
ISSUE
03

Chatter Marks

A journal of the Anchorage Museum, dedicated to creative and critical thinking and ideas of past, present and futures for the Circumpolar North.

Chatter Marks are a series of often crescent-shaped gauges chipped out of the bedrock as a glacier drags rock fragments underneath it.

Present since the last ice age, most of the world's glaciers are now shrinking or disappearing altogether as the climate gets warmer. As they mark the passage of deep time, our landscapes are also indicators of our tomorrow.

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+ images, objects, photographs, sketches and drawings from the following collections including: Anchorage Museum, Alaska State Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Alaska Anchorage, University of Alaska Museum of the North and Kodiak Historical Society. Also including work from collaborating artists, designers and historical works in the public realm.

Welcome to the third issue of *Chatter Marks*.
Guest editor: Amy Meissner / Designer: Karen Larsen for the Anchorage Museum

Wood bowl, n.d.
Yup'ik or Inupiaq

Wood bowl repaired with baleen lashing
Collection of the Anchorage Museum,
1972.005.108a
Photo: Chris Arend

THE STATE
OF REPAIR

The Anchorage Museum highlights people and place, celebrating connection, co-creation, and imagination. This issue of *Chatter Marks* gathers voices engaged in the everyday act of repair. Together, these narratives examine the sharing of intergenerational skills and material knowledge and prolonging the life of the broken or cast aside.

Through *Chatter Marks*, we look at new modes of thinking, relevant issues and responses to collective futures in the Circumpolar North. We welcome and thank the rich community of voices, thinkers, creative practitioners and changemakers who share their vision and their work.

UPCOMING ISSUES:

Alyaska: Connecting Alaska and Russia
Future Ready

To submit an article, image, or artwork for consideration, please send an email with brief abstract/images to seed@anchagemuseum.org

Siku Allooooloo
Moosehide Thimble
Custom repair tool for *Akia*, 2019
Photo courtesy of the artist.

2021
SPRING

Repairing a snowmobile
on the tundra, Republic
of Sakha, Russia 2016

Photo courtesy of the author.

WHY STORIES ABOUT

BROKEN-DOWN SNOWMOBILES

CAN TEACH YOU A LOT ABOUT LIFE IN THE ARCTIC TUNDRA

AIMAR VENTSEL

It was the end of October 2016, and for the first time in fifteen years I was in the Anabarskii district, located in the northwestern corner of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the biggest territorial unit of the Russian Federation. In 2000–2001, I had spent almost a year in the district collecting data for my dissertation (Ventsel 2005, 2007). The district is located in the Arctic tundra zone and borders the Arctic Ocean in the north. The indigenous population lives in two villages, and are mainly reindeer herders and Dolgan and Evenki hunters. A few incoming Sakha work in village administration whereas the small Russian population usually works in the district's airport or in the diamond mines. All together, the district has approximately four thousand inhabitants and the majority of them (circa 2,500 people) live in the district's centre, in a village called Saskylakh. This time I was accompanied by a local scholar,

an indigenous Evenki who comes from a reindeer herding family. Our goal was to visit different reindeer brigades in the tundra, spend some time in a small village called Popigai and return to Saskylakh and observe what has changed since new laws for reindeer herding and hunting were introduced in the Republic of Sakha.

In order to follow our plan, my colleague hired two local hunters, brothers, called Afonia and Valeri. On the first evening, we went to visit them. The hunters lived in a three-storey building, in a typical bachelor apartment – it was minimally furnished, the floor was covered with spare parts of a snowmobile, and hunting clothes and rifles hung on the walls. As it turned out, it was Afonia's flat and his brother, who permanently lived in another district, was visiting him to help out in the hunting season.

When we arrived, both hunters were cutting reindeer intestines and preparing a meal from them. After a while we sat down to eat and Afonia told us that we would have to wait a few days because he must repair his snowmobile. He had recently returned from a hunting trip and had to sell his hunting kill of a few reindeer and trade some Arctic fox furs. We were discussing the new hunting laws and how people worked around them and I noticed that the hunting economy had changed since I last visited the village. Most of the men who used to hunt were now engaged with fishing, and only occasionally hunted. The reasons are manifold: the new strict laws, falling meat prices, and increasing salaries in the village for the women, who had a steady income compared to the men.

Suddenly Afonia announced his problem with snowmobiles. ‘When I was on a hunting trip in April, the snowmobile broke down in a snowstorm. I had to walk around the snowmobile for five days in order not to freeze, and when the snowstorm was over I went to the road, found a truck that brought me to the village.’ When I asked how he managed to walk around his snowmobile for so many days, he chuckled and said: ‘You don’t want to freeze to death, do you?’ He told us that it was not for the first time – last year the lights of his snowmobile broke during a snowstorm, so he had to wait for six days until the storm was over. By walking around his vehicle, of course.

Later, when visiting old friends, I discovered that the ‘snowmobile revolution’ (Pelto and Müller-Wille 1987) was in full sway in the district. While earlier most men had one or two snowmobiles, it was now common to have three or more, with at least one for the summer period. Riding the snowmobile during the summer months was something new for me because I knew that summer riding breaks the vehicles quickly due to the sand that can get into the machinery. Also, the local men now preferred imported Yamaha snowmobiles to the Russian Buran ones. Again, I heard stories of how snowmobiles break down and how expensive it is to maintain or repair them.

Currently Russia is the only Arctic country where one can encounter professional hunters who earn their main income from hunting wild animals. Stories of broken snowmobiles reflect some aspects of life in the country. First of all, indigenous people – as demonstrated by David Anderson (2006) – are eager to reach a level of comfortability offered by the modern world, and adopt, without hesitation, new tools and practices that make their life easier. This is the reason for owning several snowmobiles and driving them all year round. When commercial hunting and fishing are regarded as ‘wage gathering’ (Bird 1983), the fact that a big part of the hunter’s income goes on spare parts and fuel impacts on the subsistence hunting life. According to my sources, the main financial supporters are in Saskylakh, and in fact are the women who work in schools, local administration, kindergartens or the village hospital. The men are hunting or fishing in order pay for snowmobiles, fuel and spare parts, which they now rely on in order to hunt and fish. Owning a snowmobile produces negligible extra value, yet even this small additional income is needed to feed a family in a remote village with high unemployment.

The existence of the hunting economy in the Russian North shows that the state is unable to create other work in its remote Arctic settlements. As my Evenki colleague from Yakutsk commented on the lifestyle in Saskylakh: ‘Life here is like in the 1950s!’ Saskylakh is a village without running water and canalisation, where most men need to go to the tundra in order to provide fish and meat for their families. In Russia, there has been a discussion about modernising the Arctic villages and establishing better connections to the ‘outside world’ but currently these villages seem to be more remote than fifteen years ago. Owning several snowmobiles is a necessity and paradoxically a luxury. On the one hand, snowmobiles make the subsistence economy more efficient; on the other hand, this form of economy is very costly, because snowmobiles must be replaced relatively quickly and broken ones can be used as sources for spare parts.

When an old friend borrowed a snowmobile from one of his brothers and fuel from another to show me around, I wrote in my diary that the snowmobile is not just private property but also provides security and income for the whole extended family. Snowmobiles can be a fragile instrument in a harsh climate where human life is precarious. I understood it again when I took off for the tundra with my colleague, Afonia and Valeri. On the first night a snowmobile broke down and we had to repair it in the freezing cold with a rising snowstorm. I observed how skilfully the hunters repaired the broken engine with the tools they had at hand. Due to the snowstorm and the repair time we lost our way, had to spend a night in the tundra and borrow spare parts from a reindeer herders’ camp. The reindeer herders were relatives of our hunters, so the circle of people responsible for keeping vehicles intact was extended. Now I have my own story of a breakage, and I am also aware that repair is not that far from survival.

Note
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Snowmobile on the

tundra. Republic of
Sakha, Russia 2016

Photo courtesy of the author.



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Ventsel, Aimar, “Why Stories About Broken-Down Snowmobiles Can Teach You a Lot About Life in the Arctic Tundra,” in *Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough: Ethnographic Responses*, edited by Francisco Martinez and Patrick Laviolette, 603-610. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aimar Ventsel (PhD) is a senior researcher at the Department of Ethnology at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Fieldwork has taken him to East Siberia to study language and identity processes, property relations, regional policy and local music business, and to East Germany to research punk subculture. In Estonia he studies the history of *estrada* music as a side project. Journal publications include “Reindeer, Rodina and Reciprocity: Kinship and Property Relations in a Siberian Village,” (*Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia*, 2005) and “Siberian Movements: How Money and Goods Travel in and out of Northwestern Sakha,” (*Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 2011).

One of Ventsel’s early experiences with repair occurred in 2001 near the village of Uurung Khaia, in the NW Republic of Sakha. After a remote spring outing on the tundra with his host family and two snowmobiles towing sledges, the group was caught in a snowstorm and experienced engine trouble on the return journey. It took over an hour to make repairs, then several more hours to locate the correct route home in whiteout conditions.

THOUGHTS ON INDIGENUITY

JOAR NANGO & SILJE FIGENSCHOU THORESEN

Growing up in an area where self-reliance is the ideal and where interior design is virtually unheard of, we have learned to appreciate the creative approach towards using limited resources and the distinct I-can-fix-it attitude in solutions and constructions, realized through the ability to make use of the available materials at hand, self-made inventions and experience.

Increasingly, we have realized that this consciousness of local ingenuity and creative zest is small and may in fact be disappearing. An important goal in this project is to heighten the awareness and self-respect regarding local knowledge and know-how. Is it possible that this local expertise is not transferable to other situations in the western world? If not, is that necessarily a weakness? Perhaps the important thing here is that we, as young and mobile designers, listen to the material culture that we grew up in. As opposed to our institutionalized design education, we hoped that through this study we would learn the ways of local and northern *Indigenuity*: skills of invention, creative knowledge, and a do-it-yourself attitude that has been honed and developed through many generations.

A structure in the Northern design tradition is shaped by what it is supposed to do, where it is made, where it will be placed and who it is that will be the user. It is designed without the involvement of an external designer. The user has the possibility to change it if it turns out that something should have been made differently, to make a kind of dynamic repair that otherwise would be impossible to make on pre-made bought products. This is in contrast to the consumer society, where the user is restricted from influencing the construction and design of the product he or she uses, where materials can come from the other side of the world, and the material loss from production to product in the hands of the consumer is enormous, up to 95%.¹

The project *Indigenuity* sketched this pragmatic tradition, one we fear may be disappearing based on the ability to understand one's surroundings and to improvise with what is at hand. By looking at what was, we might have a possibility to change what is coming.

¹ William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2002).

Joar Nango and Silje Figenschou Thoresen
Sledge Privy/Sledeutedo Reahkahivsset:
Intimate room in open landscape, (Svalbard)
Indigenuity Project, 2011

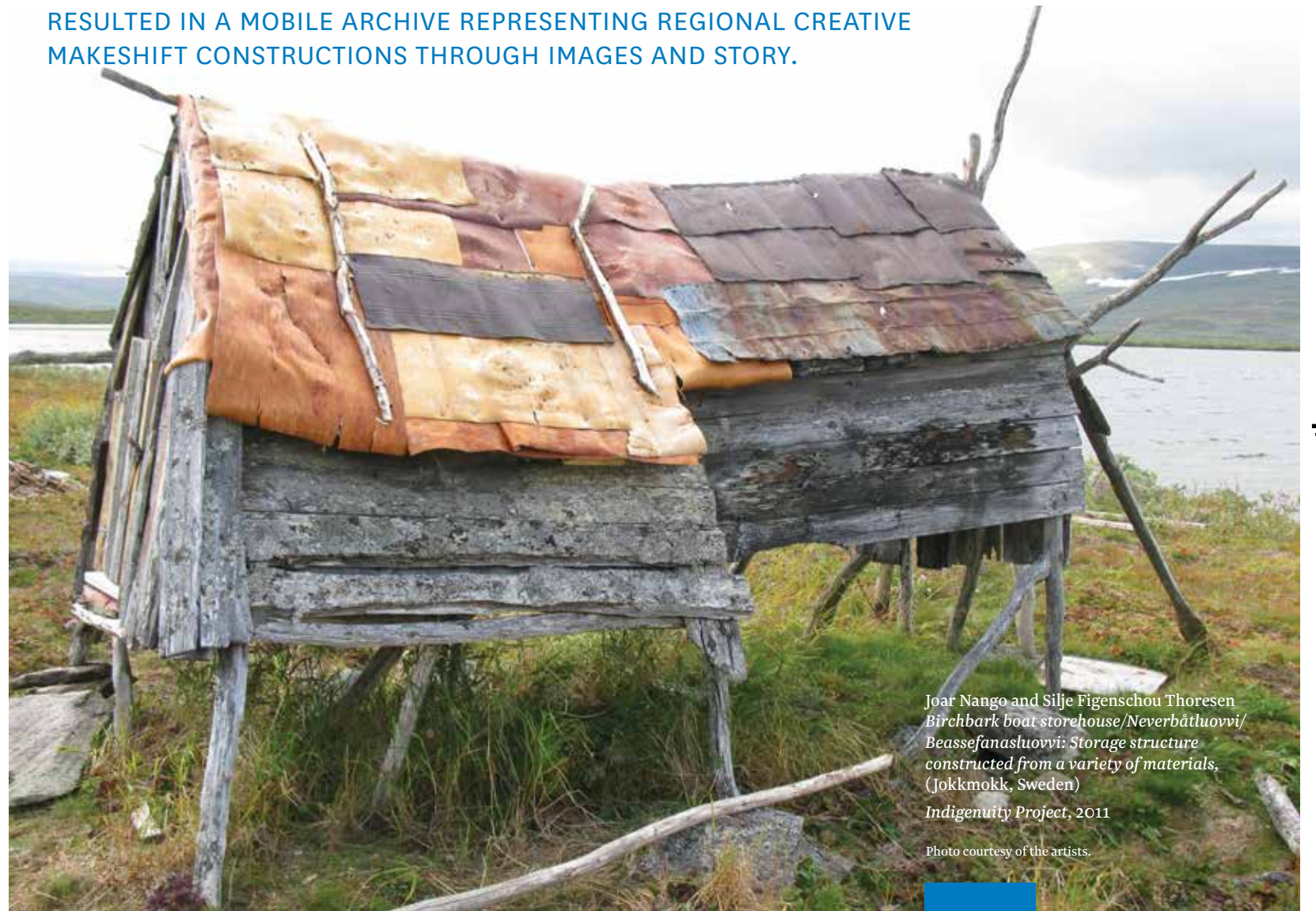
Photo courtesy of the artists.



BEGINNING IN AUGUST 2010, JOAR NANGO AND SILJE FIGENSCHOU THORESEN, JOURNEYED THROUGH NORTHERN PARTS OF FINLAND, SWEDEN AND NORWAY TO EXAMINE THE CONCEPT OF *INDIGENUITY*, THE LOCAL AND INDIGENOUS SÁMI INGENUITY IN EVERYDAY DESIGN.

THE PROJECT AIMED TO DISCUSS AND INVESTIGATE THE LOCAL AND VERNACULAR DESIGN TRADITION, IN CONNECTION WITH THE NEED FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE AND SENSIBLE USE OF RESOURCES.

NANGO AND THORESEN CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS, DISCUSSED, MEASURED, OBSERVED, SKETCHED AND PHOTOGRAPHED, WHICH RESULTED IN A MOBILE ARCHIVE REPRESENTING REGIONAL CREATIVE MAKESHIFT CONSTRUCTIONS THROUGH IMAGES AND STORY.



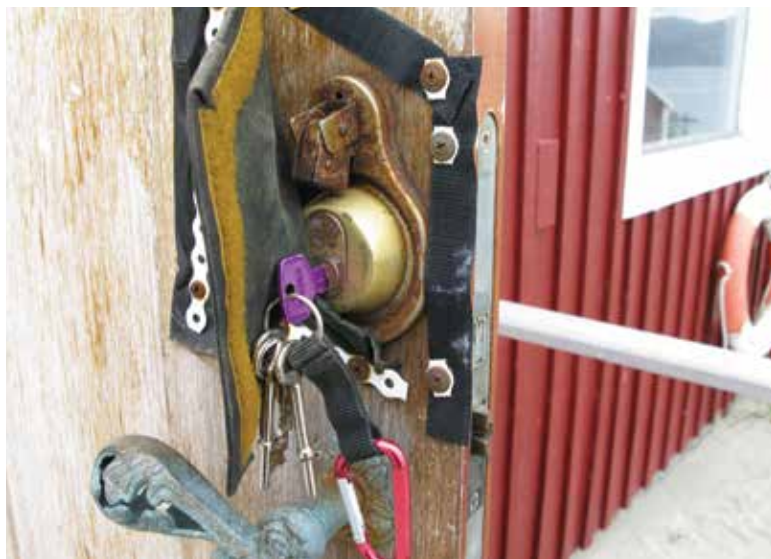
Joar Nango and Silje Figenschou Thoresen
Birchbark boat storehouse/Neverbåthuovvi/
Beassefanashuovvi: Storage structure
constructed from a variety of materials,
(Jokkmokk, Sweden)
Indigenuity Project, 2011

Photo courtesy of the artists.



Joar Nango
Shoe and mitten patterns, (Nunavut)
A temporary solution for something else
photo series, 2016

Photo courtesy of the artist.



Joar Nango and
Silje Figenschou Thoresen
Lock Protection/Låsbeskyttelse/
Lohkkaskoadas: Weather
resistant protection for a boating
association's door lock, (Lillesand,
Norway)
Indigenuity Project, 2011

Photo courtesy of the artists.



Joar Nango and
Silje Figenschou Thoresen
Newspaper sole in 'take-a-leak'
shoes/Avispapirsåle i pesselst/
Avisabábirleastu: Heavily
used moccasins re-lined with
newspaper soles,
(Kobbholmen, Norway)
Indigenuity Project, 2011

Photo courtesy of the artists.



Joar Nango
My father's life vest,
(Máze, Norway/Sápmi)
A temporary solution for something else
photo series, 2015

Photo courtesy of the artist.



Joar Nango
Snowsaw: A cheap handsaw modified
for making Igloos,
(Baffin Island, Nunavut)
A temporary solution for something
else photo series, 2016

Photo courtesy of the artist.



Joar Nango and
Silje Figenschou Thoresen
Palleslede/Pállareahka: Pallets mounted
on skis and converted to a winter sled,
(Svalbard) Indigenuity Project, 2012

Photo courtesy of the artists.

Joar Nango
A few hanging ropes,
 (Guovdageainnu, Norway/Sápmi)
A temporary solution for
something else photo series, 2018

Photo courtesy of the artist.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ARTISTS

Joar Nango is a Sámi-Norwegian artist and architect. He explores Indigenous identity issues through contradictions in contemporary architecture and the built environment. A first memory of Indigenuity is from age 5 or 6 when an older cousin (and biggest hero) taught Nango how to fish in the Alta River behind his house with an *oaggunboksa*—a “fishing box”—featuring hooks suspended from a wooden brace in an old fish ball can.

Silje Figenschou Thoresen is a Sámi artist from Kirkenes who works with structures and sculptures based on the material understanding of the vernacular tradition of the North. One of Figenschou Thoresen’s first memories of repair includes her grandfather, who mended nets torn by salmon and seal in his small fisherman’s cabin using line in “sea colors like blue and green, and a netting needle that looked like a slim river boat the size of his hand.” His swiftness and accuracy placing new knots seemed impossible at the time.

REPAIR AS ACCOMPANIMENT

AMY MEISSNER

I

The family grief begins early one Swedish morning in 1991 when my mother’s young cousins and their two colleagues collided with a truck while driving to work. My two family members were killed, one colleague survived, as did the truck driver who later described how the oncoming car had drifted across the center line. We received scraps of this news in America, thousands of miles away, translating and piecing together details of a story that, to this day, remains incomplete.

The craft act that processed this grief begins months or years later, when my cousins’ mother cut her boys’ clothing into strips—jeans, red-and-white cotton shirts, brown work clothes—stitched the lengths together, wound them into balls, and wove the cloth into rugs on a wooden Glimakra floor loom. Before my great aunt died, I inherited two of the rugs and still recognize the plaid of shirts, the softening indigo of denim, the fray of her own scissors against the fray of life’s wear. I can’t ask now about her decision to make these objects, the physicality of the act, her intuition, the embodiment of grief through a handmaking practice she already knew so well, but I’ve envisioned her sitting at the loom in the farmhouse in Jordala, surrounded by bins of rolled cloth—organized by color or thickness—shuttling memories and remnants of two lives back and forth across the warp, repeating similar steps for years as evidenced by the number of rugs she either prepared material for or completed. But, even if she were still alive, it would be difficult to ask her about this. Family, yes, but divided by language, generations, distance, and two countries—and cultures—worth of what is appropriate conversation. I can guess she would express this was a way of healing, though I’m sure all of the sadness remained lodged inside. I can guess the work was meditative, maybe practical, mourning rendered into a craft process that lived in her body as her children once had. I do know the making was rooted in care and believe it created a space for grief to expand, thrash into every recess and exist as its own threadbare being.

Which makes what I face thirty years on so difficult: in my care, one of the rugs has broken.

II

I’m drawn to cloth that holds the residual quality of a life once lived: clothing, household linens, unfinished embroideries, quilts. Much of this fabric is elderly and frail. Sometimes it crumbles in my hands. While sewing didn’t interest me as a child visiting my mother’s homeland, watching the Swedish women in my family approach handwork and mending still shaped my understanding of materials and the potential for longevity and limitations inherent in fabric, its construction, its damage. As an artist now in Alaska who has embraced these practices, I’m simultaneously influenced by an abundance of discarded material in the place I’ve lived for over two decades, where geographical distance and a limited road system ensures new materials and goods are not only expensive to import but contribute to an accumulation of waste that is also expensive to remove. Artists, makers, craftspeople, tinkerers, the capable and the curious, seek out the stockpiles or the discarded here, understanding there is a precedent for the barge or cargo plane not arriving for weeks¹ or months. With environmental changes also accumulating in the Circumpolar North, witnessing personal and societal overconsumption, materials extraction and rampant discarding has a particular weight. The mending pile in my own home cycles through similar accretion and slow subtraction, seasonal activity and inertia. I recently pulled a tiny pink sock from beneath a stack of torn jeans, realizing so much time had passed from my original intention to patch the heel that now it didn’t even fit my youngest child. And its tiny pink mate? Long gone. The obstacles to repair feel like the second blow, sometimes landing immediately after the first disruption, the breakage itself, or sometimes later the realization there’s no time to mend, or one lacks skills or inclination, or the rip-tear-crack-hole-split is too large. Often the obvious choice is to replace or discard a brokenness altogether. A disappointment, but understandable.

Because these obstacles aren’t mine alone, part of my practice involves teaching others how to mend everyday textiles in such a way that ensures this craft can then be taught by another, to another—an ongoingness of relationships, actions and simple tools. I learned mending as a child from my mother, and she from her mother, aunts and grandmother. I’ve been privileged to teach many people who didn’t have an opportunity to learn, some older than me. So much knowledge is potentially lost in just a handful of generations.

Approaching repair from the standpoint of an accelerated climate crisis and lack of shared skills initially fueled my compulsion to participate in fostering a local repair culture. I felt if people learned to repair, then they could maintain autonomy over things and push against a market system that insists on constant consumption and replacement. But because I’ve recently been circling options for repairing the rug my great aunt wove—considering its history, her actions, the materials—these initial impulses have expanded; I now believe in coming to repair with a tenderness for the broken object itself, an approach to repair as an act of caring and accompanying through transition into the next phase of an object’s life.

One morning fourteen years ago, when jostling an inconsolable infant, I stumbled over the rug. I didn’t drop the baby, but my foot landed hard, stretching and snapping a section of cotton warp threads within the structure, leaving a thumb-sized rip along one edge. When I found time, I wrangled the heavy rug under the sewing machine and confidently, but coarsely, zig zagged over the rip and returned it to the living room. I forgot about the hasty repair until months later when I pulled a soaking flail of strings and loops of unmoored cloth strips from the washing machine. The unraveled section had grown to a space bigger than the baby, with that bit of zig zag stitch still stubbornly tethered to three loose strips of denim and plaid.

I’m not a weaver, but I should have known better. Warp threads will wriggle away from a snapped center point of tension when given the opportunity. Throw in the weight of several gallons of wash water and the agitation of a 2.5-meter-long rug whipping around a cycle, no matter how delicate, and the consequences seem so obvious now. What this points to, years on and contemplating the dynamics of a repair that still hasn’t happened, is that I hadn’t considered the rug’s vulnerability. I’d placed myself, as caregiver and long-term tender, in a position of power. My “repair” had built in a weakness, the next point of failure.

Photo courtesy of the author.



Investing labor, time and attention to an object—what consumer researcher Russell Belk refers to as “psychic energy”²—generates a bond between self and possessions. He explains that creating or acquiring objects contributes to the extension of self, and therefore an involuntary loss (such as breakage or theft) creates an urgency to restore the self in some way, often through creativity.³ This clothing left behind after death were an alternative separation of self and possessions, yet still represented the ultimate breakage within a family. Emotionally, intuitively and as informal as it was, weaving these rugs from cloth holding such personal meaning was a slow, repetitive gesture towards restoration, a psychic energy driven into regenerating or extending the self through making and companionship with these left-behind objects that became the raw materials for renewal.

The rug’s snapping and unraveling years ago signal the heft of carrying an object into the future, not because of some array of valuable components, but because of this valuable family narrative. My aunt accompanied these materials across a threshold, and they did the same for her. They journeyed parallel to one another, alternating guiding and following, negotiating until completed: rugs embedded with her children’s clothing, some items perhaps pulled from her own mending pile, the mates now gone.

III

Objects are on a perpetual course to becoming things or returning to an altered state of materials. Maintaining object status, their position or usefulness—whether value is interpreted personally, culturally or financially—is an ongoing effort, every day. Decay, dismantling, breakage all point to what Fernando Domínguez Rubio refers to as the “relentlessness of things (...) whereby things, as physical processes, grow in and out of objects, sliding out of joint from their

expected object-positions and creating (...) divergence between what these things actually are and the kind of objects they are supposed to be.”⁴ This points to the familiar entropy of object becoming thing, then becoming debris. Elizabeth Grosz makes the correlation between thing and *body*, a mirroring, “the stability of one, the thing, is the guarantee of the stability and ongoing existence or viability of the other, the body.”⁵ Jane Bennett refers to the affective quality of things as “vibrant matter,” claiming there is an ethical task of cultivating “the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.”⁶ This openness feels like a space between potentiality and limitation, the connection between body and thing—particularly body and cloth, often our second skin—where making the choice to repair can return a thing to object position again, even if its original form or purpose is altered. In the process, the repairer becomes part of the greater embedded narrative, their own human “vibrant matter” engaging with and becoming part of the livelihood of the object, whether visibly marked by the hand or becoming part of the invisible inner workings when components are exchanged, repaired or replaced. An opportunity for healing both actors.

In the book *Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough: Ethnographic Responses*, Francisco Martínez states, “To repair is an act on the world: to engage in mending and fixing entails a relational world-building that materializes affective formations. It also settles endurance, material sensitivity and empathy, as well as more altruistic values oriented towards the sustainability of life.”⁷ I’m encouraged by the notion that mending could have this kind of impact, the possibility that objects are part of our ongoing work of being in the world, but the enormity of this asks a lot of the solo repairer, or the new-to-repair-curious, or the sometimes-repairer-sometimes-guilty-object-replacer, maybe even alienating the repair-contemplator or the never-repairer. But because an act on the world is an act on the objects in the world, I instead ask that we consider our everyday relationships with broken objects as a starting point. Teaching someone how to mend is a modest act.⁸ It’s less about immediate sweeping change and more about passing along an array of skills with available tools while creating relationships and connecting people with objects they feel are important enough to care for, perhaps revealing the reason they care in the first place. Brokenness implies vulnerability. We

can either see this as a weakness that results in waste or understand it as a need for care. Considering the latter, a course of care for the vulnerable, reorients the position of looking down at a broken thing to one that sits beside it. Instead of deliberating over next burdensome or inconvenient steps, we can shift our approach to a position of care and accompaniment to the thing in need.

This is a stance that emerges from a feminist ethics of care,⁹ which focuses on evolving relationships between individuals. We are rarely solitary decision makers, instead operate together as our ability to provide and receive care changes over time. While all humans are vulnerable and fragile, some are more fragile at certain points and will need to rely on others; everyone is a recipient and provider of care no matter how able-bodied. The reciprocal nature of care evolves with ability and time. Applying an ethics of care to our relations with humans as well as our world, shapes our considerations and responses while exposing power structures that operate under the guise of care. Similar thinking can be applied to our relationship with vulnerable objects as an approach to the craft of repair.¹⁰

Political science and feminist scholars Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”¹¹ While objects or things aren’t specifically mentioned here, they are a part of our environment, and this definition is intended as a starting place for further exploration into various contexts and complexities of care.¹² With repair as purpose, it’s possible to address ethical elements and phases of care Tronto outlines: *attentiveness* (caring about); *responsibility* (caring for); *competence* (care-giving); *responsiveness* (care-receiving); and *communication and respect* (caring with). These support an additional approach to repair I propose as accompaniment—a *caring through transition*—which recognizes an ongoing negotiation with materials and process, not as power struggle or need to overcome, but as a mutual arrangement of care. Applying these components to repair creates a practice, rather than a concept of care.

Repairs fail. We use the wrong techniques. Materials are old or insufficient. The object isn’t originally built with repair in mind. We’re in a hurry. We use the wrong screw, paint, yarn. The list goes on. But repairs also hold. Some of this is luck, skill, practice, but no matter how many times you have darned a sock, re-glued a board or patched a hole, the next situation will be slightly different, requiring a series of micro-adjustments that broaden a repairer’s awareness of materials, process and situation. We gain skills, but through this watching, feeling, listening we also become attuned to the interconnectedness of everyday interactions.¹³ This is *attentiveness* or *caring about*—the recognition of need and caring about something in the first place¹⁴—which also includes ongoing inspection and diagnosing,¹⁵ some of which can’t happen until after a repair even begins. Attentiveness addresses the hole in the sock that wasn’t there this morning, but now after a long day, here it is. If the hole is the story of the body’s chafe against fibers, then the mend narrates the hand’s effort at restoration, the suspension of one’s own interests¹⁶ to do the work before the hole becomes even bigger.

Responsibility, or *caring for*, is our ability and willingness to respond. Tronto’s view of responsibility is flexible, unlike obligation, which is based on actual or implied promises, even burdens, but still requires constant evaluation and looks past whether it’s our responsibility to repair in the first place. It’s an opportunity to change the course of care based on a vulnerable object’s needs and our initial assumptions about providing care and repair in the first place. Responsibility as ongoing re-evaluation asks: *is this even the correct repair?*

That evaluation comes from a certain set of skills, untransferable were I to look under the hood of my car. I could intend to investigate and assess an unwelcome sound, but I don’t have the *competence*—the *care-giving* skills—or adequate resources to personally make that kind of repair. I still need to ensure the person charged with repairing my car, my roof, my body, my clothing does have adequate resources to do so, and if I engage in repair, then I need the same, whether sourcing proper materials, skills or time. Competence also lies within the way repair skills are shared and taught. I could teach you to always place fabric in an embroidery hoop before sewing on a patch, but if I don’t present an alternative method, you likely won’t anticipate or feel for when you shouldn’t use this tool, when it’s stressing fibers or pulling off grain, for example. Instead, I can explain the tool’s limitations and why you might opt to hold a cloth repair steady with just your hands instead, feeling for fluidity or tension, stitching with the repair instead of against it, adjusting your grasp accordingly.

This is the *responsiveness* of the caregiver to feedback from the recipient of care, the mender’s response to the vulnerable object being mended. Anticipating and watching for a new or different need after repair is part of this process, an assessment that requires a willingness to admit care was inadequate or insufficient. The fragility of an object may point to previous or current environments or owners, but certainly determines whether it will be possessed by another in the future. This is a relationship that asks us to respect and care with a mended object’s position. That heavy patch you ironed on the split pants, for example, was probably too sturdy. The feedback, the *communication*, comes when the fabric tears along the new edge where the glued-on patch ends, and the previously intact portion of a pant leg begins. A heavy-handed repair will almost always build in that new weakness.

Finally, contemplating the history of my great aunt’s weavings has allowed me to generate an additional approach to repair as accompaniment or caring through transition. The clothing she cut and transformed into rugs likely held the smell and memory of wear, allowing her to work with cloth that held meaning and connected her to the past. While she cared for materials and their transition into a new form, they accompanied her emotionally, slowing time and providing a literal space to grieve. Craft processes therapeutically utilize the physicality of handwork—in this case repetitively using both hands and feeling the comfort and familiarity of cloth—which achieves therapeutic results by relaxing the autonomic nervous system through fostering “peace, focus and release of tension.”¹⁷ This is what art therapist Savneet Talwar refers to as “creating with a purpose, which calls for attentive looking and remembering, repetition and revision.”¹⁸ A traumatic experience cannot be undone, but the soothing sensory experience associated with this kind of engagement in craft is a form of self-care. Repair as accompaniment is the act of repairing an object while simultaneously being repaired emotionally.



Photo courtesy of the author.

To accompany is to share an experience, even nourish¹⁹ one another through or across a threshold. For the repairer and vulnerable object, this may mean achieving working order, or reconfiguration, or even caring through transition from presence to an absence, such as decay.²⁰ Bennett refers to “the capacity of things (...) not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”²¹ If vulnerable objects have this kind of vitality and we engage in their care, it’s reasonable to envision employing our own heavy handedness as a means of controlling an outcome. Approaching repair as a position of accompaniment incorporates an ethic of care which assumes a reciprocity between the mender and mended. To accompany is to travel parallel, sometimes guiding, sometimes following, but still caring for and repairing one another.

IV

I’ve rolled and carried this rug between continents, across town and between rooms, dragged cats on it, unfurled it down hallways, and hung it on the line to dry. Pregnant with my second child, I snapped the dusty rug outside one evening, disturbed a wasp’s nest hidden beneath the deck, then in a panic flung it onto the lawn where it stayed tented overnight filled with angry insects while my legs swelled from dozens of stings. But for years now it’s been rolled in a sheet and stored on a shelf. I’ve consulted with my mother who suggested I unravel the middle, tie off the remaining warp and create two small rugs from one. She remembers this is how it was done, an opportunity for repair built into the structure in the first place. But I haven’t landed on the technical aspects of the repair yet, so I unroll it once in a while, take another look and keep circling. This particular accompaniment, this caring through to eventual transition, has proved to be years of slow, quiet meandering.

During a recent inspection and feeling my way through the loose warp and weft, I found a strip of denim swiped with red paint, a reminder of an origin, a cousin’s absent-minded gesture and everyday farm task buried deep within an object, decades on. The rug’s impending repair while in my care has the potential to take on that dual role of object-care and self-care, once again. The visible marks of my hand combined with my family’s is a tender, but powerful ongoingness to look forward to. Part map, part history, it’s a journey that follows the disruption of the everyday—from despair, to healing, to use, to breakage, to disappointment, to repair, to re-emergence —and the potential for a return to an everyday again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ARTIST

Amy Meissner is an artist and writer living in Anchorage. Her work with abandoned textiles references the literal, physical and emotional work of women, with a more recent focus on teaching mending as a social practice. She has undergraduate degrees in art and textiles, an MFA in Creative Writing and is an MA candidate in Critical Craft Studies through Warren Wilson College. When she was five, she snipped a hole in the front of an undershirt so she wouldn’t have to wear it anymore. Her Swedish mother mended it by hand and made her wear it anyway—a first experiment with autonomy and the power of a cut swiftly overshadowed by the greater authority of the mend.



Oil barrel sidewalk.
Wainwright, Alaska 1970

McCutcheon Prints,
Anchorage Museum, B2003.11.21

left
Repairing Tail Wheel,
Point Hope, Alaska 1953

Wallace J. Wellenstein Photographs
Anchorage Museum, B2018.021.421

¹ As quoted by Wanda Seamster. See Julie Decker, *Found and Assembled in Alaska* (Anchorage: Decker Art Services, 2001), 21.

² Russell Belk, “Possessions and the Extended Self,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (September 1988): 144.

³ Belk, “Possessions,” 143.

⁴ Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “On the Discrepancy Between Objects and Things: An Ecological Approach,” *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no 1 (2016): 62.

⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, “The Thing,” in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 132.

⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

⁷ Francisco Martínez, “Introduction: Insiders’ Manual to Breakdown,” in *Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough: Ethnographic Responses*, ed. Francisco Martínez and Patrick Lavolette (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2019), 2.

⁸ I used to gather with and sit beside others to do mending work, but due to Covid 19 I currently teach through shared images and a screen.

⁹ Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 30.

¹⁰ Recent writing from the Circumpolar North applies this to the vulnerability of ecologies and human relationships. See Randi Grov Berger and Tonje Kjellevoid, eds., *Earth, Wind, Fire, Water* (Stuttgart, Germany: arnoldsche Art Publishers and Nordic Network of Crafts Associations, 2020).

¹¹ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 103.

¹² Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 21.

¹³ Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 215.

¹⁴ Tronto, *Boundaries*, 127.

¹⁵ Tim Dant, “The Work of Repair: Gesture, Emotion and Sensual Knowledge,” *Sociological Research Online* 15, no.3 (2010): 6.1. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2158> <https://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/3/7.html>

¹⁶ Tronto, *Democracy*, 34.

¹⁷ Lisa Raye Garlock, “Alone in the Desert,” in *Craft in Art Therapy: Diverse Approaches to the Transformative Power of Craft Materials and Methods*, ed. Lauren Leone (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 199.

¹⁸ Savneet Talwar, “The Sweetness of Money: The Creatively Empowered Women (CEW) Design Studio, Feminist Pedagogy and Art Therapy,” in *Art Therapy for Social Justice: Radical Intersections*, ed. Savneet Talwar (New York: Routledge, 2019), 183.

¹⁹ The root of the word accompany is *com panis*, Latin for “with bread.”

²⁰ Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 179.

²¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

A *qamutiik* is an Inuit sled constructed by drilling and lashing. This structural flexibility accommodates the pounding against sea ice, which dislodges nails in a conventionally built sled. Western explorers arriving in the Arctic with the latter design found their sleds falling apart after only a few miles of intense travel conditions.

Repair of *qamutiik*, Canada 1949

Silver gelatin photograph
Original photography by Richard Harrington
Collection of the Anchorage Museum, 1980.032.004
Rephotographed by Chris Arend



Snow goggles, n.d.
Yup'ik or Inupiaq

Ivory, baleen, hide
Collection of the Anchorage Museum,
1971.132.002
Photo: Chris Arend



Bowl, 19th c.
Yup'ik

Wood, root
Gift of the Huffmon Family
Collection of the Anchorage Museum, 2002.025.219
Photo: Chris Arend



Sewing Kit, c. 1930
Yup'ik or Inupiaq

Rawhide, brass, bird bone, walrus ivory
The Benjamin and Margaret Mozee Collection,
Anchorage Museum, 1988.022.077
Photo: Chris Arend



Thimble Holder, n.d.
Point Hope, Alaska

Ivory
Collection of the University of Alaska Museum
of the North, 1-1940-0159
Photo: Brian Allen, Collector: Froelich Rainey



MENDING NET

ANNA HOOVER

A successful commercial fishing gillnetter has clean windows, pounds of fish on the books, a happy crew, and a mended net. Bristol Bay summers are home to generations of men and women net menders, boat drivers and fish pickers. We learn, we teach, we work hard, we repeat. My father started fishing at age nine, me at age eleven; my grandfather, uncle, mother and cousins, all lifelong fishermen. Whether a hole in our rain pants or hull, a damaged coffee pot or net, we are responsible for our own.

In between soaking nets in the Brackish Bay, we care and repair. Making the chance of a good catch as high as possible.

Junior Net Mender

Bink...bink...bink...bink

The sound of preparedness and full mending needles.

My father used to say: *If you think of something and you have time, take care of it.*

No time to think, only time to react.

On the water, situations can change in an instant, think ahead and have your tools ready.

Holding tension on the net is the only job of a Junior Net Mender, as he or she watches knots being tied, once, twice, patching the net in measured size and equal tension; a delicate and artful trade. There are many unique, correct ways of tying knots off. It's rare for two people to approach mending a hole in the exact same way, unless one learned from the other.

Hold here

Eyes dart like the needle

Pinch and pull

Tension

We rebuild the diamonds of the machine-made net

2's and 3's, 1-bars and 2-bars and 3...

Diamonds appear

Muscle memory

Survival memory

Sometimes we cut a hole larger just to rebuild it.

Some net menders prefer colored twine to 'hide' the mends. For instance, black mends look like a hole to the fish as they approach the wall of net. When one fish in the school darts, they all dart, if one fish dives for a false hole, they all get caught. Our environment too, is constantly in flux and riddled with danger.



Sven Haakanson Jr. teaches Jay Clough how to mend net in the early 80s in Old Harbor, Alaska (both age 15). Haakanson learned to mend left-handed because his teacher, Bobby Inga, was left-handed. His first memory of repair is mending nets: "I loved learning how – the more complicated, the bigger the rip, the more fun it was. You have to know exactly what direction the knot is going and how it's situated in the net, itself. If you tie the knot in the wrong way, it's going to pull the net in the wrong direction. It's a puzzle."

Mending Seine.

Kodiak Historical Society, P-779-10-1

Wood Shuttle, n.d., Yup'ik Kwillingok, Alaska

Collection of the Anchorage Museum, 1971.116.003

Balancing Harvest and Care unplugged and distant from our 'normal' governed instead by the Wind and Tides at the mercy of the elements.

Invisible currents, lunar energies the water swirls, and curls in response Wind and Water dance, we observe in Moon, Sun, Sleet and Fog.

The floor beneath rides the swell balancing Harvest and Care legs engaged in the Rhythm of the Tides we ride the swells. Generations of mending holes—Generations of making holes.



Mother Seal teaches her pup to pluck salmon out of fishermen’s nets: rip, tear, teeth, claws. Occasionally the net is spared and instead the carnage of a bodiless fish head comes aboard, organs dangling. Other times, a hole you can walk through, evidence of a family of seals and their theft.

Mend and Sew, Hunt and Eat
Come, my child
Feast on the sign of the buoy
Swim with me and see

So satisfying
So satiating

Generations before
 Generations to come

Mend and Sew, Hunt and Eat.

Generations before
 Generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norwegian/Unangaᖃ artist, fisherwoman, filmmaker and founder of the non-profit First Light Alaska, Anna Hoover holds master's degrees in Native American Art History and Indigenous Documentary Filmmaking from the University of Washington. Born in Washington and raised summers in Alaska, she now makes her home in the fishing community of Naknek, in Bristol Bay.

She first learned to mend nets from Giuseppe Davi, a Sicilian boat captain who had two small hand-drawn tattoos on his hands, visible when he mended and cared for his nets. Hoover fished with him for 13 years.

Grace Bailey repairing trout/white-fish net, granddaughter in back. Sheshalik, Alaska 1952

Charles V. Lucier papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage, HMC-0165

I am staring at the wall
~~those grand mountains~~
A vision passed down to my spirit
from my father My own memory is that cradle
drifting in from far away

I am staring down this wall like a veil
concealing all we've lost
Salpied into the spirit world
for both the balance and safe keeping

Months ago an undertow
pulled me into hidden depths
Growing belly, swollen breasts
unstable and heavy as the moon
Body, spirit expanding with new love
the way they shrunk from trauma
demanding the fruition of all my stolen dreams

Mountain vision, erupting beauty of first
like an earthquake on some other earth
Motherland from long ago
numbing beauty in my bones
I remember it yes, but ~~this~~ is not my memory

Then, in unknown throws
tears overflow like a tide that went stop rising
braving up my need to know
Why did they call her Akia

I ask him for the small piece of my mother
I might inherit if I place my feet along old ground
if he'll walk with me there
Akia, ~~the other side~~

I knew him like the deepest part of myself
and barely at all

For people from Rind Inlet, he says
it means beautiful Bylot Island
Deep and strong and silent, my father, an entire ocean
He, of him, but adrift

Why was she called that? I press
Sometimes we find the current
timeless and unbroken like those ancestral lines
but mostly we are swept by amassed brokenness and time

"called her that" he says, and I break
Communication for us has always been subterranean
Love and romance and everything we cannot overstate
expressed through instinct more than words

Talking is like peering into fluid darkness
a world of life and complex depth
estranged as all my birthrights

Another wall I've stared down and returned to all my life
am still staring down, and trying to return to
while terribly afraid of causing pain
with my longing
and my ignorance

This time, something inside feels like whales nearby
If you remember, Bylot Island is very beautiful, he said
with high mountains
When people from Rind were away at school
when they got home - that's what they saw
beautiful Bylot and its mountains
When people asked me what is her name I told them
her name is Akia

I don't know how to answer
There is place of words
like water over whales as they curl back under sea

So much I did not know - his depth of love and what she meant
What we meant, where did it go? What is held within the distances?
What is held in the expanse of all of that distance?
Hidden made the way he kept our language alive - silently, in spirit
Buried with that landscape, all those years
while he was worlds away and breaking
forging into stone to survive

I could never ask and he could never speak
He suffered the unthinkable - ~~survived~~
Some things remain intact because
he knew how to hide how to keep them alive
though he himself could not return from stone

Now that dormant seed is waking
shifting my sense of what I (need to) know
forcing me to grow, calling me back home

I'll never understand what was lost, what was endured
Right now that's unimportant
It is blinding

I am learning how to see, I am searching

I am staring down this wall
~~those mountains and this mirror~~
with vision I don't comprehend but trust
is capable to guide me

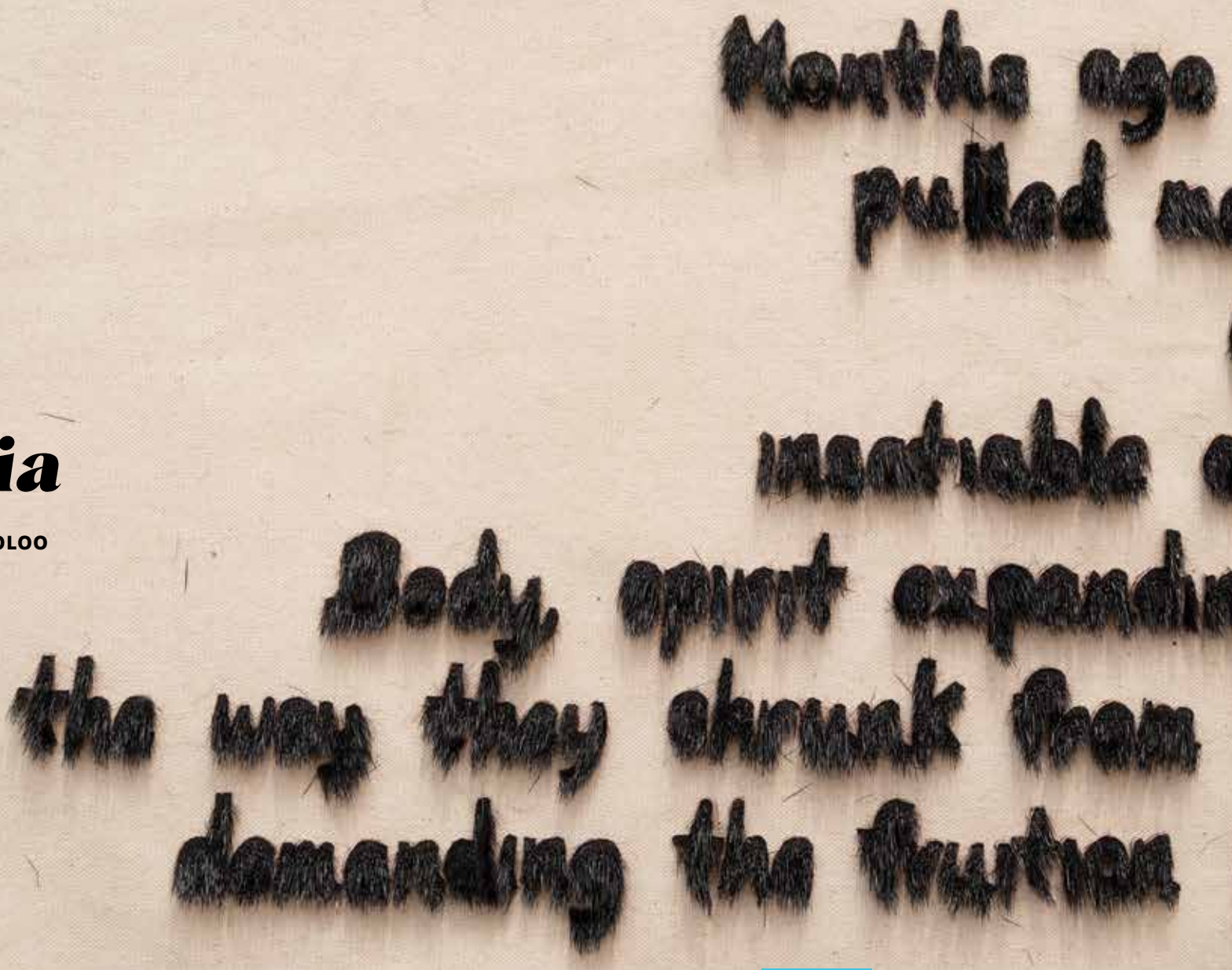
I'm afraid of all the distance
everything I do not know
but I am here

I want to reach across ~~the other side~~
take my place in the bridge
for all that wants to come full circle

I am finding
being found

Akia

SIKU ALLOOLOO



In essence, *Akia*¹ is my attempt to heal what's been severed culturally and interpersonally through colonialism—as an *arnaq*², displaced from my family and homeland. It is a deeply personal story, a shared story, and a re-creation story. Working intensively with my fingers to carve, sew and communicate through sealskin, a distinctively *arnaiit*³ process of healing and transformation emerged. Activating blood memory and a descent into unknown depths, this process of transformation spans impossibility to generate new forms of sustenance and connection from the other side.

The Inuit creation story of Sedna is embedded in the artwork, and her transformative space of the ocean forms the lens. Sedna's father had thrown her into the sea after a failed rescue attempt and cut off her fingers so she couldn't hold on to the kayak. As she falls through the sea, she transforms into a half seal goddess. Sedna's fingers become sea animals, which she sends up to sustain, feed, clothe and house Inuit, who are also bound through loving connection and interdependence to respect and take care of her.

The sealskin text in *Akia* signifies Sedna's transformation as she descends to the bottom of the sea. The 2700 letters are also an affirmation of Inuit culture, values and ways of life as immense sources of sustenance, connection, and healing; an offering in a way, to feed the spirit of my people. The panels of canvas signify home—based on the canvas wall tents of my childhood, camping and harvesting with my family near Mittimatalik in the spring and summer months.

At its broadest, the poem is a reflection on how cultural knowledge and spiritual being, having gone into hiding for safekeeping and Inuit survival, return to a new generation through spiritual means (via ocean, landscape, memory, blood memory, and sealskin). More intimately, it is also a gesture of healing what's been severed between a *panik*⁴ and her *ataata*⁵, and the restoration of my belonging to home, through the process of reassembling fragments to form a new whole—the creation story reconfigured.

¹ Title of the artwork, and an Inuktitut word meaning “the other side”

² Inuk woman

³ Inuit women

⁴ daughter

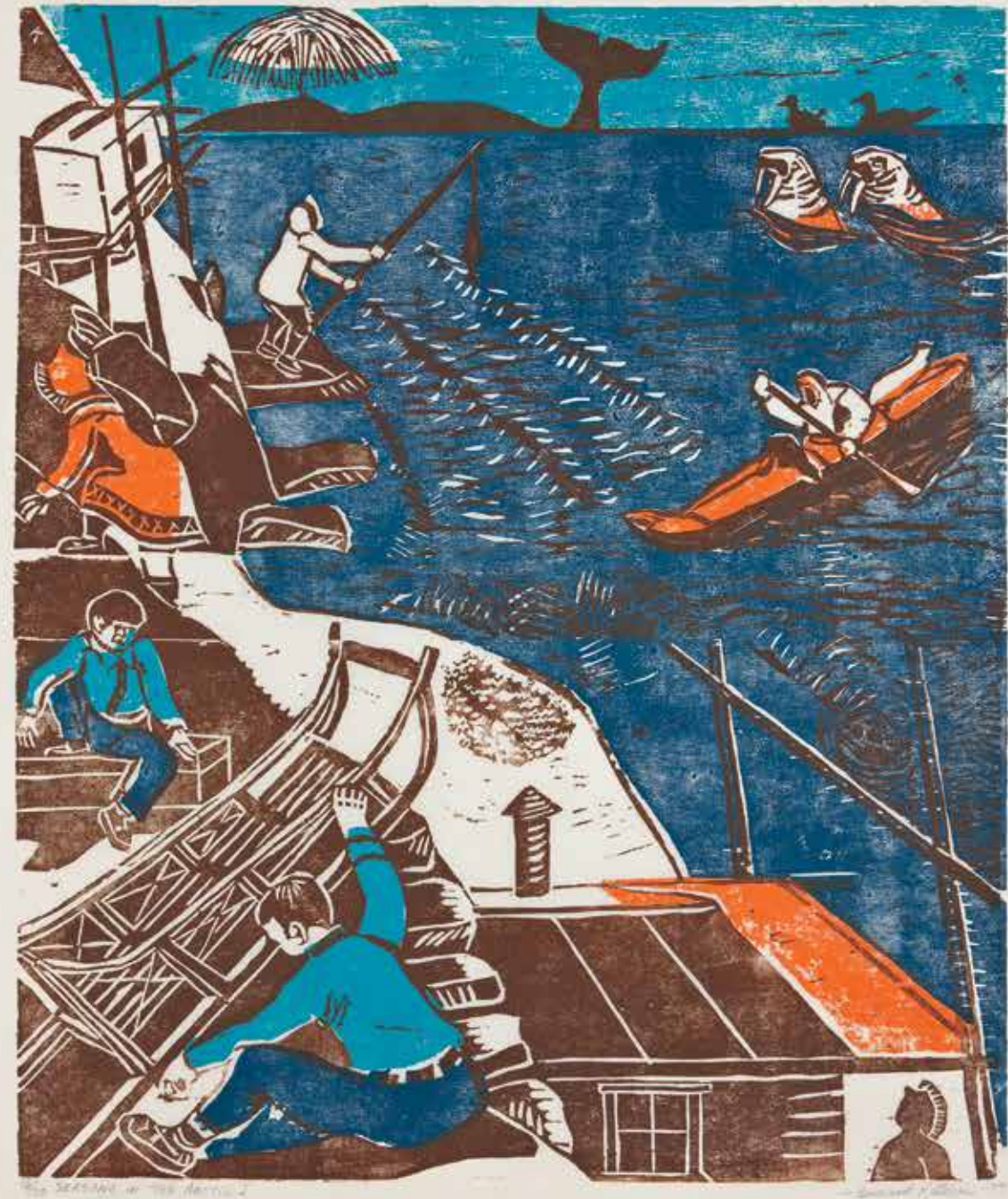
⁵ father

Siku Allooooloo
Akia, (detail) 2019

Sealskin on canvas
Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Siku Allooooloo is an Inuk/Haitian/Taíno writer, artist and community builder from Denendeh (Northwest Territories) and Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet, Nunavut), currently based in Whitehorse, Yukon. Her first memories of repair are her mother's bedtime stories about Taíno history and ongoing presence (correcting the colonial narrative of annihilation), and of learning how to sew “the invisible stitch” from her mother, as taught by Allooooloo's father.



Bernard Katexac
Seasons of the Arctic I, 1977

Ink, paper
Collection of the Anchorage Museum,
1978.006.001



Sewing kit (thimble) n.d.
Inupiaq

Bearded seal
University of Alaska Museum of
the North, UA2001-013-0211AC
Photo: Brian Allen

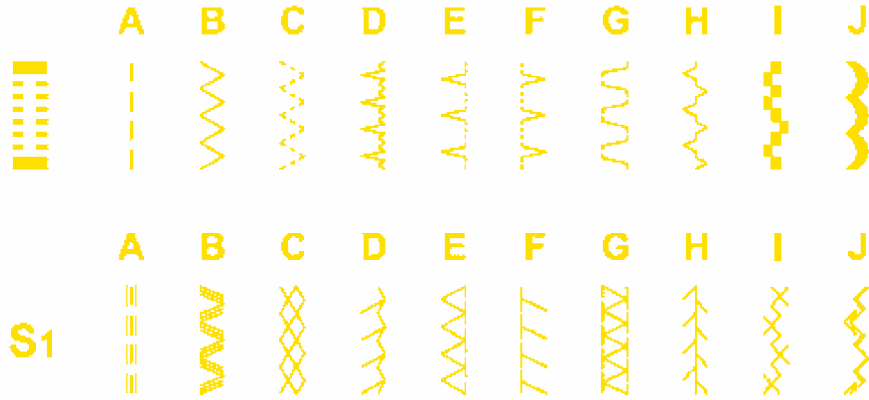
Doing mending (Lily Oktollik).
Point Hope, Alaska

Mary Cox Photographs, 1953-1958
Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E.
Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks,
UAF-2001-129-276



Betty Marie Huffmon (1920-2008)
Sewing needles, 19th c.
Goodnews Bay, Alaska
Yup'ik

Squirrel, marmot or pika bone
Gift of the Huffmon Family, Collection
of the Anchorage Museum, 2002.025.239ag
Photo: Chris Arend



Sewing Kit, Early 20th c.
Tanana, Alaska
Athabascan

Glass beads, wool felt, cotton cloth,
commercial thread, cloth backing
Collection of the Anchorage Museum, 1969.074.001
Photo: Chris Arend



Sewing Kit, n.d.
Inupiaq

University of Alaska Museum
of the North,
UA2001-013-0211AC
Photo: Brian Allen



Betty Marie Huffmon (1920-2008)
Sewing Equipment, late 20th c.
Goodnews Bay, Alaska

Linen, metal, plastic, paper
Gift of the Huffmon Family, Collection of
the Anchorage Museum, 2002.025.198
Photo: Chris Arend

Betty Marie Huffmon (1920-2008)
Sewing Kit, Early 20th c.
Goodnews Bay, Alaska
Yup'ik

Cotton cloth, wool, steel, reindeer hide, aluminum,
cotton thread
Gift of the Huffmon Family, Collection of the
Anchorage Museum, 2002.025.113
Photo: Chris Arend

Army nurses on Adak, 1943
Adak Island, Alaska

US Army Signal Corps
Photograph Collection
Alaska State Library P175-137



Fixing Saw

Peggy Farmer Mullins Slides,
Anchorage Museum B2C19.8.144



A JOURNEY OF NOURISHMENT IN THE NORTH

JENNIFER NU

In a covered storage area outside the cabin, I bend over the side of the chest freezer searching for the week’s meals. My gloved hands rummage through possibilities: Chicken feet. Trotters. Spruce tips. Salmon heads and tails, bellies and collars. Bones. Caribou livers. Hearts, kidneys and other organs. Stomachs. Lamb heads. Chickweed pesto encased in olive oil. Intestines packed in salt. Sheets of pigskin. Bags of wild-harvested berries. Birch sap. Aged muktuk. Lard. A jar of seal oil. Ribs. Fish eggs. Lime juice from the discount bin. Ginger and turmeric from a farmer’s market in the Lower 48. Lemongrass from the local Asian mart. Vegetable trimmings for broth.

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Haggis and fleece.
Fairbanks, Alaska 2017

Photo: Sarah Lewis

Northern food systems reveal how relationships between people, place and food intertwine. While imported foods arrive via industrialized supply chains that depend on distant producers, local foods continue to be at the heart of enduring lifeways linked to harvesting from local landscapes. Land, water and air form the warp of our food system, providing structure to the fabric and foundation for all existence. People’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors form the weft. Their knowledge, skills and practices intersect with the ecologies of place to create patterns and texture. Value systems and cosmologies guide the weaving, interlocking weft to warp and ultimately shaping how humans exist in relationship with the greater web of life. Damage in either direction weakens the integrity of the entire system.

Raised in the manmade, manicured suburbs of the Lower 48 states, I harbored little interest in food. We ate what was available in Western grocery stores, along with unused soup bones and chicken wings set aside for us by friends who owned a restaurant. My parents missed the opportunity to learn many cultural food preparation skills due to the disruption of relocating from Southeast Asia to a new country with a different language and culture. Like many immigrants, they combined snippets of knowledge from their homeland with a new repertoire of frugal shopping for Western groceries. They did their best to maintain connections to their own food traditions by growing vegetables and trading with networks of relatives and friends. When I made my own migration, I carried these early influences and appreciation for my parents’ teachings, but turned my back on life in the suburbs. I arrived in the North hungry for new beginnings surrounded by the natural environment.

As an outsider in Alaska, my complete lack of place-based knowledge, practical skills and understanding of local cultures opened a crevasse between myself and belonging in the North. An uncomfortable and complicated separation from my own ancestral connections fueled a yearning to understand the intersections of warp and weft from this new northern fabric that appeared, at least on the surface, less tattered than my own. By learning how local and traditional food systems endure, I hoped to craft the tools and cultivate the courage to heal rifts in my own life.



Salted, split king salmon head.
Scammon Bay, Alaska 2017

Photo courtesy of the author.

Ancient knowledge common to all our ancestors involves harvesting local plants and using diverse parts of an animal for food, fiber and medicine. I place my trust in the teachings and techniques from many cultures of the North and around the world that value everything the natural world provides. Considered by-products of the food processing industry, offal are edible organ meats and trimmings still cherished by frugal gourmets and global food traditions. Tripe, which includes stomach and intestines, is highly prized all over Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. Svið is a traditional Icelandic dish featuring lamb’s head. Indigenous peoples of the Circumpolar North enjoy delicacies such as boiled seal intestines, fermented seal flipper and marine meats aged underground. An inquiry into the underappreciated or sometimes forgotten fragments is one small way to closely examine what food tells us about our world.

To honor a lamb raised by friends on their farm in Two Rivers, every usable part is salvaged. The hide is salted, fleshed and



Chicken feet.
Fairbanks, Alaska 2019

Photo courtesy of the author.

tanned, while organs are reserved for haggis, a celebrated sausage-like pudding of Scottish origin. In the kitchen, I unwrap a smooth, burgundy-colored liver, two jellybean-shaped kidneys, brilliant pink spongy lungs, a small fist-sized heart, the pebbly-surfaced pancreas and solid chunks of snow-white fat. The stomach soaks overnight in water with a splash of vinegar. The inner linings of its four chambers display distinct tapestries, each one exquisitely designed to hold and transform the animal’s own food during its brief and beautiful life.

Healing Spaces.

Searching the margins of cultivated spaces for edible and medicinal plants yields a host of underappreciated provisions. I once encountered a fellow forager who jumped from a stinging nettle patch to enthusiastically lead me to a “secret” garlic mustard spot she had been eating into submission for years. Spoonfuls of my own homemade chickweed pesto regularly fill dark winter nights with vitamin-packed nourishment and memories of summer sun.

Farmers and gardeners of the North label unwanted plants “weeds” because they are tenacious and resilient, often overtaking slower-growing vegetable seedlings. Manual removal is labor-intensive, time-consuming and requires consistent vigilance to ensure the desired crops thrive, but many weeds are edible and medicinal. A growing “invasivore” movement invites culinary creatives to harvest and consume invasive species as an alternative to poisoning them and provides reconnection to beneficial gifts from the land. Visiting friends’ gardens and farms, I fill pillowcases with chickweed to pulverize into a garlicky paste, and seek dandelion in all seasons: fall roots for roasting into tea, summer leaves for stir-fries and salads, spring buds for pickles and flower petals for fritters.

“Every culture on the planet actually belongs to people who at one time were connected to people who were connected to the earth,” observes Vivian Yéilk’ Mork, a Tlingit ethnobotanist, educator, writer and co-owner of Planet Alaska based in Juneau whose teachings call attention to living in a complex world that needs healing and

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repair from past transgressions. “Everyone has experienced colonization in different ways. As a result, some people and their stories are disconnected from certain foods and medicines.” Mork believes in sharing plant knowledge to keep these healing practices alive but cautions against cultural misappropriation that happens when non-Indigenous people claim such knowledge and practices as their own. Indigenous peoples worldwide continue to experience misrepresentation of their ceremonies and commodification of their sacred plants, such as *ayahuasca* from the Amazon or white sage in the Southwestern US. Cultural misappropriation deepens the intergenerational trauma of colonization, decontextualizes the spiritual value of plants, heightens risk of overharvesting and threatens the integrity of Indigenous identity and homelands. To avoid repeating past mistakes, Mork encourages settlers and immigrants to be respectful of the sacred connections Indigenous peoples continue to maintain with their homelands.

Meda DeWitt is a Tlingit traditional healer and ethnoherbalist living in Anchorage who is a master weaver of networks for healing and repair. “When humans are out of balance with the environment, it leads to famine, disease, death and having to migrate,” DeWitt says. “Our entire economy has to be based on how to tend our spaces and clean up environmental damage or prevent it.” Organizer of traditional plants as food and medicine gatherings and leader of social justice and healing initiatives, DeWitt’s healing work includes reweaving warp and weft to strengthen areas worn thin before holes in our collective memories become too large to mend. She asks a fundamental question: “Who are we as human beings? We can be good stewards of the land, be good to each other and live in abundance.” DeWitt reflects on her gratitude to Alaska Native civil rights leaders whose efforts ensured her ability to still harvest and enjoy her traditional foods. “Our grandparents’ generation worked all their lives for the right to be Native. Their only lament is that they gave up too much,” DeWitt explains. “Our purpose is to live in joy by being good to ourselves, being good to each other and good to the land. This is the foundational structure of being in alignment with God and the Earth.”

A feeling of joy arises as a steaming cup of spruce tip tea warms my hands. The citrusy aroma of the forest transports me back to late spring when I plucked these tender green bundles from the ends of spruce branches. I follow my plant teachers and harvest only what I need, visualizing how removing new growth changes the architecture of the living limb. As a guest in someone else’s homeland, I often wonder and worry about how I relate to place and how to be in solidarity with those whose ancestral lands I live on. When the weight of this responsibility feels overwhelming, I repeat the calming words of Naomi Kaasei Michalsen, a Tlingit traditional plants and foods educator and community leader based in Ketchikan. “With patience and compassion, we can rekindle our relationships to our foods, the land and to each other and return to wholeness,” Michalsen says. “It’s about listening to our hearts and not just our heads.” All our ancestors were once cousins long ago. We still share the need for clean water, appropriate shelter and nourishing food — the common bond of our humanity.

Passionate leaders like DeWitt, Mork and Michalsen restore the relationships between people and place as part of a growing network of healers, teachers and learners. Their words and actions weave hope in the hearts of Indigenous peoples to honor themselves as the original guardians of ancestral foods and wisdom. For newcomers, living in the North begins with genuinely acknowledging Indigenous peoples for stewarding relationships with plants, animals and places, and finding meaningful ways to offer support and appreciation. Healing and strengthening these relationships require a process of co-creation that draws on everyone’s skills and gifts. These teachers remind us that our lives are shaped by the decisions, struggles and successes of those who came before. Just as we influence the spruce bough by how we harvest young tips, the accumulated effects of our own small actions and relationships will impact those who come after.

Generosity and Gratitude.

When the fish are running, masterful hands guide the curved edge of their *uluqaqs* through solid salmon flesh like a knife in

butter. Each fish-cutter learned these skills from their elders and honed their own technique while cutting thousands of fish over the course of a lifetime. Red-orange curtains of salmon on the drying racks catch the breeze for several days before migrating into the smokehouse. Cutting fish varies between regions, communities and even households in Alaska, yet the goal is the same: preserve summer’s bounty for a long dark winter.

In searching for ways to reconnect to my own ancestral foods, Indigenous friends who harvest in their homelands generously share their teachings with me. I fish with Billy Charles and his family, beloved Yup’ik friends and mentors who have lived their whole lives on the Lower Yukon River. We pull fish from the net, expressing gratitude for the silver bodies filling the tote. “There’s reverence, and there’s story and memory with these foods,” explains Charles, a community leader in Emmonak. “Each meal is a celebration of gifts from the land.” We prepare a rich broth from the heads, and I watch as an auntie carefully splits a king salmon head like accordion pages of a map. I emulate her cuts on the thick, meaty tail. We hang the heads and tails next to the slabbed meat and stand back to admire these glimmering jewels, dripping oil and drying in the wind.

I recall teachings from Simeon John, another mentor and respected Yup’ik leader in Toksook Bay. “The animals are given to us from our creator, *Ellam Yua*, the spirit of the universe,” John explains. “They sacrifice themselves. In respect to the animals, we try not to waste anything and utilize anything that’s edible, every part of it.” In his community, hunters traditionally give away the first catch of the season. “Our ancestors believed that if we share, the Creator will provide us with more. The animal will offer itself to us again knowing we had good intentions for it.” In the Circumpolar North, Indigenous peoples continue the tradition of sharing with neighbors who are unable to hunt or get out on the land, such as widows, elders and those with fewer resources. Essential for survival in remote places, sharing also strengthens relationships between people. “Giving away food to others who aren’t getting enough is a really powerful feeling,” John explains.



Lamb stomach.
Fairbanks, Alaska 2017

Photo: Sarah Lewis

“When an elder has gratitude and passes it on to the youth, it’s like a blessing that pushes the youths to have a positive, productive, protective life. *Tuvqakiyaraq* is our value of being thoughtful of others with whatever you have to share.”

Elsewhere in Alaska, industrial seafood processors generate immense quantities of waste by grinding up heads, bellies and edible bits with the nonedible, and flushing the slurry out to sea. However, Executive Chef Amy Foote at the Alaska Native Medical Center’s Food and Nutrition Services reaches out to coordinate purchases of fish heads and donations of salmon bellies that would otherwise be discarded, transforming the act of wasting into one of sharing. Foote also coordinates with hunting associations, charters and lodges to salvage deer, moose and caribou meat from sport hunters, and accepts donations of other traditional foods such as herring eggs and berries. “It’s such an honor for our staff to be able to prepare healing foods for those who need it the most — our elders and our patients,” Foote

explains. By dedicating time and energy to celebrate and serve undervalued and overlooked food sources, passionate people like Foote and her team bring healing to their patients while making repairs to the fabric of the food system.

Patching Together.

At a recent online gathering hosted by the Alaska Food Policy Council Conference and Festival, the melodious voice of keynote speaker Sommer Sibilly-Brown resounded with emotion. “Food is politics, food is power, food is control,” stated the founder and Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition. “We have to begin to explore the whole truth, the whole story and specifically look at the ways that food has been weaponized and how it can also be used to heal. It is then that we can look at the reality of the past and be brave enough to reclaim our practices.” From across the sea and over the continent, her message resonates with us, inhabitants of an equally remote place that is part of the United States,

yet separated by its own unique ecology, diverse cultural identity and conflicted history. “Real innovation is in not what we were, but what we are becoming once we are rooted in what we were.” Sibilly-Brown’s words are a call to courage and an invocation for all our ancestors to be with us in this work.

A quest to strengthen the fabric of our food system and weave a bridge to belonging spans a lifetime of remembering, practicing and innovating. We reach for the odd bits and recombine existing ideas, technologies and resources while intention guides the way. We reinforce weak areas, save the scraps of our diverse experiences to patch holes, and join disparate fragments.

On a frosty autumn morning, I walk slowly through my favorite lowbush cranberry spot, searching for the shiny bundles on plants I frequent each year, but something is amiss. What happened to the berries? Did extra rain discourage pollinators? Was I late to the patch? Maybe the plants were taking a break from more bountiful years.

Thinking of people across the state who I know are also out on the land, I recall recent conversations with friends in Scammon Bay, including Wybon Rivers who instructs youth in skills for harvesting Yup'ik foods for their community. "Being out on the land, hunting and fishing, and taking care of food teaches the youth about hard work and responsibility," says Rivers. "For example, we tell them, if you're going to give something to elders, make sure it's presentable and clean." After hunting or fishing, young people deliver plucked birds, rinsed shellfish and other fresh food to the houses of elders. "A lot of the boys didn't believe in themselves when they were hunting," adds Georgianna Ningeulook, who coordinates these activities. "But after their success, their happiness was contagious when they gave their catches to the community." Emotion catches her quiet voice as she describes changes she witnesses in the youth over the years. "They form bonds by doing healthy activities and connecting to who they are as Yup'ik people." Nearby, a smile lights up Abraham Rivers' face as he shares why it means so much to reach out to youth who would otherwise not have these opportunities to go hunting or fishing. "It's always good to teach young kids to share their catches, so when they get their own kids, they can pass on this tradition that has been passed from many generations."

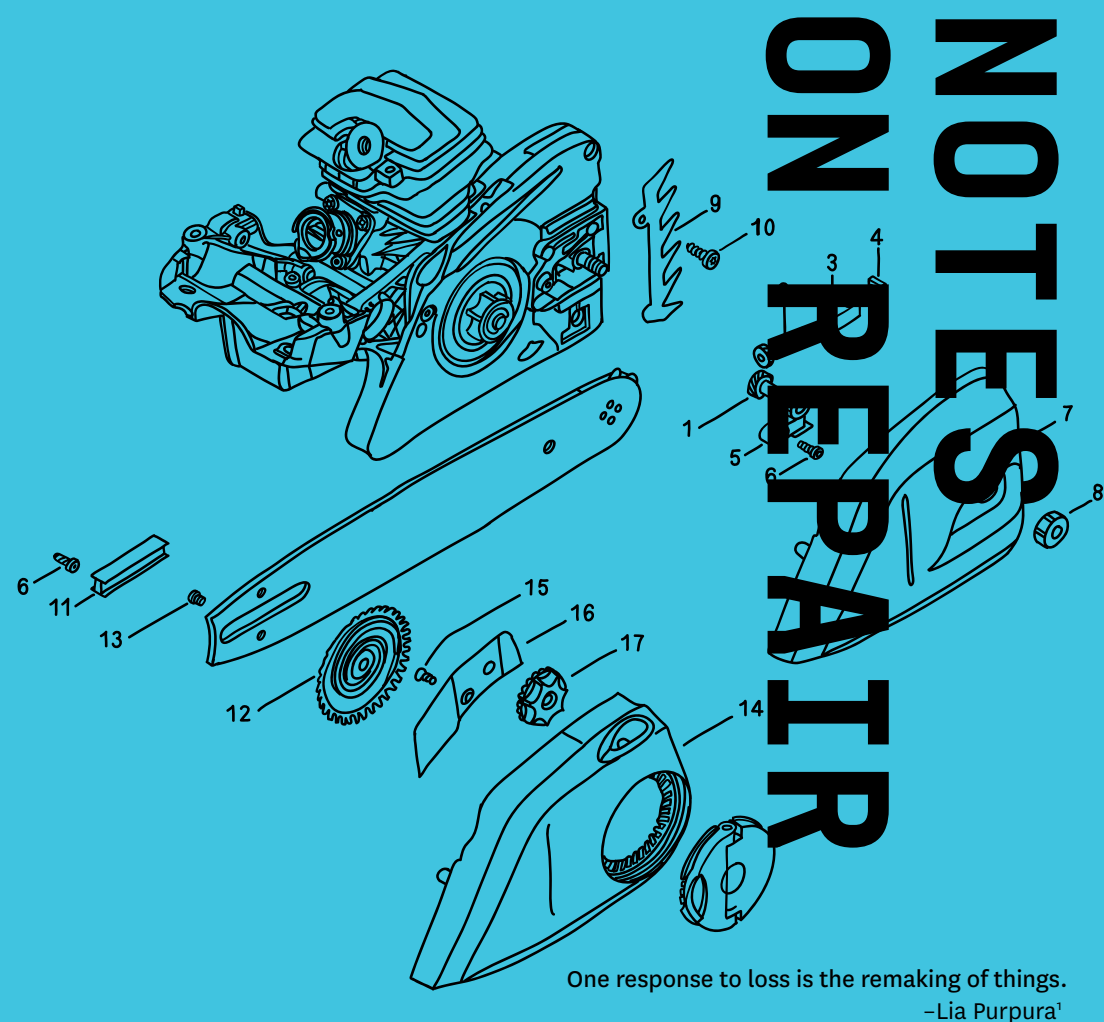
In the berry patch, my questioning shifts from examining natural elements to exploring my own behavior and intentions. I pour jasmine tea from my vacuum flask into a cup and set it to rest on a bed of moss. I pause, watching the steam rise. A single-minded pursuit for berries melts into a moment of stillness, breathing the clean cold air and listening to the rustle of falling leaves in the boreal forest on the edge of winter. I serve the cooled tea and offer gratitude as liquid dissolves into earth. A local elder comes to mind – someone I have not seen in a while. I resolve to visit and bring her something. As I retrieve the cup, I catch a glimpse of red orbs under shiny leaves, my eyes adjusting to hidden abundance underfoot. Later, I deliver berries to my elder friend and we delight in catching up. She surprises me by mentioning that it had been years since she had been gifted cranberries from the land. The lesson that day was about gratitude and generosity —the unexpected opportunity to connect, honor and remember. This is how we take care of each other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Nu is an Asian-American freelance writer and photographer in Alaska specializing in wellness, the environment, traditional food systems and stories about people and community. She is grateful to her parents and sister for their unconditional love and support and to friends across the state who have shared their teachings and wisdom with her. One of her earliest memories of repair occurred in a maelstrom of toddler tears when her favorite stuffed bear accidentally ripped in the washer. Working together, her mother and father re-stitched the ragged bear with needle and thread. Given the right tools and right reasons, healing is possible.

Sweetbread and other lamb organs.
Fairbanks, Alaska 2017

Photo: Sarah Lewis



CHRISTINE BYL

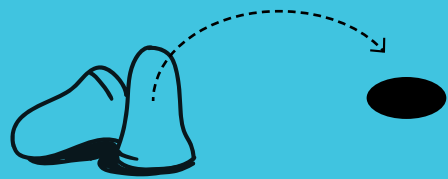
It's 15 degrees below zero and the generator won't start. The electoral system lies tattered at the feet of a bloated tyrant and today, another virus record, another extinction record, someone's job gone, someone's aunt gone, someone's facts someone else's lies. The world seems windy and tossed, as if a rogue gust could flatten all that's standing. And yet. Justice rumbles through the streets with every color face. Soon, a new man, and a woman, will lead. Change the generator's oil and the Honda purrs again.

Over and over, this question arises: what is fixable? With what skills—mine? Ours? A person I know? How do we speak about the process, or ask a neighbor to lend a tool? With what words?

Etymology provides insight. At once theoretical and embodied, speech sprouts from action, as "inspire" derives from "to breathe." The root of "repair" is Latin, *re-* & *parare*, to make ready (again). Its permutations range across cultures, times and geographies, which is good, because we need every tool we can gather for the tasks at hand.

FIRST, DIAGNOSE THE PROBLEM. TRIAL AND ERROR. BEGIN WITH WHAT’S IN FRONT OF YOU. TRY THE SIMPLEST FIX FIRST.

PLUG



Three of us crouched around the chainsaw, disassembled on a dirty tarp. Early summer in Western Montana, miles more trail to clear, and the saw was down. It was my first season on a backcountry trail crew, and though I was learning to run the Stihl o36—hesitant, obsessed—I was far off-shore of competent, and no mechanic. Still, the damage was obvious, even to me. The chain tensioner had broken so the bar yawned from the powerhead, the chain slack, as useless for cutting as dental floss. After he’d fussed with every tool and part in the saw kit, Burke, the leader, named our predicament. “I think we’re fucked.”

A Zen phrase happened next. “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” Translation: the more you know, the more you know what won’t work. The less you know, the more ridiculous you dare to be.

I twisted the foam earplug in my pocket and before I could think myself quiet, extended it toward Burke. “Could you stuff this in, take up that space?” He looked dumbfounded. But, desperate times. He took the plug from my fingers and rolled it between his. He pulled the bar taut against the chain and, with the tiny carb screwdriver, poked the plug into the tensioning channel. We watched the foam slowly expand to fill the gap as if returning to a shape it knew.

Burke fitted the bar back onto the powerhead and tightened the nuts. When he wiggled the tip, it held. “Huh. We’ll see,” he said. He started the saw and revved it for a couple minutes. The chain spun. He killed the engine and reopened the bar plate and there was the yellow plug, fused in the gap, as plasticine as if extruded in a factory. It lasted long enough for us to buck the last trees.

Back at the shop, Shelli, the saw tech, took the Stihl apart while Burke told the story and I shyly examined the concrete floor. Shelli poked at the soldered mess with her screwdriver. “That was a crazy fucking idea,” she said.

JURY RIG



One of my favorite repair synonyms floats into colloquial English via sailing ship, where “jury” means makeshift and “rig” refers to the mast, sail and lines, which, if toppled or lost at sea made for a problem solved with outside-the-box thinking and materials at hand. Far from the harbor, this term has special resonance even in Interior Alaska, where DIY culture and ingenuity rests on deep roots—Alaska’s First People, for millennia, made everything they had from “materials at hand.” Even now, breakdowns in remote towns and bush villages require remedies with duct tape, zip ties, something whittled, and beginner’s mind, even if only while waiting the weeks it may take for a part to arrive by mail.



So many socks in a life! So many poked-through toes, so many heels worn thin. The verb “darn” may come from West Germanic *diernan* to old English dialect, *dern*, meaning to hide (sign of wear, skiff of poverty, maw of neglect), or else from Middle Dutch, *dernen*—to stop a hole, as in a dike.

How apt, since my Dutch grandmother, Beppe, knitted notable cable socks from the wool of unraveled Goodwill sweaters, a pair for each child, each Christmas, almost too thick for ordinary shoes, and she darned them when they wore out (after years). The Christmas I brought home a boyfriend, my first serious love, Beppe gave him one sock. He opened it, confused, to her heavy Dutch brogue: “If you are still here next Christmas, I will make you de other one.” We howled, all of us who knew her sense of humor, her loving tests. The man stayed and got his sock the next year, and stayed longer, long enough to know a bit of Beppe before her mind began to go, long enough to learn her steely whimsy, her devout beliefs and from me, her history, of which she did not speak. She never complained, even that sandpapered curse—*darn*—still too coarse for her.

After the war, she’d come to America with my Pake, seven children, and one on the way. They left the dikes and the war-torn country, dead brothers, the trauma that skittered to the surface when passing a certain field, under a certain sky. But what’s past is not always gone, and as Beppe aged, trauma’s residue leaked back in. She woke in the night to small voices outside her window and tried to bring the children inside, to hide them from the Nazis. She’d wander into the yard in the dark, bereft and anxious, and my mother began to worry that she’d hurt herself.

As Beppe’s mind tangled, so did her knitting. Darned heels thickened, like a woolen callous, dropped stitches a sign of her unraveling. Those holes we could not patch or mend. My Beppe has been gone for seventeen years. I still have two sets of socks, too treasured to wear. For better and for worse, in sickness and in health, the man and I have been paired for 26 years.

FUSE

Some repair begins with separation: loosening a stuck cable from a winch’s drum. Extricating crud from a clogged drain. After many backcountry nights sleeping in a ski hat, I spend twenty minutes picking knots from matted hair. Other repairs begin with joining. To fuse is to splice disparate things into one. A broken bone fused to mend. Two ideas, fused, can remedy dogmatism, or correct a false dichotomy. Two, three, or more people fused—a family, a village—might allay loneliness. Too much fusing can cause a break of its own: self-erasure, codependence, nuclear war. The opposites held within our speech astound me. A word, no sooner uttered, throws a shadow.

STITCH

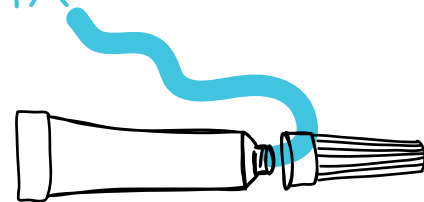
Fifteen seasons of physical labor and here I am, third hernia in seven years, the first two repairs botched. After the procedure, as I part anesthesia’s velvet curtain, Dr. A. stands at my bedside mimicking a stitch, his deft brown hands suggesting my mother’s when she made our clothes. “Steel thread, the stitch is strong!” He pulls his fists apart as if testing a rope. From Old English, where stitch meant puncture, or stabbing pain, the word moved, in Middle English, to sewing: a needle punctures and loops. The stitch in my side has been sewed now, the linguistic loop closed. Dr. A’s reassurance is accented and musical. “This time will not fail you. You can lift, run, use your chainsaw.” He grins and curls fist to chest. “Now you are strong.”

How I want to believe him! That I am strong, that it will not fail. I’m scarred though, from the two painful failures, one on a remote trip (should we call a helicopter?), the grim two-hour drive to the Fairbanks ER. Scarred by two long recoveries, painkillers (wretched Vicodin), light duty status, lost wages. I’m hoping this third time is charmed, at a specialized hospital dedicated to an old mode of surgery, where Dr. A. has sewn me up by hand like a sock. Before I went under, he said, “In the Civil War, on a battlefield, this is how they did it. It’s an art.”

Art as in craft, he means. To craft is to make, and a craft is a style of making. Craft fluency takes ten thousand hours, they say, and this is why, the doctor tells me, the old way fell out of use. Pharmaceutical reps pushed plastics in the 80s, and medical schools took the bait. An intern could learn to slap on a mesh patch in a fraction of the time it took to learn natural tissue repair. Such regression is 21st-century familiar—a once-prized skill slouches into a quick-fix. But now, the old way is in demand again, as patch jobs fail and complications burgeon. (“The mesh was spackled to your bladder,” Dr. A. tells me. “It took an hour to pick it loose.”)

In medicine as in woodcraft as in baking, to make from scratch, manually—literally, by hand—is to take a stand. To invest time. To resurrect a skill worth passing down, and worth receiving. A stitch in time saves nine—better to fix a small rip immediately than wait for it worsen. Better to keep a skill in use than let it stagnate. As my artist-surgeon promised, I barely have a scar.

FIX



Into Middle English by way, again, of Latin, *fixare*—to fix—or *fixus*, past of *figere*—to fasten, fix has longest been a verb: “to repair.” Take a broken chainsaw and make it useful again. By the early 19th century, fix had become a noun, as well: a hurdle, a jam. Out in the woods with that broken chainsaw was a fix. Use both meanings in one sentence—“I’m in a fix, this saw is busted, can you fix it?”—and you gesture at the circle repair beckons us into. Something broken—a button popped, a hole in your boot, a botched promise—when mended, may become useful again. But for how long? Not even skillful effort confers permanence. The earplug solution lasted one day. A patch on a boot sole lasts maybe a mile, maybe a hundred. I hope the hernia fix lasts the rest of my life. But whatever breaks could do so again. Repair is an optimistic task, betting on the future as it does, but its basic premise remains: nothing lasts.

PATCH



Interior Alaska is permafrost country and every stretch of highway has recurring ridges, buckles and holes, some humps so large (why don't you slow, you know this is here, it's here every spring!) your tires catch air. Summer brings road crews and closed lanes. Flaggers lean on planted stop signs, their overheated dogs panting in the shade of parked cars. Asphalt trucks, then road rollers, then newly-dotted lines. By September, perfect pavement rolls out like an airplane runway and we take off, thrilled for speed. Then winter buries the new road under snow. Unfixed holes fill, the year's smoothest driving. Early spring fools you—the patches worked!— but by June's thaw (each freeze shallower than the last) the sinks reemerge in the same places. As if the layers beneath our tires need to remind us that we rest upon land that heaves and holds, flows and folds. Though we like to think it, and have gambled our infrastructure on it, the ground's deepest, most fundamental job has never been to bear us up. Earth answers to its own calculations. We are animals on blacktop game trails, parting brush, avoiding low spots, seeking a patch of ground for water or rest.



How to communicate a thought, cogent or fleeting? Is there slop in my syntax, carelessness in my diction? Do I use a word without regard to origin, ignoring a violence it might connote? A poorly-written clause, a lazy phrase, a kind of wound. A trope thoughtlessly parroted is a repetitive stress injury. It hurts clear thinking. *Fake news. It is what it is. Badass. It's all good.* What do we even *mean*? Cut, tweak, edit. To refine language is to strengthen it. To edit is to suppose what I write and what you read can hope to be the same.

REGENERATE

Witness a near-magic power—a starfish regrows a severed limb (or an entire body from an appendage!); a lizard drops its cartilaginous tail and builds one new; a bird's feathers act as decoy, and snatched off by a predator, will regrow. Even animals that don't replicate cells can heal quickly from injuries inflicted by the natural or human world. A wolf chews its foot loose from a trap and cold-cauterizes the wound in snow. It survives on a limp for years. A friend knew a musher whose sled dogs scuffled and one's entire scalp came loose from its skull, the pelt slipping under a pat like a rug on a smooth floor. The friend drew back his hand in horror. "You gotta take that dog to the vet, eh?" and the musher said, "He'll be fine, it'll heal in a couple days." Even in a dog yard, muddy from spring rain—it did.

Animals are also vulnerable, and some damage cannot self-resolve. A thrashing whale entangled in fishing gear is huge, and powerless. Sea birds' guts weigh heavy with microplastic, from soda bottles and laundered fleece. Is it possible, as scientists project, that, humans gone, the earth might regenerate? How much damage can an ecosystem sustain before it's beyond repair?

Chuckling my hoodie in the washer, boarding a plane for a family visit, I witness my complicity. What urges—I *want*, *I want*—should I drop like a tugged-on tail? Left alone, parts of my exhausted self might regenerate. Other times, I reach too quickly to improve. What might I sit with, infinite and sad, until I am altered?

IMPROVE

Once a thing is made—building, recipe, democracy—it's easy to assume the work over. But holy hell, what a task, to make something *better*. Better than it was. All better, like a skinned knee, kissed. Improvement has the industrious tinge of a slog, implying a stoic stick-to-itiveness. Absent the glamour of creation, the thrill of *ex nihilo*, there is only pure effort, shoulder-to-the-wheel. But to try at all is an imaginative leap: a belief that better is possible.

REPARATION

In 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil spill ravaged Eastern Prince William Sound. Chenega, an Aluttiq village at its heart, relied on the marine coast and waters for subsistence. After the spill, as Exxon raced to control damage to ecosystem and reputation, oil executives at a public meeting in Chenega rolled out a plan for economic reparations with the promise, "we will make you whole." Incomprehensible arrogance. A devastated people might say, we are already whole. You didn't diminish us with your injury any more than you can undo our injury with your power.

Reparation seems a decent impulse—own up, make right. Even so, what a shoddy fix. As if profound harm can be easily countered, the oppressor's hand still on the wheel.

History is full of the "powerless" who, retaining belief in their own worth, demonstrate extraordinary authority. The catalyzing litany of the enslaved, the colonialized, the raped, the cast-aside, is this: You owe me damages, but you do not control my wholeness, or the path by which I heal. I can put my own self right. Remove your hand from my neck.

SISTER

In building, to sister is to bolster the strength of a load-bearing board (a joist, a rafter) by attaching a parallel member, which spans a fracture, or shores up a sag. The familial allusion resonates—my siblings and I hold each other up with our abutted paths. The gendered piece, familiar in some way (two items alike, *as in* sister cities) piques my curiosity. My brief search roused no clear etymology, but this insight, from a commenter on a building forum, rang true: "You ever see how two sisters sleep? They snuggle right up, kind of like sistering joists. Females are a lot more comfortable touching other females than males are touching males."

Yes. I picture my sisters' bodies, how they slept when we were young—flung limbs, the noises that annoyed me—and how they move now, like me in some ways (fast walk, arm swing, a thinking/looking squint we call "pig face") and yet their bodies are their own. When I feel undone by too much weight or bereft of my ability to span what is asked of me, they lean beside me and I do not splinter.

Here's what I'd fix: how men learn to pull back from their brothers and pound backs when they hug, how they've never slept spooned up, their muscles at ease. I'd have brothers know each other's bodies without fear or shame.

MEND

What if a life, a self, gets *ripped*? Before/after. Trauma, *illness*, injury, loss, or the ordinary swivels decades bring. Changed circumstances bring a shifted self. Here is another side of "fix": to pin, to fasten in a specific location. Fix in place. Fixed position. A *fixed* self calcifies into an itchy cast, and a life bereft of re-envisioning seems sadly static, but a rip can feel like *severing*. The work of re-seeing yourself can take a long time.

Aside from the hernias, I'd *always* been well, strong even. *Capable*. A laborer's muscles, backcountry endurance, a stubborn-ass Midwesterner's grit. I knew myself as the first to jump in, the last to quit. I'd show you. (I'd show me.) Was my worth tied to doing? Perhaps. The Protestant work ethic on steroids, a woman-in-the-trades' need to prove. The human clamor just below the surface. (Am I enough?)

Then, in my mid-40s, a *virus*, *another virus*, an *international* trip, a remote field camp, another (brutal) virus. Immune system flattened, hospital stay, my body too worn, too beaten, too depleted, to rebound.

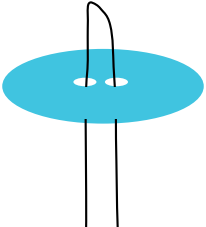
For months, I walked the *tightrope between my old mantras* ("I'll be fine. Stick it out. I always do") and the new person I couldn't yet claim as *me* ("I am not fine. I am exhausted. I cannot do it.") At first, I hated her: useless shell, sickly thing. So *tired*. So helpless. And the health malady litany, banal, it bored even me. In the acute stage, offerings of help flooded in, and I let myself relax into care, but after six months and I wasn't better, I could feel a shift. Acquaintances, some friends, stopped asking, "How are you?" I didn't blame them. I had no good news. Americans are culturally optimistic, and there's no buzzkill like someone who can't get well. My failure to mend weighed on me.

I knew myself, proudly, as a fixer. I was ashamed to be broken.

A healer friend told me, "Chronic illness is the body trying to give you a message you have not yet let yourself hear." Like what? She took a stab. "You've spent your life on go. Enough of your grit. What if your body is asking for ease?"

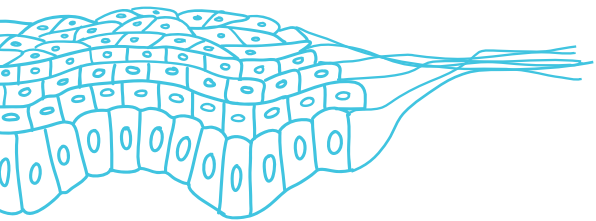
Ease. Finding ease. The search for that—or, I should say, the permission to cease searching and allow ease to arrive—became the basis of a cure. Repair also means to retreat (from the Latin *repatriare*, to 'return to one's country'), often connoting respite. Repair to my chambers. Grow quiet. Look inward. Listen to the body's smarts. Slowly, I learned to see my maimed self not with shame, but tenderly, as my Beppe used to speak of her mending pile, each hem and button a friend in need of a hand.

I unfixed myself from the rigid persona that had grown around me, and when I did, I felt relief. Now well, it is work I do still, opening to each day's cells anew. My healer friend reminds me, "We are freest when we willingly release the emptied form of what has been."



HEAL

When the body repairs itself. When the wound closes. The bruise fades. The fissure grows invisible and new skin knits and what's left behind is tender, and strong. When through action and process, trial and error and time, I mend myself.



CURE

Tikkun is a Hebrew word for fix, and *tikkun olam* a common phrase that means “to mend the world,” which is a way of saying *justice*. The Chinese word for repair (修 - xiū) holds meanings that English does not—to compile; to study; to construct; to cultivate; to trim or sharpen, even to adorn.

I don’t speak any other language fluently—bits of Dutch, dabs of Frisian, traveler’s Spanish, undergirded by high-school Latin. Will I learn a language at 47, my brain already full of things that get short shrift? Perhaps not, another fissure.

Living as I do in the Far North, on land long used by the Dene people, here I would like to tell you the Ahtna word for “fix,” the Denai’na spelling for “improve.” Maybe there are more words for “repair” than there are for snow. I could look it up and insert a list here. But devoid of context, what would it mean? Researched but not really known, that list would be about me, signaling virtue, not about the languages themselves. Certainly not about the people who speak them.

I’m tired of performing, which only seeks to conceal this rupture: I live on Dene land and I do not know a single Dene word by heart. That unknowing—absence of the need to know—is a brokenness, the settler’s pathology. And what cure? Googled words inserted in an essay are a Band-aid for a wound that needs surgery. A systemic fix requires suffering, yes? Under the knife, chronically ill, I expected pain. How much deeper this injury. Doing just enough to seem ally, but not enough to shift a single thing, is a painkiller masking a persistent ache. Privilege, that comforting opiate, lulls me back to sleep.

Skillful repair—whether decolonizing or mending a tool—asks for time. Time spent—thousands of hours—and time passed, which heals wounds, though not all. Another meaning of cure is to set, to dry, to solidify, to undergo a process, over hours, years, generations. But time alone won’t do it. Skillful repair—of an engine, or a harm—requires attention, like my Beppe darning our socks before bed, and wakefulness, like the girl crouched over the chainsaw, her beginner’s mind racing, and also courage, like a person standing in a fierce wind, ready to be blown. Most of all, skillful repair requires the humility of an apprentice, stepping into a lineage of those who learn from those who work.

Here I return to the world where I began, with the stink of the generator’s exhaust outside, the public square crumbling, all the busted-up villages and bruised creatures at our feet. Poet Sabrina Orah Mark writes, “I feel like I’m in Gertrude Stein territory, where the buttons are so tender they’ve come undone. The whole kingdom is spilling out of itself. There are holes everywhere.”³

Lately, when I sleep, I dream of holes, big enough for a country, a family, a future to fall through. My nightmares are an unfastening. When I wake myself from torpor, I rouse first to the smallest task I can bear. Overwhelmed as I am, I admit that any naming unveils possibilities. As speech grows from action, so action might grow from speech. To repair implies a return, and also, something new. To fix means to make permanent, and also to undo, to make do, to re-do, to rearrange. To fix is to change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Byl is the author of *Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods*, a finalist for the 2014 Willa Award. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *Glimmer Train Stories*, *The Sun*, *Crazyhorse* and *Brevity*, among others. She has made her living as a professional trail builder for the past 25 years and lives in Interior Alaska with her family. One of her earliest repair memories involves a persistently unraveling rawhide stitch on her favorite baseball mitt.

¹ Lia Purpura, “The Creatures of the World Have Not Been Chastened,” *Emergence Magazine*, <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/the-creatures-of-the-world-have-not-been-chastened/?fbclid=IwAR2GOvTKcLnfnzNaV5QMyPp.41q55q01lO4qSOg7OLoAOm9qs4UixLooH1Io>.

² Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, rev. ed. (New York: Weatherhill, 1992), 21.

³ Sabrina Orah Mark, “Fuck the Bread. The Bread is Over,” *The Paris Review*, May 7, 2020. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/05/07/fuck-the-bread-the-bread-is-over/>.

A RETURN TO WATER: REPAIRING BOATS IN THE NORTH

The following text includes excerpts from a July 8, 2020 conversation between Fairbanks craftsman Andy Reynolds and Anchorage artist Amy Meissner about the craft of repair in the North. It has been edited for clarity and length.

Andy Reynolds: The more rigorous an environment one lives in, the more important the traditions of skills and practices—they’re just more critical. They’re something people pay more attention to here because if you don’t, you’re going to pay a price. Nature still is ascendant in high latitudes. It can’t be ignored. It’s a reality that asserts itself over and over again, so we have to be attuned to our surroundings, and the people really steeped in understanding our environment and how we best interact with it are our elders.

At this point I find myself in the position of being an elder, and the Folk School has afforded me the opportunity to be a mentor. This is one of the more satisfying and fulfilling kinds of experiences I’ve ever had in my life. When I finish a class at the Folk School, I always feel I’ve learned at least as much as my students have. The process of passing information on to another person or generation is inherently filled with possibilities for learning new things—for the instructor or mentor, and the pupil or mentee. For me, this makes the Folk School a great place to be associated with. Part of the beauty of a mentoring relationship is that it can switch on and off and happen repeatedly over a long period of time. It can flow in both directions. I’ve had mentors younger, older and the same age as me. It’s a relationship based on the joy of sharing something of value—and that *creates* value—as well synergy between people. When you’re sharing something of value, you’re giving of yourself, but the teaching and learning is a process that flows in both directions. It’s very incentivizing because it feels so good when you’re learning and gaining skills, progressing through a series of steps in a process that leads you towards understanding.

Amy Meissner: I think it's a real skill to be able to transfer craft knowledge inherent in your body, to put a language to it that's transferable and understandable to another person, especially if they're new to a process. And approaching a repair itself, feels different than starting a project from the very beginning with all new materials.

Andy: I grew up in a home where if it's broken, you fix it. That's an ideal that works against the modern consumer society model of buying a thing and when it breaks you throw it away because there's *no way* to fix it. I'm frustrated by devices built to be thrown away and can't be repaired, at least not in any kind of a reasonably affordable and direct route. I feel like it's a huge problem that's persisted long enough to create basically existential threats to the survival of, if not our species, then our culture. We've consumed much of the resources of the planet and thrown that away or degrading it to a state where it's no longer of use to anybody. So, it's a dead end, an unviable economy, basically.

Amy: I think we feel it in the North. Maybe it's because our climate is changing faster, or maybe it's the remote quality of how goods get to us and don't leave. Things tend to pile up.

Andy: We pay a lot for anything that gets shipped up here, which gives us an incentive to use local materials if that's a reasonable possibility. But we also have a much less dense population here and the luxury of being surrounded by mostly intact ecosystems, we're more

aware of how degraded a lot of the rest of the country's and world's ecosystems are. I think nature asserts itself here so much more strongly than in other parts of the world. Every environment has its challenges, but winters in Alaska are particularly insistent on making us uncomfortable, and that attunes one to nature in a way that can be forgotten in less rigorous environments.

Amy: This speaks to a sense of place and ability to engage in close looking, which is so transferable into the kind of work you do with boats and repair in terms of attunement with materials, objects and damage assessment. How much of your practice is boat repair?

Andy: Well, it's become kind of an obsession for me, actually. I have quite a fleet of boats here, and there's nothing that brings me more pleasure than taking a boat that's been broken and making it seaworthy or river-worthy once again. There's very little market for wooden boats in the interior of Alaska, most are fiberglass or plastic. The fiberglass boats have always been relatively easy to repair because you can just remake the fiberglass—you grind things down and put new glass fiber and resin, and it cures and you can be as good as new if you do a careful job. But plastic has always been, until quite recently, *if you broke it, it's broken*. Well, that's not necessarily true—you can glue a heavy raft material onto a plastic hull with repair materials rafters use when patching a leak. That makes a pretty sturdy patch if you put it on the inside and the outside, it's got good structural strength. But this material

called *G/flex* came along—a reformulation of epoxy that flexes with the plastic rather than breaking away. It was a game-changer for people with plastic boats that had cracks or holes knocked in them from bashing into rocks or wrapping around bridge piers in the river.

Around Fairbanks particularly, a lot of boats have cracks in their hulls as a result of cold climate. Plastic isn't thermally stable. It shrinks in the wintertime. And in our climate, people discovered the hard way if you don't take the screws out of wooden gunwale, the hull can't contract around it. The screws at the bow and the stern develop cracks running through the screw and straight down towards the waterline. Lots of people had canoes they hadn't yet thrown away that turned out to be repairable with this special epoxy. Other damage happens to the bow and stern from being dragged up rocky rivers and beaches, so when we offered classes for canoe and kayak repair—both plastic and fiberglass—the response was great. One of those really gratifying experiences where people were completely blown away by how easy it was to repair what they thought was unrepairable. There's nothing I enjoy more than seeing a boat that's been damaged in one way or another repaired and put back into water.

Amy: People have emotional experiences with boats—memories, childhoods, or your own children's childhoods. As objects, boats are really special.

Andy: Yes. Yes, they are. And boat building is the ultimate challenge for a woodworker to take on because you're creating something that has almost no straight lines, every shape has curves or angles from one point to another along a piece of wood—shaped on six sides. Every plane on a straight stick of wood gets precisely changed in some way, a really demanding but satisfying process to shape very straight or even naturally grown curves in a way that optimizes the strength of the grown curve in a piece of wood in a crook.

Amy: I've seen diagrams for building ships, tree shapes intended for certain parts of the hull because they'd grown a specific way and had the right angle.

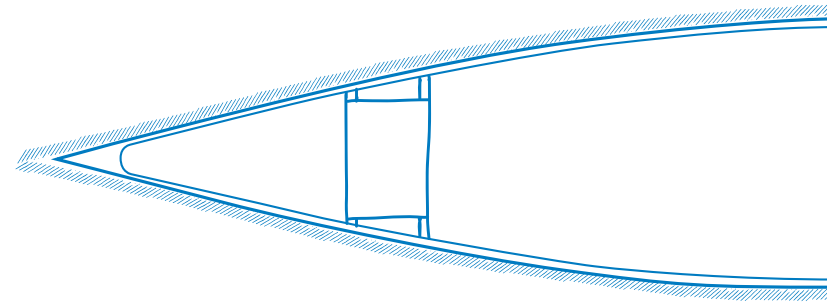
Andy: Because if you find the right piece of wood, it can do a job that that would otherwise be very laborious to do with straight pieces of wood. It can be done with laminating or with multiple pieces joined together, but, boy, nature does a great job of creating curves.

Amy: Are there other common boat repairs that come up, especially in the North?

Andy: For wooden boats, rot is always the greatest hazard you face. I have four wooden boats, one of them also has a broken plank. I haven't tackled that repair yet. I'm still scratching my head about that repair.

I have a friend who's got a soft spot for wooden canvas canoes and he hired me to help repair the stem and ends of the gunwales. Canoes tend to get stored upside down outdoors, and that's fine. It keeps them from filling up with snow all winter and then melting into the inside of the boat when it warms up. But if it's sitting upside down, meltwater flows to the lowest point at the gunwales and stems, and the ends of the inwales and the outwales tend to rot because they stay wet. Those are tricky parts to replace, particularly the stem, which is inside the structure of the boat. Everything comes together at the bow and the stern, so there's a fair amount of stress on them.

So, my friend has built lots of his own dog mushing sleds over the years, but this was a little bit beyond his comfort zone—he hired me for the woodworking because he knew he wasn't patient enough to take the time to try to get things as well-fitted as they needed to be. I spent a lot of time with him working on that canoe two winters ago. We scarfed in new pieces at both ends of the gunwales and managed to get them all shaped and fitted to the ends and repaired the worst



Damaged bow. Repaired bow.
Fairbanks, Alaska

Photos courtesy of John A. Jodwalis

of the damage on that canoe. It looked great when it was all done and that was really a satisfying job. That canoe is probably close to a hundred years old. It took a long time. It was very painstaking work and it was bonding, working closely together. He and I have had our differences of opinion for as long as we've known each other. At times the relationship has been more antagonistic than probably either of us would like it to be. We have different approaches and different opinions about things. But that project repaired our relationship to a degree that hadn't happened in a while. So, there's a form of parallel repairs, an emotional repair as well as a physical repair.

Amy: I think about the value of looking closely at an object and not only being able to solve the problem of a repair but also watching for those first signs of stress or strain and knowing when to make a repair sooner rather than later. It transfers into relationships, that same kind of thinking and tending and care. Ideally, you mend a hole in a sock when it's quite small, not when it's spanning your foot. You can still mend it, but it takes longer and more effort. The same with relationships.

Andy: This is a good time to be thinking about those kinds of things, because it seems like we may be in a pivotal point where we could reset the way we interact with the rest of the world. Both with the physical, natural world, as well as the people in the world.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Andy Reynolds engages in various building projects from fine furniture and cabinetry to home renovation, as well as teaching woodworking and small boat repair through the Folk School in Fairbanks, Alaska. Reynolds’ first repair memories include helping his father install a sump pump under a concrete patio, as well as building and repairing skateboards using hand tools and dismantled roller skates in the early 1960s. He grew up in western Colorado, and in 1973 at age 20 traveled alone to Alaska, where he learned to properly sharpen knives on the slime line at Osmar’s Ocean Specialties in Clam Gulch. This taught him the art of maintaining a sharp tool edge—an invaluable skill for woodworking.



Bethel Slough, 1950
George A. Morlander Photography Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, UAF-1997-108-413



Eline Medbøe
The Act of Mending no. 2, 2018

Two linen shirts mended together. The linen was grown and woven on a family farm near where the photo was taken.
Photo: Geir Dokken

below
Eline Medbøe
The Act of Mending no. 16, (detail), 2019

Denim jeans, textiles; Dimensions variable
Photo: Geir Dokken



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Norwegian artist Eline Medbøe considers mending the embodiment of respect for materials, people and resources used to create everyday items. To encourage prolonged use, the re-configured clothing in her recent body of work is accompanied by a buyer agreement to continue the repair process if needed. Medbøe is the founder of RELOVE, a non-profit organization in Oslo that connects families and youth with various multicultural backgrounds through the common vernacular of textiles, stitching and needle skills. Norwegians have a tradition of repairing wool garments using *stopping* (darning) as a technique for weaving threads over holes in knitted items. When Medbøe was 10, she discovered a well-worn sweater *stopped* so many times the original knit had become “*stoppe* thread on *stoppe* thread.”

I find shelter in our remains.

I collect the clothes and textiles from our daily lives that show signs of living through wear, tear and use. I’m interested in the emotional repetitive action of hand-stitching, since there can be something ruthless and brutal about a needle sewing into a beautiful skirt someone once wore close to the body.

Clothes are intimate and express our personality and identity. Whether it is conscious or not, clothes define us. When we take them off our smell lingers, and we are still present in these garments.

It is strange we have so little respect for something so woven into our daily lives and personalities. The price of clothing isn’t commensurate with the human and environmental resources that go into producing them, and so we haul off huge quantities of usable textiles annually.

By using recycled materials and discarded garments in my work, I try to say something about us and the time we live in. I hope that those who see the work will become more aware of their own relationship to clothes and the value that lies in the materials we get rid of far too easily.



Eline Medbøe
Teppe, 2017

Textile scraps, stockings; 2m x 2m
Photo courtesy of the artist.



Eline Medbøe
The Act of Mending no. 21, 2020

Used textiles; 2.2 m x 3 m
Photo: Øystein Thorvaldsen



The act of mending
www.elinem.no

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Eline Medbøe
The Act of Mending no. 5, 2018

Denim jeans, textiles; Dimensions variable
Photo: Geir Dokken

THIS IS DENA'INA ELNENA

Land Acknowledgement is a formal statement recognizing the Indigenous people of a place. It is a public gesture of appreciation for the past and present stewardship of land you and your organization occupy. Land Acknowledgment opens a space with gratefulness and respect for the contributions, innovations, and contemporary perspective of Indigenous peoples. It is an actionable statement that marks our collective movement towards decolonization and equity.



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