Journal of INDIGENOUS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Volume 12, Issue 1 (2023)
https://ucalgary.ca/journals/jisd
E-ISSN 2164-9170
pp. 28-46

All Things Sacred: Love, Resilience, and Sovereignty in Linda Infante Lyons's Alaska Native Icon Series

Chie Sakakibara
Syracuse University

Keywords: • Alaska Native • Alutiiq • Sugpiaq • Alaska • Art • Icon • Portrait • Multispecies • Adaptation • Resilience • Colonialism • Decolonization • Sovereignty • Love

Abstract
This article will explore how the contemporary Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) artist Linda Infante Lyons's Alaska Native icon portrait series embody the Indigenous ideas of love and resilience. In our times of global climatic and environmental change and the pandemic that disproportionally affect and displace historically underrepresented and underserved communities, it is vitally important to seek out the core of Indigenous social health, wellbeing, and sovereignty through diverse origins of resilience. To accomplish this mission, this paper will shed light on Lyons's quest of colonial past and the contemporary revival of Alaska Native expressive tradition through the cross-cultural and multispecies entanglement—love— between humans and nonhuman kin as it has been steeped in creative expressions.

This article will explore how the contemporary Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) artist Linda Infante Lyons's Alaska Native icon portrait series embody the Indigenous ideas of love and resilience. In our times of global climatic and environmental change and the pandemic that disproportionally affects and displaces historically underrepresented and underserved communities, it is vitally important to seek out the core of Indigenous social health, wellbeing, and sovereignty through diverse origins of resilience. To accomplish this mission, this paper will shed light on Lyons's quest of colonial past and the contemporary revival of Alaska Native expressive tradition through the cross-cultural and multispecies entanglement—love— between humans and nonhuman kin as it has been steeped in creative expressions.

In the Alaska Native icon portrait series, initiated by the artist in 2016, the imagination and innovation that Lyons imbues into her work reflect an extraordinary process of Native survivance in Alaska's southwest after over two centuries of relentless Russian-American colonization of Alas'kaaq (Alaska in Sugcestun, Alutiiq language). Stories of Alaska Native arts reveal Native identity and beliefs that survived through centuries of colonization. Less than a century ago, most non-Alaska Natives had imagined that the Native cultures of Alaska would soon disappear. With

the passing of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, the Alaska Native lands and peoples were corporatized and incorporated into capitalist economy, which enabled the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline system effective 1974. Alaska Native traditions and ways of life—subsistence—had gone through an unprecedented speed of transition. Yet today, their arts are thriving and receiving renewed attention from international and domestic audience, and more importantly, simultaneously inspire self-empowerment and determination for their own communities in their own lands. In fact, today, such artistic imaginations are among the most eloquent articulations of contemporary ideologies and struggles for sovereignty in Alaska Native communities, which cultivate the ground for grassroots resistance for socio-environmental justice and equity (Amsterdam 2013; Barker 2017; Perea 2021; Williams 2009). Embodying the spirit of contemporary Alaska Native social development, love is an element that powerfully penetrates Lyons' oeuvre. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to explore how the notion of love has come to express Alaska Native resilience in Lyons's Alaska Native icon series.

Love, Resilience, and Sovereignty in Indigenous Social Development

What makes Indigenous love unique? Undoubtedly, love is a socially constructed concept. It is also a subjectively nuanced experience. In Western epistemologies, when considering the discourse of love associated with Indigenous peoples, as Poarch Creek scholar Roger J. Kuhn (2021) interrogates, the majority of literature focuses on *romantic* love in which Indigenous peoples, Native bodies, and aboriginal experiences are romanticized and essentialized, as little consideration is given to other forms of love. "Love," in this context, is a noun that is commodified and materialized, complementing the victimist narrative as part of the Manifest Destiny discourse by objectifying Indigenous peoples and, by extension, legitimizing their disappearance. However, it is also worth noting that "love" is frequently seen as a powerful verb and process in Native epistemologies, and by acting in loving ways, we evoke, nurture, and enhance our connectivity to oneself and/or the world. In this sense, love signifies an action accompanied by significant duties, obligations, and responsibilities. In so doing, love also illuminates the emotional indication of belongingness and cultural identity rooted in space and place. When there are factors affecting our ability to love, one's wellbeing and sense of identity get threatened, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma may surface as a wider community problem. As the anthropologist Radhika Govindrajan (2021: 195) points out, love is also about politics that involves multiple agencies because "[t]rue love does not 'just happen,' but entails work; its affective attachments have to be made flesh and blood through acts of labor …. Only a laboring subject could … lay *genuine* claim to the status of a loving subject." This discussion resonates with the perspective held by the

Choctaw-White Earth Ojibwe historian and feminist Clara Sue Kidwell (2005) that regards love as something potent, unpredictable, and dangerous because of its uncontrollable power.

No matter how we attempt to deconstruct the idea of love, on very concrete levels, love fuels our lives and sustains connection and passion that glues an individual to the rest of the world. Such power has potential to transcend any boundaries and limitations. At the same time, love is the cornerstone of a fundamental concept in human wellbeing and social development: resilience (Doan and Borelli 2022; McKinley & Scarnato 2021). Then, how exactly does love manifest in Indigenous communities to cultivate resilience? While love and its relationship with resilience is universally recognized, an enhanced sense of resilience, indeed, is a strong element that characterizes Indigenous love. Love cultivates resilience. In so doing, love enables Indigenous survivance, "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories … [that] are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry" (Vizenor 1999, vii).

Love and resilience collectively empower Indigenous agendas toward decolonization—an accomplishment of environmental justice, political reconciliation, and sovereignty. The Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2018) discusses that the emerging field of Indigenous Environmental Studies and Sciences is distinctive as it investigates social resilience to environmental change through the research lens of how moral relationships are organized in societies. The central ideas linked to social resilience are all intertwined with the idea of love in the names of moral and ethics to organize a healthy community; in this context, responsibility, spirituality, and justice all intersect with Indigenous love.

Resilience is the capacity of an individual, entity, culture, or organization to maintain and renew itself when its existence or viability is challenged or threatened. Resilience, often entangled with adaptation and survival, originates from the Latin resilire (to leap back). In our world, resilience can be linked to the short-term and long-term consequences of extreme stress. Stress is a reality of daily life, but when exposure to adversities increases, so does stress. Extreme weather conditions and climate change are forms of adversity which can also cause depression, anxiety, and ailments, and also aggravate social problems (Southwick et al. 2014; Cunsolo et al. 2015), especially in the isolated rural communities, where the rates of death by accident, suicide, homicide, depression, and addiction are much higher than the rest of the world. When a problem surfaces, resilience opens up a passage for us to adapt, recover, and survive. As much as its link with psychology and psychiatry is inevitable, resilience should also be understood as inherently an Indigenous concept that elucidates "spiritual connections, cultural and historical continuity, and the ties with family, community, and the land" (King, Smith, and Gracey 2009, 82). This perspective reflects what Blackfeet/Crow scholar Iris HeavyRunner (2009) proposes: Indigenous

resilience is steeped in the culture and society and contributes to a process of decolonization through the integration of personhood with the community, land, and environment. More broadly, Indigenous activism today is empowered by fundamentally community-based movements on the local, national, and global levels. Such resilience allows Indigenous voices to resist and assert agency in the face of adversity and stress (see also Henry et al. 2018).

The regions of the world most affected by climate change are also traditional Indigenous homelands. The current international dialogue on climate change is predominantly focused on a strategy of adaptation that includes the projected removal of entire communities. Activists argue that strategies derived from such perspectives are genocidal (LaDuke 2015; Whyte 2016; Wildcat 2009), and instead promote Indigenous rights to establish their own priorities upon their lands to accomplish sovereignty (Grossman and Parker 2012; Watt-Cloutier 2018).

Love and resilience nurture sovereignty. Sovereignty is an inherently Western political concept. Nevertheless, the idea of sovereignty, however, should not be confined in the realm of politics; rather, by expanding the boundaries, the domain of arts can serve as a process of extending a sovereign space. Representing varied experiences of human life and as a portal to understand the ever-changing world germinates visual sovereignty, a powerful tool to imagine and re-imagine sovereignty outside of a social science framework. As Seneca scholar Michelle H. Raheja (2015: 29) writes, “Under visual sovereignty, artists can deploy individual and community assertations of what sovereignty and self-representation mean and, through new media technologies (from wampum belts to film), frame more imaginative, pleasurable, flexible, and often humorous renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms, such as the presentation of the spiritual and dream world, than are often possible in official political contexts.” In this sense, sovereignty is the ability of artists to tell their own stories in their own words in their own language whether that language is verbal or visual. This understanding is reflected in Lyons’ work and deep and personal engagements with local Anchorage or rural communities on Kodiak, in Shaktoolik, and other Alaska Native communities to kindle and collaboratively seek out new directions of Alaska Native identity.

Togetherness cultivates resilience. Therefore, resilience cannot be accomplished by a single agent; as Donna Haraway (2016) challenges the term “the Anthropocene” by arguing humans are not the only important actors, and kin-making is a multispecies affair to cultivate resilience and mitigate vulnerability for survival: to be formed as a person is to be formed relationally with other nonhuman persons by decentering human experiences, as proposed earlier by American Indian scholars Vine Deloria, Jr. (2001 with Wildcat), and Daniel Wildcat (2009).

Indigenous vulnerability to climate change has been discussed extensively in the fields of public policy, political science, anthropology, and geography, but few studies have shed light on the ways in which people emotionally invest themselves in their entanglements with animals and environments to nurture resilience. Research has instead focused on the physical impacts of climate change on land and sea, the economics of livelihoods, and on perceptions of environmental change or how Alaska Native communities are confronting climate change via a cultural rejuvenation. However, as climate change increases environmental and cultural uncertainties, it also intensifies Indigenous emotions and relatedness with others to seek out cultural activities that strengthen social identities. This is a point of departure for my explorations of love, resilience, and sovereignty illuminated in Lyons's work.

Love and Llam Sua: Linda Infante Lyons

Figure 1: St. Katherine of Karluk (2016).

In 2017, I was first introduced to the work of Linda Infante Lyons. I was then a junior faculty member at a small liberal arts college in northeast Ohio. My archaeologist colleague and friend who worked at the same institution shared with me a photo of *St. Katherine of Karluk* (2016; Fig. 1), which had been just acquired by the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository in Kodiak, Alaska, a non-profit museum and cultural center dedicated to preserving and sharing the cultural traditions of the Koniag Alutiiq branch of Sugpiaq (also known as the Alutiiq of the Alaska Native people). My work until then had focused on the community adaptation to climate change

on the North Slope region of Alaska where I learned how Iñupiaq whalers rely upon and strengthen their cultural identity as a way to respond to climatic change and environmental unpredictability. They do so consciously and unconsciously by reinforcing their relationship with the bowhead whale, a cultural keystone species. The whale is the foundational entity through which all elements of Arctic life among Iñupiat are integrated: the sea, land, sky, animals, humans, nonhuman others, and shared stories. When the tundra thaws, sea ice disappears, and coastlines erode, the bowhead whale remains central to Iñupiaq life and culture; it sustains rituals and ceremonies as much as contemporary sovereignty.

Despite the distance of nearly 1,000 miles between the North Slope and Kodiak, I could not help but realize the striking resemblance between the Iñupiaq cosmology and the worldview held by the artist. The gaze of the central figures on Lyons's canvas—the woman and seal—did not let me take my eyes off canvas. Inadvertently, I fell in love. I promptly looked up the artist, reached out to her via email to introduce myself, and started corresponding with her.

The Alutiiq homeland spans across Prince William Sound, the Kenai Peninsula, Kodiak Island, and the Alaska Peninsula (Fig. 2). The wet, stormy climate is moderated by the southwestern shallow warm-water current alongside the Pacific Northwest coast, and the sea remains unfrozen despite the existence of massive glaciers flowing from the mountains. The eastern Alutiiq homeland is framed by spruce forests, and much of Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula is characterized by treeless tundra, presenting a similar view with the North Slope region of Alaska.

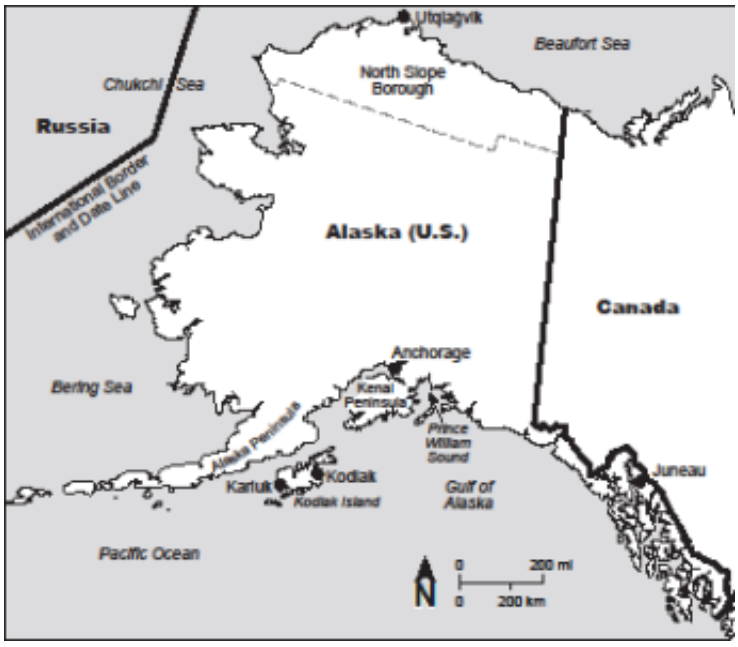

Figure 2: Map of Alaska. Courtesy of Joe Stoll.

Lyons was born in 1960, in the decade that witnessed the monumental surge of Alaska Native activism for organizing and fighting for their lands across the state. Having grown up in Anchorage with the Catholic faith, Lyons studied biology at Whitman College in Washington, and has lived in Chile for eighteen years where she attended the Viña del Mar Escuela de Bellas Artes. Embracing the heritage of Alutiiq and Russian-Estonian, the artist self-identifies as "a living example of two cultures, the Native and the colonizer." Her work illuminates the rich cross-fertilization of worldviews that prevails in Alaska today; the northern terrain she recreates on wooden canvases and the stories she weaves into her creations are both saturated with the strong current of magical realism and religious icons steeped in the traditions of the Russian Orthodoxy and Alutiiq faith.

St. Katherine of Karluk was the first piece of Lyons's Alaska Native icon portrait series. It portrays Katherine Reft, her Alutiiq great-grandmother, haloed and adorned with elements of historical Alutiiq masks collected by French explorer Alphonse Pinart in 1871, now part of the collection at the Château Musée in Boulogne-sur-Mer in France (Haakanson & Steffian 2009). St. Katherine embraces a seal pup, one of the cornerstone species in the Alutiiq ecology and spirituality who holds a pushki, a local medicinal plant as an attribute. The work signifies the belief that Christian iconography could be eclipsed and absorbed by Indigenous cultures much in the way Christianity co-opted pagan stories and symbols as their own, and the seal represents traditional Alutiiq faith and the connection to the animal spirit. Lyons shares with me:

> I was inspired by stories and photographs of my great grandmother, Katherine. She was from the Alaska Native village, Karluk, and spoke Alutiiq, her Native language, and Russian. She married an Estonian/Russian immigrant. She died from tuberculosis in her 40s. This painting was originally part of group exhibition, Decolonizing Alaska. The Russian and American occupation of Alaska was devastating to the Alutiiq people and the intent of this portrait is to elevate Alutiiq spiritual traditions as equal to those of the Western world, melding the Christian symbols of the colonizers with those my Indigenous ancestors.

Syncing Alaska Native symbols of spirituality, landscapes, sacred animal spirits and ceremonial Christian relics, Lyons says, is a subversive act to dismantle the duality and hierarchy forcefully instilled in the community through colonization. *Decolonizing Alaska* was curated by Asia Freeman of the Bunnell Street Arts Center (Freeman, 2016). This traveling exhibition featured thirty-one Alaskan artists—both Native and non-Native—who strived to move beyond misleading pre-conceptions in popular culture of being Alaskan. The tour started in Homer, Valdez Museum & Historical Archive, Corcoran School of Art & Design (Washington, D.C.), Alaska State Museum, Ketchikan Area Arts & Humanities Council, University of Alaska Museum of the North, and Center for Contemporary Art & Culture in Portland. After nearly three years of traveling, the exhibition ended its tour in Anchorage in February 2019.

What are the defining elements that constitute Alaska Native love, resilience, and sovereignty? The foundational beliefs underlying Alutiiq relationships with nonhuman animals and their environments, place-making, cultivation of sacred geographies, and expansion of epistemologies, all contribute to the making of love and resilience in Lyons's work. As Alutiiq anthropologist Sven Haakanson, Jr. and Alutiiq Museum chief curator Amy F. Steffian (2015: 6) write, "in the Sugpiaq universe, everything is alive." As an Alutiiq saying goes, *caqiq tamarmi suangq'rtuq*—something all around has a spirit (Alutiiq Museum 2014).

In addition to the spirits of earthly beings, the world is filled with all things sacred:

> The Alutiiq universe has great spirits, some of whom inhabit the sky worlds. Llam Sua, the spirit of all things, lives in the fifth and purest sky world. This spirit can see and hear everything but is invisible to people. Kas'arpak, the spirit who created all birds and animals, lives in the third sky world. This spirit assists shamans, relaying the wishes of Llam Sua to earth. There are also two female spirits, Imam Sua, ruler of the sea, and Nunam Sua, ruler of the forest, who live on earth. These spirits control the creatures in their domains and Alutiiqs called upon them for hunting luck. (Alutiiq Museum 2014)

This worldview testifies to how Llam Sua is a powerful force that brings every element together to cultivate the world. And this act engenders love in the form of cross-cultural multispecies entanglement.

While the Russian Orthodoxy was relatively lenient to the traditional Alutiiq faith, the United States' acquisition of Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867 brought the Baptist Brethren, which categorically severed the intimacy that used to exist between Alutiiq people and their non-human kin. The process of colonization inadvertently involved the colonizers, colonized, and the nonhuman others with whom they shared the environment. Originally by the Russian and later American settlers, the Alutiiq people were converted into Christianity, some villages were destroyed, and the local fauna was turned into lucrative natural resources. The introduction of new social and economic norms brought a detrimental impact upon the sea otters, seals, and many other species. Then, against this backdrop, decolonization needs to be initiated with the continuous involvement of the Indigenous people and their nonhuman neighbors, and the love that exists in between.

In the Alutiiq universe, as the supervision of Llam Sua reveals, togetherness represents love. This love is founded upon deep senses of place, ethics, and responsibilities. This multispecies embeddedness is embodied in ongoing Alutiiq relations with nonhuman others, which occurs in the everyday life. In other words, human-animal relations serve as a foundation of Alutiiq wellbeing, resilience, and sovereignty. Reflecting upon both humans and non-human others equally, Lyons's work explores the effects of human entanglement with other kinds of living things through time-tested ethics, care, and virtue as the Alutiiq sense of love permeates

her canvas. Lyons' work documents how the multispecies relatedness, as it had been part of Alutiiq cosmology, have helped restore the kinship between humans and animals, which implies the improvement and reclamation of Alaska Native health through expressive culture. Lyons replaces, or borrowing her word, "decolonizes," the Russian Orthodox icon with Alutiiq symbols, elements of ceremonial masks, the seal calf as an animal spirit and attributes of local ecology and traditional knowledge. In this sense, her vantage point is global as much as rooted in Native communities.

Pursuit of sovereignty fuels the idea of decolonization. To Lyons, painting is a subversive act. In her portraits, inspired by the Alaska Native women whom she admires, Lyons elevates them as emissaries who interrogate and challenge the colonial systems of human domination over nature and erasure of Indigenous voices. In her icon portraits, the women are simultaneously saints, shamans, or post-colonial Madonnas who give birth to Alaska Native modernity. Each of her icon is animated with diverse elements of Alaska Native life including animal spirits, shamanism, local spiritual relics, and traditional Indigenous design meticulously interwoven with Orthodox elements. Through creating new iconic imagery, melding Christian religious icons with Indigenous symbols of spirituality, Lyons's painting is about recovering lost culture, which translates into empowering and renewing Alutiiq identity.

Nevertheless, the Alaska Native women are not of the sole focal point in her creations; Lyons' portraits highlight the animals as much as the women, as Christ Child being replaced by the prominence of the young cub, pup, calf, salmon, or bird each of them is sanctified by a halo, directly staring into viewers' eyes. At the same time, this togetherness breaks down the human-centered dichotomy of the Western faith, such as humans and animals, life and death, mind and body, Christianity and paganism, Russian and Alutiiq, and colonized and colonized. Togetherness, indeed, cultivates resilience. Therefore, resilience cannot be accomplished by a single species. Humans are not the only important actors, and kin-making is a multispecies affair to cultivate resilience and mitigate vulnerability for survival. In this sense, to Alutiiq people, as well as to many other Alaska Native groups, to be formed as a person is to be formed relationally with other nonhuman persons. Alutiiq heritage and spirituality have been deeply intertwined with respect, appreciation, and embracement of the natural and spiritual environments and cultivate social and environmental ethics.

All Things Sacred: Alaska Native Icon Portrait Series

The history of tragedy and aspiration for renewal continue to cycle through Alutiiq modernity. The process of colonization brought the unprecedented flow of capital, addictions, fire weapons, and epidemics including the influenza, smallpox, diphtheria, and depression. Reflecting many implications of modernity, Lyons' work exemplifies the rebirth of Alutiiq cultural identity. It emits love that brings together humans, nonhuman animals, community, ecology, and constructing and reconstructing Llam Sua. As Joanne Mulcahy's ethnography (2001) on the decline and revival of the communities on the Kodiak Island illustrates, Alutiiq healers were often female midwives. Lyons may well play a role of a midwife for such a renewed tradition—what she helps bringing into the world is the future of Alaska Native resilience. In so doing, her work reinstitutes the future resilience of Alutiiq art and shapes its configuration in the future Alaska Native. In the time of struggles, a strong affirmation of traditional culture that strengthens social bonds keep community healthy. This is how social resilience emerged in the Alutiiq community in the 1990s especially after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound. Gordon L. Pullar (2009, n.p.), Alutiiq educator and author, writes:

> When the Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred in 1989 people were deeply shocked and depressed. Eleven million gallons of oil poured into Prince William Sound and then drifted west on the wind and currents, polluting fifteen hundred miles of shoreline. The huge spill coincided roughly with the geographic boundaries of the Sugpiaq culture area. Most sea life eventually recovered, but the communities that relied most heavily on fishing and coastal subsistence were disrupted for years and suffered deep economic losses. Today oil can still be found on the beaches, lying just below the rocks and sand. Its pollution still leaches slowly into the sea.

The ripple effects of the sudden environmental devastation directly had hit the social fabric of the Alutiiq community. Nevertheless, the community leaders of the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) promptly reorganized themselves to cope with the crisis: A grant from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustees Council supported the development of their new Alutiiq Museum (funded in 1987, two years prior to the oil spill) to build an archaeological repository and research facility rooted in the community. Resilience is being rooted in tradition. Tradition is an integral part of modernity, and despite various connotations of its "unchangingness" that are associated with the term, tradition is never frozen in time. Culture and tradition are intersected with each other, and mutually changing over time, connecting our lives with the past and future. This integrity shows how resilience helps people transcend intergenerational soul wounds steeped in the colonial past. Such resilience founded upon expressive culture that involves one's kin and community members show there is hope, as it presents a process of healing and consequential recovery from adversity.

Lyons's portraits decentralize human experiences. Each human and nonhuman other in her work radiates a fresh energy to dance off the canvas. This embeddedness reflects Alutiiq relations with the wildlife, which deeply intersects with human lives, drawing a full circle of entangled relationships. In what follows, I will discuss six portraits from Lyons's Alaska Native icon portrait series to highlight the idea of love, resilience, and sovereignty.

Takuqa'ak: A Bear's Blessing (2018)

Figure 3: Takuqa'ak: A Bear's Blessing.

In *Takuqa'ak: A Bear's Blessing* (Fig. 3), the Child's position is boldly occupied by a brown bear cub. Kodiak brown bears (*Ursus arctos middendorffi*), the largest terrestrial mammal in North America, have interacted with humans for centuries, especially Alutiiq hunters and other people in the rural coastal regions of the archipelago, which is home to more than three thousand bears. The bears used to be the only large land mammal available to Kodiak hunters, because Sitka deer, elk, and reindeer were introduced in the twentieth century. Lyons says:

> Kodiak Brown bears live among the people of Karluk, birthplace of my mother, homeland of my grandmother and great grandmother. Pushki, a native medicinal plant of the island surrounds the subject of this icon portrait. An ancient Russian Orthodox Church still sits on a hill overlooking this Alutiiq village. The spiritual power of the bear lives on as well.

The bears have long been providing food and raw materials for Alutiiq people as well as imaginations to nurture Llam Sua. In addition to meat and fat, bears provided gut for waterproof clothing, bone for tools, teeth for jewelry, and hides for bedding. Inside the warmth of sod houses,

people sat on bear hides to sew, make tools, and play games, and in the evening, families wrapped themselves in the plush fur for sleeping.

In the early twentieth century, hunters from around the world flocked to Kodiak in search of trophy brown bears, and Alutiiq men became famous for their expertise as guides. In the 1940s, however, the federal government designated much of Kodiak Island as a national wildlife refuge, and bear hunting was seriously restricted. Some of these restrictions have been lifted in recent years, allowing Alutiiq people to once again hunt bears for subsistence purposes.

The Alutiiq Madonna (2017)

Figure 4: The Alutiiq Madonna (2017).

The Indigenous Mother embraces a blue-eyed blonde Child (Fig. 4). His right hand holds an artifact, shaman figurine excavated in the Karluk-1 archaeological site, a site of primary importance in defining the late prehistory of the Kodiak archipelago, in particular the Koniag tradition. The halo around the Mother's head is trimmed with historic masks from the Pinart Collection, a legacy of the French anthropologist Alphonse Pinart who traveled to the Kodiak archipelago in 1872 to collect the most extensive number of Alutiiq ceremonial masks. In May 2008, thirty-four of the ceremonial masks from the collection travelled back to Kodiak for an exhibition at the Alutiiq Museum, which facilitated the initiative for cultural revitalization including language preservation and expressive culture including masking, dancing, singing, and drumming in the community. Lyons states:

> This is one of two icon portraits, my tribute to Alaska Native women who survived two waves of European colonization. There is a diverse interpretation by Alaska artists of the Alaska Purchase, marking the Treaty of Cession, 150 years ago, with the Russian Empire. This painting honors female Alutiiq ancestors who, under the siege of colonization, married Russians and gave birth to their babies. Despite the pressure to assimilate, some were able to pass on to future generations their indigenous knowledge and traditions.

Russian-American settlers in poverty occasionally relinquished their offspring in Alutiiq settlements knowing those children would be raised by the community. Native women that raised them, handed off Native culture to their "white" children. This painting pays homage to Lyons' Alutiiq great grandmother and Karluk, birthplace of her mother by representing the melding of European/Western cultures and Indigenous cultures.

Sea Birds Merganser (2018)

Figure 5: Sea Birds Merganser (2018).

The Kodiak sky, land, and water are brought together by the merganser in *Sea Birds Merganser* (Fig. 5). The merganser is particularly a symbolic bird that is spiritually powerful in the Alutiiq universe as they can travel through all layers of the universe through the air, land, and in the ocean. Birds were often the personal helpers of Alutiiq hunters and bird imagery is common in Alutiiq art. Lyons shares:

> Birds as a medium between humans and spiritual domain. They bear practical aspects of life as well as our spirituality by unifying different layers and spheres of the world. Merganser often shows up in Alutiiq art. The mergansers represent a hunting bird that also fishes and are known as "toothed

> bird" often portrayed in Alutiiq pottery. The Alutiiq people consider sea birds as spiritual guides, as well as protectors at sea.

Our Lady of Karluk (2017)

Figure 6: Our Lady of Karluk (2017).

A Native woman in an industrial outfit holds a sanctified salmon in *Our Lady of Karluk* (Fig. 6). King salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), also known as chinook, spawn in the Kodiak region. They are only indigenous to the Karluk and Ayakulik rivers, both on southwestern Kodiak Island. Their annual arrival in the archipelago symbolizes the beginning of the salmon fishing season. According to Alutiiq worldview, the first fish captured each year had to be entirely consumed, with the exception of its gills and gallbladder. This showed reverence for the animal and ensured an abundant future supply of fish (Alutiiq Museum 2020). Only about 13,500 of these fish return to the archipelago's streams each year.

A salmon cannery was first built in 1888 by the Arctic Packing Company on the Kodiak Island, which permanently transformed the relations between the people and their salmon kin. *Our Lady of Karluk* (Fig. 6) was inspired by the women in Lyons' family from the village of Karluk who worked in salmon canneries in Kodiak, Alaska. Lyons says:

> The painting is dedicated to the Sugpiaq/Alutiiq people of Karluk, on Kodiak Island, birthplace of my mother, and the abundant salmon runs that sustained them for thousands of years. The portrait is of a cannery worker on the Karluk River spit, behind her the Shelikof Strait and the Alaska Peninsula. Kal-ut is the Alutiiq word for Karluk and means "where the sun sets." The village of

> Karluk is on the Karluk River, once the site of the most abundant red salmon run in the world. Once the US purchased Alaska from Russia, Karluk became the location of fish processing plants and canneries. Many of my female relatives worked in the canneries, some to fund their college education. The painting honors those women and the sacred salmon of my ancestors.

A juxtaposition of capitalism and traditional economy shines through this icon painting. Lyons, an Alutiiq artist with ties to the community of Karluk, reflects the struggles of her ancestors and her exploration of the contemporary Alutiiq identity is an act of decolonization.

Llam Sua (2019)

Figure 7: Llam Sua (2019).

Llam Sua (Fig. 7), the spirit of all things, is represented by an Alaska Native youth and her marten (or short-tailed weasel) companion in this icon. According to the Alutiiq cosmology, the universe is comprised of five layers revealed by concentric circles (different layers of the universe), the center of which is occupied by the all-seeing Llam Sua. In this worldview, everything is interlinked, and everything has a human soul (*sua*; literally, "its person"), cultivating equal multispecies relations. Lyons emphasizes the importance of portraying the reality of Native youth life in rural Alaska. This icon captures the moment in which Llam Sua manifests itself in the eyes of an Iñupiaq teenager from Shaktoolik, Alaska, where Lyons visited in 2019. Shaktoolik is an Iñupiaq community in the Nome Census Area in Alaska. The community's population is 212 (2022), and the settlement is one of the coastal Alaskan communities threatened by erosion and related climate change and sea-level rises it had been relocated twice in the past. The Iñupiaq youth, as an embodiment of Llam Sua, is not adorned in

her traditional regalia. Rather, she is portrayed boldly as a contemporary figure in her fleece beanie and two layers of hoodies. She probably rides a bike in the village and may also like skateboarding. She may use a VHF radio in the village and may be also active on social media. She may be a good traditional Eskimo dancer and may enjoy hip hop at the same time. This is a portrait of Alaska Native modernity.

The short-tailed weasel (*Mustela erminea*), also known as an ermine, is one of only six land mammals indigenous to the Kodiak Archipelago. Biologists believe that weasels, along with bears, otters, foxes, voles, and bats, colonized Kodiak following the last major glaciation. This resilient species accompanies the Native adolescent, and they are collectively sending out a message that Alaska Native people are both contemporary and traditional at the same time. It defeats an assimilationist narrative that characterizes Indigenous peoples as being frozen in time. Lyons captures the Spirit of youth and future altogether in the eye of Llam Sua.

Martens, weasels, and small rodents are a favorite prey of village children for hunting and trapping. As the "weasel" entry of the Alutiiq Museum language site introduces, parents used to save the skin from a child's first kill, presenting it to their community at a winter festival. The skin demonstrated his potential as a hunter and their upcoming passage into adulthood (Alutiiq Museum, n.d.). In this contemporary manifestation of Iñupiaq-marten relations, Lyons illustrates the coming of age of contemporary Alutiiq cultural identity in the context of rising social resilience that enhances visual sovereignty.

The Pangolin Prophecy (2020)

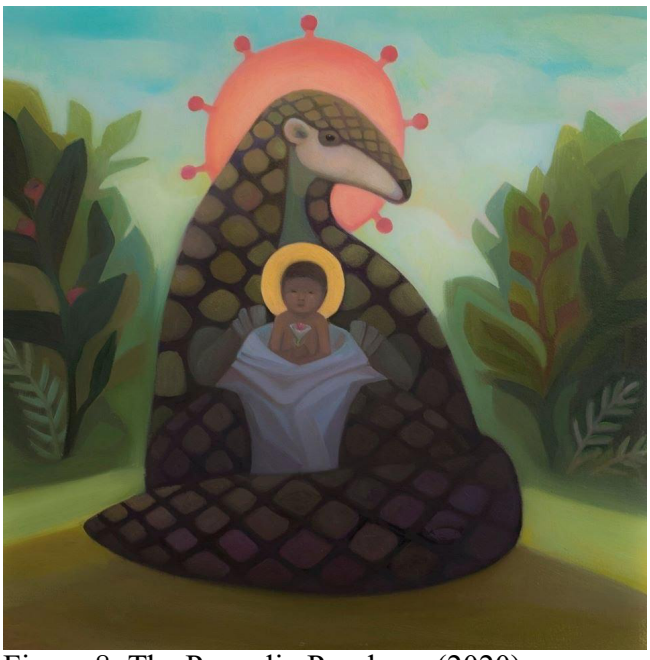

Figure 8: The Pangolin Prophecy (2020).

As her recent work The Pangolin Prophecy (Fig. 8) shows how humans and animals collectively and collaboratively transcend the history and legacy of conquest. “The pandemic is a warning but also an opportunity to face problems together,” says Lyons who painted this icon as a gift for her daughter who works as a newly minted gynecologist in Arizona:

> The Pangolin is one of the world's most vulnerable and trafficked animal, a possible vector for the coronal virus. Some say this is the Pangolin's revenge. On the other hand, could this be our salvation? All things are interconnected. When a species out of control upsets the natural balance, there is usually a check on this species, a crisis event that causes recalibration. COVID-19 may be our check, one that does not end in our extinction. It seems, Mother Nature has placed us on a time out, telling us all, "go to your room and think about what you have done.” The pandemic has exposed foundational social, ecological and ethical failures, laying bare structural racism, ecological degradation, income, justice and health inequality, a corrupt government and a ruling class that is willing to let us die to salvage their stock portfolios. Yet, this pause has revealed our unique strength, the power of the people, the extent to which our collective efforts can effect massive positive change. Our unified effort to isolate in place saved lives of the most vulnerable. For the first time cities woke to clear blue skies and the possibility of a unified fight against climate change. Our collective energy transferred to the streets to protest racism, declaring in one voice, Black Lives Matter! Mother Nature's time out is the chance to reset our priorities, reimagine the world we choose to live in. This may be the moment we wake up and gather to save ourselves.

Conclusions

Indigenous communities, voices, and ideologies are resilient, and they are never frozen in time. The core of Indigenous social health, wellbeing, and sovereignty are supported and nurtured through diverse origins of resilience. This paper explored Lyons’s quest of colonial past and the contemporary revival of Alaska Native expressive tradition through the entanglement between humans and nonhuman kin steeped in creative expressions. The process of her decolonizing effort highlights the Alaska Native idea of love--frequently seen as a powerful verb and process in Native epistemologies, and by acting in loving and responsible ways, we evoke, nurture, and enhance our connectivity to oneself and/or the world.

Embodying the spirit of contemporary Alaska Native social development, love is an idea that powerfully penetrates Lyons’ oeuvre. This paper explored how the notion of love has come to express Alaska Native resilience through the portrayal of pluralistic worldviews and deep entanglement of the Alutiiq past, present, and the future, which trespasses cultural and species boundaries. In so doing, Lyons’s Alaska Native icon series demonstrate a foundation of Indigenous visual sovereignty that brings all things sacred together to further decolonize Alaska and beyond.

References

Alutiiq Museum. (2014*). Spirit—Alutiiq Word of the Week—December 21.* https://alutiiqmuseum.org/collection/index.php/Detail/word/470

Alutiiq Museum. (2020). *King Salmon—Aamasuuk, Iiliksak.* https://alutiiqmuseum.org/collection/index.php/Detail/word/308

Alutiiq Museum. (n.d.). *Weasel—Amitatuk.* https://alutiiqmuseum.org/collection/index.php/Detail/word/534

Amsterdam, L. (2013). All the eagles and the ravens in the house say *yeah*: (Ab)original hip-hop, heritage, and love. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 32*(2), 53–72.

Barker, J. (2017). *Critically sovereign: Indigenous gender, sexuality, and feminist studies*. Duke University Press.

Cunsolo Willox, A., Stephenson, E., Allen, J., Bourque, F., Drossos, A., Elgarøy, S., Kral, M. J., Mauro, I., Moses, J., & Pearce, T. (2015). Examining relationships between climate change and mental health in the circumpolar north. *Regional Environmental Change,* 169–182.

Deloria V. & Wildcat D. R. (2001). *Power and place: Indian education in America*. Fulcrum Books.

Doan, S. N., & Borelli, J. L. (2022). Love and Resilience. In *Nature Meets Nurture: Science Based Strategies for Raising Resilient Kids* (pp. 67–92). American Psychological Association.

Freeman, A. (2016). *Decolonizing Alaska*. Bunnell Street Arts Center.

Govindrajan, R. (2021). Labors of love: On the political economies and ethics of bovine politics in Himalayan India. *Cultural Anthropology, 36*(2), 193–221.

Grossman Zoltán & Parker A. (2012). *Asserting native resilience: Pacific rim Indigenous nations face the climate crisis*. Oregon State University Press.

Haakanson, S. D., Steffian, A. F. (2009). *Giinaquq like a face: Sugpiaq masks of the Kodiak archipelago*. University of Alaska Press.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

HeavyRunner I. (2009). *Miracle survivor (pisatsikamotaan): An Indigenous theory on educational persistence grounded in the stories of tribal college students.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation].

Henry, R., LaVallee, A., Van Styvendale, N., & Innes, R. A. (2018). *Global Indigenous health: Reconciling the past engaging the present animating the future*. University of Arizona Press.

Kidwell, C. S., & Velie, A. (2005). Land and Identity. In *Native American Studies* (pp. 21–40). Edinburgh University Press.

King, M., Smith, A., & Gracey, M. (2009). Indigenous health part 2: The underlying causes of the health gap. *The Lancet,* 76–85.

Kuhn, R. J. (2021). *Two-Spirit love: Toward an inclusion of sexual sovereignty and erotic survivance*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation].

LaDuke W. (2015). *Recovering the sacred: The power of naming and claiming*. Haymarket Books.

McKinley, E. C. & Scarnato, J. M. (2021). What's love got to do with it? "Love" and alcohol use among U.S. Indigenous peoples: Aligning research with real-world experiences. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, *30*(1), 26-46.

Perea, J. B. (2012). *Sound relations: Native ways of doing music history in Alaska*. Oxford University Press.

Pullar, G. L. (2009). *The Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) people and their culture*. Smithsonian Institution Arctic Studies Center. https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/the-sugpiaq-alutiiq-people and-their-culture/tAatLPcTDsVq7K46.

Raheja, M. (2015). Visual sovereignty. In S. N. Teves, A. Smith, & M. H. Raheja (Eds.), *Native studies keywords* (pp. 25-34). University of Arizona Press.

Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C. & Yehuda, R. (2014). Resilience definitions theory and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 5*, 25338.

Vizenor, G. R. (1999). *Manifest manners: Narratives on postindian survivance*. University of Nebraska Press.

Watt-Cloutier S. (2018). *The right to be cold: One woman's fight to protect the Arctic and save the planet from climate change*. University of Minnesota Press.

Whyte, K. (2018). Critical investigations of resilience: A brief introduction to Indigenous environmental studies & sciences. *Daedalus*, *147*(2), 136–147.

Whyte, K. (2016). Indigeneity and U.S. settler colonialism. In N. Zack (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of philosophy and race* (pp. 91-101). Oxford University Press.

Wildcat, D. R. (2009). *Red alert!: Saving the planet with Indigenous knowledge*. Fulcrum Publishing.

Williams, M. S. T. (2009). *The Alaska Native reader: History culture politics*. Duke University Press.