

Learning Resistance: Inupiat and the US Bureau of Education, 1885-1906—Deconstructing Assimilation Strategies and Implications for Today

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Native students must be taught to deconstruct their history of assimilation in order to understand their current struggles and to strengthen their cultural identity. As an example of this, the paper considers how community education was justified, carried out and implicated in Inupiat assimilation practices during the first 20 years that the U.S. Bureau of Education was in control of Alaska Natives' education. Government documents, reports, and personal letters from missionary educators and government officials will be examined to identify the rationale that supported vocational and schooling efforts and drove educational practices. The analysis will begin to explain how education worked as an assimilation strategy that contributed to the devastating changes the Inupiat experienced between the years 1885 and 1906. This perspective has ramifications for schools serving Native communities. The paper concludes by highlighting the ways in which these forms of colonization persist in educational settings. The historical and present day subjugation should be made visible to help today's Native youth reclaim their cultural heritage and gain strength from the process.

Introduction

The idea of education for many Westerners carries with it rhetoric about benevolence, philanthropy, and the promotion of social progress. These concepts were reflected in the discourse of missionary teachers and the rhetoric of the United States Department of the Interior's Bureau of Education aimed at Inupiaq¹ education in the northwestern arctic. Eighteen years after the Alaska territory was bought by the United States, the federal government—through the Organic Act of 1884—established that the U.S. Secretary of the Interior would

be responsible for the education of “children of all races” in the territory. The following year, this responsibility was given to the Bureau of Education. During the first years after the establishment of the Bureau of Education (1885-1906), Sheldon Jackson presided over the educational project that incorporated both religious and vocational training for Alaskan Natives. Under his leadership, many schools were established in rural areas through contracts with missionaries. In Northwest Alaska, the Evangelical Society of Friends led the educational effort. These European American missionaries immigrated to northwestern Alaska and set up schools to save Inupiat souls, make them productive, and to teach them a civilized, Christian way to be in the world. In conjunction with these endeavors, the United States government embarked on an adult education project aimed at civilizing the Inupiat and creating money-based, economic dependence for those living on “barren land.” Toward this aim, the government bought and distributed reindeer to government-owned reindeer stations, Christian missions, and to individual natives who were deemed worthy by these entities.

The paper considers how these forms of education were justified, carried out, and implicated in Inupiat assimilation practices during the first 20 years that the U.S. Bureau of Education was in control of Alaska Natives’ education. Government documents, reports, and personal letters from missionary educators will be examined in an effort to identify the attitudes, values, and philosophies that supported vocational and schooling efforts. The analysis will provide clues as to how European Americans understood themselves in relation to the Inupiat *other*. The paper will explore how this concept of *other* was constructed, reinforced, and used within the individualizing, normalizing, and disciplinary educational structures as defined by Michel Foucault (1977, 1972), a French postmodern philosopher. This begins to explain how education worked as an assimilation strategy that contributed to the devastating changes the Inupiat experienced around the turn of the century and continue—to a lesser extent—today. The paper concludes with an imperative for teachers to share this perspective with their Native pupils. To understand their own experiences, Native students must be taught to deconstruct their history of assimilation. This process makes visible current forms of oppression, inviting personal resistance and cultural renewal.

Background

For Inupiat living in the region, education was the institutional force that drove assimilation practices. Mandatory schooling and vocational training required that many basic Inupiat beliefs and traditions be altered. Through both obvious and subtle means, education served to marginalize, control, and subjugate the Inupiaq community. A short ethnohistory of the region will contrast the past to present, and by doing so, underscore the extent of change that was necessary for Inupiat to be successful within a Western educational context. This background is essential to understanding how education worked as a primary colonizing agent that has implications for today.

Traditional Practices

Instead of living in sedentary villages brought about by mandatory schooling, inland Inupiat traditionally lived in traveling, autonomous family groupings affiliated by kinship. Small family groups followed the seasonal migration of their food sources (mainly caribou). The size of the family group varied depending on the natural resources of the area (Burch, 1975). Groups ranged from a dozen to over fifty members. In each family group, there was time set aside for learning, being social, and playing together. No matter the size, each group had a *qargi*, a family gathering place of some sort. During the day, this structure was used as a meeting place for boys and men. At night, the *qargi* served as a community center. There, families gathered to perform rituals, play games, dance, and tell stories (Burch, 2000).

Stories were traditionally used to impart moral lessons to youth (Kendal, 1989). Lessons were embedded in the story content (Adam & Fosdick, 1983). Details of the characters' thoughts and actions were told so that youth could intuit the emotional spaces, relationships, and motivations of the characters, and thus learn through listening. This intuitive process allows story listeners to access their own understanding in a detailed and insightful way. "The insights are in the best sense original, which means they are rooted in personal experience, and also traditional [understandings], which means that the originality has been woven into the fabric of group life. It is this combination that makes cultures both stable and life-giving" (Adam & Fosdick, 1983, p. 73). After hearing the Elders' stories, parables were historically retold by youth to each other. This served to reinforce the lessons within the story and also provided the teller with practice orating. The latter provided an important social function since youth were not given the opportunity to "hold an audience" until they were adults (Kendal, 1989). This contrasts with the classroom expectations of the 19th century and today.

As in the case of stories, most education was a part of everyday life. Yupiktak Bista (1977) explains that "[w]e did not have to worry about relating education to real life, because learning came naturally as part of living. Education was a process of living from the land, of subsisting, of surviving" (p. 71). Learning meant watching for subtle cues to determine appropriate action. In her dissertation research, Kendal (1989) examined how Inupiat children are raised to intuit the social context, the flow of interaction, and the intentionality of the social players. She states, "A highly prized Inupiat skill is that of reading implicit messages below the surface of a conversation, much like the reading of subtle features of the Arctic tundra during hunting expeditions" (p. 29). This is quite different from the overt communication processes employed in Western educational institutions.

Interpersonal learning is very important in a society that emphasized social interaction and public opinion as the primary means for establishing and maintaining social control. Inupiat did not have a "chief" or council or other recognized form of government capable of external control (Chance, 1990). Although there were no formal leadership structures, each family group had an

influential male leader who "... regularly won the right to lead through their personal attributes of hunting, trading, human relation skills, energy, and wisdom. These qualities were what gained them their following and their following is what gained them their wealth" (Chance, 1990, p. 22). The negotiation of power and influence was an on-going process.

Wealth was exchanged through extensive trade networks. The region had an annual trading fair at Sheshalik, a location very close to the area that is now known as Kotzebue. Before Westerners became involved with trade, peoples from throughout the circumpolar region converged at this strategic point to trade among themselves. This annual trading fair sometimes attracted upwards of 2000 people.

Contact with Westerners

It wasn't until 1816 that Otto Von Kotzebue crossed the Bering Straight and began trading with Inupiat. Their trading tradition served the Native people well in their dealings with Europeans. By the middle of the 19th century, Alaska Natives were understood as aggressive bargainers, not to be swindled (Ducker, 1996). This was noted by Vincent Colyer, the Secretary of the Board of Indian Commissioners who attributed the natives' shrewdness to Western influences in his 1869 report. In this document, he said, "for a half century educated into traders... they have become sharp-witted, and drive as hard and close a bargain as their white brothers" (Haycox, 1984, pp. 158-159). This statement points to the ethnocentric understanding that attributed the capability of another people to influences of one's own culture. It also underscores a typical European American judgment that confers value only through that which is familiar: Inupiat trading skills are respected only because these skills are useful within a Western framework. Even though the understanding between cultures was limited, their economic association enabled both peoples to exchange goods and maintain separate cultures throughout most of the nineteenth century.

In conjunction with this exchange-based relationship, the Western history of this region can be traced through political and economic ventures. Starting with Otto Von Kotzebue in 1816, both Russia and United States utilized the natural resources of this region. By 1823, the two countries had signed a treaty to afford them rights to fish and navigate in the northern Pacific. This treaty also granted both countries the opportunity to trade with the Natives who lived in this unclaimed territory. This treaty increased Westerners travel to the northwestern coast of Alaska. Russians, Europeans, and European Americans exported fish, furs, and whales from this territory. By the middle of the 19th, economic interests peaked as the whaling industry crested from 1841 to 1852. During this time, 278 whaling vessels navigated the waters along the northern coast of Alaska (Senungetuk, 1970). The Inupiat people continued their seasonal migrations and subsistence lifestyle, while also obtaining seasonal wage employment on fishing boats and whalers.

Little changed for Alaskan Natives after the United States bought Alaska from Russia in 1867. Their only mention in this transaction was to note that, "the

uncivilized tribes will be subject to such laws and regulations as the United States may from time to time adopt in regard to the aboriginal tribes of the country” (Senungetuk, 1970). Since the natural resources of the area were undefined, there was no need to subjugate the original inhabitants. Trade continued in an informal manner, and by the latter part of the century, it is estimated that half of the Inupiat population was seasonally involved in trade with Westerners (Ducker, 1996). By 1885, many Inupiat utilized western goods and half of them adapted their subsistence activities to accommodate some wage-based work. It is important to note that at this time, the relationship between the foreigners and Natives was chiefly economic. The Inupiat belief structures, social systems and migratory traditions remained stable and intact.

In the 1890s, the major churches in Alaska carved up the state’s territory so that they would not have to compete for converts (Chance, 1990). This is when the Northwest region—an arbitrary delineation—was created. The evangelical Society of Friends, a Protestant denomination, lost no time in sending missionaries to the region. Soon thereafter missionary schools were erected in several places along the northwestern coast and with them came permanent settlements (Chance, 1990). These changes affected the Inupiat social structures and migratory traditions in dramatic ways.

By 1907, the native communities in Northwest Alaska were no longer viable and strong. In describing the “Condition of Natives of Alaska,” Judge Royal A. Gunnison made this plea to the Grand Jury:

Gentleman of the Grand Jury: There exists today in Alaska...a most deplorable condition of affairs among the natives. That steps toward amelioration of this condition should be taken at once there can not be the slightest question. The court, as at present constituted, can not, we think, be characterized as pro-native, but the state of abject misery in matters physical and social into which this race is rapidly sinking must cause one to consider what can be done... (Gunnison, 1907).

In the 1870s, “witnesses had testified to the general capability and self-sufficiency of the Alaskan natives” (Haycox, 1984, p. 161). By 1907, these same people were considered to be in a “state of abject misery.” What happened in those intervening years to lead to this “rapidly sinking” condition? One answer points to the Bureau of Education, which was established under the Department of the Interior with Sheldon Jackson at its head during these intervening years. This paper will examine how the Bureau’s policies, practices and emissaries constituted an individualizing and disciplinary (Foucault, 1977) process termed a *colonization of consciousness* by Comaroff & Comaroff (1989) in their study of South Africa. These subtle forms of colonization turned the Native community against itself and continue to afflict the Inupiat today.

Sheldon Jackson and Community Education

Sheldon Jackson is known as the father of Alaskan Education. After visiting Alaska in 1877, he lobbied extensively to educate the Natives of the territory

(Ducker, 1996). By writing countless letters to congress and making congressional appearances backed by the political clout of the Presbyterian Church, Sheldon Jackson is credited with the Organic Act of 1884 (Hinkley, 1982). This act required that the Secretary of the Interior make “needful and proper provision for the education of the children of school age” in the district of Alaska “without reference to race” (Haycox, 1984, p. 162). This duty was to be carried out by the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Education under the direction of the General Agent of Education. Sheldon Jackson was appointed to this post in 1885 and remained in it until 1906.

As a Presbyterian minister, Jackson believed that “be his skin black, his antecedents Islamic, or his society as ancient as China’s, he could be saved for pure Christianity by education” (Hinkley, 1982, p. 3). Jackson held that everyone is entitled to an education because it enables people to read the bible and thus know God.

As representatives of the finest nineteenth century Christian concept of stewardship, Sheldon Jackson felt that American manifest destiny must and could respect the rights of native people. He felt that Christian principals provided the basis for true civilization and that through education Christianity and civilization were fused (Roberts, 1978).

He thought that natives had a *right* to the civilizing influences of a Christian education.

Jackson believed that institutional learning could provide the Natives with the necessary means to enable them to become part of the “superior” American system. This sentiment is evident in the letter that Jackson wrote to congress about the benefits of establishing a comprehensive education program—reindeer apprenticeships and schools—in the arctic. In this letter, he states that “the surest way of attaching them (Alaskan Natives) to our government, and so making them good and useful citizens, is to show them that the American people are not merely powerful, but just and merciful as well” (Jackson, July 25, 1891). Jackson was convinced that his proposed teaching practices embodied justice and mercy because this education would enable Alaska Natives to provide for themselves within their new economic system. Jackson believed that economic independence and the procurement of a vocation were endeavors supported by God. He believed God put Christians on Earth to glorify Him through tireless secular work. Alaska’s educational system had the potential to teach Natives how to function in a cash economy, and in so doing, lead them to the *correct* vocational, spiritual, and moral path. These three elements intertwined, creating the philosophical underpinning that supported educational practices focused on assimilationist goals. This process was viewed as beneficent, a means to a higher end.

In order to obtain such far-reaching objectives, Jackson believed that educational initiatives needed to “extend to the heart as well as the mind” (Haycox, 1982). In a report to congress, Jackson proposed to “lift up this native race out of barbarism by the introduction of reindeer and education” (Jackson, 1893, p. 14). He believed that reindeer herding would create “change (in the

Alaskan Natives) from the condition of hunters to that of herders which is a long step upwards in the scale of civilization” (Jackson, 1893, p. 13). In that particular historical moment, Social Darwinism proclaimed European Americans to be at the top of the evolutionary ladder. Any attempt to assimilate “others” was understood as a generous act done in service of a greater, human good.

Although well meaning, the practical changes in lifestyle required by these economic and political initiatives irreversibly changed the Inupiat people’s traditional way of being. The ancestral migratory cycles were replaced by a sedentary lifestyle. Because they no longer migrated with game animals, starvation became a real threat (Senungetuk, 1971).

In addition, large groups of people were suddenly forced to live together throughout the year. This situation was alien to Inupiat and made many traditional practices ill-suited to their new social structure. Sharing resources had been a symbol of strength and a way of ensuring interdependence within family groupings (Burch, 1988). In large sedentary settlements, acquisition illustrated worth and facilitated personal independence, an imposed goal. Traditionally disputes were settled through conflict or avoidance: the factions would either violently fight or merely take leave of one another (Burch, 1988). These practices were not viable in large village communities. In addition, large settlements encouraged the spread of disease. Before the missionaries arrived, the spread of disease was minimized because only small bands of Inupiat remained together for any length of time. When Westerners introduced Spanish Influenza, the traditional medical care provided by the shamans was ineffective, and a large number of Inupiat died (Chance, 1990). These unintended outcomes of educational policy made Inupiat more vulnerable to conversion.

Structures of Control Inside Education

Cultural assimilation was the overt goal of the Bureau of Education. Their rhetoric supported and justified this goal by situating the white race as superior—years ahead of the Natives—on the evolutionary scale. Within this frame, it is “natural” that European Americans teach the inferior Natives how to move toward a more advanced civilization. In 1898, William T. Harris, United States Commissioner of Education, described this benevolent and pragmatic aim. “(Natives) must take the long step from nomadic fisherman and herders to dwellers in villages, with permanent employments that should support them and also render them useful to a white population which would eventually come to central and northwestern Alaska” (p. 5). To achieve this end, administrators and missionary educators forced Natives out of their migratory patterns, by requiring that their children attend school. This act brought Inupiat youth into the disciplinary regime of civilized, American culture in the form of institutional learning. Foucault (1977) writes about the efficacy of this process. “The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination” (p. 170). In the case of Inupiat education, the system used

constant surveillance, documentation, and punishment (or reward) to ensure that Inupiat abide by non-Inupiat standards. This action alone situates European American knowledge, values, and institutions as “the reality” to which Natives must adapt.

This lopsided exchange supported the Western view that Natives are less capable, like children. “To treat someone like a child is, roughly, to treat her (or him) as if her (or his) choices are not quite her (or his) own to make” (Schapiro, 1999, p. 715). Educational policies that forced families to live in villages and send their children to school clearly reflect this kind of thinking. The perpetrators of these actions felt benevolent; they were promoting social progress. This view is evident in an Alaskan missionary’s letter written to the committee on Indian Affairs about Alaska Natives in 1901. In it, William Duncan condemns a proposed government policy that will “leave natives to themselves, to fight their own way, work out their own destiny, and take the same chances as whites.” Not only is such a scheme morally reprehensible, it is truly unfair given the difference between the races.

When we contrast the condition of the two peoples—whites with centuries, and the Indians, still as children making their first lessons in civilized life—then the seeming fairness of this proposal vanishes. For a race to be a fair one the competitors should be equally matched. A struggle between a full-grown man and a child leaves no room for speculation as to the results of the contest (Duncan, 1901).

Reindeer apprenticeships—an educational strategy that instituted a paternal relationship between white herders and Natives—was supposed to render this contest fair. In such a relationship, “the master was expected to provide apprentices not only with occupational training, but also with the same moral, religious, and civic instruction that would be given to his own child” (Swanson & Torrac, 1995, p. 16).

Surveillance, Documentation, and Punishment

Reindeer apprenticeships required Inupiat to perform an assortment of tasks that are judged to be wrong or right, docile or disobedient. This kind of concrete labeling was unheard of in Inupiat society. In 1893, Ellen (Nellie) Kittredge, a teacher missionary, commented on the fact that the Native language did not even have a word for disobey. “They have no government to obey, or bible, and parents’ orders, I think, are often on the order of, ‘go to school, or, if you don’t want to, go fishing’” (Engerman, 1982, p. 83). The Inupiat communicated using pliant and often ambiguous gestures and language, leaving people to determine their own meanings. As illustrated earlier, traditional Inupiat learning was based on questioning and story telling, making the conclusions drawn highly personal (Briggs, 1992, 1998). Western education with its sharp delineation between correct and incorrect behaviors and knowledge stands in stark contrast to the fluid forms of Inupiat learning.

Implications of colonial education strategies become clear when considering the conflicting orientations of traditional practices and those that were

introduced. The decontextualized knowledge of missionary educators ignored that which is original, subjective and negotiated between people. In so doing, Western education negated the value of personal and conferred ways of knowing, replacing them with rigid doctrines that used foreign lenses to judge people individually. Apprentices were chosen according to each individual's perceived strengths. This personal evaluation process was on going. William T. Harris, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, explains in his 1900 annual report to Congress, "At each mission station there is constantly going on a process of selecting trustworthy natives, those ambitious to learn the civilization of the white men, those ambitious to hold and increase property" (p. 6).

The on-going surveillance not only rewarded specific, "civilized" characteristics, it also constituted the natives as *individuals*. McLean (1997) argues that this individualization process alone is oppressive for Native peoples. He writes, "the production of individuality is itself a form of governance" (p. 3). In this case, the educational process requires that an Inupiaq person is identified as separate from their community and apart from his or her context. Individuals who displayed characteristics such as cleanliness, compliance, and industriousness were rewarded with material goods, reindeer, and additional liberties within Western institutions. These appraisals of merit created a social stratification within the Inupiaq community that was based on "individual worth." This is problematic when one acknowledges that the idea of individual identity is foreign to Inuit. An Arctic anthropologist, Fierup-Riordan (1986) explains that Alaskan Natives believed that the life of each person "only took on meaning in the context of a complex web of relationships between men and animals, both the living and the dead" (p. 262).

The production of the individual can be seen as a product of power relations. Foucault (1972) asserts that the mere idea of "individual" removes the bonds of context, and thus constitutes each person as a distinct object to be shaped by the unmoving structures of moral regulation.

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects (p. 212).

Education was characterized by the individualization of production relations within the power structures of the colonizing society. "As put forward by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in his 1899 annual report: 'The Indian must be individualized and treated as an individual by the Government...The Indian must be prepared for the new order through a system of compulsory education, and the traditional society of Indian groups must be broken'" (Chance, 1990, p. 52). Individualization was an explicit colonization strategy used by the Bureau of Education in Alaska at the turn of the century.

As the General Agent, Jackson offered to build buildings, provide reindeer for villages, and pay the salaries of teachers if the Evangelical Society of Friends

would establish schools in Northwest Alaska. According to Roberts (1978), an Alaskan historian, the Friends sent their missionaries north and by 1902, this church had 100 members in this region. By 1905, membership had increased to 900. These missionaries established schools for the natives as “the best and quickest means of Christianizing and civilizing them” according to W. T. Lopp, a government emissary, in 1894. The mission schools utilized a reward-punishment system to institute a new kind of stratified social organization within the Inupiat communities. Foucault (1977, 1972) refers to this process as *discipline*. Techniques such as perpetual observation, evaluation, and documentation were used to mold Inupiat to fit within European American standards.

Educational policies that forced religious, cultural, and economic conversion were lauded. In 1900, William T. Harris, United States Commissioner of Education, explained this to the audience at the Ecumenical Conference of Foreign Missions. He said that education was the way to promote “elevation of the natives and their assimilation with our own” (Harris, 1900). To fulfill this mission, it was essential to convert Inupiat practices, spirituality and morality to Christian American ones. To do this, the elimination of traditional beliefs and acts was necessary. Missionary letters revel in these kinds of assimilationist accomplishments. A Quaker teacher/missionary stationed in Kotzebue describes this kind of triumph in a 1901 letter stating, “Old time superstitions were completely disregarded. ...With greater attention to sanitation and hygiene, the roots of the old taboos were systematically eliminated” (Roberts, 1978, p. 211). In one of Sheldon Jackson’s early reports, he boasts about the Natives’ new reliance on doctors.

When our physician has been called upon so much it proves that the Eskimos are tired of the burden of supporting their heathen medicine men, and that they had rather seek a physician than employ these sorcerers, who are losing more and more confidence of the people and will soon be a thing of the past (Jackson, 1893).

The unintended spread of tuberculosis and Spanish Influenza served to further subjugate indigenous knowledge. The effects of the spread of disease on culture is lauded as an accomplishment in many educational documents of the time, while there are only cursory mentions of the epidemics that decimated more than half of the Inupiaq population (Senungetuk, 1970). Many of the written accounts applauded the growing distrust that the Inupiat had for traditional medical practices because they failed to cure the European American diseases. This callused appraisal reflects a drive toward assimilation at all costs. It seems that many viewed Inupiat only as subjects to be molded into their own image.

This transformation not only fulfilled a moral imperative, it was also good for the economy. Sheldon Jackson summed up the connection between education and economics in his first report to congress as the head of the Bureau of Education.

Education creates new wants. It is therefore proper that instruction should train the hand in order that the newly created wants can be supplied. The work of the Alaska school system is not only to teach reading, writing and arithmetic, but also how to live better and how to utilize the resources of the country in order to make money (1886, p. 32).

Widening the scope to encompass the entire economic picture, William T. Harris, the United States Commissioner of Education wrote in 1900 that “the 50,000 natives of that (northwestern) region will be as essential to our white miners, as they are now to our salmon factories.” The Gold Rush in Alaska’s Northwest required laborers, and education was the vehicle for colonizing and integrating native people into the workforce. This was justified through an ethos that underscored the benefits of increased production and industry. Harris (1900) continues;

When our converts (the natives) are brought into our system of productive industry and are made partakers of our world of commerce, they will acquire a new sense of the meaning of our theological doctrines, which have inspired European peoples to take possession of lands for productive industry and world commerce, uniting all in one vast effort to conquer nature for human uses (p. 38).

Clearly, Harris advocated methods to reject “nature religions” repress indigenous knowledge and erect in its place a unified humanity bent toward a Western purpose (conquering nature). McLean (1997) asserts that this kind of effort requires education that denies the particularity of social experiences lived by different groups within society, and marginalizes their expression of difference. This could be achieved through a system of individual rewards and discipline.

The missionary teachers constantly watched their Eskimo charges, judging and enacting consequences for behavior that was deemed normal or aberrant, good or bad. Educational theorists write about this process as damaging, even to children who are part of the dominant culture.

[Education] involved the structuring of relations, of social space and social time; and social knowledge and action, in such a way as to produce a theory and practice of normality, which conformed to the state model and which marginalised alternative patterns of living (Paterson, 1988, p. 282).

The constitution of normality in education promotes, sustains, and internalizes assimilation practices. “Norms invariably centre on the imperatives of docility and productivity, and individuals are ranked on the basis of where they stand in relation to such norms” (Ryan, 1991, p. 109). In the schoolroom, students are classified, distributed and defined in relation to specific standards of thinking, behaving, and responding. These methods are then used to create hierarchical structures that measure and place students in relation to one another. This allows the teacher to systematize the allotment of rewards and punishments around the normalizing agents (Ryan, 1991). In so doing, the mission teachers of Northwest Alaska exerted a constant pressure to conform—or in their own words—to progress.

These mechanisms of assimilation to Christianity and American civilization are overt, and at the same time, involve a veiled process that contributes to a *colonization of consciousness*, first coined by sociologists Comaroff & Comaroff (1989) in their study of post-colonial South Africa. “At a deeper level, they (these processes) set their sights on the total *reformation* (emphasis included in the original) of the heathen world; i.e. on the inculcation of the hegemonic forms, the taken-for-granted signs and practices, of the colonizing culture” (p. 289). On-going surveillance, punishment, and rewards produce a framework for judging that is adopted and internalized by the subjugated population. The internal gaze becomes *the* criteria by which oppressed people evaluate their own practices and beliefs. This perpetuates itself. Through these mechanisms of external and internal control, the missionary educators supplanted Inupiat indigenous ways of being from the inside, out.

When considering the invisible and insidious features of this colonizing method the “sudden” decline of the Inupiat community between 1885 and 1906 is put in stark relief. Education paved the way toward natives’ “rapidly sinking condition.” Although it is hard to encapsulate the complexity of these processes, the analysis identifies some colonizing practices that quietly, and with benevolent—although paternalistic—intent, wore away the foundations of meaning for the Inupiat. These less obvious forms of oppression can not easily be addressed.

The essence of colonization inheres less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming ‘others’ by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their own choosing; in making them pliant objects and silenced subjects of our scripts and scenarios; in assuming our capacity to represent them (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1989, p. 15).

It is precisely the educational modes of understanding, representing and interacting with Inupiat “others” that eroded the strength of the community.

The Damage Persists

One hundred years later, these invisible forms of colonization continue to structure the way that the dominating culture perceives the Inupiat. When mentioning my work as a community educator with Native people in Kotzebue, European Americans never fail to inquire about the high rates of suicide, alcoholism, and depression. They also tend to praise me for tackling such immense social problems. These commonly-spoken statistics and the expectation that I should act as “savior” reinforce the marginal status of the Inupiat by situating the Native people as problems to be solved by “white” people. This orientation also fails to acknowledge the role of educational institutions as colonizing forces that continue to contribute to these issues. The organized practices of discipline, individualization, and normalization continue to be the dominant forms of education in the region’s schools (Chance, 1990; Durst, 1992; McLean, 1997; Paterson, 1988; Ryan, 1989), despite the beneficent intentions of the teachers and administrators. In subtle, yet ubiquitous ways, these practices force Inupiat into Western paradigms.

Foucault (1972, 1977) describes the social practices employed in modern classrooms as *discipline*. These include the division of space, the employment of observation, individualizing and evaluation. These processes are involved in the structural design of schools (classrooms and individual desk assignments), the division of time (class periods), the role of the teacher (disciplinarian), and the practice of giving grades (evaluation). According to Foucault (1977), these institutional processes were developed to extract maximum productivity from each individual while also securing their docility. “A relation of surveillance, defined and regulated, is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it which increases its efficiency” (Foucault, 1977, p. 176) This is done by establishing and enforcing universal norms. Each student is differentiated, compared, and judged according to how well they adhere to the accepted standard. These judgments characterize each individual according to his or her relation to established norms. In Ryan’s (1989) study of Innu schooling practices, he found that;

Students commonly judge their own worth in relation to their own capacity to master knowledge and skills as well as their own capacity to abide by norms that school personnel feel would promote (these). These impressions are reinforced by a multitude of sanctions that are applied by teachers to individual students—students are either good or bad; bright or slow. Those procedures single out individuals and impose a forced visibility on students rendering them particularly open to any negative evaluations that might arise...[S]tudents are required to write exams and do assignments that are graded, and their achievements and nonachievements are systematically recorded and occasionally sent home. Students cannot escape the school’s overbearing gaze, a gaze that endeavors to know intimately each student, and, if need be, correct him or her so that each may cooperate in order to enhance production. Everyone, including fellow students, is aware of each student’s general worth. This may prove troubling in a school where students miss a great deal of school, must overcome a language barrier, and have different cultural imperatives (pp. 394-395).

Through constant surveillance and reinforcement of norms, the characterization of individuals is internalized so that each person assesses their own worth on the basis of their location within such normalizing practices (Ryan, 1989). This process is extremely effective because it establishes internal surveillance regimes and self-administered maintenance of the accepted norms. The mechanisms by which discipline is imposed thus become self-perpetuating and indiscernible.

Modern colonization in the schools of Northwest Alaska is further cloaked and maintained by the content of classroom learning. The standard curriculum taught in these schools decontextualizes knowledge, and situates Western perspectives and experiences at the core of all learning, despite efforts to integrate Inupiaq culture into the classrooms. Although Inupiaq classes are offered, they are not part of the curriculum required by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Classes are conducted mainly using Standard English. The school day is broken into content-specific segments where

knowledge is imparted without the perspective gained from its context. Additionally, linear (Western) forms of logic permeate the classroom and History focuses on Western accomplishments and wars. The latter serves as a clear example. “Most educational efforts in Alaska promote what Freire calls a ‘culture of silence’ in that the native northerner learns how others make history, but this does not enable him to develop a sense of his own history” (Chance, 1971, p. 13).

Even today, school texts frequently present Alaska’s colonial experience as an effort by the dominant society to bring the benefits of American progress to its outlying Arctic peoples—and of course, bring those peoples into the ever-widening expanse of that society. For the Inupiat, however, one can say that western ‘progress’ represented at least in part an erosion of their history, and with it, a lessened sense of self-worth (Chance, 1990, p. 212).

Not surprising, these educational practices can be implicated in the role confusion and cultural insecurity many young Inupiat experience. As recently as 1969, young Kotzebue Eskimos are described collectively as having “personal insecurity, well-developed self denigration, and extreme confusion about (their) role in life—indeed the very meaning of that life” (Hippler, 1969, p. 38).

This confusion is exacerbated by the conflicting expectations of Inupiat students’ school and home environments. The verbal and nonverbal interaction and communication patterns that dominate the school environment are counter to many Native values and practices (Greenbaum & Greenbaum, 1983, Erickson & Mohatt, 1982). This makes it harder for Native students to master the process of formal schooling (Philips, 1983). Similarly, the performance expectations (turn-taking, speech interaction, eye contact, etc) of Inupiat students in Northwestern Alaska are very different from those encountered in everyday village life (Kendall, 1989). This negatively affects Inupiat students’ success in their classroom environments. Although these issues arise from structural procedures and expectations, Native students in general and Inupiat students specifically, understand this lack of success as a personal failure, not an institutional one, e.g. not the failing of the schools. As a young Inupiat woman stated in a focus group, “people here are not educated or going to school or trying to finish...that is their problem” (unpublished data, Wexler, 2005). In short, *discipline* (Foucault, 1977) is enacted in schools to produce individuals who adhere to normative (Western) standards which are different from those of the Inupiat. When these standards are not met, Inupiat as well as others, blame themselves.

This self-blame is supported by the seemingly fair application of discipline. In other words, the inequality of the school environments for Inupiat young people is masked by the universality of expectations. Foucault (1977) describes how this occurs. “[T]he non-reversible subordination of one group over another, the ‘surplus’ of power...is always fixed on the same side, the inequality of position of the different ‘partners’ in relation to the common regulation make it...possible to distort” (p. 223). This distortion renders modern colonization ambiguous. “Ambiguity has serious consequences when a people are told that they live in an egalitarian society but find that their every action or feeling, indeed their very

being, is highlighted as inferior, different, and of less importance” (Tatz, 2001, p. 7). This form of discipline is internalized so that each person evaluates and condemns themselves for not measuring up to the imposed standards of the colonizers.

When teachers try to make allowances for this inherent imbalance, their actions either erodes their Inupiat students’ feelings of self-worth or makes them indignant: Inupiat students feel they are seen as less capable than their counterparts or they believe the teacher is prejudiced. During a focus group discussion in one of the region’s villages, a young Inupiaq described how he feels when the educational standards are altered to accommodate Inupiat students.

Sometimes they treat you a little different than they would a white person I guess. And I think in villages like this they expect more out of white students than they do Native students, that’s how I feel. Sometimes students don’t get what they should in school or they feel cheated sometimes when teachers expect more out of white kids than they do with Native kids (unpublished raw data, Wexler, 2005).

Since the structural forms of oppression are indiscernible to both students and school personnel, efforts to accommodate for them are misunderstood.

Instead of addressing the cultural standards embedded in the disciplinary structures of education, the schools in Northwest Alaska make marginal efforts to include “Inupiaq culture” into the students’ schedules. The region’s schools celebrate Inupiat days several times each year when Elders are invited into the classroom to tell stories and demonstrate crafts in fifty-minute blocks of time. Within a similar structure, decontextualized Inupiaq language classes are available to students so they can learn a few Inupiat words. In a focus group interview, a high school senior illustrates how these small efforts are lauded, while the subtle forms of oppression remain obscure.

Here you can learn to talk Eskimo and like in Anchorage it’s hard cause there they teach you French, they teach you German and Spanish but they don’t teach you Inupiaq. It’s weird they don’t teach you the traditional stuff. I mean, it’s more of a white man’s place to live. I mean, it’s the same here but I think it is better because you can learn your Eskimo words (unpublished raw data, Wexler, 2005).

This quote illustrates that despite the overt efforts to include “culture” into the classrooms of Northwest Alaska, the experience of school is inextricably western even though this perspective is hard to define. The attempt to bring the “Inupiaq culture” into the region’s schools is considered positive, but not really substantial.

Uncloning Modern Colonization

A more meaningful approach would make the colonial structures within education visible to students and school personnel. Instead of fortifying oppressive processes, education for the Inupiat could identify the ways in which Native people are (and were) marginalized through the creation, sanctioning and internalizing of normative (Western) standards. The difference between these

established, foreign guidelines and those found in Inupiaq society must be underscored to make the colonizing implications clear.

To do this, students could be asked to identify the “right” and “wrong” ways to behave in school and village settings, and to consider the belief systems and values that underpin the contrasting codes of conduct. The two cultural paradigms also support different mechanisms of control, and young Inupiat might examine the past and present forms of regulation within the two societies. As an important component of this, students could identify the *disciplinary structures* within their schools that create and reinforce a framework for judging *individuals* based on their adherence to normative (Western) standards (Foucault, 1977). These tasks would give Inupiat students a platform to investigate the ways that cultures—both Inupiaq and Western—permeate and conflict within their social context. This will help students recognize and articulate how colonization plays out in their everyday lives.

Education can also increase young Inupiat’s sense of cultural pride and continuity. An important first step in doing this would involve teaching history from a Native perspective. The approach would highlight the Inupiaq customs, perceptions, and experiences before, during, and after contact with Westerners. Students could be asked to examine their communities in order to trace the ways in which Inupiat traditions, perspectives, and practices continue today. This outlook emphasizes the subtle forms of resistance that occurred within the Inupiaq community in response to colonization. It would also counter many young Inupiaq’s notion that “our culture is like totally falling apart” (unpublished raw data, Wexler, 2005), which was expressed in a focus group with many nodding heads of approval. Instead of describing a “dying race,” this perspective views the Inupiat people as viable and capable of counteracting the normalizing influences of oppression. This shift in perspective alone has potential to revitalize young people’s cultural identity.

With the goal of empowerment, education can serve as a vehicle for the Inupiat students to reclaim their cultural heritage and gain strength from the process. Deconstructing the educational strategies they take-for-granted will give Inupiat youth perspective to understand current forms of colonization, while also helping them appreciate their own capabilities for living between and within two worlds. These investigations would not only highlight Inupiat peoples’ past and present strength, it will also make the subtle forms of modern colonization visible. The suggested exercises do this by challenging the hegemonic (Western) forms of knowing and being that are currently accepted as normal. In so doing, the educational strategies that foster(ed) a colonization of consciousness can be deconstructed and replaced with a liberating process.

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Endnote

¹Inupiaq is the singular form, and Inupiat is the plural.

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