

Linda Green

Betwixt and Between: Yup'ik Combat Soldiers and the Burden of Wars

Violence [...] refers to not only acts of individual physical aggression but also to social and linguistic systems of exclusion and collective coercion, degradation or destruction of property, persons and the environment. Violence is any harm or destruction of life, whether intended by individuals or enacted by a system of language, policies and practices (Pahl 2010, p. 15).

Enduring Contradictions

Eric Hobsbawm, the noted British historian, in his masterful account of modernity¹ writ large, suggests that the 20th century was the most violent in human history,² highlighting crucial connections between capitalist expansion and bellicosity. Over the course of the twentieth century, and in particular over the past 60 years, the United States has indisputably become the global master of war. A military budget and a weapons arsenal that dwarfs those of all other countries, alongside its repeated incursions into other sovereign nations, are alone sufficient to earn the title. Moreover, warfare in its many guises – coups, counterinsurgencies, direct invasions, the training and financing of brutal dictatorships and more recently torture, kidnappings and drone attacks – seems to be acceptable to large swaths of the American population, as is evident from their acquiescence, or perhaps indifference, to the costs of ‘protecting US interests.’ With little public discussion of what those interests are and who they may represent, a hegemonic discourse of US military might as a force for the ‘greater good’

1. See especially his latter four books; *The Age of Capital* (1962), *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *The Age of Empires* (1987), *The Age of Extremes* (1994).

2. Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), notwithstanding. Pinker argues that ‘violence has been in decline for long stretches of time’ and ‘we may be living in the most peaceful era in our species’ existence.’ See also Jared Diamond (2005). For a competing critique see Edward Herman and David Peterson’s ‘Steven Pinker on the Alleged Decline of Violence,’ dissentvoice.org/2012/steven-pinker, December 5 2012.

pervades mainstream society. This rationale, of course, serves to paper over the real beneficiaries of US power, capitalist profiteers. The enormous costs of wars in monetary, social and human terms go mostly unacknowledged.

Within its borders however, American bellicosity in the name of the greater good has its roots in the 18th century. The American Indian Wars (1775-1924) comprising a series of broken treaties, warfare and forced assimilation of Native peoples on the North American continent, circumscribed a ruthless, albeit changing set of policies and practices designed to extinguish Native peoples, a one-two punch of genocide and ethnocide (Brown 1970; Jennings 1975). Justified by an ideology of Manifest Destiny, militarization, missionaries, merchant capital and medicine became some of the primary emissaries of domination. This American variant of social Darwinism has been crucial to the dispossession and dislocation of indigenous peoples from their land, their livelihoods and their kin, key elements of their collective survival over the centuries. Although the long term goal of full extinguishment has only been partially successful, the self-inflicted violence and the blunt force trauma of poverty and racism – legacies of these earlier wars – continue to mark indigenous peoples' lives into the twenty-first century (Williams 2012). Native Americans and Alaska Natives as a whole remain some of the poorest and most marginalized peoples in the United States. Impunity for these crimes – crimes against human dignity – is a crucial facet for the continuance of this multi-faceted violence directed against 'Others,' whether at home or abroad.

Given this, it seems at first glance incongruous that Native Americans and Alaska Natives make up a disproportionate share of US military troops per capita. Together they have the highest rate of military service of any group of Americans (Robinson and Lucas 2008; Holms 1996). Ironically these native soldiers, along with their non-indigenous counterparts, are the public face of US aggression outside America's borders. As they take their place on the frontlines of US wars, the soldiers are quite literally the embodiment of empire, defending a way of life that has relentlessly tried to destroy theirs. After the Vietnam War, volunteer conscription replaced obligatory military service. Since then the vast majority of the America's foot soldiers have been from poor, minority and indigenous peoples' communities, the very victims of America's class war.

In what follows I draw on some of my preliminary findings from my ongoing research project with Yup'ik combat soldiers from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of south-western Alaska. Grasping the human and social consequences of war on the lives of Yup'ik men who serve in combat in the US military requires an examination of the social, economic, political and cultural texture of their lives. Many of them must shoulder the burdens of two wars: a racialized class war – mostly unacknowledged by the dominant society – but whose misery is keenly felt by Yup'iks, while at the same time they bear the hardships of combatants at the frontlines of America's 'global war on terror.'

In this essay I situate the experiences of deployment to war by Yup'ik men within a historical context of structural, symbolic and everyday violence (see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003) that brings to the fore some of the social

processes and forces that have turned rural Yup'ik communities into what Joao Biehl (2005) has called in another context, 'zones of social abandonment.' Crucial to these processes is the extent to which social vulnerabilities and injustices both historically and in the present are at once painfully knowable, as the grim statistics on Native well-being testify, and simultaneously rendered invisible, refracted through a lens of race, ethnicity and class. A process that squarely situates on individuals and their 'culture' the blame for what are in fact socially produced problems (Bauman 2004). The duality of the distress of most Yup'iks remains largely outside our purview, a canvas writ small.

Over the past several years I have interviewed dozens of active duty soldiers and veterans who have served in Vietnam, Desert Storm and over the last decade in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the summer of 2011 I spoke with a number of Alaska National Guard soldiers, many of whom had been deployed to Kuwait in 2007. At the time of our meeting the unit was preparing for a ten-month tour in Afghanistan in 2012 as paratroopers. In this essay I explore two dilemmas that emerged from that facet of my work with these Yup'ik men who live in rural communities scattered across the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. First, many of the Yup'ik men I have interviewed joined the US military in the hope of creating a future for themselves and their families, one mostly denied to them as indigenous people whose communities have been ravaged under the weight of long-term, systemic policies and practices that have produced unremitting poverty and intensifying violence. The rub of course is that as soldiers they are fighting for a way of life from which they are systematically excluded both before and after their combat experiences. Moreover, the social and cultural costs of building that future most often include having to leave behind their deep and abiding connections with the land and with each other. Second, and somewhat contradictorily, I examine how almost all the Yup'ik National Guard troop's experiences in the military, in particular, reinvigorate a shared cultural identity through social spaces that are not simply invoked but that are actually experienced as collective social bonds. The irony, however, is that these ties are configured within a matrix of state violence; a violence that leaves in its wake its victims alongside its perpetrators.

Field note: Summer 2009

I met Wayne, 25 years old, who was a member of the Marine unit that entered Bagdad in March 2003, soon after the US-led invasion. After receiving an honourable discharge from the Marines in 2006 Wayne returned to his natal community of 800 people. Restless, by 2007 he was off again. Wayne went off to the Middle East war theatre but this time as a member of the Alaska National Guard that deployed to Kuwait.

Wayne joined the Marines right out of high school. He said ever since he can remember he wanted to be a Marine like his father who served in Vietnam. At 18 he passed the entrance test and soon thereafter entered boot camp. Although he said there was the full measure of racism and discrimination in boot camp, noting that, 'I had my fists up a lot' he tried to not let that deter him from his dream. Wayne said he was excited to go into combat so that he could put to use his skills learned so well on the tundra. As a hunter of sea and land mammals from a young age, Wayne was already an accom-

plished marksmen and knew well how to work and travel in groups, skills necessary for survival on the tundra of the Far North and on the battlefield. Wayne spoke with obvious pride and dignity of those remembered successes.

When I did get a chance to interview Wayne's father he described to me some of his own difficulties that he had faced upon returning home. And he reiterated he did so mostly in silence. Now he worries about his son as he faces a similar set of circumstances. Wayne by his own admission isolated himself and drank heavily after his discharge from the Marines.

Wayne holds one of the few steady jobs in his community. For the past nine months he has been a member of the Village Safety Police force. Because there are no state police in rural communities local village men are trained as community police. Alaska State Troopers come out to rural communities only when a violent felony crime has been committed. Although by all reports Wayne is a capable worker it is also taking its toll. To do his job well Wayne must uphold the law even if it necessitates taking action against kin or community members, many in the throes of their own distress. All the while, Wayne is left to cope with his own nightmares and flashbacks from his deployment to Iraq, which he says are often aggravated when he must intervene in violent assaults. Wayne does so mostly alone and in silence.

When Wayne joined the Marines he had ambitions to go to college afterward. He thought he could use the benefits from the military to do so, but now he says he is too 'screwed up' to use them.

Community members pointed Wayne out to me as someone who has readjusted and reintegrated with some difficulties, but now seems to be doing well. And he is clearly devoted to his wife and daughter. Yet over the weeks I spent talking with Wayne he began to tell more of his distress, his anger, and his isolation from those around him. Perhaps most startling to me, however, was the day he asked if I would like to see some of his videos of Iraq. As I sat watching in some horror the explosions, bombings and battles, Wayne told me that these are the memories that he is left with from Iraq. And he felt he could never really escape them. When I asked if he had ever sought any help for his difficulties, he shrugged saying there was not much that could be done to help him.

August 2011

When I last spoke with Wayne he had been moving every few months, coming and going between urban Anchorage and his rural community, trying as best he could to find a place for himself and his family to stay afloat. The village, he said, felt too confining, but Anchorage provided no relief. In fact he felt that the racism against Natives in the city rivalled the discrimination he experienced in the military. Although at the time Wayne was still officially in the Alaska National Guard he will not redeploy with the unit to Afghanistan in 2012. Initially, he wanted to go, especially for monetary reasons, but in the end he will not do so.

This field note raises several key issues that I begin to develop within the context of this essay; first, young men like Wayne enlist in the military with expectations of a viable future within the framework of Western society, as few other options are available to them. Opportunities for jobs, education and skills

training are severely curtailed by the constraints of their positionality and most especially within a context of neo-liberal economic policies whose overriding ethic is one of 'survival of the fittest.' The minimal state social protections that had been available to Yup'ik communities for decades have now been even further reduced. The impact of global warming is particularly evident in the Arctic, where increasingly the quantity and quality of marine and freshwater species have diminished: resources that are crucial to the Yup'ik subsistence way of life. Within this context wage considerations have become more urgent, as social reproduction has become all the more precarious.

Secondly, the invocation of following in a family tradition as a key reason for serving in the military is one I have heard from most every soldier I have interviewed. The dignity these young men feel is palpable, afforded they say by the accomplishment of their elders, particularly those men who served as scouts on the tundra in the Alaska Territorial Guard during World War II, quite literally defending their homeland, as the Japanese occupied several islands on the Aleutian Chain (see Marston 1969). And lastly this vignette brings to the fore the social and emotional disquiet, the restlessness and the desire to return to combat, that many soldiers like Wayne face after they leave the battlefield; left to cope alone, as best they can, with the very real but, mostly invisible wounds of war.

Thus, combat service and in many cases the resultant trauma that Yup'ik men experience when they return to their home communities must be understood within a context of massive cultural transformations and diminished social opportunities that have left Yup'ik peoples with few options to survive both as individuals and as a collective with dignity. And while these structures and processes do not determine people's behaviour they do condition the range of options available to them. By placing these Yup'ik soldiers' lives within the contours of history I try to explicate more fully how power and violence operate through dynamic tensions rooted in particular geographic, socio-economic and historical sets of relations. As such I shed light on the ways in which the violence of war abroad is inextricably linked to the violence of modernity at home, contributing significantly to the shape of the soldiers' everyday lives and livelihoods.

Hegemony as History

Yup'ik peoples of south-western Alaska have experienced massive social transformations over the course of the 20th century. The violence and trauma in its myriad forms have reworked not only individual lives, but altered in the process much of the connective bonds of kin and community. This violence has mostly been normalized. The violence of which I speak is a violence that has left in its wake the almost total obliteration of a mode of life for indigenous peoples around the globe. A violence that leaves its victims standing, but weakened. And what has been lost is a point of view, a way of being inextricably tied to its material base and spiritual foundation. This violence is not, however, an unintended outcome of a social project, but rather intrinsic to those very processes. It is

violence so naturalized that most assume that the victims of this violence are actually its beneficiaries – rescued as it were from their isolated, primitive ways. And even those who may harbour doubts understand the outcome as inevitable, redeemed in their minds perhaps, by its imputed rendering of equality and freedom. This civilizing myth is deeply entrenched in the self-consciousness of Western society (Bauman 1991; Williams 2012).

The aggravated assault on indigenous peoples has often been carried out through processes of dispossession, dislocation, and partial³ assimilation. A historical understanding of how these processes are produced is crucial. In a seminal article entitled ‘Pandora’s History,’ Gavin Smith (1997) explores the paradoxes that belie a rapprochement between anthropology and history in attempts by both disciplines ‘to give voice to the unspeakable.’ Smith urges us to think through those silences, to peer into ‘those subterranean passages where silence resides,’ to interrogate the ways in which they may ‘link up the events’ of official history. Thus, an examination of history also entails an interrogation of an erasure of history alongside the complicity of that erasure – of ordinary people’s suffering, not just in physical terms, but the emotional, cultural, social parameters of that suffering, suffering rooted in injustice.

The erasure of history, however, is not total, but rather partial – in both senses of the term – one that blocks any real understanding of the full extent of people’s suffering, while simultaneously setting the stage for an engagement with a particular kind of history, one that serves power. William Roseberry (1994) characterizes this as ‘hegemony as history,’ that is to say, the way those in power actually pose and then define the questions around which struggles are fought (Gramsci 1971). And it is here in these ruptures that violence against a people is often rendered invisible. Moreover without explicitly naming this violence, challenges to the status quo become mostly muted. Impunity in these instances can be thought of as something more than a lack of accountability in its legalistic sense, but rather as a social process that is enabled in part by a characteristic mixture of silence and memory among its victims and historical amnesia and widespread indifference, what the sociologist Jon Pahl has called ‘innocent domination’ on the part of the dominant society (Green 2008; Green 2011; Pahl 2010).

This history is not incidental to this story, but rather crucial for understanding the full extent of the violence that circumscribes the lives of Yup’ik peoples. As David Price (2013) has noted, historical memory can be utilized to make visible and to oppose both the legacies of the past and the current reality of state violence in its many guises.

The Weight of the Past, the Shape of the Present

Yup’ik people were at the end of the 19th century a semi-nomadic people who travelled in small kin groups over the vast tundra by dogsled, boat, or on foot.

3. There is ample historical evidence from around the globe to support the contention that the assimilation of indigenous peoples was intended to be only partial; that is they were to be consigned to the margins of society.

For centuries Yup'ik people have survived the harsh environment of the Far North with skill and grace. A people, who by necessity, moved seasonally and widely across the debouchments of the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta, some 30,000 square miles, to hunt, fish, gather foods and trade items necessary for survival (Haycock 2002). The tundra for the Yup'ik was not a vast empty space, but a crucial site for the production of social relations and cultural well-being, as the land not only provided them with their material sustenance, but embodied the very essence of their lives. Recent mapping and oral history projects with elders in the Delta (Chevak Traditional Council 2000) for example, have revealed the tundra to be alive with local history – of births, battles, burials, myths and ceremonial sites. I am not, of course, arguing for a romantic notion of the Yup'ik as Noble Savage. The Yup'ik people experienced famines, disease, warfare and violence – that is to say, all sorts of human and natural calamities, on a fairly regular basis – yet they lived their lives, as best they could, on their own terms.

My interests lie precisely in those aspects of the social transformation in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta villages that may not at first seem obvious; the extent to which social relations and social ties were reworked in Alaska Native communities, even as native people remained in place – on the tundra and with seemingly unchanged access to subsistence. Yet, the enormous changes in social conditions with the arrival of outsiders made the continuation of the old ways of making a living and living together increasingly impossible.

In the case of south-western Alaska, the assault was not on land per se, nor ostensibly labour, but on a constellation of social and material practices, crucial pieces of the organized matrix of their lives and livelihood, that slowly eroded their ability to survive with dignity. Elsewhere (Green, forthcoming) I index three such important and interrelated events: first, the introduction of merchant capital through the commodification of their subsistence species – wildlife and fish – that reworked Natives' relationships to their landscape and each other through social rearrangements of their productive activities; secondly, the arrival of missionaries and teachers – often one and the same – who spearheaded fundamental changes in their gendered, social and spatial relations as well facilitating the internalization of their imputed inferiority; and lastly, the reworking of Yup'ik lives and social identity in the context of rapacious epidemics of smallpox, influenza and tuberculosis that decimated the Yup'ik peoples of the twentieth century.

Until the late nineteenth century the peoples of south-western Alaska had only limited and sporadic interactions with outsiders,⁴ mostly because the natural resources most sought after at the time – seals, walrus, gold and furs – could be procured elsewhere in relatively more accessible regions of Alaska. By century's end, fur traders began establishing trading posts along the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers and Moravian and Jesuit missionaries were travelling to and soon living in native settlements, establishing a permanent presence on Native lands and in Native lives.

4. The people of the Y-K Delta had long sustained ties through trade and warfare with other indigenous peoples in Alaska. There is little evidence that Russian colonists had much direct contact with peoples of the Y-K Delta, particularly with those villages on the shores of the Bering Sea.

Some of the changes introduced – trapping for cash or barter alongside of the introduction of the small engine, sugar, white flour, alcohol and tobacco – increased their dependence on a cash economy (Napoleon 1996). Yet, they were drawn into a cash economy, only partially and sporadically, which created both a dependence on outside resources that could never adequately fulfil their ability to meet their daily needs for social reproduction, while simultaneously precluding most alternatives. Moreover it altered the connections between them. Gerald Sider in his account of changing economic relations among people in the hinterlands of Labrador illustrates how ‘the tensions produced between autonomy of work processes and the imposed constraints to produce under merchant capital’ reworked positions of power and authority, as ‘traditional’ leaders coordinated the relations of their production and social reproduction in new and often deleterious ways (1986, p. 36).

It was not until the late 19th century, with the arrival of outsiders on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, that dramatic changes took place in the daily lives of Yup’ik people; the resettlement of seasonally nomadic people into settled villages changed the way they practiced subsistence and their relationships with each other. It reworked kin and gender relations as men were encouraged to move out of the men’s houses (*kasim* or *quigiq*) into nuclear family structures, changing the balance of power and authority between and among men and women and between the young and old. Environmentally, people moved out of their semi-subterranean dwellings into housing above ground that were structurally, socially and economically inadequate. The vast tundra, the site where meaningful social relations had been produced became a space of their confinement. Yup’iks began to live between two cultures – one slowly being hollowed out and the other, in which they took their place as marginalized people, as Western education, Western medicine and Christianity disrupted the meaning of their lives.

With the crash of the fur trade in the 1930s Yup’iks by necessity were thrown back onto their own resources to survive,⁵ but in a context where everything had changed. Both before and after the collapse of the fur trade a succession of episodic epidemics – small pox, measles and influenza – occurred, which together left Native groups decimated, physically, socially and economically (Napoleon 1996). In many cases whole kin groups perished and in others the sole survivors were young adults. Subsequently, most Yup’iks were increasingly being lured in from the tundra – although often under duress – with the assistance offered by missionaries; schools for their children⁶ and Western medical care that seemed all the more necessary as the power and legitimacy of the shamans had waned in the face of such disease and death. The long, slow death march from tuberculosis and other infectious diseases for massive numbers of people in the ensuing decades was simply another iteration of their dispossession and dislocation from

5. Men also began to go work in the fish canneries and crew on commercial fishing boats on Bristol Bay. Yet in many cases, the owners preferred migrant laborers to Alaska’s indigenous peoples (Haycock 2002).

6. Parents were often threatened that if they did not enroll their children at school the authorities would revoke their rights of custody.

each other and the landscape of their lives, as their social and economic fabric was shredded.

Today the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta is home to some 25,000 Yup'ik people living in fifty-six small, geographically isolated villages. The largest village has an estimated population of 1,200 people and the smallest 100. The Yup'ik people make up the largest population of all indigenous groups in Alaska, yet the Delta remains the poorest region. For many in Yup'ik communities the social effects of poverty and trauma circumscribe their everyday lives. The deteriorating conditions of rural wellbeing have left many village members with a day to day existence best characterized by its instability. Yup'ik peoples in this region have the highest rates of unemployment and underemployment in Alaska – by some estimates over 75% of the active workforce is without waged employment as there are only a handful of regularly paying jobs in each village. More than half of the population live below the official poverty line. Most people rely on a mix of intermittent low-wage jobs and the state welfare system for cash to survive. And even these meagre sums are rhetorically denied them as Yup'iks are often derided in public discourse for their imputed laziness and 'cultural' backwardness.

Confined in their everyday lives to specific parcels of lands, further restricted by state-imposed hunting and fishing regulations, most people do continue to practice some degree of subsistence, but now from a sedentary existence. They go by boat, four-wheeler, or snow machine to hunt, fish or collect berries and grasses, food items crucial to their social ties and social identities. Yet, this too is becoming prohibitive as gas for their vehicles costs well over \$7 a gallon. Increasingly, even as their dietary mainstay remains their subsistence foods of fish, fowl and game, the local village store has become essential to survival. Yet, it is filled with mostly toxic substances – frozen fast food, soda and candy – that are literally killing them, albeit slowly, as hitherto unknown rates of cardiac disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer has soared over the past half-century. Most village people live in substandard, overcrowded housing, and even newly-constructed houses are inadequately designed for the sub-Arctic climate of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Moreover, there is simply not enough housing for all village residents and many households provide shelter to multiple kin. Many families lack even the most basic of resources; running water, access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Among those villages where a sanitation infrastructure does exist, many communities and households do not have the monetary resources to keep them operating adequately (Eichelberger 2011).

Yup'ik peoples too, have some of the highest rates of suicide, alcohol abuse, violent deaths, domestic violence and sexual assault in the state. Suicides among Alaska Natives alone rose over 500% between the mid 1960s and the mid 1990s. According to the State-wide Suicide Prevention Council, Native populations in western Alaska continue to bear the brunt of Alaska's suicides in per capita comparisons. While Alaska Natives make up less than one-fifth of the state's population, they account for more than a third of the state's suicides (Perkins 2006). Between 2004-2008, for example, the Wade Hampton census region, which en-

compasses part of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, had the highest suicide rate in the state (AK Bureau of Vital Statistics 2011).⁷

Yet, the chaos produced by economic and social policies and practices is mostly silenced by a rendering of history that is quite sanitized. Some in the dominant culture may lament the passing of a 'primitive' way of life, but cling to the notion that this is 'progress.' Such sentiments, however, not only fail to account for – and hold accountable those responsible for – the distress, disruption and destruction of Yup'ik lives, but actually contribute to the normalization of such violence. If one looks closely at the cluster of social and behavioural problems that plague many Yup'ik peoples today one finds that they mirror the very same types of symptoms that have come to define post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but this Yup'ik trauma is far from over; it is as ongoing as it is relentless. Today more than three generations of Yup'ik people are in the throes of distress as a result of the violence and trauma of an imposed capitalist modernity that has rendered them and their culture superfluous and disposable (Bauman 2004). This violence strikes precisely at the very essence of their being. It utilizes a destructive ideology of their imputed inferiority combined with an economic system that undermines their collective social ties, ties that remain crucial to their wellbeing as a people.

Although community spaces and kin relations are at one level fraught with contradictions, these social webs continue to be crucial for Yup'ik struggles for survival, giving vitality and a sense of dignity to individuals, kin and community members. At issue today are the intensifying violent social relations that undergird neoliberal capitalism, and that include the necessary breaking apart of the bonds of being human, our relations with each other. And for Yup'iks that includes a deeply-felt sense of relational ties to the natural world (Fienup-Riordan 1990). What is being undermined are the very places and spaces in which people are a little better able to withstand the blows and counterblows of capitalism and its attendant suffering.

Creating a Future in the Context of an Honoured Past and Intensifying Insecurity

Over the past several years I have interviewed Yup'ik men who have participated in war, from Vietnam to Desert Storm to the 'Global War on Terror.' The majority of them said that one of their major reasons for enlisting in the US military, whether in active duty service or the Alaska National Guard, was to follow in the footsteps of their grandfathers who had served in the Territorial Guard. This tradition has continued over the subsequent generations as fathers, uncles, and older brothers too, have participated in the military, mostly in the Alaska National Guard, whose mission was until 2004 confined within Alaska's borders.

The Territorial Guard was formed under the auspices of the US military during World War II, prior to Alaska statehood and prior to Native Alaskans being given the right to vote, even though they were considered US citizens. These

7. See Wexler 2006 for an insightful discussion on Alaska Native youth suicide.

units were comprised of local men who acted as scouts along the western coastline of Alaska, after the Japanese occupation of the Aleutian chain. Their service was not formally and officially recognized by the State of Alaska until 2006.

By the 1950s the local National Guard had taken on a visible materiality as Guard buildings sprang up in most communities, where men would meet monthly to complete their formal service obligations. These spaces, too, provided a sanctioned site for men's communal gatherings, replacing in part the by then deprecated role of men's houses, and thus giving men a place where they could experience a modicum of public respect in community life under their new social arrangements (Chance 1990). The creation of a local National Guard and lay deacons of the Catholic Church were two imposed sites of legitimated authority and power for men, however limited. Today most of these village National Guard buildings stand idle, as non-deployed troops meet their training obligations away from the villages, in Bethel, Fairbanks or Anchorage.

Serving in the American military has long been a point of pride for many families, as the photographs of family members in dress uniform displayed prominently on walls in most homes attest. Moreover, military service linked to grandfathers, fathers and uncles viz. the Territorial Guard honours a way of life rooted in both material and affective relations when elders survived on the tundra in service to their kin and community foremost. Taken together, these webs provide young soldiers with links to their local history and with a modicum of respect in public discourse, as they are for a time also legitimized within the dominant culture by their 'service and sacrifice to the nation' (Pahl 2010).

At the same time most of the young soldiers who recently joined the Alaska National Guard unit headquartered in Bethel told me, too, that they had joined the military for economic incentives; often including the desire to help family members who may be struggling, a mother, a grandmother, an 'auntie,' a sister, a girlfriend. The younger soldiers, mostly in their early twenties, spoke with enthusiasm of the prospects of educational benefits that would be accruing to them after their service; college tuition or technical skills training, and housing loans. Older soldiers, mostly in their mid-late thirties, several of whom are close to completing twenty years in the National Guard, want to transfer educational benefits to their children as well as receive a retirement when they reached sixty years of age. Both young and old alike, however, said that the steady pay check, most particularly combat pay, provided much needed assistance for families often stretched beyond their limits.

Yet, what also became clear when talking with the younger soldiers in particular, was that their excitement about joining the military was also rooted in the sense of possibilities, of hope for a future considerably more than simply putting one foot in front of the other (Berger 2007). But to join the military they must leave their communities and families, much like the poor and marginalized people across the globe who are on the move. As John Berger poignantly notes, 'month by month they leave their homelands. They leave because there is nothing there, except their *everything*, which does not offer enough to feed their children. Once it did. This is the poverty of the new capitalism' (2007, p. 120).

Many spoke about their decision as a spur of the moment one; a recruiter was in town or they encountered the encouragement of a guidance counsellor at school, or simply discovered a desire to see other places. Several, too, mentioned that their parents objected to them joining because of their concern about the ongoing wars. Yet interest is high among the youth. A National Guard recruiter told me there are ten applicants for every two or three recruits accepted. For Yup'ik youth the military is increasingly seen as a survival strategy economically and socially. Thus, however contradictory it may seem, military service holds out the promise of reinvigorating the soldiers' ties to the honourable past of their ancestors and their elders, while simultaneously giving them hope for a future, but as individuals rather than as part of collective social bonds.

War: Coming and Going

The numbers of soldiers drawn from these Alaska Native communities who have deployed to the Middle East war theatre over the course of the past decade are quite small. Yet the percentage of the population who has served in the active duty military and the Alaska National Guard in Iraq and Afghanistan is noteworthy. One local example is illustrative. In 2007 when the Alaska National Guard was deployed to Kuwait it was first time that Guard troops had been sent outside United States borders on a combat mission. The absence of 100 plus soldiers deployed from twenty-five communities across the Y-K Delta placed a strain on the economic and social fabric in the affected villages. In one community of eight hundred people, for example, seven young men were on active duty in the US military and six more were in the National Guard, all of them deployed, mostly to Iraq and Kuwait⁸. In material costs alone, family members struggled with the absence of so many adult males, men who are primarily responsible for day to day survival activities; such as subsistence hunting and fishing and procuring wood and water.

Moreover, upon returning home after a year's absence the soldiers felt 'out of place' in their own households. Family dynamics shifted by necessity, as their wives had assumed power and authority within the household. Several men mentioned that it took months before their children would listen to them as an authority figure or for the resentments and recriminations about their absence to stop reverberating in family struggles. A sense of mistrust of what those left behind had done or not done also caused a certain friction in the initial months of the soldiers' return.

One of the contradictions soldiers face while they are deployed is the liminal space they inhabit between a family they never fully leave behind and a battlefield without clear boundaries. With the new social media of Facebook, Skype, and the Internet, families are in constant contact even while the soldiers are away at war. The frequent communication between them allows, as one soldier put it 'to micro-manage the family from a distance.' And at the same time the soldiers fight in wars that no longer have clearly defined 'frontlines.' With sui-

8. This is over 1.25% of the local population, a percentage that mirrors the overall representation of indigenous peoples in the US military well beyond their demographic of 1% of the population.

cide bombers, IEDs, and where civilians and combatants co-mingle inadvertently, one feels 'safe,' if at all, only within the confines of the compound or encampment. The tensions that arise as a result of these antagonistic pulls leave these men in the throes of constant, albeit low-level stress, which further exacerbates its toll on their well-being and that of their families.

And in more than one case the distress in the family was palpable, like that of one soldier's 13-year old son. According to his mother, both father and son were experiencing nightmares alongside aggression alternating with depression. The youth was receiving some behavioural health assistance, which according to both parents was providing a modicum of relief. Recent research has shown that the family members, including children, of those who are experiencing PTSD can often exhibit what has been called Secondary Traumatic Stress, that is indirect exposure to traumatic events through close contact with someone experiencing primary PTSD.⁹ The father did not think he himself could be helped, but he was anxious about his own health as he wanted to redeploy one more time.

As it came closer to the unit's second deployment, this time to Afghanistan, many wives, children and other family members, although supportive, were reportedly not very enthusiastic. Yet, the vast majority of the men I spoke with expressed not only interest in a redeployment but were quite expressive in their excitement about returning to combat, to a shared sense of a group mission. 'As crazy as it sounds, when I heard that the National Guard unit was deploying to Afghanistan, I wanted to go too' a Desert Storm veteran told me, even as he spoke of his difficulties in readjusting after his own combat experience.

What was striking to me as I spoke with these men was their anticipation of reconnecting with each other, as a group that 'counts on you and you on them,' offsetting in part, perhaps, the aloneness of modern individualism. The opportunity to experience deep, abiding connections with each other is increasingly rare for most ordinary people under conditions of capital relations. And while this sense of Western individualism is not as intensely felt in Alaska Native communities as in dominant American culture, many more now withstand the injustices of daily life in increasing isolation. Their experiences in the military invoke in part a shared past that reinvigorates and gives new meaning to their ties to each other. Many also reflected on the racism and discrimination directed at them from senior officers and non-Native soldiers which, in part they say, was mitigated by a mostly Yup'ik unit. The contradiction is that this sense of dignity and purpose as Yup'ik men is short-lived, as their lives are configured within a matrix of state violence.

Although men sign up for the military as individuals, what is required of them is a transformation of their identity from that of an individual to a member of a fighting team. To be effective combatants, soldiers must overcome the social prohibition of killing. During basic training one of the key objectives is to embed within the soldiers' psyche allegiance to and responsibility for each other, most

9. See for example Nelson and Wright (1996) on the effects on female partners of veterans with PTSD.

especially directed toward one's 'buddy' (Malantes 2011). But the chasm between this sense of camaraderie and belonging and the reality of the ongoing degradation and unspeakable suffering they witness, experience and perhaps cause often leaves soldiers with residual conflicts that may last a lifetime. Many return home alone and in isolation and into a context that one tribal leader characterized to me in 2011 as 'a war situation here at home,' referring to the intensifying social and economic turmoil that so many families and households were experiencing.

Invisible wounds of war

'Dying from the inside out' –
description from a mother reflecting on her son,
an Iraq combat veteran who committed suicide.

Like Wayne, combat veterans and community members I have interviewed, spoke of the difficulties of returning from war. One goes off to war as part of a group yet returns as an individual. The sense of confusion, pain, grief and isolation from others that bears down relentlessly on the psyche and soul of a combat soldier has been well documented in literature, fiction and non-fiction alike.¹⁰ The abuse of alcohol and drugs, legal and illicit, are some of the more ubiquitous ways in which soldiers have sought to numb the pain and confusion they feel. After a year or two, many are able to recover their equilibrium, often with the help of family members (Malantes 2011). But others remain lost over their lifetimes. A number of villagers noted that this had been the case for those who returned from Vietnam, and more recently for those returned from the Middle East war theatre.

Robert Jay Lifton's work on the Vietnam War analyzes one of the profound contradictions that many soldiers confront as they attempt to readjust to civilian life: the psychic numbing they experienced in the face of killing and death on the battlefield alongside lingering doubts about what they have seen or done (1992). Jonathan Shay (1994) argues that the betrayal of 'what's right' by military commanders – that is the very legitimacy of the war itself – underlies the etiology of the PTSD of returned soldiers. And because many soldiers are unable or unwilling to talk, their silence only reinforces their isolation, creating a vicious cycle.

Many US soldiers who return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, like their Vietnam veteran predecessors, have developed crippling psychological problems. Among the most common diagnoses given is PTSD, a cluster of debilitating symptoms including uncontrolled anger, nightmares, and depression. Moreover, many carry with them the dangerous reflexive habits of violence so necessary under combat conditions, but inappropriate and dangerous in their civilian lives and relationships (Coleman 2006; Grossman 1996; Malantes 2011). For example,

10. See for example Tim O'Brien (1973, 1990, 1994), Karl Malantes (2008 and 2011), Camilo Mejia (2007) and Kevin Powers (2012) for recent examples of war experiences and war injuries.

some recent studies have found a correlation between PTSD and interpersonal violence among Vietnam combat veterans, even some twenty five years later (Beckham et al. 1997; Sherman et al. 2006). Not all soldiers turn violent upon returning, but they all must take the brunt of trying to reconnect, to make sense of the moral compromises that combat demands, especially in wars in which there is no defined battlefield and everyone is a potential enemy.¹¹

Stanford University scholars estimate that 40% of soldiers who fought in Iraq will suffer or have suffered from PTSD (Atkinson 2009). Numbers from Afghanistan are predicted to be similar. Researchers found that nearly half of those with PTSD will have suicidal thoughts. Nonetheless, seven out of ten soldiers who suffer from PTSD do not seek treatment.

Suicides of active duty soldiers are now numbered at an all time high, an average of eighteen per day, but the rates for veterans are much harder to determine. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, National Guard troops and reservists in general who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001-2005 made up more than half of the veterans who committed suicide after returning home (Defense Health Board 2007). In the Delta there have been two reported suicides of soldiers returned from the 'Global War on Terror.' Moreover, two of the primary factors that can inhibit veterans from obtaining needed behavioural and mental health services are access to care and willingness to seek care, mostly due to the stigma attached (Tanielian and Jaycox 2008; Schroder 2007).

To date, little ostensibly seems to have been done to address these problems in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta among the various health care agencies whose responsibility it is to make services readily available to assist soldiers in their reintegration (Bryson 2007; Green 2008; Green 2009).¹² And unlike the Vietnam War when veterans' distress was denied by the Department of Veterans Administration (VA), today the VA has recognized it, putting in place efficacious treatment regimes. But it also has a backlog of veterans who may wait up to a year to be deemed eligible for care. Year after year, VA officials promise that the problems of eligibility or disability will be addressed expeditiously. Yet, for a large number of veterans this promise is only partially realized (Kors 2008). In this context the lacklustre performance of the United States Veterans Affairs Administration, the United States Indian Health Service, State of Alaska, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, the Alaska Native Tribal Consortium, and Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation – key institutions responsible for Yup'ik soldiers' well being upon return from combat – to provide substantive assistance to facilitate reintegration is all the more egregious.

Although soldiers may apply for disability and receive some services locally that they are eligible for, most of the frontline care has been assigned to lo-

11. Jonathan Shay (1994) was one of the first to talk about moral injuries – wounds from having to do something, or failed to stop something that violates one's moral code, Shay argues that such acts torture the conscience, and are often expressed as shame, guilt and rage.

12. In an interview with me in 2007, Major General Craig E. Campbell, then Adjutant General of the Alaska National Guard, stated his firm commitment to providing whatever assistance was necessary to returning combat soldiers and their families to aid in their reintegration.

cal women who serve as behavioural health aides in rural communities: those with the least amount of professional training to deal with both emergency and chronic situations that these soldiers and their families face. The other option is to receive psychological help via telemedicine. Thus, one of the few possibilities for those who are in distress is go to the local health clinic to talk with a therapist via video and audio transmission. Both options however leave the soldier with little to hang onto and further burden the kin and communities where these soldiers live. As John Berger has noted despair is the emotion that often follows a sense of betrayal and in this sense US combat soldiers have been betrayed twice – once on the battlefield of America's illegitimate wars and again with an unrealized promise of benefits along with expedient and efficacious care.

Many soldiers, like Wayne, have decided that the path of least resistance is to struggle alone.

Conclusion: On Silence and Survival

In the context of both their disposability and their desire to create a future for themselves, Yup'ik men become soldiers. The hollowing out of the cultural values and material practices that sustained Yup'ik people across generations has foreclosed most other local options for creating a future. Thus, military service becomes a possibility of resistance to their marginalization, as they are readily seduced by and simultaneously alienated from American culture.¹³ To create a future Yup'ik men must do so as individuals within a context of ideal Western masculinity, defined by qualities of aggression, autonomy as individuals, and competitiveness. Yet, these very characteristics are antithetical to Yup'ik values of cooperation, generosity and relational space, where humans are part of, rather than dominate the natural world. These qualities are what for centuries have marked the ideal of male leadership and prowess on the tundra and among kin. Today all youth, and in this case in particular Yup'ik youth, must construct a future mostly circumscribed by racism, inequality and domination, and further reinforced by the relentless glorification of violence and aggression in popular culture. Whether the war on drugs, the war on terror or the war on poor, marginalized people, a social message is powerfully sent that violence as both means and ends is not only inevitable, but justified.

Yet, Yup'ik people have survived despite the systematic attempts to extinguish them. Subsistence food is still shared among them, caring for each other remains a powerful ethic and an allegiance to place and space on the tundra is held dear. People willingly give their time and resources to kin and community. They take pride in the revival of their dances, the stories and myths retold by elders that render history on their own terms and a language that remains vital even among the youngest of generations. Yup'ik struggles

13. See Gill (1997) for a discussion on citizenship and masculinity among indigenous youth in Bolivia. Also Bickford (2003) on the militarization of masculinity in the former German Democratic Republic.

however are centred within a social, economic and political context that continuously undermines their abilities to meet their collective obligations to each other. And while the everyday violence does not touch each individual and to some extent is idiosyncratic even in the cases of those that it does, yet chaos and marked vulnerability do circumscribe the social conditions in which the Yup'ik live. It is from this contradictory space – in which there exists a simultaneous hope of a future and an escape from a present that cannot sustain them – that young Yup'ik men enter into the military, many to combat in the service of 'American interests.'

Wilber Scott, a sociologist and Vietnam veteran, suggests (1993) that one of the most efficacious remedies in helping Vietnam vets return and readapt to civilian life was their involvement in political issues, most especially aggressive political participation in issues and concerns of their group. Perhaps some of the current returned soldiers from the Yukon-Kuskokwin Delta with their reinvigorated ties to one another may find similar spaces of possibility and of resistance, on their own terms within their own communities.

With fierce determination sustained by his dignity and his abiding hope for the young people of his community, a Yup'ik elder commented to me two summers ago, as he spoke about the current circumstances in his village, and the recent suicide of young Marine who was about to be redeployed to Iraq; 'we can still survive, we have already survived so much.'

References

- Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, 2011, *Death Date Leading Causes of Death*, <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/VitalStats/Pages/data>
- Atkinson, M., Guetz, A., Wein, L., 2009, A Dynamic Model for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among U.S. Troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom, *Management Science*, 55(9): 1454-1468.
- Bauman, Z., 1991, *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Bauman, Z., 2004, *Wasted Lives*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Beckham, J., et. al., 1997, Interpersonal Violence and its Correlates in Vietnam Veterans with Chronic Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 53(8): 859-869.
- Berger, J. 2007, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*. Vintage International, New York.
- Biehl, J., 2005, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Abandonment*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Bickford, A., 2003, "The Militarization of Masculinity in the former German Democratic Republic" in Hitgate, P. R., (Ed.) *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*. Praeger/Greenwood, Westport.
- Brown, D., 1970, *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*. Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York.
- Bryson, G., 2007, *The VA's Health Services Non-Existent in the Bush. Far Away: No local access for Native, other Vets in Rural AK*, Anchorage Daily News, December 1: 1.

- Chance, N., 1990, *The Inupiat and Arctic Alaska: An Ethnography of Development*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Chevak Traditional Council, 2001, *Agtuquamavermuit*, Chevak, Alaska.
- Coleman, P., 2006, *Flashback: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Suicide and the Lessons of War*. Beacon Press, Boston.
- Defense Health Board, 2007, *An Achievable Vision: Report of the Department of Defense Health Task Force on Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Defense.
- Diamond, J., 2005, *Collapase: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Penguin, New York.
- Duran, E., 2006, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples*. Teachers College Press, New York.
- Eichelberger, L., 2011, *Lights Out in Alaska*. Submitted in fulfillment of Ph.D School of Anthropology, University of Arizona.
- Fanon, F., 1967, *Black Skin, White Mask*. Grove, New York.
- Fienup-Riordan, A., 1990, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them*. Rutgers University Press, Rutgers.
- Giroux, H., 2013, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting*, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/17647-the-violence-or-organized-forgetting>
- Gramsci, A., 1971, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. International Press, New York.
- Green, L., 2008, A Wink and a Nod: Notes from the Arizona Borderlands, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 32(1-2): 161-167.
- Green, L., 2009, *Coming Home: The Reintegration of Yup'ik Soldiers/Veterans into Their Rural Communities*. National Science Foundation, EGER funded research.
- Green, L., 2011, "The Utter Normalization of Violence: Silence, Memory and Impunity among the Yup'ik People of Southwestern Alaska" in Six-Hohenbalken, M., Weiss, N., (Eds.) *Violence Expressed: An Anthropological Approach*. Ashgate, Surry.
- Green, L., (in preparation), *To Die in the Silence of History: Yup'ik Peoples and the Tuberculosis Epidemics of the Twentieth Century*.
- Gill, L., 1997, Creating Citizens, Making Men: The Military and Masculinity in Bolivia, *Cultural Anthropology*, 12(4): 527-558.
- Grossman, D., 1996, *On Killing: the Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Back Bay Books, Boston.
- Guttmann, M., Lutz, C., 2009, Becoming Monsters in Iraq: Civilian Casualties and PTSD among US Veterans, *Anthropology Now*, 1(1): 12-20.
- Haycock, S., 2002, *Alaska: An American Colony*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Herman, E., Peterson, D., 2012, *Steven Pinker of the Alleged Decline of Violence*, www.dissentvoice.org/2012/steven-pinker, December 5 2012.
- Hobsbawn, E., 1962, *The Age of Revolution*. Vintage, New York.
- Hobsbawn, E., 1975, *The Age of Capital*. Vintage, New York.
- Hobsbawn, E., 1987, *The Age of Empire*. Vintage, New York.
- Hobsbawn, E., 1994, *The Age of Extremes*. Vintage, New York.
- Holm, T., 1996, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

- Jennings, F., 1975, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism and the Cult of Conquest*. Norton, New York.
- Kors, J., 2008, *The VA Continues to Abandon Returning Vets*, The Nation, New York.
- Lifton, R. J., 1973, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*. Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Malantes, K., 2008, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*. Atlantic Monthly Press, New York.
- Malantes, K., 2011, *What it is Like to Go to War*. Atlantic Monthly Press, New York.
- Marston, M., 1969, *Men of the Tundra: Alaska Eskimos at War*. October House, Inc., New York.
- Mejia, C., 2007, *Road from Ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Sergeant Camilo Mejia*. New Press, New York.
- Napoleon, H., 1996, *Yunyaraq: The Way of Being Human*. University of Alaska Fairbanks Press, Fairbanks.
- Nelson, B., Wright, D. W., 1996, Understanding and treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptomts in Female Partners of Veterans with PTSD, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 22(4): 455-467.
- O'Brien, T., 1973, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. Broadway Books, New York.
- O'Brien, T., 1990, *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, New York.
- O'Brien, T., 1994, *In the Lake in the Woods*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, New York.
- Pahl, J., 2010, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*. New York University Press, New York.
- Perkins, R., 2006, *Alaska Suicide Follow-Back Study*, Final Report, Alaska Injury Prevention Center.
- Pinker, S., 2011, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Penguin, New York and London.
- Price, D., 2013, Memory's Half-Life: A Social History of Wiretaps, *Counterpunch*, 20(6): 14.
- Powers, K., 2012, *Yellow Birds*. Little Brown and Company, New York.
- Robinson, G., Lucas, P., 2008, *From Warriors to Soldiers: The History of Native American Service in the United States Military*. IUUniverse, Bloomington.
- Roseberry, W., 1994, "Hegemony and the Language of Contestation" in Joseph, G., Nugent, D., (Eds.) *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*. Duke University Press, Durham.
- Scheper-Hughes, N., Bourgois, P., 2004, "Making Sense of Violence" in Scheper-Hughes, N., Bourgois, P., (Eds.) *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Schroder, W., Davie, R., 2007, *Soldier's Heart*. Praeger Security International, Westport.
- Scott, W., 1993, *The Politics of Readjustment: Vietnam Veterans Since the War*. Aldine Transactions, New York.
- Scotti, M., 2012, *The VA's Shameful Betrayal*, New York Times, www.nytimes.com/2012/05/28/opinion

- Shay, J., 1994, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. Maxwell Macmillan, New York.
- Sherman, M., et al., 2006, Domestic Violence in Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder who seek Couples Therapy, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 32(4): 479-490.
- Sider, G., 1986, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Smith, G., 1997, "Pandora's History: Central Peruvian Peasants and the Recovering of the Past" in Sider, G., Smith, G., (Eds.) *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemoration*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Tanielan, T., Jaycox, L., 2008, *Invisible Wounds: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences and Services to Assist Recovery*. RAND Center for Military Health Policy, San Diego.
- Williams, R., 2012, *Savage Anxieties: The Invention of Western Civilization*. Palgrave MacMillan, New York.
- Wexler, L., 2006, Inupiat Youth Suicide and Culture Loss: Changing Community Conversations, *Social Science and Medicine*, 63: 2938-2948.