BECOMING NATIVE AGAIN: PRACTICING CONTEMPORARY CULTURE IN THE YUKON–ALASKA BORDERLANDS

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ABSTRACT

For the Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone members of the White River First Nation (WRFN), conceptions of contemporary Northern Athabascan tradition are understood within the context of several historical events in the Yukon–Alaska borderlands. The history and presence of the international border, twelve kilometers from the community, has amplified themes more broadly associated with indigenous revitalization movements in the North American Subarctic. The construction of the Alaska (Alcan) Highway, deeply enmeshed memories of residential schools, and federal governmental intervention (Umbrella Final Agreement and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) are now regularly regarded as influences that have led to broader regional revivals of Central Alaska–Yukon linguistic and cultural practices. These influences, amplified by the presence of the border, have prompted members of the White River First Nation to reimagine their past in a contemporary, intergenerational way. The retelling of oral histories and the implementation of a Northern Athabascan language program have enabled the White River First Nation community to revitalize precontact cultural and linguistic practices. This article examines one community's experience of a larger trend aimed at restoring and continuing Northern Athabascan culture and language.

Ongoing attempts to define what the term "tradition" means within the Northern Athabascan community of Beaver Creek, Yukon (Fig. 1), shape the way lives are lived in the Yukon–Alaska subarctic borderlands today. The community of Beaver Creek, home to the White River First Nation (WRFN), is no exception. Theirs is a situation markedly affected by a series of historic influences that have been internalized and reconfigured within a Northern Athabascan cultural repertoire. The contemporary revitalization of cultural and linguistic practices in Beaver Creek is representative of larger regional movements to reclaim precontact traditions, with several unique differences.

The area surrounding Beaver Creek is known as the Yukon–Alaska borderlands for fairly obvious reasons—the Canada–United States international border splits the local landscape into two parts. Tribal elders tell stories of the day that U.S. officials showed up and insisted that individuals choose whether to be American or Canadian. The imposition of this border, the construction of the Alcan Highway, and the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) have forced the WRFN to reconcile these events with contemporary cultural beliefs and practices. Nostalgia for what is described as a more "pure" and non-Western past plays a dominant role in present conceptions of Northern Athabascan intergenerational identities in the borderlands.

For the WRFN community, the aforementioned events illustrate a distinct series of "Western" influences within the Yukon–Alaska borderlands region. Over the last century, the impacts of these events have led those in Beaver Creek and other Northern Athabascan communities in the region to actively reconfigure themselves and their contemporary understandings of culture in opposition to "the West." Objectified versions of precontact cultural practices now serve as the "pure" standard by

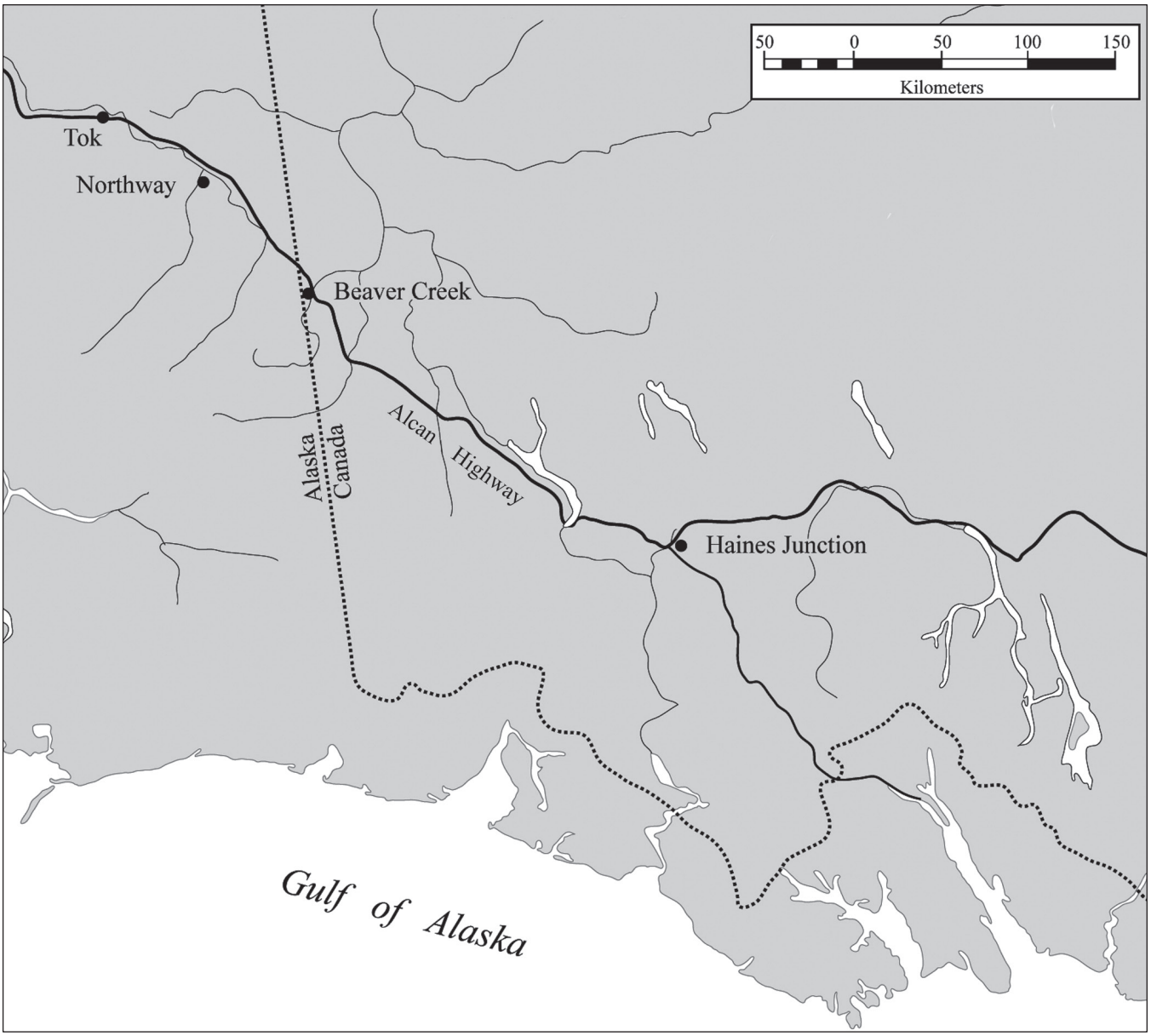

Figure 1. Study area. Map by Dale Slaughter.

which the community may enact "authentic" Northern Athabascan practices.

This paper highlights two distinct themes that adult and elder members of the WRFN use to tell the story of their contemporary culture, themes that have become apparent across much of the Subarctic. The retelling of oral histories and the implementation of a successful Northern Athabascan language program allow for forms of "traditional" cultural expression in the village of Beaver Creek. These activities allow the community to imagine and assert their identities in response to what they view as the ongoing threat of Western influence. This modern world is interpreted within specific intergenerational groups, with each group playing a role in the retelling of the community's story. This essay explores the efforts of tribal elders and adults, aged forty to sixty, to express the importance of local geography, history, and language to younger members of the community through oral histories and the reintroduction of Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone dialects.

The failure of younger community members to adopt practices as they are taught often leads to overlapping and occasionally contradictory interpretations and enactments of contemporary Northern Athabascan culture. Ongoing efforts to reconcile the presumed "death" of traditional Northern Athabascan practices with fears of an already

present and encroaching Western culture[1] feed into the intergenerational processes that shape the cultural realities of Beaver Creek.

BEAVER CREEK

The town of Beaver Creek is located in the southwest of Canada's Yukon Territory along the Alcan Highway and is Canada's westernmost town, 12 kilometers southeast of the Alaska border and the Canadian Customs Post. The WRFN includes the majority of the population of Beaver Creek in the winter months, averaging seventy individuals. The population increases in the summer months to around 120 people, including seasonal workers and members of the community who spend their time in larger towns or cities during the winter.

The community's main employers are the Canadian Customs Post, the WRFN, and two tourist lodges that are open in the summer. Beaver Creek's economy is heavily based on the seasonal tourism that peaks in the summer. Though there are small stores and gas stations along the Alcan that provide services and supplies during the summer, the closest large towns to Beaver Creek are Tok, Alaska, two hours to the northwest, and Haines Junction, Yukon, about three hours to the southeast. There is a small grocery store open year-round in town, but the high prices usually send individuals to either of the larger towns hours away for supplies. Beaver Creek is served by a very small airport, operated by the Yukon government.

The Nelnah Bessie John School, located in the center of the village, serves students in kindergarten through grade nine. The school was renamed in 2001 after WRFN elder and teacher Nelnah Bessie John, whose "legacy of traditional ways of knowing and being continue to define [the community's] determination to include culturally significant learning opportunities for students in combination with mainstream curriculum" (Cochrane 2012). Following the completion of ninth grade, students have the choice of continuing their education in larger towns and cities in the Yukon Territory or Alaska, pursuing online education, or ending their schooling.

The remote location of Beaver Creek has amplified the effects of outside influences in the region. Construction of the Alcan Highway in 1943 and implementation of the international border and customs offices have altered conceptions of individual and cultural identity. By altering the flow of traffic and travel and by imposing two sets of national laws upon a previously unified indigenous community, the border and highway have become points of contention in the borderlands region. Adults and elders in the community describe the Alcan as having "sliced" through traditional lands and trail systems, while the border imposed a set of unfamiliar and unnecessary regulations upon a previously unified community. The provisional border separating the Yukon Territory and Alaska, established in 1825 and subsequently altered during the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898 (Gibson 1945:27),[2] was not monitored by Canada or the United States until the construction of the highway and implementation of the customs posts in the mid-1950s. Because the border only began to be monitored at the completion of the Alcan's construction, the two events remain linked in the minds of those in Beaver Creek, who felt their immediate effects. As David Krupa (1999:52) states, "it often seems as if Native people and culture are relegated to the margins of some more urgent history coursing the narrow artery of the Alcan."

The Alcan, understood as a "channel" of Western influence, supports the northern tourist trade. The border, on the other hand, acts to monitor and limit flow between Canada and the United States, forcing a switch from one set of national laws to another. The highway and the border are viewed in the WRFN community as the most tangible representations of Western influence in the area, and as such remain at the root of discourse surrounding cultural revitalization. Both the highway and the border have been internalized as impositions of a distinctly Western separation of space upon what was previously land structured by the Northern Athabascan tribes in the region.

REVITALIZATION

For the WRFN, contemporary cultural revitalization remains rooted in a collective effort to reclaim "authentic" cultural practices with a basis in traditions preceding Western contact. Anthony Wallace describes this trend as a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" in a time when those involved in the process of revitalization perceive their cultural system as "unsatisfactory" (Wallace 1956:256). The presumed death of "traditional" culture is often alluded to as the factor that drives the community to actively remember and re-create cultural ideologies and practices from the past. However, the adoption of certain Western practices and technology to accomplish this revitalization has prompted the community to reconfigure what constitutes "tradition."

Revitalization movements are powered by emic understandings of cultural objectivity that exist within a framework constructed by demarcation between self and cultural other (Wallace 1956). The movement in Beaver Creek is characterized by such understandings. The demarcation between "Native," or more specifically Northern Athabascan, and "Western" drives the revitalization efforts. Many objectified forms of culture exist within the repertoire of Beaver Creek. Two activities frequently referred to as among the most significant indicators of successful cultural revival include linguistic revitalization efforts and the retelling of oral histories. These activities act as contemporary gauges of culture and "authenticity" that have been reconfigured and reinvented as, paradoxically, both inversions and replications of Western customs. During the process of inversion and replication, the activities are reconfigured to include both Western and Northern Athabascan aspects.

The use of trucks or ATVs to hunt large game, refrigerators to preserve food, and firearms for hunting are both assets and hindrances at once. At any time, community members in Beaver Creek may choose to venture into the bush and live in the "traditional" way—hunting, fishing, and foraging sans vehicles, walkie-talkies and, occasionally, Western weapons. Community members may also, in the same day, buy groceries at the local convenience store or drive two hours to see a "Western" movie in a "Western" movie theater. More commonly, and most significantly, a combination of these two sets of activities occurs. Western technologies increase the ease and productivity of authentic practices, but also have innately altered the practices themselves to such an extent that many adoptions of technologies and practices within the Northern Athabascan repertoire are deemed "authentic."

How can driving down the highway with binoculars be considered a culturally authentic form of hunting for large game? How can using a speedboat to collect fish nets for a fish camp be considered a traditional cultural activity? Why is it acceptable to study Native language from note cards instead of learning it fluently as a child? To account for these changes and to internalize them in ways that make sense in the setting of Beaver Creek, WRFN members actively reflect upon the ideologies and practices that constitute authenticity (e.g., speaking in Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone dialects, hunting large game, participating in fish camps). What has resulted from this discussion is two-fold—on one hand the community seeks to cherish and maintain Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone practices as remembered and described before the waves of Western encroachment. On the other hand, community members actively engage with the Western world and are very aware of their positions as modern indigenes. They are aware of the complex, often contradictory nature of these beliefs. As stated by Radin:

> Did not similar things happen before? . . . It is quite unwarranted to argue that, because we can demonstrate the presence of European artifacts or influences, we are necessarily dealing with cultures that are in process of deterioration or that can no longer be regarded as aboriginal in any sense of the term. These cultures have no more lost their aboriginal character because of European influence than, for instance, the Mississauga Indians of southeastern Ontario lost their aboriginal character because they were so markedly influenced by the Iroquois (Radin 1933:121–122).

In the WRFN, the underlying ideological features of the revitalization movement are rooted in efforts to reconcile understandings of precontact cultural heritage and the colonizing efforts that altered it. Individuals from the two major groups within the community—Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone—have, to a large degree, worked together to assert claims of Northern Athabascan heritage in the face of broad interpretations of "Western" culture. While differences between tribal groups, most notably Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone, are acknowledged, semblances of past conflicts between groups have been deemphasized.

In the 1970s, Guédon (1974:20) argued that, "on the whole, the different native groups in and around the Upper Tanana basin present themselves as a cultural continuum, the boundaries of which must be defined only with the most extreme caution." This description also serves to define the contemporary relationship between the Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone groups within the WRFN today. The relatively fluid contemporary nature of Northern Athabascan tribal identity in the borderlands makes speaking about one particular group difficult. The feeling of cultural continuity that exists in the region is supplemented by increasing reliance on kinship ties as a measurement of similarity. Now kinship ties often overshadow what were once considered significant cultural differences, though Northern Tutchone and Upper Tanana elders have pointed out that this was not always the case (Sanford 2010; Winzer 2010).

POLITICS

In the early 1950s, the Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone–speaking bands were combined into the White River Indian Band by the Yukon government. In 1961, the White River Indian Band was merged with the Southern Tutchone-speaking Burwash Band. This new band, the Kluane Band, was centered at Burwash on Kluane Lake until 1990, when the Kluane Tribal Council split into two groups—the Kluane First Nation in Burwash and the WRFN in Beaver Creek. Following the founding of the WRFN in 1990, an elder spoke to difficulties surrounding cultural and organizational issues related to the differences of the two bands. She mentioned that at first "we [the two groups] did not always get along, but today it's much better and more peaceful" (Winzer 2010).

The unification of the two groups within the WRFN is attributed to the revival of traditional Northern Athabascan culture. To a large degree, separate tribal groups were forced to make drastic changes following the implementation of Canada's UFA and the United States' ANCSA to fight for land rights and self-governance. Described as being faced with a common "adversary," familial and tribal groups banded together in a fight to preserve aspects of their livelihoods that were threatened (Winzer 2010).

A political agreement between the governments of Canada, the Yukon, and the Yukon First Nations, Canada's UFA was reached in 1988 and finalized in 1990. The document provided a framework within which established Yukon First Nations would conclude a final settlement agreement regarding land, compensation, self-government, and the establishment of boards and committees to guarantee joint management of future ventures.[3] The WRFN refused to agree to the terms of the final agreement, splitting from the Kluane First Nation in 1990. Though they did participate in land negotiations following their break from the Kluane First Nation, the WRFN was unable to reach a consensus for ratification. The mandate to negotiate land claims expired on March 31, 2005, and on April 1 of the same year the Canadian government ceased discussion with the WRFN. From this point forward, the government stated that negotiations with the WRFN would no longer allow for the possibility of land claims and self-government agreements, and that further discussion would fall under the provisions of the Indian Act. The UFA provided a total of 13 percent of the Yukon's area to be returned to First Nations under the Final Agreement, but because the WRFN was unable to reach a consensus, they hold no official claim over the traditional lands that were in dispute during land claims negotiations.

While kinship and cultural ties still play important roles in connecting the lives of regional tribal groups, tribes falling under the jurisdiction of either Canada or the United States have faced separation from cultural and kin-based networks that were in place prior to the implementation of the international border. Family members on the U.S. side of the border, most of whom live in the village of Northway, Alaska, have had their own negotiations with the federal government, most notably in the form of ANCSA.[4] Although strong cultural and kin-based connections have been maintained between the community of Beaver Creek and villages like Northway, the fact remains that their lives are significantly shaped by their respective relationships with the countries within which their territories lie. Given its geographical placement, the WRFN has been especially impacted by the UFA and internal culture and politics.

At the time of its founding in the early 1950s as the "White River Indian Band," many individuals believed that the tribal groups to which they belonged were fundamentally different from others within the band (Winzer 2010). Years after the establishment of the WRFN, individuals of Northern Tutchone and Upper Tanana identity perpetuated a divide between themselves despite familial ties and many cultural similarities. Only recently within the WRFN has there been a move to identify Northern Athabascan intercultural ties and strengthen bonds between groups. This period of disagreement between tribal groups is now entirely attributed to Western influence (Johnny and Johnny 2010; Sanford 2010), with residential schools identified as the most emotionally disruptive and psychologically traumatic example. The fact that the majority of adults and elders attended the schools now serves as a rallying point against a broadly defined sphere of "non-Native" influence.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

In addition to the hardships that occurred with the increasing populations of hunters, trappers, and prospectors, missionaries introduced Christian religion and Western education simultaneously through the implementation of residential schools throughout Alaska and the Yukon in the nineteenth century. By 1850, children between the

ages of six and fifteen were required by Canadian law to attend the schools, though many Northern Athabascan groups in the Yukon–Alaska borderlands region were geographically far enough removed from government and missionary officials that this law did not affect them immediately. Several elders in the WRFN recall living in the bush as young children in the mid-1900s with their families, who actively avoided the missionaries (Johnny and Johnny 2010).

The Canadian government and the missionaries who were responsible for running the schools maintained the belief that it was necessary to separate Native children from their parents to civilize them and break them of their "savage" tendencies (Hoxie 1996:275; Sanford 2010). Children arrived at the schools speaking their Native dialects, only to be punished for failing to adopt English and Western customs. Forced to remain in the boarding schools all year, with their only breaks during the summer, children became estranged from their families, languages, and culture. Many stories from WRFN elders who attended residential schools in the mid-1900s allude to physical and sexual abuse. Authority figures would literally try to "beat the Indian out of [them]" (Demit 2010; Sanford 2010; Winzer 2010). The generation of children who experienced residential schools is often referred to as the "lost generation," and within the community many of these individuals have just in the last decade begun to be comfortable speaking their Native language(s).

The last Canadian residential school was closed in 1996, despite the fact that compulsory attendance ended in 1948. Elders actively avoid the topic of their experiences at the schools to this day, and many harbor deep-seated resentment toward government officials, whether or not officials have had any involvement with the schools themselves (J. Johnny 2010). Within Beaver Creek, distrust and suspicion continue to flavor dialogue between First Nation members and the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) (J. Johnny 2010; Sanford 2010). Both parties continue to address these issues through seasonal community events and an emphasis on creating a more positive atmosphere within the community for the sake of future generations (Johnny and Johnny 2010).

Talk of residential schools regularly enters discussions of the efforts to revive past cultural and linguistic practices, especially among adults and elders, who deal with the effects of their experiences on a daily basis. Younger generations, on the other hand, present a unique challenge to the revitalization efforts. Their disconnect from the immediate psychological effects of the schools paired with the vastly different atmosphere in which they spent their formative years (e.g., English as a first language and access to Western technology) has prompted an "intergenerational meld" of practices considered to be "traditional" and "authentic."

GENERATIONS

The impetus for the conscious attempts to revive and maintain culture within the WRFN is largely attributed to Western contact, specifically residential schools, the expropriation and alienation of lands, and forced resettlements. It is the current older generation who experienced the direct effects of these events during the formative years of their childhood and youth and who subsequently suffered with the effects through their adult lives.[5] This generation now faces the task of passing their knowledge to a younger generation of individuals who understand their culture within a vastly different framework and environment.

An issue at the center of many of the community members' attention is this intergenerational conflict of cultural rejuvenation and continuity, which is often explained through the opposition between the "hard life" of the authentic past and the "easy life" of the modern present. Lack of interest in continuing historically based "authentic" traditions in the WRFN continues to be a source of conflict. Many elders attribute this lack of interest in learning Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone dialects and practices to the draw of an easy Western life, centered upon reliance on cars, computers, telephones, and other technology. In an interview, Agnes Winzer (2010), a Northern Tutchone elder, expressed her disappointment that some young community members did not display an interest in storytelling. Her interpretation of this trend was that young people increasingly express a lack of interest in traditional Northern Athabascan culture. This lack of interest is often viewed as a factor negatively affecting the work that adults and elders do to revive and maintain traditions.

For instance, when Easton was in the early stages of his fieldwork in the village of Beaver Creek in the 1990s, elders pressed him to devote considerable attention to recording of place names in the local Native languages and documenting the trails connecting these places (Easton 2008). The current generation of elders, who had spent some portion of their lives living in the bush, holds a com-

prehensive knowledge of these names and trails. In his description of the trails around the Scottie Creek area, close to Beaver Creek, Chief David Johnny, Sr., described just how significant the trails were to the structural integrity of the Native communities in the area. He pointed out that:

> Walter Northway said, even marriage [relied on the trails]. Northway, they marry this way, Copper Center and even Burwash before. Copper Center, all the way down that way and then back up Mentasta, Tanacross, South Lake, Suzie Lake. At that time they said one more person married from Tetlin to Northway it would've covered, made a round circle. A big circle (D. Johnny 2010).

This description of the importance of trails for tribal relationships mirrored that of Agnes Winzer (2010), who described the trails around Beaver Creek as "all connected together, just like how all people are connected together." The emphasis on the familial and marital connections that were so reliant on the trails highlights the distinction between a "pure," traditional Native way of life and the current way of life, tainted by Western influence.

The younger members of the WRFN, ages twenty to thirty, simply do not have the same relationship to these trail systems as their parents and grandparents did. The use of the trails for communication and travel has been almost entirely replaced with the Alcan (D. Johnny 2010). Young community members still travel along the trail systems if they so desire, but they are by no means used as frequently as they were prior to the construction of the highway. The presence of the international border atop the trail systems further complicates their use. Border officials require individuals to report any plans to use trails close to the border before heading into the bush, limiting spontaneity and freedom of movement on lands still considered to be under the informal stewardship of the WRFN.

The younger generation (Fig. 2) faces the task of reviving traditional practices in a world lacking aspects of what constitutes "Indianness" for older generations (Easton 2001). These differences may be understood to reflect a distinct intergenerational division of cultural labor and knowledge, implying that with time these youth will grow into new identities as they mature (Easton 2001). This intergenerational division of cultural labor informs the ways in which indigenous heritage and cultural traditions are remembered, interpreted, and taught within the community. The following sections address specific examples of the ongoing attempts to revive and maintain Northern Athabascan culture in light of the factors discussed above. The recitation of oral histories and linguistic revitalization play significant roles in what appears to be a trend to reconnect with authentic practices of the past.

ORAL HISTORIES

There are several themes that color the dialogue of Native and Western relations in the Yukon–Alaska borderlands, many of which are viewed in a negative light in Northern Athabascan discourse on culture and identity. The exploitation of Native people, the land, and its resources by fur trappers, missionaries, and, later, the governments of the United States and Canada shapes associations with Western influences in Northern Athabascan dialogue. At the heart of the cultural revitalization of the WRFN are intersections of cultural, historical, and political rhetoric and practice. Oral and written histories, current archaeological evidence, and representations of "Western" culture inform modern notions of what being Native means in the borderlands community of Beaver Creek.

While there are no indigenous written accounts of Athabascan groups before Western contact in the late nineteenth century, oral histories, myths, and legends provide a historical context more attuned to an Athabascan way of interpreting the past. Myths and stories provide a type of history that individuals in the community use to understand their own identities. Many of these stories span great distances across the interior of the borderlands and hold significance for the interior Northern Athabascan region as a whole. Elder Joseph Tommy Johnny offered an example of this practice in his account of how raven created the moon:

> It was all dark and raven was flying up there [points to the sky], and he saw a little hole in the big blackness above. Raven fly around and pick up a white cloth and fly it up to that hole. Raven fly all around the sky. When get to that hole he plug it with the cloth. Raven get sucked into that hole out the other side, but that cloth stick in, and that's how we get moon up there (J. Johnny 2010).

Stories like this one reflect centuries of oral history practice that are becoming increasingly significant to those working to preserve a uniquely Northern Athabascan present. This particular story retold in January of 2010 was likely modified on the spot to fit within the window of time of the interview and altered so that a *Noglé* (non-Native person) would be able to understand the intended message more clearly. For many in the borderlands, the

Figure 2. Chealsea and Jolenda Johnny at fish camp on Pickhandle Lake, summer 2009.

practice of storytelling relies less upon the recounting of facts and truths and more upon the context of the time and place in which the story is told.

As Annie Ned, an elder interviewed by Julie Cruikshank, said, "You've got to believe it, what Grandma said. . . . Old-style words are just like school!" (Cruikshank 1990:267). These "old-style words," like those in Joseph Tommy Johnny's raven story, represent a part of the repertoire of Northern Athabascan tradition. According to Annie Ned and other elders interviewed by Cruikshank, collective cultural knowledge passed on from generation to generation was the equivalent in precontact Athabascan life to Western schooling today. Whether the practice of oral histories is in fact equivalent to the Western schooling system is not the point. The significance for those who tell and retell these stories stems from the *belief* that these oral histories exist as forms of authentic indigenous culture and history.

The widespread staying power of the stories in relation to specific locations in the landscape of the Southwest Yukon and Alaska Interior shows the importance of the local landscape in shaping understandings of modern Athabascan cultural identity. In an interview with Chief David Johnny, Sr., ties to the landscape were extended to galactic heights and presented apocalyptic themes:

> I'll tell you a story about the time they landed on the moon. My grandpa, Billy John, and grandma, Laura John, and my dad, we go down in Northway and went to visit them, and they [the astronauts] landed on the moon! So we had black and white TV, Andy had black and white TV, so we went over and watched it and then went back over to the house, Andy's house. And we took them [his grandparents] over and they said, "so what they [the astronauts] do?" They landed on the moon up there, and they [grandparents] were really mad. My grandma was mad, my dad was mad (D. Johnny 2010).

When asked why they were mad, Johnny responded:

> Because, he said, those white people have no business up there, it's weird, they got no business up there, we have to leave that alone, that's not up there for you to go up there and do what you want. It was put there for a reason and that reason was that the creator made the earth as it was so you can live on it. And, you know, you can't go up there and live there, so you got no business bothering that stuff. The planets, my grandma said, if you bother that stuff, that moon, you bother the things up there, the world is going to change, she said (D. Johnny 2010).

Here, apocalyptic warnings drove the distinction between a uniquely Native perspective, understood to be natural, and its opposition to the Western way, described as intrusive and unnatural. By casting blame upon the scientists and astronauts who destroyed the natural order of things by traveling to the moon, this story highlights the oppositional categories that inform notions of revitalized identity. This identity is at the crux of cultural representation within the Beaver Creek community. By using scientific terminology in his story, Johnny demonstrated the simultaneous adoption and rejection of Western influences upon contemporary Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone notions of cultural identity and authenticity.

While a rejection of Western ways and technology is glorified among various members of the community,[6] Western rhetoric is still widely used in representations of Native and Western social and cultural categories. This was evident in Johnny's commentary on *Noglé* reliance on Western culture and technology:

> What's gonna happen to you if the banks and technology goes down? How would you get home [from here]? Where would you get money? Banks don't mean anything if the system goes down. There would be no way for you to get money or way to get back home. But us? We could go back and live off the land like we used to (D. Johnny 2010).

David Johnny, Sr., also contrasted Athabascan and Western spiritual beliefs to illustrate the environmental and geographical orientations upon which individuals frequently base their identities. Johnny described a paradigm wherein Northern Athabascan identity became associated with the natural, pure landscape and Western identity was associated with science and a distinct lack of connection with the environment.

> You know the thing, the bushman, eh? We say *gonh*. It comes and lives in the fall time, it will come around and bother you and all that stuff, eh. You know me, I went to school, to Western school and all that stuff, and even though I went to listen to the Western idea of what things are, when I come back to my culture I believe in the spiritual part of it, you know? I know there are bushmen out there, I know there's something out there not human like me, but it's spiritual, it's a spirit. I know that white people are not gonna believe me, but you know, I walk in the bush and I heard stuff. But you tell somebody from Western, the white people, and they'll say "Oh, that's a whippoorwill, that's a bird, yeah." But you know, do birds do that? I heard all that stuff. But . . . their minds are just blocked, you know, they're just so blocked . . . there's a spirit out there (D. Johnny 2010).

The bush-dog, a large wasp about four inches long, bright orange and black with a large stinger and an appendage for drilling wood, is very active and can be seen flying frequently during the summer. The bush-dog is a "spy" for the bushman. It serves as an example of the ways in which multiple meanings may be projected onto a single entity. For the Northern Athabascan elder, the bush-dog means *gonh*, the bushman, is investigating the area. For a Western entomologist, the presence of the bush-dog may convey information about the surrounding ecosystem and season. For a young Northern Athabascan child, the bush-dog may incite fear or anxiety about being captured by *gonh*. For a young, Western-educated member of a First Nation group raised by his grandmother, like David Johnny, all three interpretations may apply. During a camp visit by a bush-dog, several individuals declared "we should pull out its stinger," or "kill it," and yet none dared to.

Reconciling the Western and Athabascan worlds is the challenge of the cultural revival movement occurring in Beaver Creek. I suggest that what occurs in the examples above is a modern melding of Northern Athabascan and Western categories of theory and practice. This modern meld is complicated by intergenerational interpretations of what it means to be Athabascan in an increasingly Western world.

Facets of the Western world that have worked their way into the Yukon–Alaska borderlands are there to stay. Accommodating these factors into an existing, intergenerational cultural repertoire is the project at hand. The goal of cultural revitalization in Beaver Creek is one

that simultaneously embraces certain aspects of Western technology and culture and protects other Northern Athabascan practices that are deemed "authentic" and "traditional" in nature. It is increasingly important for individuals to embrace Western practices only within the scope of a Northern Athabascan cultural narrative.

LANGUAGE REVIVAL

Over the past twenty years the people of the WRFN have actively identified themselves as members of a distinct cultural group who struggle to revive and maintain what they understand to be "traditional" culture. The descriptors "tradition" and "traditional" have come to encompass a conscious move toward practices that predate the waves of white settlers in the mid-eighteenth century. These settlers represent the exploitation of Native people, the land on which they live, and its resources. The active revival of traditional culture within this community is "founded on the marked opposition between 'ourselves' and 'others'... [and] is a *relation* inscribed [within their] culture" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:51).

Frequently, tribal elders insist upon an overt objectification of their own culture to highlight creative ways in which Western technology may be adopted within a Northern Athabascan framework. Throughout this process, Western technology is used in ways that more quickly and effectively allow individuals to identify and return to their indigenous roots. The Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone language courses offered at the WRFN Band Office and in the Nelnah Bessie John School exemplify the ways that technologies have been adopted to bolster cultural and linguistic revitalization efforts.

Spearheaded by the late Bessie John and now run by Ruth Lynn Johnny (Fig. 3), the WRFN conducts Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone language classes that attract individuals from all generations in the community. The classes are taught in English by Ruth Johnny, who uses visual aids, her own extensive knowledge of pronunciation and vocabulary, and a discussion-based teaching style to conduct lessons. These lessons provide opportunities for community members to both learn and practice several Northern Athabascan dialects and to congregate and reflect upon cultural and community activities.

At one such language lesson, the word for "refrigerator" was discussed and translated into the Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone words for "ice" and "box." In a similar instance the word for "fox" was decided to mean "shadow of a dog" in Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone. When questioned as to why no word for fox existed already, Ruth Johnny explained that until the past twenty years, foxes were not seen in that particular area of the borderlands (R. Johnny 2010). She thought that global warming, a common theme she and others regularly attributed to Western society, had changed patterns of temperature and snowfall in the area, creating an environment more suitable for foxes. Changes in the ecosystem and the availability of refrigerators provoked discussions of meaning and interpretation of their places in contemporary vocabulary.

In an interview, Chief David Johnny, Sr., and his wife, Ruth Johnny (Fig. 3), highlighted the increasingly significant role of Native language within the community by pointing out the history of use and fluency of Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone dialects. David Johnny described how a chart could track the use of Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone languages in the community. He argued that "if you set up a chart with fluent speakers—line up fluent speakers from the 1950s up until now... you see that the chart starts to rise back up because people are starting to take an interest in their culture again" (Johnny and Johnny 2010). Moving his hands to mimic the fall and subsequent rise that would represent Native language use on this hypothetical chart, Johnny explained that, "after 1985 the language just kind of died... but then Bessie [John] started to bring it back" (D. Johnny 2010). Both fluent speakers, David and Ruth Johnny vehemently ar-

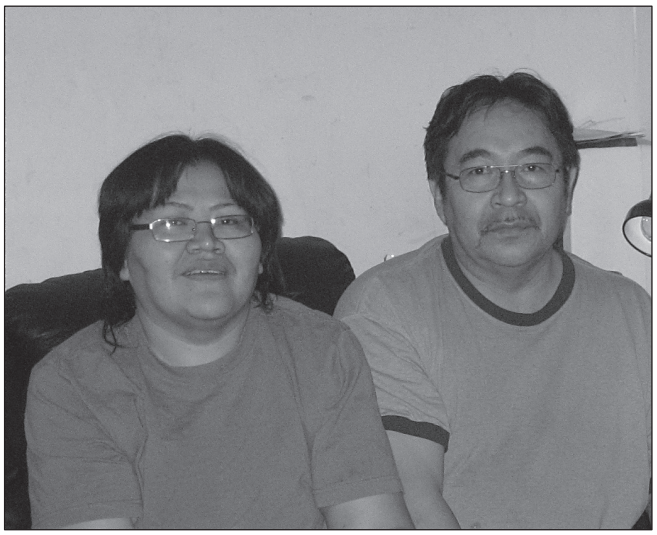

Figure 3. Ruth and David Johnny at home, January 2010.

gued that the revival of Native language was paramount to the revival of Northern Athabascan culture as a whole.

As prominent individuals in the community and leaders of the language and cultural revival, the Johnnys have taught and continue to teach the Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone dialects to their youngest children and grandchildren, all of whom are now fluent. Their fluency is unanimously regarded and celebrated throughout the community as a huge success in the fight to revive and maintain indigenous culture. The fact that their vocabularies include the words for refrigerator, fox, truck, highway, and other words associated with Western influences is generally regarded as an acceptable form of cultural change.

As the Johnny example shows, language is a means for assessing the degree to which an individual is linked to his or her Upper Tanana and/or Northern Tutchone past. There is a prevalent sentiment among the community that the use of these dialects alongside cultural practices provides tangible evidence of one's involvement in the revival and continuation of Northern Athabascan culture. Language competency is continually emphasized across the intergenerational division of cultural labor and agreed upon as one of the most important aspects of cultural revival (Easton 2001). Elders who are fluent in Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone are viewed with high esteem and are looked upon as "keepers of tradition" and representatives of the "true" languages and practices of the past. While some, usually older, members of the community lament the loss of culture, others, often younger members, embrace changes and objectively choose to incorporate them into an existing cultural repertoire.

While members of the WRFN live in houses with central heating, drive Hondas, Fords, and Chevys, and take vacations to Hawai'i, many of them also hunt moose, catch fish, and speak local dialect(s). These practices remain resolutely grounded in the Athabascan way (Easton 2001). While these practices remain contested, they have also become deeply enmeshed over time and are emblematic of the conflict between Northern Athabascan tradition, history, and culture and Western practices. Discussions of cultural authenticity play an important role in this conflict. When faced with so many choices of livelihood, how individuals choose to live their lives becomes increasingly dependent upon their personal identification as members of both the Yukon–Alaska borderlands and the far-reaching Western world. The agency that distinct groups such the WRFN exhibit in the shaping and reshaping of their beliefs and practices relative to external influences demonstrates the complex nature of cultural revival movements taking place not only in the borderlands, but throughout the North American Subarctic.

CONCLUSION

Members of the WRFN have maintained a distinctive position in the Yukon–Alaska borderlands through their dynamic interaction with their surroundings and distinct cultural "others." Changes in geographic space, contact with different cultural groups, and assimilation processes have altered the realities of those who claim Northern Athabascan heritage and culture. Individuals have reacted to these forces through active reconfigurations of their collective cultural identities and ownership of geographic spaces within the borderlands. In many cases, these reconfigurations have been initiated through forceful means, attributed to Western culture, the capitalist state, and the Canadian and U.S. governments. Despite these events, the people of the WRFN remain optimistic about their future as an autonomous cultural group and as representatives of Northern Athabascan culture in an increasingly modern world.

The people of the WRFN who are most involved with cultural revival movements objectify aspects of their culture they believe to be authentic (e.g., Northern Athabascan dialects, traditional hunting and fishing practices, subsistence living). These practices are at the forefront of an explicitly reflexive set of ideas of what it means to be a member of the community. Distinct forms of culture are perpetuated, though in ways unfamiliar to some tribal elders. Discourse surrounding the presumed death of Northern Athabascan borderlands culture has effectively been reconfigured to fuel an ongoing, intergenerational dialogue of cultural rebirth and revitalization.

There are many understandings of what traditional and authentic culture mean today for members of the WRFN. For tribal elders, authentic Athabascan culture refers to practices such as speaking one's dialect fluently, mastering traditional hunting practices, and living in the bush. For younger members of the community, modern technology, oral history, and local notions of space and geography inform understandings of contemporary Northern Athabascan culture. These interpretations continue to shift as the WRFN works toward a peaceful future, a goal envisioned by the vast majority of those living in the small communities of the borderlands. Individuals envision this

future as involving aspects of both the Western and traditional worlds. The community understands the necessity of interplay between these two worlds, an interaction that involves a balanced configuration of modern categories of cultural identification that remain distinct and intertwined at once.

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NOTES

1. The terms "Western," "traditional," and "Native" are emic categorizations.
2. In 1903, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay and British Ambassador Michael Henry Herbert resolved the international boundary dispute by creating a joint commission composed of one British, two Canadian, and three U.S. nationals. The final ruling of the commission was in favor of the U.S. boundary proposal (Gibson 1945:31).
3. Only eleven of the fourteen established First Nation groups currently have final agreements. The WRFN refused to concede to the terms of the agreement and still unofficially manages the land that they claim as their own.
4. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was signed into law in 1971. Congress required Native Alaskans to organize twelve regional "profit-making corporations and approximately two hundred village corporations to manage this property." Forty-four million acres of land were handed over to these corporations, along with $962.5 million to compensate for "the extinguishment of aboriginal title to the remaining acreage of Alaska" (Doyon, Limited, 2013a, 2013b; Hoxie 1996:276; Landye Bennett Blumstein LLP 2006). Doyon, Limited, owning 12.5 million acres in Alaska's Interior, is the corporation most closely associated with the Yukon–Alaska borderlands.
5. This has included feelings of deep shame of their *Dineh* heritage, endemic racism despite attempts to Westernize, drug-abuse and imprisonment, loss of language facilities and traditional geographic knowledge, erosion of bush skills, the tragic deaths of many of their peers, and difficulties in raising their own children due to a lack of parenting models (Dänojà Zho Cultural Centre 2009).
6. These members tend to be part of the older generations.

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