

SIKU ALLOOLOO

Caribou People

Tuktu Glow

IT WAS CHRISTMAS BREAK in Yellowknife, and we were celebrating. We were three Inuit women, of three generations: my cousin, whose family had been relocated from our home community of Pond Inlet by the RCMP, was one of the last to attend a residential school; her friend, like my father, was one of the last to be born and raised on the land; and me, one of the first raised outside of Nunavut and not in residential school. Like others, our lives were each threaded with an array of colonial trauma, though that evening all of this was furthest from our minds. For this brief, unexpected moment we transcended everything.

My cousin had lovingly roasted a large, beautiful piece of caribou just for us, so we sat around it with great joy. We cut pieces off with a knife and brought it to our mouths with our fingers. Tuktu was getting harder to come by and this was my first in a long time. I chewed and the meat felt insatiably delicious in my teeth. They clenched and grinded each bite with pleasure as the flavour I was raised on dilated my every cell and brought my whole being forward to intoxicating focus. In a breath of sudden self-consciousness I looked up at the other two women and saw they were already in deep, their eyes downturned and far away as they savoured each mouthful. Without hesitating, I took another large bite. The pull carried us to an innate world. Somewhere primal, dark. Endless. Like a full moon in winter, eternity blowing in the wind across the blackness of the night. An ancient existence. A womb.

When we came back into the room, forty-five minutes had passed. Not a word had been spoken. The meat was all gone. We looked at each other.

“Holy fuck,” my cousin finally said, and we all broke into laughter. “Look at us, three Inuit women, eating tuktu! What our people have eaten

for thousands of years. It's so deep in our DNA that it just took us back."

We were still glowing.

"They were so incredibly tough.... To survive out there on their own. In the freezing cold, with only animal skins and snow houses. Travelling in the dark, no sun for months. Giving birth. Hunting for days, sometimes coming back with nothing.... And her, she was raised like that!" my cousin said, pointing to her friend beside me. "When all the children were being taken away, her grandmother packed her in a qamutiik and took her out into the cold. She built them an igloo and they lived there together for as long as they could, until eventually they had to go back. Isn't that amazing?"

Memory of Stars

The enormous Bathurst caribou herd used to pass by my hometown of Yellowknife in the early winter when I was growing up. I remember my mom taking my little brother and me out to see them in 1992, just after she and our father split up. I was six-years-old, my little brother was not yet four. She was a newly single mother of four and our rock. It seemed at that time our world would be forever cast in grey, punctuated by incomprehensible heartache and confusion. *How was it possible to lose half of ourselves?* Something inside I wasn't aware of before felt exposed in its brokenness. The form I had been, that contained me, now a mess of shattered pieces. I wondered how it was possible to exist. *Was this really our life now, forever?*

She told us we were going to see something amazing as she drove out along the Ingraham Trail, a road we knew well and were fond of, as it was the way to our cabin. Halfway there, we came upon several vehicles parked along the side of the road, at Pontoon Lake. She pulled over into an open spot and turned off the ignition. We stepped out onto the ground, a bit bewildered. We had never stopped here before or seen so many people along this quiet dirt road. Rifles fired in the distance, the sharp cracks slightly dulled and resounding across the treetops below us. The air was charged with excitement, glimmering on the faces of people buzzing by.

The three of us walked down from the road into the bush, through fresh fallen snow. We kept forward through the pines, birch, and willows. Not too long and we could see through the trees, a few caribou on the edge of the clearing. Like magic. We continued on and our eyes filled with even wider amazement as we made our way to the shore. We nestled beneath the trees and watched in awe as hundreds of thousands of caribou crossed the frozen lake, just metres before us. A multitude of brown, grey, and white walking steadily ahead, their breath hanging in

the air in frozen clouds, just like ours. I remember the snow on the lake, padded down by millions of hoof prints, and how special it felt to be so close to them, the three of us, like some miraculous dream. They remained calm and unhurried despite the presence of all who had come to see or hunt them. To this day, I have never seen anything so majestic.

They say the Bathurst herd was 350,000 strong that year. Difficult to imagine now, twenty-four years on, when they are down to a mere 15,000.

Years later, after our mother's death, my little brother and I were adopted into an extended Dene family. I learned that the Dené Sų́łné word for barrenland caribou (of which the Bathurst is one herd) is eththén. It is the same word for "star," and as my stepfather put it, "perhaps because there were so many." That is exactly how it was that day, like watching a million ancient beings in the snow, their light spanning across an unfathomable distance.

"We Sew It Up"

People often speak of the north as a place of extremes and harsh realities: long, frozen winters, endless summer daylight, constant winter darkness, vast and all but uninhabited wilderness. As a northerner rooted in both Inuit and Dene cultures, the harshest extreme to me is how rapidly and far reaching colonialism has set into our world.

Within the span of two lifetimes, my parents' and grandparents' generations have seen drastic changes both in our ways of life and our homelands. My Inuit grandparents went from freely travelling the land as our ancestors had always done to living in a permanent community. The RCMP forced Inuit into settlements in the 1950s in order to bring us under government control. They slaughtered our sled dogs so we were immobile and also split entire family groups apart, scattering us across different communities.

My father was born in a sod house in 1949 and was raised to travel the land and provide for his family from a very young age. He can navigate using constellations and landmarks, make traditional tools, build shelter in any season, attend to injuries, and his intimate knowledge of our world makes him a very skilled hunter on both the land and the sea. At the age of eight years old, he was able to go out for the day alone and come back with a seal to feed the family. At eight years old is also when he was taken from his parents and sent to residential school thousands of kilometres away, which he was lucky to have survived.

He was one of tens of thousands of children stolen from every Indigenous nation across the country by the Canadian government and forced into assimilation schools. They knew our entire societies

stem from the land, which meant we would never give it up and that we would always protect it. So for 150 years Canada stole all of our children—our heart, indeed our future—and sought to break them of our ways and collapse our societies in the process. Many of these children suffered unthinkable atrocities during their time at these schools, and thousands never made it home to our families. It is a devastating and recent history, with the last schools finally closing in 1996, and Indigenous peoples throughout the country are still working through the debilitating repercussions that persist in our lives.

The desire to dominate and exploit peoples and lands in order to create wealth—this is the driving force of colonialism and also the lifeblood of this country. If there is any hope of recuperating a sense of humanity, or of surviving the climate crisis that is rapidly intensifying throughout the world, we need to engage with the reality of everything we are up against. The stakes are too high.

It is no exaggeration to say that Canada is built on racism, genocide, violence, and theft. The founding and daily maintenance of this colony depends expressly on the domination of Indigenous peoples through the illegal seizure and occupation of our territories, colonial laws and policies, police brutality, excessive incarceration, economic marginalization, gender violence, child apprehension, and the suppression of our governance systems, spiritual practices, and ancestral ways of life—all of which remain deeply rooted in our lands.

Canada is sustained by a resource-based economy—if there is any doubt as to the racism and brutality this necessitates every day, just consider: where do the resources come from and how are they obtained—are they not violently torn from the earth? And are those sites of extraction not integral parts of Indigenous homelands or crucial to animal and plant life? Why is it that most Indigenous peoples are living in extremely impoverished conditions on reserves, in remote communities, and in urban centres whereas the resources stripped from our lands generate massive amounts of wealth for governments and corporations? Is this country not home to one of the biggest and most destructive industrial operations on the planet? How many of our territories and water systems have been contaminated by hydroelectric dams, oil, gas, and toxic waste and how many lives are being lost to new cancers as a result every year? How many community members have been harmed or arrested for protecting their homelands from pipelines and mining operations? What recourse do we have to the distinct rise in gender violence and narcotics abuse that come with intensified mining in our communities?

Treaties 8 and 11 grant permission for settlers to coexist on our lands and were contingent upon certain terms, including mutual autonomy,

self-governance, and the provision of health care—but how many of our men, women, elders, and youth continually suffer violence at the hands of police officers or are denied adequate care by health providers?

These treaties were also meant to ensure that Indigenous ways of life would continue despite the presence of settlers—meaning that all of the elements that sustain life on the land would remain protected—so that our people could continue to live according to our ancestral ways forever.

Due to ongoing colonial policies, industrial exploitation, and now climate change, places where we used to be able to harvest food or medicines, drink the water, and inhabit alongside other forms of life are being turned into wastelands.

My hometown of Yellowknife was built for gold mining in 1934 and became home to one of the richest gold mines in Canadian history. Giant Mine sits on the shore of Great Slave Lake, one of the largest freshwater sources on the planet. Though the mine closed in 2004 its toxic repercussions will last forever: the deteriorating site rests upon 237,000 tonnes of arsenic trioxide, a lethal byproduct of gold mining that is impossible to remediate or prevent from leaking into the surrounding lakes and atmosphere, which it is doing at a disturbing rate. A study released in April 2016 showed mercury and arsenic levels to be dangerously high in lakes within a twenty-five-kilometre radius of Giant Mine: in some cases, over thirteen times the limit for drinking water and twenty-seven times the level deemed adequate for aquatic life.

Canadians tend to romanticize the northern town for its remnants of a frontier history forged by sweat and gold as well as for its supposed “untouched, pristine wilderness”—but the truth is we can no longer drink the water or eat the fish in that area and now have to travel long distances to harvest foods and medicines. They say Giant Mine rests upon enough arsenic to kill the entire planet twice over—and though there have been several attempts over the years to contain the toxic waste, there has never been an adequate plan to protect the environment from contamination. For me, this is the clearest indication of western society’s single-minded focus on obtaining wealth at any expense. There is no contingency plan or thought of the future or respect for any form of life. The only drive is money—and this is true of any mining operation in the country, whether diamonds or oil and gas or gold.

Today, the beautiful, vast, wild landscape of Denendeh is riddled with large-scale mining operations that have destroyed numerous lakes and river ecosystems, as well as the migration and calving grounds of caribou—an essential source of sustenance for both Inuit and Dene alike since time immemorial. We are caribou people, and

the widespread decline of this ancestral relation is a source of deepening loss across the north.

There are many stories of their generosity and benevolence, how they offer themselves in times of need. Dene and Inuit peoples would not exist without the caribou: its hide has given us warmth and protection from the cold, its meat our main source of nourishment, its bones and antlers our tools, its skin stretched on drums that carry our songs and spiritual connection. It was the caribou who taught us how to honour our kinship and practise ways that sustain us both. A growing anxiety throughout our communities is: *What happens when there are no more caribou? Are we still caribou people? If we can no longer practise our culture in all of the ways that depend on the caribou, are we still Dene or Inuit?*

Protecting the caribou was once a major rallying point for northerners. It's what galvanized us to stand strong against the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline and assimilative government policies in the 1970s and also work toward self-determination. Since then both the caribou population and our anticolonial nerve have been in steep decline. We have veered quite far from the unified vision we once fought hard for to ensure that our homelands would remain grounded in Indigenous principles, values, and ways of life well into the future.

Last spring, I spent some time with a very knowledgeable and beloved elder, Ethel Lamothe. We were at Dechinta Bush University—a northern organization based outside of Yellowknife that delivers Indigenous education on the land and one of the saving graces in my own educational journey. I was helping her scrape her moose hide in preparation for tanning, and as our hands worked we talked about womanhood, spirituality, and bush medicines. She told me about the work she and others did in previous decades to advance decolonization, social transformation, and healing in Denendeh, and also shared insight about the challenges. I had been troubled lately about the gap between elders and young people, the cultural inheritance being lost, the growing alienation I see in current generations, and the complexity of overcoming all these challenges when we are starting from such fragmentation. At one point Ethel stopped and said, "Our society is full of holes now, like the ones in this hide. So we have to sew them up. Where there's a hole there instead of a mother or a father, an aunty or grandparent steps in to raise the kids. We have holes in our spirituality and culture, how we relate to each other and deal with things, so we have to find ways to re-learn that. You know, we lost some of our own ceremonies and ways of praying but we can learn from other cultures who still have it. You don't have any grandmothers to teach what you need to know as a woman so you adopt a new grandmother who can teach you. So we do it like that. We sew it up."

The Elders Kept Heart

In 2015, I led a project with elders and youth on the land near Fort Smith to study how climate change impacts ancestral foods and ways of life. The changes are drastic: massive declines in animal and plant populations, erratic weather, disrupted seasonal patterns, diminishing quality of snow and ice, disappearing sources of fresh water. The land is growing more dangerous to travel. People are having to go farther to search for food, medicine, and materials, and everything is less abundant. Etthèn, for example, have not passed through this territory in over fifty years.

It is very difficult to face the extent of these changes, to realize how much everything our cultures depend on is bearing the brunt of climate change and industrial development, the same way we as Indigenous peoples are bearing the brunt of colonialism in our everyday lives. It was especially difficult for the youth, whose entry point to their culture and territory came with the disappointment of realizing how much is being lost. The elders kept heart. They stressed the importance of survival skills, encouraging us to become self-sufficient and adaptive on the land—the same way our peoples have always had to be. They said that though we are unable to stop the changes, we must continue on and not be afraid.

Beautiful, wise Ethel also taught me to cut upwards when harvesting plants for medicine. “Because life goes *up!*” The same way my brothers honour their kill by setting its ears in the direction it was headed so its spirit can go forward. Everything is done with respect to the natural flow and continuation of life, even when taking life, because we exist as a continuum. The essence that we come from will always carry through us, and beyond us.

Though the birds no longer black out the sky as they migrate and the fish no longer teem and the river no longer breaks up in thunderous crash of six-foot-thick sheets of ice, the elders remain in close connection to the land as it is now; they continue to live in our ways despite unprecedented changes and endlessly destructive forces. They lead us younger ones to fortify from within, from the richness our cultures, from the sources that strengthen, connect, heal, and affirm. An understanding of how potent our lifeways remain begins to emerge—lifeways meaning ways of life we belong to and also ways that give life. Those old ones knew it was always about both.

So when we experience something that breaks through the haze, like eating caribou meat or spending time on the land, we meet a profound and undeniable truth: that our ancestral connection is alive, embodied, and easily reawakened.