC as an Arctic Refuge advocate and GSC ally. I've shared in works such as a month-long letter writing campaign, planning a winter vigil, and supporting community actions as correctives for Environmental Impact Statement hearings improperly run by the Bureau of Land Management. I am learning to identify and transition from my ingrained settler-colonial assumptions and to redirect my white privilege. It has become a priority to seek out, listen to, and amplify Indigenous elders and land-keepers as land relationship experts. Doing this within my pre-existing, non-Indigenous academic circles has cost me something. The costs have given me small glimpses of systemic constraints on others beyond my previous experience.

After the other Fairbanksans arrive at the boat launch area, I enjoy waiting together for the skiffs from Gwichyaa Zhee. It is sunny and hot. Many of us take off layers, down to sleeveless shirts and sandals, and don hats. I slather on sunscreen. In my hours waiting here, I also meet a lot of unfamiliar people who are coming and going to and from the River—hunters and fishermen, a dog musher, local

folks parked for a smoke and a gaze at the water, a town manager, workers loading building materials onto a barge. This is a delivery for Ikhènjik River, or Birch Creek village, on a tributary of the Yukon. A charismatic man named Vince Alexander, who seems to live well within his own vision, says he and I are heading to the same place. He shakes my hand and looks me in the eyes. More than once he asks me where I am from and where I am going. Then he turns back to help with the barge loading.

Mike Peter, Second Chief of Gwichyaa Zhee, is my boat driver. He's had a late start, driven through a rain shower, and hit a sandbar on the way to pick us up. The river is running very low, a reality that will be noted repeatedly in the days of the Summit. Rina and her two kids-Livy and Dax-and I will ride together. We toss our luggage into the open boat along with her family's bright orange, blue, and pink sleeping bags. I gratefully sit on one with my back to the metal side of the vessel. Livy and Dax curl up in the pile of our stuff, which includes puffy coats and blankets. The Second Chief, his companion, and Rina sit on stools, facing the wind. Away we go along the silty river, three hours of breezy, bumpy, and chillier than I had believed, though GSC had warned travelers. I pull a parka out of my bag and wrap it around my life preserver. The Yukon is a cloudy river, a big river, a banks-eroding-skin-of-topsoil-skin-folding-into-river. A swallow follows alongside the boat for a minute before peeling off. A few miles along, a half dozen Forster's terns fly overhead, like snowy angels with black caps trailing wakes of long tail.

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Camp

I add my tiny shelter to the ephemeral tent suburb expanding about four hundred yards from the northern bank of the Yukon. I set up my camp in a nook of wild roses blooming next to a couple of four-foot-high spruce trees. I eat the generous meal of corn, meaty salads, and biscuits offered by our hosts. Dax brings me a handful of bluebells that he's picked, and one or two rose petals also to nibble. With the other late arrivals, I sit under the Octagon, a wide pole-built structure half-covered with blue tarps for protection from heat and rain. After supper, I visit a rustic, wooden outhouse with an uncomfortably gaping hole widened by animal chewing. Porcupine, I am thinking. I brush my own teeth with fresh water

from a barrel. I curl up in my sleeping bag, cushioned by soft tundra. I sleep deep that first night and each subsequent one under the sun who barely dips down at latitude 67 so close to solstice.

Gwichyaa Zhee—in English, roughly, “House on the Flats.” From millennia ago, this was a place of storehouses, and a trading post. *Zhee* also translates loosely as “angel” or “sky.” Maybe this naming reminds its speakers that stores of food—lifted on stilts--and other gifts are blessings of Creator.

Gwich’in People did not traditionally live in such settled villages, I learn. Doing so now is an adaptation forced by colonization. So, too, is the graveyard, explained bus tour guide Richard Carroll. Before 1862, cremation was usual. Later in the week, on a walk, I weave between white crosses that commemorate the lives of far too many youth.

With past winter temperatures far below zero, it is also only more recently that people visited, let alone lived, in the Flats year round—this includes Gwich’in, as well as newcomer fur trappers and gold rushers, and, in the 1950s, the US Air Force, a base that is now closed. This small city got a post office in 1898, and was incorporated in 1959. In 1984, a NASA “sounding rocket” was launched from this ground, a research vessel that pierced the heavens to harvest atmospheric data. Sometimes wayfarers visit. A man from Europe who’d set up camp, not knowing of the Summit, was surprised to find himself surrounded by so many others.

For my part, I have come here to the Summit to hear the programmed speakers and to continue learning about climate change and how to be a more effective allied-community member. Moreover, coming here to the Indigenous Summit at Gwichyaa Zhee is personal. It is relational, and it is sensual. I have come in remembrance of a heart commitment I made in 2018. I have come to witness something of the spirit of the ancestral Land of Caribou People. I have come to answer David Smith’s challenge to experience what he knows as irresistible. I have come to try out his claim that to be present in this Arctic lifescape—alongside an ancient membership of people—is to be called to a deepening defense of The Sacred, particularly the Porcupine Herd calving ground—not so very far from here.

The three days ahead will be full and demanding. The mornings are organized with speakers. The afternoon schedule gives time for walking about and for happenstance conversations. In the evenings, the

plan is fiddle dancing a mile or so up the road in Tribal Hall in the center of this small Gwich'in city on the banks of the Yukon.

The Yukon, here at Gwichyaa Zhee, receives waters of the *Ch'oonjik* or "Porcupine Quill River." The river is named for the charismatic, prickly mammal. The caribou herd most entwined with the Gwich'in Nation is named for this River. This watery convergence has long been a good place for salmon weirs, receiving three runs during summers. Walk a few hundred miles north, cross the Brooks Range. From there, your imagination might soar like a Golden Eagle over Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit, "the sacred place where life begins." Beyond this plain, the Arctic Ocean harbors seals and whales and polar bears, with whom, in addition to caribou, Iñupiat tribes and other Alaska Natives have long been inter-reliant.

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"We need to tell that story"

A pivotal message I glean at this Summit is that those who walk on the Land—alongside their ancestors—know it better than those who don't. Millennia of survival and flourishing as an Earth-connected People, I think, is convincing evidence of expert knowledge, scientific as well as in other senses. Tribal Chief Steve Ginnis says: "We know what is happening...We need to tell that story." Gwich'in and other Arctic Native hunters, chiefs and elders, those who are land keepers, are land experts. I hear from the knowledge of their bodies, minds, and hearts that the Arctic is rapidly changing. They are on the front lines of climate warming experience, which is manifesting faster in the Arctic than elsewhere on Earth. Deep Indigenous knowledges, as unique and combined, complemented by academic sciences, including computer-driven models testing hypotheses of global-scale causes and effects, support a unified conclusion: Burnt oil and gas and disrupted living ecosystems, which also release carbon, have led to a world-wide climate emergency. The Vuntut Gwich'in across the border in Old Crow, Yukon, Canada recently issued the first known Indigenous declaration of climate emergency, "Yeendoo Diinehdoo Ji'heezrit Nits'oo Ts'o' Nan He'aa" or "After Our Time, How Will the World Be." This declaration

strikes “the imperative that Indigenous peoples be central to every effort for mitigating and adapting to climate change at local to international scales.”

This physical emergency intersects with moral and social ones. Climate change is disrupting healthy ecological conditions that every People depend on. In a wicked twist of injustice, however, Peoples living closest to Land, including members of the Gwich'in Nation's fifteen villages, have not brought forth the troubles. Yet they are suffering the brunt of the problems. In Demientieff's words at this Summit: “The climate emergency in the Arctic threatens our food, our water, and our future.” With other Indigenous Peoples around the world facing similar threats to cultural adaptive capacities, including traditional responsibilities and spiritual ways of life, health, and survival, Demientieff urges: “We need to stand together and demand that our governments stop allowing oil and gas companies to put their profits before our human rights and basic needs.”

Many Indigenous Peoples are feeling climate burdens head on. At the same time, it has taken long-learned resiliency for many such Nations to live in a place for millennia. Dwelling within dynamic land and Earth has always meant dwelling within contingencies—like, howling winds, below-zero temperatures, better or worse hunting seasons. Add to these, however, recent colonizing pressures on Alaska Natives, including genocide, forced removal of children to government- and/or church-run boarding schools, violent forms of silencing languages and ceremonies, and fossil fuel-driven land destruction. Peoples who have endured all of this—and are still enduring it—prove to have hunters, elders, chiefs, language and culture keepers, herbalists, aunties and grandmothers who know how to be strong and innovative.

The individual and collective wisdom of many Indigenous Peoples—here, of the Gwich'in—as far as I may understand, is a wisdom of heart inseparable from mind inseparable from the rest of the Land, from ancestors, and from new generations. It is a wisdom in which Land-community respect and empirical knowledge are by nature intertwined. Might not respecting this unity of ways of knowing also encourage healing some of the wounds within post-settler-colonial cultures?

A settler-colonial mindset cleaves desire from responsibility. On one side of this alienating worldview there is money greed and on the other side there is so-called “collateral damage.” So-called because what is really lost is not collateral to flourishing health, but connects into the very core of it—clean waters and air, fertile soils, plants and all animals, including the Porcupine Caribou Herd and Gwich’in Nation and all the rest of us, too. And inside the gaping cut out of which health has spilt, emptiness. In the words of Koyukon Athabaskan Tommy Kriska at this Summit, where fossil hydrocarbons have been mined, there is “the void where oil was.” Something must fill it, but, what that will be, nobody yet may know.

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“Where are we going?”

On the third day of the Summit, Enei Begaye, executive director of Native Movement, calls willing participants together. Begaye invites us to share in an exercise with the consent of its inventor, Rose Dominique, a Yup’ik woman from Kuskokwim. Begaye places a drum on the ground under the Octagon. This drum represents the core, she explains. This core is everything that connects to Mother Earth. It centers many Indigenous worldviews, she says.

Begaye is Diné (Navajo) and Tohono O’odham, married into the Gwich’in Nation. Earlier, Begaye retold a story passed on from some of her grandparents. She recalled them saying that when Dene (Athabaskan Peoples) of the north and south meet—maybe as in her marriage, and, as in what is happening here at the Summit—it would mean the end of the world. This would mean, she clarified, that so much change had occurred that the world as formerly recognizable was finished. This finish, I think, might be the consequence of disconnections within Mother Earth, a severed core, empty of herself.

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Consequences are manifest. I think of Kriska’s list of previously unheard of incidents that announce climate-warming. For example, the Yukon running unfrozen as late as November 20th, followed by freezing, followed by mid-winter thaw, thus making river ice unpredictably dangerous. Unusually, in spring, there were almost no black ducks, hill slides into the Yukon, a Moose was seen

swimming eleven miles from Arctic Sea shore, and a Mountain Lion in Minto. Chief Steve Ginnis, Draanjik Gwich'in traditional and Western trained scientist Stanley Edwin, and others report that melting permafrost has made land spongier. The river has become more shallow. Demientieff points out the island visible from where we stand that was not visible when she grew up in the Flats.

Siqiniq Maupin—a twenty-something mother, community organizer with Native Movement, artist, and senior majoring in Iñupiatun at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks—was born in Nuiqsuit. Her city is already surrounded by oil and gas infrastructure and mining. She describes what happens directly to drilled land. She tells of mile-wide erosion of village shoreline since her mom's childhood. Maupin bears witness to discolored white fish, starving caribou, some with black bone marrow, and dead whales full of plastics and toxins. Maupin talks about the smog poisoning the people. She depicts the fire flaring from oil fields—a dark, dystopic actuality—under her ancestral Land, which she is not free to walk on without an industry escort. At the same time, many of her People, Maupin says, have fallen out with traditional values. Money and the ambition to get rich are values that the oil and gas corporations impose, she emphasizes. Stanley Riley is also a twenty-something Iñupiat leader—a hunter, teacher, and spoken word poet—from Anatuuvuk Pass. He tells about finding polar bears drowned on a beach, a caribou route split in two in the aftermath of pipelines, with the animals re-routing away from his neighborhood. Riley describes, too, how oil and gas corporate greed is set against the land-keeping wisdom of tribal elders and the Land's foundations of flourishing.

The youngest Gwich'in Chief, twenty-two-year-old Timothy Roberts, of Venetie, bears witness to greed in another form. He tells of a recent unethical killing of a so-called trophy moose by a flown-in tourist. Roberts expresses concern about powerlessness against this kind of theft. He is concerned about being seen “up here” by anyone who will help in defense of the Animals, the Sacred—this Land, his People.

Stephen Frost, at 87 the oldest elder from Old Crow, has made the very long trip by boat, arriving in middle of the night to be here. He asks: “What are young people supposed to do?”

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Back under the Octagon, Begaye lifts the drum from the ground and places it aside.

Without Indigenous values beautifully threading human activities into the weft of the Land, nothing holds the core together. The void left in the center is surrounded by a ring of children surrounded by a ring of women with an orbit of men behind them, having their backs, their own backs exposed to the outside.

Begaye asks the seated children to leave. The children's departure replays the forced separation of many of their grandparents and great-grandparents from their communities into distant boarding schools.

"What's happening? Where are we going?" asks one child, distracted by play with a five-week-old puppy.

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Now, Begaye walks around the circle, tapping shoulders. First the women, then the men. The tapped ones step away. This reenacts the further erosion of many Indigenous communities via historic and ongoing traumas. These include settler-brought diseases, murders and kidnappings-- especially of women--overuse of drugs and alcohol, suicides--especially by young men--poisoned air and warming climate tied with stolen children, stolen lands, stolen songs, stolen language, missing country foods, shackled and broken values, shattered identities, griefs over lost loved ones.

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As the circles break apart, my throat contracts. I hear others sobbing. This IS the end of the world. "There is no core," I say out loud.

Begaye brings us back together to talk a bit more. Then, we all take a break.

I walk slowly to the river. I dip my fingers into one small eddy. Yes, I hear this echo--"water is life."

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The Songs Return

The representation of Mother Earth's connective core by a drum feels carefully chosen. First the sleeping songs awake, and then Native languages lead us back, Begaye says. Values—respectful

relationships with land and Mother Earth—have been sleeping, Maupin encourages. She believes that it is time to wake up and reconnect and protect what is left, while it still may be possible, she says, to get animals healthy again. When Maupin herself recovered, in her own words, “from walking with the dead,” she quit drinking. Her eyes and ears were coming open. She heard drums. Hearing them made her cry, she tells us, as their music led her to feel what had been missing in her heart.

I hear Maupin tell us that the old songs connected her to belonging in the village of her birth—as sick and sickening from oil mining as it is. The drumming connects her with her mother tongue, with eating tutu (caribou) and muqtuq (whale). It connects her as an Iñupiat woman in solidarity with the Gwich’in. Peoples who once were enemies, she says, are discovering “persistent love,” as Riley underscores, too, in his own words. I feel this love extended to non-Natives. I take courage in words of Princess Daazhrai Johnson. She is Neets’aii Gwich’in, a mom and Creative Producer of *Molly of Denali*, the first PBS kids show with Native characters. Johnson says, “we all have a role.” We know in our hearts what we need to do and how to do it from love.

Mother and childhood activist Mayda Garcia, who is Tewa, Chumash and co-founder of Society of Native Nations, tells us: “The trees are talking about leaving.” As Edwin also had noted, as climate warms, tree lines are heading north. Glaciers are melting, Garcia continues. After oil and gas, wars over water loom next. Resist. Defend. Speak. Talk to kids, she says, talk to trees, rocks, and animals. They will listen and remember. Garcia begins singing and sings for several minutes in smooth syllabic vowels. She sings the “Women’s Willow Song.” The circle begins to heal. The center is reborn. The trees are singing and the children are singing back that which their mothers and grandmothers have passed on.

Demientieff introduces the new Gwich’in Steering Committee Youth Board. She stresses trust in their fresh insight. The future is theirs and their childrens’ kids and so on for generations. The Youth Board will design their own goals and write their own bylaws. This, I learn, springs from *Ni’inlii Declaration* of the Gwich’in Nation, composed three years ago. “We, as Gwich’in youth,” the document reads, “live between two forever changing worlds, and we need to find our own voice and have it be heard.” In line for lunch, Riley, who is also a teacher and youth advocate, quietly shares a song in spoken

word form about his home village of Utqiagvik (briefly called Barrow). I hear this as a gift to the core of healing, to the song in so many forms of land and Earth relations.

Shalak naii--Princess Dazhrai Johnson has us repeat. In English, *shalak naii* is “all my relations.” “If you have a community who loves you,” she says, “you know you can stand back up.” “We know in our hearts what we need to do. Believe in yourself,” Demientieff echoes. “Your ancestors are with you,” she says. Healing

Before meals, serving elders then visitors first, were prayers, often ending in the name of Jesus. At one breakfast I sit next to Louise Benally, a *dineh* mother and grandmother, traditional counselor, and spiritual advisor. The first day of the gathering, under the Octagon, Benally did an opening ceremony. She lit a fire on the ground in the center. With a pipe to her lips she blew smoke to all the cardinal directions. She prayed in words I had never heard before. Yet, at least in part, with my spirit, I understood. In later remarks, Benally urged, “Do not give up. Do not bow down.” In particular, she said, do not submit to “the beast that wants to consume.” Do not submit to a god who would send a prophet with “a book in one arm and a gun in another.” “Believe who you are,” she says.

I start to hear this—“believe who you are”—as another refrain resounding in many voices here. I am not Indigenous. At best, I am becoming a naturalized Land community member, as Potowatomi writer Robin Kimmerer suggests for us non-Natives. I respect the faith of those around me, many Christians. I know that there is an Episcopal clergyman who is attending parts of this Summit. I understand that his church issued a resolution in solidarity with the Gwich’in opposing drilling in the Arctic Refuge. It is as an individual, from my own heart, then, over coffee and pancakes, that I blurt out to Benally, “I am healing from white evangelicalism.” Her eyes widen. “Wow,” she says, “how are you doing that?” “Deep diving and then coming back up for air,” I respond. This is the unlearning work of one whose ancestors have bowed to a consumptive monster, I feel in myself. This is the unlearning work of one who has passed on a spirit-abusive belief in an ungodly god to whom I must now talk back, as I am learning to do. “You have a powerful stone around your neck,” Benally says, indicating the pounamu or greenstone pendant I am wearing. Carved by Aden Hoglund of Ngati Raukawa, it is a Māori figure called *manaia*

with a fish tail, human torso, and bird head. “This comes with a special story,” I say. She says, “hold on to that.” This is the center, I feel, also holding onto me.

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Love your food

Benally expands on what she means when she says, “Believe who you are.” To the group summited under the Octagon, she says: “That is who you are. Eat the bushes.” Eat the Land, the caribou, the whale, the rose petal, I think. “That is who you are,” Benally repeats. Challenge the beast, she continues, “because you love your food.” I take this also to mean, because you love yourself and your community. What feeds us all, we also feed. Everyone eats and every body, eventually, will feed the land. “Focus on unity,” in Begaye’s words, “not on divisiveness.” Again and again it is said here: This story is not tribe against tribe, but tribes and allies resisting an insatiable monster. The message is solidarity against that monster gorging on plants and animals, slurping up below-ground carbon-rich fossil life, knocking back human beings with brown and black skins, coming also for people with white skins. It is a collective “stop” to the monster that excretes climate warming gases into air and poisons into water. It is a collaborative “yes” to shifts from norms of “consumption” and “waste” to values including “food is our medicine,” as Maupin, Edwin, and many others stressed, and to “generosity,” “abundance,” and “reciprocity.”

Alaskans, especially Alaska Natives, are on the front lines of colossal exploitations. The consequences are so rapid and widespread they challenge even the most ancient Indigenous legacies of adaptive innovation and resiliency. “We’re all going to lose,” Maupin says, “if we drill and desecrate Land.” Second Chief Mike Peter reminds his gathered Indigenous family and allied tribes--“We’re survivors. We’re resilient.” Darrell Vent, a hunter from Huslia, speaks from his own experience trying to adjust to pipelines in his tribe’s “backyard.” The caribou that frequented his area changed their route, he explains. They moved farther away, and grew less fat in land that is not ideal for them. Hunting success in the aftermath takes working even harder and with greater safety risks. Adaptation, he says, also comes to

involve trying for animals besides caribou. If unsuccessful, it means being hungry, malnourished, and/or buying more food in stores.

I walk into Fort Yukon Commercial Company to see for myself the notoriously high prices of packaged products. My favorite cereal is \$9.20 a box, twice the price of the same box in Fairbanks. Once the pipelines come making animals more scarce for hunters, even more people go on food stamps and move to cities, Vent continues, to the streets of cities, he says. “You’ll be faced with this,” he warns the Summit, if drilling comes to the Arctic Refuge. You’ll have to “learn to improvise or get run over,” he emphasizes. “We’re native so we adapt,” an elder repeats. At the same time, story after story voices concern. How far can even those best at adaptation, improvisation, and resiliency be further stretched by the deadly feedback between Arctic drilling and frontline climate change? How far can Native Peoples stretch without breaking beyond possibility of healing? This prompts me to ask now--How much farther can non-Native capital-industrial dominators continue drilling down before sinking themselves? Maybe this will happen sooner than they think. “Is there hope?” asks Mike Peter, rhetorically. “There is always hope,” he says. There is, as long as lands and Earth are habitable.

Chuck Peter, at forty-two years old, is already father and grandfather to fourteen kids, a respected Gwichyaa hunter and Land expert. He emphasizes how climate change “changes our everyday life.” He draws attention, again, I think, to the consequences of cleaving the core. He points once more to the lowered river water. The Yukon is out earlier and earlier in the spring and freezes later in the fall, he says. Some years now King Salmon return upstream in such low numbers that US federal managers do not permit taking them. In this way, I learn how a traditional lifeway is suddenly deemed illegal by the U.S. government. The speckle-bellies or white-fronted geese stay a shorter time before flying up north, Chuck Peter continues. The ways the ice melts differently makes it riskier to follow them upriver.

Chuck Peter’s tone lifts as he reflects on his delight in summer fishing, harvesting berries ripening with fall ahead. Moose hunting comes with the changing autumn leaves, he pictures. He imagines a fat bull moose. That is the way things long have worked, anyway. Chuck Peter pauses. I am

thinking, he says, I am distracted by thinking how much I'd like to be eating "fat moose kidneys and blueberry pancakes" right now. The group laughs. My mouth salivates.

One afternoon of the Summit all of our activities are cancelled. This is out of respect for a Gwichyaa Zhee community member who has just passed on. The small city closes down business for the funeral ceremonies. Biding the time, I sit quietly on the steps leading into Tribal Hall. Bernadette Demientieff comes up behind me. She carries a paper plate with some steaming food I don't recognize. "This is for you," she says. "This is caribou tongue." I look up in surprise. I say thank you. I take the food in my fingers as she heads back inside. I take a bite. The morsel is crisp on the edges and soft in the middle. I taste savory spices. And I taste something else unfamiliar. I think about who I am eating, holding back a reflexive gag. I think more about who I am eating and the precious gift of this animal. My tongue is licking a soft cottongrass and lichen-licking tongue. I taste plants in the tender meat. Delicious. I wonder, does my own tongue taste like caribou now?

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"They are who we are"

"If we go, they go," Demientieff says. She is quoting a former Traditional Chief and strong Refuge defender, Jonathan Solomon, again voicing the Gwich'in-Caribou entwinement. Another respected Gwich'in activist, Sarah James, once put it this way: "We are caribou people. Caribou are not just what we eat; they are who we are. They are in our stories and songs and the whole way we see the world. Caribou are our life. Without caribou we wouldn't exist." Demientieff emphasizes the temporal span of this connection reaching back forty thousand years. She recounts a visit she made to Vashraii K'oo, just a few years ago. On this visit she recognized her own broken spiritual, cultural, and material ties, she tells us. Demientieff shares how she committed, then, to healing in herself and in building solidarity with others. Demientieff says how she recently recovered a story in the GSC archives containing a "vow to the [Porcupine Caribou Herd] to always take care of each other." For millennia, the Caribou have been there for her Nation. Now, she says, it is the Nation's turn to care for them. Reciprocity.

During the Summit Arthur RedCloud takes his turn under the Octagon to enact a gift-giving ceremony, which becomes a celebration of reciprocity. RedCloud is Diné (Navajo). He serves with Mayda Garcia as a Society of Native Nations board member. He is also well known as Hikuc in the 2015 film *The Revenant*. In the film, Hikuc comes to the aid of Hugh, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, a character who wears the skin of a bear who had almost killed him. RedCloud explains that he arrived to the Summit with a gift from the South to the North. He did not know, he says, to whom he would give this beautiful present—a carefully hand-beaded leather vest—until after he had arrived. When he met Chuck Peter, RedCloud explains, he knew right away, the vest was for him. With this gift to Chuck Peter, RedCloud says, he is honoring ancestors. He is opening the way to belief in strengthening tribal alliances. Chuck Peter accepts this gift. After he sits down, Vince Alexander enters the center of the Octagon. He unfolds a skin—this is the skin of a bear he'd killed. He gifts this bear skin to RedCloud. The assembly laughs. If you're not laughing, you're not serious enough, a friend once told me.

If it is the end of the world, after all, it might also be a beginning. This ritual of mutual generosity meant a lot to me. Here was a lesson on both the joy and the solemnity at a gift's center. The beaded vest delivered a message of pleasure and responsibility. In my imagination I glimpse a needle catching up the sleeve of one person who uses it to catch up the pant leg of another repeating the same stitching together with however many others—humans and other animals, plants, rocks, and soils—each embroidered into a complex design. As the needle gets tossed back and forth, it also can be shuttled from one generation to another--as a child becomes a mother bearing a child who becomes a man and so forth. Shalak naih, again, as Princess Daazhrai Johnson had said. "All my relations" might mean, after all, getting caught up in something not easy to walk away from. Reciprocity might craft a durable, woven artwork. Reciprocity might be re/connecting to the core of Mother Earth—animal hide to hand to bead to heart to bear who may eat you. Maybe it is what Maupin heard in the song of a drum. Maybe, it is how love holds us and frees us.

It was Indian fiddling, though, not drumming that moved us into dance in the evenings. Pete Peter—of Indian Pete and the Band of Brothers—made the music happen. I had met Pete in Fairbanks the

last winter at the Arctic Refuge vigil. He'd read poetry in Gwich'in side-by-side with Iñupiat elder Nutaaq Simmonds, who also recited in her native language. Pete Peter and I sit and talk on the porch of Tribal Hall one afternoon. He tells me about growing up in a traditional way in Venetie and also of being a widely-travelled U.S. military veteran. Pete Peter's music honors his ancestors and rising generations. He passes on traditional knowledges for suicide prevention, including fiddling, drumming, and dancing—in places North and South—from Alaska Native Villages to Diné reservations.

As we talk, Pete Peter returns to some earlier remarks he made under the Octagon. He stresses the need for spiritual and religious dimensions to count against drilling. I agree with him. And, in fact, so do U.S. policies that are going ignored. The U.S. National Environmental Policy Act, for instance, requires decision-makers to count all “environmental values” that Refuge mining would touch. These would rightly include Gwich'in relationships with sacred and ancestral lands, including the Porcupine Caribou Herd, also vital to Iñupiat tribes. The UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ratified by the U.S, acknowledges the right of Indigenous Peoples “to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship” with their Lands, including “to uphold their responsibilities to future generations.” The traditional calving grounds are sacred to Gwich'in. What happens to the Herd happens to them, nutritionally, culturally, and spiritually, as Demientieff and others here stress repeatedly. Especially amid climate emergency, what happens on the calving grounds with regard to drilling also happens to everyone—antipode to antipode. Yet US agencies and law-makers proceed, heedless and rash.

“My grandpa once said, he would be watching. And, that I'll pray for our future,” sings Pete Peter and his band. The singers switch between English and Gwich'in phrases. This recorded song, titled “Geronimo's Point,” is dedicated to his brother, Jeremiah, who died while moose hunting in the Christian River. “All you Natives know your tongue,” the song continues. “And, your spirit will live forever. Things will be good again. Like they were in the past,” Pete Peter sings. “All along the Yukon River, live our proud Indian Nation. We've been here thousands of years. Our fathers are here forever,” the music goes on. Second Chief, Mike Peters says, “What's not to fight for. Look around.” First Chief Nancy James reminds this summit that over twenty years ago, at a 1988 tribal gathering in Vashraii K'oo,

Gwich'in elders and chiefs directed their People to tell the world we are here and not to compromise.

“Don't give up,” Nancy James re-emphasizes, “We are Gwich'in People, and we never give up.”

I can see this on the dance floor. The fiddlers and guitarists play fast; they play slow. They play long. The center of the Tribal Hall dance floor stays empty at first. The chairs and benches along the wall are full, though. Two by two and singles, the boldest try out their feet. Groups form and break apart. There are contests. Little children and elders win prizes of hand-made jewelry and handkerchiefs. There are programmed dances with swinging couples and quickly tapping moccasins. Those moccasins hold my attention. Their furs and beadworks—a detailed blur of flowers of pink and blue and green and yellow—are dazzling. The room smells like dust and sweat and mosquito repellent. Outside there is a fire going for s'mores. When the floor thins out a bit, a man who goes by “Elvis” invites different women to join him. I go along with him to the floor, hooking elbows. At the water cooler, Phil, another military veteran, I learn, invites me to learn the two-step. He patiently teaches me out of the spotlight. Once I catch on, we head into the center of action. Left foot forward, right foot back, right foot forward and back, and, again, feeling it natural and fun.

In the corner of a bench that lines two walls, a few come to rest in a crowded cluster. Desire merges into a wordless, nameless, dynamic of close bodies. For unity, difference must be acknowledged, I think. Varying motives of genders and ages, mixed with plays involving sizes and shapes of buttocks and breasts, colors of skin and eyes, race, culture, personalities and callings, morality, privilege and power. Brown, white, brown, blue, brown, wrinkled, smooth, round, narrow, adult, child. A tall child moves from seat to floor for the nearby hands of a mother, a bit older than her own, to twist a braid into her hair. There are offers and refusals to dance. Acceptances. Figures move out of and then back into the corner. Maybe-sex scents. Animals posturing, posing. Heat. Human beings. Watery eyes, shoving off, want with or without giving or taking something. Dispersal. Proper farewell hugs and kisses. A selfie or two before the night ends. Who knows what happens, what might be gained or lost, dreamed of or quenched, triggered or healed? At every turn, each and all in that cluster would make good study—nothing at all like a still-life,

though—for a photographer or a painter. Much that happens in a dance stays in a dance, and, I sense, lives beyond questions.

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“We need to help one another”

Gwich'in organizers invited some non-Native experts to this Summit, allies in climate science and policy arenas. The organizers' message of unity tolls for Native and non-Native collaborations, too. “We're all going to lose,” as Maupin said, if more drilling “desecrates Land.” “We need to help one another...We need to be as one...We really do need help,” urges Kathy Tritt, a Gwich'in hunter and fiddler whose hometown is here in Gwichyaa Zhee. Brooke Brisson, a non-Native staff attorney with Trustees of Alaska, speaks on behalf of her legal team. The BLM, in charge of oil and gas leasing processes, Brisson details, claims that drilling the Refuge would have no impact on the Gwich'in. The BLM's stated reasoning, Brisson explains, is that the People do not live day-to-day in the coastal plain. The Bureau practices a willful ignorance, I see. It is a refusal to admit how events in one place—the calving of the Porcupine Herd in the coastal plain—happen reciprocally with events somewhere else—the flourishing of the Gwich'in in surrounding areas. The BLM's argument, to my mind, is something like arguing that New Yorkers don't need healthy farms, vineyards, houses of worship, or a habitable climate because they live in apartments. Brisson, concluding her comments, stresses that tribes can request federal consultations. Legally, the BLM must comply, she says. With the Bureau's timeline for leasing just weeks away, I feel a chill up my spine.

Brie Van Dam is a non-Native atmospheric chemist invited to speak on a western science perspective of climate change in the Arctic. She works with Snowchange Cooperative. This is a Finland-based and local community-driven network of non-Indigenous and Indigenous experts with shared concerns, including climate change and related policy-making. Van Dam describes a few already ongoing Alaska Native and other First Nation-driven ventures, each contributing to their own oral and visual history archives. At the same time, her remarks bring to light challenges of trust-building between cultures. In public discussion, Edwin re-emphasizes to his Native colleagues the importance of

maintaining governance of their knowledge. He re-stresses to non-Natives, that if they're going to do science in a Native community, to send a Native. The extended legacy of settler-colonial, non-Native agents is one not only of stealing lands and languages, but also of misappropriating arts and knowledge from First Nations. Even between those with shared concerns agreeing that "we must help one another," doing so remains no simple work.

This Summit is the first place I've witnessed Native hunters' and elders' expert knowledge hosting that of academic non-Native scientists, rather than the other way around. Western science and its envoys, in this event, are welcomed with a respectful hand-shake. Their institutionalized methods and technologies can, after all, provide complementary lines of evidence to Indigenous ones and add important data to collective understandings, especially at global scales. Along with Van Dam, Joel Clement helps convey these services, as a non-Native ally. Clement, now a Harvard Fellow, is a former Department of Interior executive. He first blew the whistle on the Trump administration and Congress for suppressing climate science and responsible policy-making. He also called out administrative racism. At the Summit, Clement emphasizes that, after the Trump administration took office, thirty percent of the DOI colleagues—who, like him, were pointedly reassigned to misfitting jobs—were American Indian and Alaska Native. The Trump administration's newest Secretary of Interior, David Bernhardt, is an oil industry lobbyist. He is "part of the beast," stresses Clement, referring to Benally's earlier message.

As Tommy Kriska and other Native experts detail for the Summit—based on knowledges gleaned from ancestral stories passed on to present-day experience, from walking the Land—sea ice and permafrost are melting, river ice is no longer predictable; the Yukon stays open longer and is shallower than ever; river banks are eroding; trees and animals are altering patterns to cope, some culturally integral ones are moving away; hunting is more difficult and dangerous. These changes are drastically noticeable within the lifetimes of one to two human generations. Clement adds quantitative details that help sum up local observations and some predictions from global models. These abstractions, I think, are perhaps most important for those who are neither Indigenous nor yet naturalized. The Arctic, says Clement, is warming 2-3 times faster than elsewhere. Sea ice will likely be gone by 2030. Half of permafrost will likely be

melted by 2070. If carbon emissions causing climate change stopped immediately, the already baked-in consequences would still accelerate until 2050. In other words, as Clement puts it, Earth is “in a time of transition. We’re not going back.” Or, in Begaye’s words, when the South and North meet, we will see change that feels like the end of the world; the end of the world as many Indigenous Peoples, as well as non-Indigenous Peoples, have known it.

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Duets

On the last afternoon of our gathering, I notice Clement sitting on the ground in the shade of the tarp-roofed Octagon. I ask if I can join him. He nods okay. “Who is that bird?” I wonder out loud. He doesn’t know either. The bird sings two full, clear tones up and down, repeating. I have been hearing this song through days and nights here—in this season of midnight sun—without glimpsing the songsters. Earlier I had asked Vince Alexander who the birds were. “Robins,” he’d said. I admit now that I didn’t quite believe him. I mean, how could I not recognize the voices of such a familiar animal, I say. A few minutes later, a young man and woman from town join us, sitting on the ground. We form a small circle now. The pair smile and introduce themselves as brother and sister. There is no alcohol allowed at the Summit. But Gwichyaa Zhee is not a dry town. The two share a “buzzball” between them. They joke about how this spherical container, when emptied, would make a good Christmas tree ornament. We all laugh. The conversation returns to birds. Yes, the woman says, she’s also been hearing sandhill cranes, distant, across the river; swans, too.

Early the next morning, I lie in my tent listening, as I have through the past four nights. The loudest songsters are the two-toned birds, which I am still reluctant to believe are robins. There is also a duo of white-crowned sparrows. One of them is singing from the spruceling by my tent. The other is some yards away. The first night I’d heard the sparrows in the wee hours, still bright. They’d swayed me ever so gently out of a deep dream. I still hear them as limning my steady breathing with something sparkling and silvery-pink. The second night there was a bit of rain. My tent fly was wet. I heard a

scrambling right over my head. I popped my eyes open in time to see the eight pointy toes of two sparrow feet slipping off the nylon incline.

That last morning, still listening, I zip open my screen door and step out with my water bottle. I am searching for the toothbrush I dropped among the tundra plants through a haze of mosquitos. I hear a familiar bantering. The sibling pair of yesterday afternoon are heading up the path through our soon-to-be de-camped tent city. They see me wave and come over. We drink now, says the brother, holding a cup, but when we go out to fish camp or on a hunt, we don't. We work hard. We sweat it out. He talks about the eagles he loves to watch along the river. His sister offers to braid my hair. I bend back my head, gratefully, and hold my neck still for her hands to work. The biting insects benefit.

By the time the braid is finished, wind has blown up with some ominous clouds. While the sister and I chat about her grandchild, soon to be born, her brother munches on rose petals and whittles bark off a young willow branch. He ties the bark strips into a bow fixed on the tip of the stick. He points this stick at the clouds directly away from all the tents. He plants the stick in the ground. I hear the clear-toned birds singing, again. "Who is that?" I ask, hoping to get an answer I like better. "A robin," they both say at once." O, okay," I reply. "Yeah," I laugh, "that's what Vince also told me." I don't think I've ever heard that particular song before," I explain.

We look each other in the eyes. We exchange hugs. "I love you," says the sister. "I love you," I return. The pair move on to bid good-bye to my neighbors. The cloud moves away. The wind dies down. The sun comes out over the Yukon where the Porcupine River joins in. Nothing and no one here belongs to me, nor I to them. Yet I feel this Land's life and love, still holding together, healing, the core beating loudly.

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What's Not To Fight For?

I came to the Arctic Indigenous Climate Summit, to Gwichyaa Zhee, to listen and learn, and also to keep a personal commitment. A year ago, back in Fairbanks, David Smith had urged—come visit him in Vashraii K'oo. Come walk on Gwich'in ancestral land occupied with new generations of living people.

Maybe even encounter some caribou. Anyone who did so, Smith believed, would understand why the inseparable Gwich'in ways of life and the sacred coastal plain supporting them must be defended from oil and gas drilling. In response to my question of what non-Gwich'in people, like me, could do to strengthen their alliance, Smith had repeated, come visit his Nation's Land. Find out for yourself.

What I found out filled my head, but, not in a way that could have happened anywhere else. What I learned was viscerally and spiritually inseparable from being with this real Land and with this real People as given to each other—for better or for worse--generation-after-generation for millennia. Inhabited by and inhabiting the Land, I feel the Gwich'in intent to continue. I feel their sovereignty.

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Along with those of my traveling companions, I toss my bag into the skiff that will return us via the Yukon to Circle City, to waiting cars, the Steese Highway, and our homes in Fairbanks. I know to wear my heavier coat for the trip, though the day is hot. Betty Flitt hands us a box full of sandwiches. For this journey, I am seated face-to-the-wind, looking ahead—fast silty water, spruce- and tundra-greened Flats on every side, a “V” of speckle-bellies taking off, chattering tree swallows, white clouds, a horizon, mountains. At our backs, piloting his craft, is Chuck Peter, recipient of the beaded-vest gift.

“What’s not to fight for,” the voice of Second Chief Mike Peters, whose boat had shuttled us here, echoes in my head. “Look around,” he says.

Although words hardly feel necessary.