

Materiality vs. Spirituality:
Eskimo Cultural Suicide in Nunavut
With No Word or Concept for Future

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At the end of September 2006 I visited Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, the North Pole. The purpose of my visit was to film Inuit (later to be called Eskimo) culture in situ. I was focusing on the Inuktitut language, wishing to find examples of the writing to include in my film about landscape, alphabet, culture and neurophysiology, *Reading the Landscape*. Before I left for the North Pole, I could not imagine how profoundly this trip would change my life.



Cambridge Bay, 500 miles north of Arctic Circle (North Pole)

Photo: Gilah Yelin Hirsch

It took two days to get there: Los Angeles to Salt Lake, Utah, to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. Each successive flight was in an increasingly smaller plane, and the last two were individually owned and operated. The cost was exponentially higher than anywhere else I had traveled in the world –over US \$4000. The last plane, from Yellowknife to Cambridge Bay, was delayed by a day because of stormy weather. I was surprised to discover that the final plane was more disc-like than cylindrical, designed specifically to fly over the Arctic Circle. Eskimos on both sides of me in the little roundish plane told me on take-off, our heads would “explode” when we crossed the Arctic Circle. We all suffered excruciating head pain for several minutes, which then subsided as we entered another magnetic field.

I was hosted by the elder Bill Lyall, one of the founders of Nunavut, and certainly the man in charge of the hamlet of Cambridge Bay, 500 miles north of the Arctic Circle, at the southeast shore of Victoria Island, Nunavut. Bill picked me up at the tiny Kugluktuk airport, seemingly randomly set on the tundra. Eskimos crammed the small space thrilled to see their arriving friends and relatives, all carrying large packages of food and clothing as well as incongruous leafy plants and birds in cages that they had placed beneath their airplane seats.

Bill drove an enormous pickup with wheels as high as a small house to the only hotel in town five minutes away. He had arranged for me to stay in the Arctic Hotel, a two storey Quonset metal building at the cost \$200/night for a room that made Motel 6 look like the Ritz. Food at the hotel restaurant (the only public eating place in town) was equally expensive –two eggs \$12. Fruits or vegetables were scarce but muskox was cheap and plentiful and a bit gamier than the yak I had eaten in Tibet. Arctic Char (fish) was the alternative option.

This remote enclave was built in 1957 when the US and Canadian Governments established the DEW Line to help protect against the feared Russian missiles allegedly targeting the west during the Cold War. Although the original DEW Line was decommissioned in 1997, it was recommissioned after 9/11. The immense white globes headquartering the military establishment stand like Buckminster Fuller snow domes on

the infinite flat tundra, visible everywhere, a short walk from “downtown” Cambridge Bay. The DEW Lines themselves are clear on the tundra when not buried in snow.

Other than government, corporate officials as well as intermittent traders, foreign visitors were discouraged and rare. My life-long friend in the Canadian government, the late Charles Dalfen, had arranged my trip with Bill Lyall as these two activists had collaborated on behalf of the Nunavut people during Bill’s many trips to Ottawa. Several visits had been planned and cancelled until I finally was given a short spate of days in September.



Bill Lyall in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, September 2006

photo: Gilah Yelin Hirsch

Bill was anything but welcoming when I arrived.

It was clear that Bill was suspicious of me. I was sure he was thinking: who was this woman who came to the top of the world alone, where did she think she was going when she arrived in that lightweight, red windbreaker that wouldn’t even keep the cold out in Edmonton?

Bill had been informed several times over a period of 5 months exactly what I was after, and I had agreed to arrive at a time that was convenient for him as he travels consistently around Nunavut. When Bill dropped me at the hotel, he told me to visit him at the Co-op

after I settled in. Faced with a sudden blizzard I had immediately changed into my polar parka as soon as I got to the Arctic Lodge and was deeply wrapped in Arctic gear when I visited Bill at the Co-op as requested two hours later. Sean, the Caucasian man from Prince Edward Island hired to run the Arctic Lodge, had been impressed that Bill brought me in. He told me that Bill was the most important man in Cambridge Bay and in Nunavut, and had, among many achievements, founded the Co-op, the first all-purpose establishment.

The Co-op was not quite five minutes walk from the hotel. Through the blinding blizzard I could make out the red STOP sign in English and Inuktitut. Parkas and winter gear take up a good third of the Co-op, household needs another, canned and frozen food, the rest. A few sorry samples of produce were to be found in the refrigerated section of the food corner, but musk ox meat patties and Arctic Char seemed the most prevalent, either fresh or frozen.

When I was ushered into Bill's simple office, he eyed my gear with approval and greeted me with a little less animosity. I realized that I was being tested. He began the brief conversation by saying forcefully, "I cannot help you. If people see me with you, they will think that I am getting something out of this for myself. I have to live here!"

Stunned and disappointed, I replied that I understood his position, not to worry about me; I had been all over the world alone and had always managed to find what I needed.

I left and walked through the blizzard stopping in at all public buildings to ask about the language and alphabet. The illustrated signs and slogans I saw everywhere, particularly in the school halls, such as the "Eight Values", moved me: Apologize, Helping, Teamwork, Consensus, Conservation, Acceptance, Unity, Resourcefulness; and signs that read, "You are Loved", and "Respect Our Elders" – written in Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, (both dialects of Inuktitut, the most widely spoken Eskimo languages in Nunavut), as well as English.

I ate in the small dining room of the Arctic Lodge, the lone restaurant and only social venue in town. Local kids, sometimes carrying toddler siblings on their backs, always having several children in tow, were there whenever the dining room was open, buying

sweets, and gossiping about the adults present and laughing hysterically. Several of the tables were occupied by obviously dating couples, the women astonishingly chic – three inch heels and deep décolleté at the North Pole, the men suave and trying to impress, both clearly nervous.

The next morning there was a telephone message at the hotel that Bill wanted to see me at the Co-op.

When I visited Bill the second time, he already knew that I had talked with everyone in town who would speak with me. I was gathering materials that I needed despite Bill's active avoidance of me, and the downright hostility of the principals of the elementary and high school. He also knew that I had visited the Kitikmeot Heritage Society and Cultural Center of the Library, which shared the building with the high school. Emily Angulalik, the librarian, and by training a linguist, was very interested in my project and said she would help me. She agreed to translate, write and record into Inuktitut the 25 English words I had given her (for a fee \$150 cash), and suggested I go see various people at the several campuses - small metal buildings of Arctic College.

"I can't help you", Bill began as he had on day one, "but since you did travel this long way to get here, I'll drive you out on the tundra early Saturday morning for an hour and show you the muskoxen."

"Are you sure you can spare the time and possibly create a problem for yourself?" I asked genuinely worried that this could jeopardize his standing in the community.

"Just one hour very early. People won't be out and about yet".

I began to listen for his colloquialisms.

While I was at the Co-op, a body bag with a young male suicide was brought in the back.

I spent the next two days walking all over town. At the height of the short summer (late August, early September) when the daily temperature averages around 50F (10C), the population of greater Cambridge Bay, which includes hundreds of miles, reaches 1300. The population shrinks to diehards in the dark, 60 below Fahrenheit winter, since those who can leave for the winter, crews of supply ships, and other seasonal workers are gone.

I traversed the unpaved, heavily pot-holed Main Street, the side “streets” away from the center of town, as well as the shoreline around the town at various times. A large supply ship was anchored in the harbor. The crew ate in the dining room of the Arctic Lodge when I did. They were obviously interested in the presence of a new female in town.

The following very early Saturday morning, Bill Lyall drove me out onto the endless flat tundra to experience the beauty of the landscape, to see the odd outcroppings - the only low, long legendary, anthropomorphic hilly parts of the land in hundreds of miles. These hills are said to be the mythic bodies of the family of giant-gods who walked that territory eons ago and are renowned for having invented death. Bill showed me the *Inukshuks*, traditional piled stone markers in the form of humans. Tribal hunters would read the clues intrinsic in the construction - where the caribou were heading, where the fish were plentiful. He showed me the modern Christian graveyard - stark, small wooden crosses in orderly rows, just behind the town, facing the bay of the Arctic Ocean.

Bill drove to the herd of muskoxen (which I ate at breakfast and dinner). He suggested we drive close and hide behind the open truck door, which we did. When I looked at those huge humped landscape-like animals, covered with cayenne colored fur and lavish tobacco-golden manes, I remarked to my guide, “They remind me of camels”. “What’s a camel?” the Eskimo asked.

I told him about the “ships of the desert” and the yaks of Tibet, and orangutans I had lived with in Sumatra. He became fascinated, wanted to learn more about the world. In a genuine gesture of unmitigated warmth and friendship, looking for common experience, he asked me “Where were you on 9/11?” We recounted our stories bridging worlds that had just before seemed unbridgeable. We were both humans who had shared and survived a global calamity.

Bill told me he had knocked on my hotel room door at 11:30 the night before to urge me to see a particularly exquisite display of Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis). He was impressed when I told him I had been out there, lying bundled on the tundra, hypnotized by the beauty until two in the morning.

It was Bill who exhorted me not to use the word Inuit that I had been schooled to use as politically correct. He explained that Inuit means “humankind” in Inuktitut, while Eskimo means the people who eat raw meat, and “this is who we are”. He told me that due to the extreme hardships of the climate and austerity of life, hardly anyone comes that far north and white people are definitely not welcome. White hunters arrive to kill the sacred animals for trophies. Mining for diamonds and other minerals destroys the land. Oil is pillaged from the delicate tundra.

The furtive early morning trip to the tundra was supposed to last only one hour. However, as Bill learned more and more about my life and mission to preserve cultures worldwide, he warmed to me, told me his own story and the one hour extended to six.

Bill related the terrible history of the destruction of his people that happened so quickly within his generation. The first missionaries to reach Cambridge Bay were the Anglicans in 1932. Now, of the twenty or so buildings on “Main Street”, seven are Christian churches. The largest, pretty white with red trim Anglican Church, with service in Inuktitut, is attended only by the few remaining elders. Most popular is the Pentecostal Church, although in one of the smallest houses in town.

Missionaries had kidnapped Bill, when he was a very young child. Hundreds of children had been taken to residential schools as far away as the northern United States, brain washed, robbed of their names, forbidden to use their language, practice their culture, abused physically, sexually, emotionally, not educated, and cut loose at fourteen with no education, trade or identity. It was only in 1998 that this practice was outlawed in Canada. Bill escaped the school in Wyoming and managed to get training as a mechanic. He followed the jobs north, until he heard of the DEW line needing mechanics. He reached Cambridge Bay, not knowing that this was his home, but soon became aware that like a homing pigeon, he had returned to the place of his birth. He became an activist, and in 1997 became one of the founders of the Eskimo homeland, Nunavut, set apart from the Northwest Territories in the northernmost areas of the Canadian Arctic.

It was also from Bill that I first learned that one or more males in each family commits suicide by the time they are twenty, and of the remaining men, most are suicides or

homicides by the time they are forty. The day before I arrived, grandmothers had arranged a highly publicized “Celebration of Life” festival trying to give Eskimos a reason to live, rather than to commit suicide. Eskimo women will not stay with Eskimo men because they are so abusive and violent, and prefer to be alone or hook up temporarily with white men doing stints in the military or those who work on supply ships that stop in Cambridge Bay the few months that weather permits. Most children are of mixed parentage, and are raised by single mothers or grandmothers.

In another of my suddenly invited visits to Bill at the Co-op, he told me that I must visit an elder, but reiterated “I cannot help you” in setting up such a visit. “Go to the Anglican Church on Sunday...that’s where the elders go,” he exhorted. “They may invite you for tea...”

On Sunday I visited each church on my way to the picturesque Anglican Church at the end of Main Street, the same denomination that had kidnapped Bill and so many others. The loud singing that spilled out of the tiny Pentecostal Evangelical church lured me and I entered into the extremely crowded joyous environment. The Eskimo pastor sang and played guitar, while at the side of the pews, a piano and drum set completed the band. The congregation was singing, praying, dancing, rolling on the floor, testifying, crying, speaking in tongues – the only emotion I had seen displayed in Cambridge Bay. Eskimo culture shows only deadpan expression. To learn Inuktitut one must place a pencil between one’s teeth to practice not to open one’s mouth as one breath too long could kill in extreme cold. But here, I witnessed a no-holds-barred, frenzied church experience rivaled only by a similar experience in Compton or Watts, African American cities in Southern California.

A couple of feet away across the unpaved road I entered the Anglican Church, distinguished by its austere yet classic English wood architecture. Twelve elders snored loudly in the front pews as a female lay priest quietly intoned the service in almost silent monotone Inuktitut. At intervals I could hear the rapturous Pentecostals screaming and singing and ecstatically praising Jesus through the clapboard walls. Despite the lifelessness of the service, I was impressed by the beauty and astonishing subject matter of the stained glass windows built in all around the exterior walls, as well as the felt

murals above the altar. Eskimo imagery – parka clad people (almost all female) on the ice, in front of igloos, with Caucasian Jesus in the sky.



Photo: Gilah Yelin Hirsch

I *was* invited to tea by the welcoming lay pastor after the service. I asked permission to photograph the church windows and the murals - the only art of any sort I had seen in Cambridge Bay. Culture-specific and vivid in color, I imagined how the images must have captured the earliest congregants. I joined the elders who sat close together on old couches and chairs in a small low, room at the front of the church. While the men mostly wore commercially made parkas, the women were dressed in their striking handmade, often embroidered parkas, topped by “sunbursts” of many kinds of fur. I wished I could photograph them right there. However, sensing the hostility towards me as soon as I got to Cambridge Bay, I realized that I had to scotch my film plans and only surreptitiously would I take stills with my smallest camera hidden in my glove – and only then from an unseen position. One evening when I walked about town, thinking that I was invisible in the dark, I photographed Eskimo teenagers on their dune buggies getting drunk and stoned outside the smoke shack that also rents videos. The boys saw me and hurled extreme invectives my way. Ultimately they were right, I thought. On another evening I had surreptitiously photographed the big event of the week – teenage boys on speeding skidoos skimming across a lake at the edge of town. If they managed to cross the lake they were heroes. If not, they slid into the icy waters and tried to retrieve the sinking skidoos. Many drowned, another form of suicide.

The elders, the pastor and I drank tea and ate *mannok*, (fried bread) in the warmed room. Although we examined each other, we could not converse, as we were languages apart. I knew they were talking about my red hair, freckled white skin, a woman so far north, alone. I hankered to photograph the compelling elder woman in her handsome red embroidered parka and the little girl in her blue one, sitting side by side facing me. I restrained my desire and trained my eyes into memory.

After church I stopped in at the Cultural Center to see whether I could pick up the translations that Emily had readied for me.

“I’ve arranged a visit to an elder’s home in ten minutes, at 1 pm”, she reported proudly.

We walked quickly to a Quonset house on another “street”. This was one of a set of houses given by the Canadian government in support of the elders. Maria Kaotalok and her 4-year-old granddaughter, Matok-Kaotalok (called Tracy Ann in school) whom she was raising, occupied half the house. I was delighted that these were the two I had so wished to photograph at the Anglican Church tea. The interview took place in the kitchen/living room.



Maria Kaotalok and her 4-year-old granddaughter, Matok-Kaotalok
Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, September 2006, photo: Gilah Yelin Hirsch

The elder, Maria, and her granddaughter, Matok, were dressed in their parkas in an ultra modern kitchen which had a microwave, electric stove and refrigerator, washer and dryer, dishwasher, blender, toaster-oven and ubiquitous pictures of Jesus on the walls. With Emily as translator to and from Inuktitut, I heard Maria's story. Now 65, the oldest woman in Cambridge Bay, she had been born on a dogsled during a tribal hunt, and had grown up in the traditional nomadic life. I had already been told that babies are born within the roomy parkas while women are riding the dogsleds, the men barely aware that a momentous event is taking place immediately next to them. The infant, who can nurse on demand, is carried in a sling under the parka against the breast of the naked mother who cares for the infants' need always protected beneath the parka. At three months, a different sling is created for the infant to ride the naked back of the mother, and is easily rotated to nurse. At one year old, an additional compartment is created under the back of the parka to allow the baby to still be close on the back of the mother although now they are both clothed lightly. When the baby is two another compartment is sewn into the outside of the parka in the great hood, where the child will ride for several years snuggled deeply inside the hood, close to the mother.

Emily and Maria deepened my education into Eskimo culture launched by Bill Lyall on the tundra. As an ancient matriarchal culture, the grandmother declares when it is time for the six-month ritual hunt. As soon as it is announced, everyone prepares for the long difficult foray onto the tundra. Only one animal is killed to provide food, shelter, and oil for the tribe. The animal is revered, ritually slaughtered, its bones ceremoniously laid out and buried in special formation. There is no waste.

Dogsleds were no longer in use, although there were a few isolated on the fringes of town. Dogs are seen as nuisance in Cambridge Bay the few depressed pet huskies were chained outside houses. These animals of such immense energy, born to work hard, are severely frustrated and easily get into lethal fights. Every child can identify rabies and dogs are shot regularly. Skidoos are the vehicle of choice, as well as off-road "dune buggies", that pollute the pure air with noxious fumes and the pristine environment with screeching noise.

“What about tribal medicine and shamanic rituals”, I asked Maria through Emily. Maria’s eyes brightened then darkened. She related that there used to be many shamans and medicine people. No more. Maria and Emily told that there are still few shamans who are closeted and known only to a handful of elders, because the time is not right, nor are there people well enough equipped emotionally or psychically to carry the knowledge. These secret shamans are containing their knowledge until they find those who are ready to receive it and use it skillfully. There may be only one such secret shaman at any time who is the repository of all esoteric knowledge. Public revelation of the knowledge may take several generations, they both agreed. Each said that she knew at least one shaman in town, but most residents no longer knew them. Western medicine, as western religion, was now needed to deal with the white man’s diseases that the missionaries brought with them. No longer active but sedentary and eating sugars and fats, Eskimos are plagued with Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, AIDS and cancer.

“What about global warming”, I asked. Both women said that it had become much warmer, and that animal cycles were changing as a result of the warmer climate. There used to be many feet of snow on the ground at end of September, but annually less and less. They attributed the change to natural cycles of the earth.

In 1957 Maria’s father heard that workers were needed in Cambridge Bay to build the DEW Line, and he, as other Eskimos, arrived with their families looking for work. Maria married there, had four sons, all of whom had committed suicide young. (Every family story that I heard included youthful suicides.) The daughters-in-law had all gone south as they call it, to Yellowknife, and 2-year-old Matok was left to be raised by her grandmother. When I told the women that Matok means sweet in Hebrew and is often used as a pet name, they both asked what is Hebrew. Jesus spoke Hebrew, I said. They both grinned broadly, and I knew I had been accepted. At the end of the hour-long interview I asked Emily to ask Maria if she had one wish what would it be. Emily told me that it was impossible to translate “wish” as there is no concept or word for wish or future, or anything having to do with the future. There are very many words describing landscape, snow, weather, present situations, but none for future, Emily related. Astonished, I asked Emily to ask Maria if she had a goal. Yes, the next step.

Suddenly the crushing truth hit hard. Why so many suicides? This culture had lived successfully and fully in the present for a hundred thousand years with artifacts found as early as 75, 000 years ago. Missionaries arrived in the 1930's and by the '40s the kids were kidnapped, brainwashed and abused. Christianity, which is founded on a belief of the future was slapped onto and then layered into a culture that does not have a word or concept for future. The DEW Line brought electricity to Cambridge Bay. Thus the subsequent generations had access to radio and TV via satellite. Although living on a remote island in the Arctic Ocean, they see and desire everything that exists in the south. Young people go "down south" to Yellowknife thinking they will become urban Eskimos. They have no social or economic skills for city life, are quickly addicted to alcohol, drugs, and gambling that enslave them to ever growing credit card debt. Unable to adapt, they return humiliated to Cambridge Bay, and commit suicide very soon. Those who never leave become equally addicted and indebted as alcohol and drugs are smuggled into officially dry Cambridge Bay, and spiral downward just as quickly to suicide.

In half a generation, ancient tribal life based on the nomadic dog sled ritual hunt had ended. Life in the present, breath by breath, the reverence toward the land, the animals, light and dark, and the breathtakingly beautiful Aurora Borealis, had been supplanted with belief in one or another form of Christianity. The contradictory, irreconcilable beliefs between a culture that has no concept of future and a religion that dwells in the future leads ultimately to a present of addiction, suicide, and homicide.

That night as I sat on the frozen tundra of the North Pole, huddled down deep in my polar gear, wrapped in extra scarves, watching the slithery heavenly light show, I realized that my world view had profoundly shifted. I had erroneously held the received knowledge that humans were the inheritors of the earth. I now understood that we, like all other species, are just a blip in evolutionary history, and that we too would disappear in time as had all our antecedents before us.



Often choked with despair in the remaining days I listened to many sad family and individual narratives. I gathered books and newspapers, photographed where I could, and was gratefully invited to different homes. The kids, especially the prepubescent girls followed me and spent long hours in my room at the Arctic Lodge. We discussed their lives, their dreams, TV, clothes, hairstyles and nail polish, and they begged me to take them back to Los Angeles – to Hollywood!

A telephone message on my last full day invited me to meet Bill again at the Co-op. He asked me what I had found, whom I had spoken with and in a most friendly, collegial manner, voiced his cogent, insightful opinions about each of the people, agreeing wholly with my assessment, both of the individuals and the dire nature of the situation. He then told me he had created the Aboriginal Healing Organization, to preserve and maintain the old shamanic ways of medicine and divination, and was heading an archiving project, recording the histories of the few remaining elders. He has instituted the mandatory study of Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun in the schools, and has reinstituted the six-month tribal hunt, luring the youth into the traditional dogsled ritual. I told Bill of meeting Elisabeth Hadlari, a white woman who had married an Eskimo 30 years earlier, and was the founding director of the Arctic Coast Visitor Center. Elisabeth, a gifted artist, is the mother of four sons who were raised in the traditional manner, and were studying at universities across Canada intending to return to Cambridge Bay. Committed to restore

the rapidly vanishing culture, Elisabeth is leading workshops in traditional weaving (felting) of *quiviut*, muskox under fur, as well as caribou antler carving, and has been inviting youth to live the old way in her remote “summer house”, several miles away from town, close to the giant-gods’ hills. There they would hunt, fish, cook, live in the traditional ways, learning the myths and lore of the ancestors. I rode behind her as she drove her motorcycle to her home to show me her paintings, jewelry and the many marvelous parkas she had made and embroidered for her family. I now own a silver donut form that says in Inuktitut, “oot-jir-toot-ce-ar-necq (meaning total awareness in the moment), the Eskimo way of life.



Photo: Gilah Yelin Hirsch

I learned that Inuktitut was traditionally an oral language, but in the 1870s, Edmund Peck, an Anglican missionary adapted the Cree syllabary to Inuktitut. The Inuktitut letters were identical to those I had found in every other alphabet in the world. These shapes are identical to the five forms I had identified in nature as alphabetic morphology, which mirror the shapes of neurons and neural patterns of perception and cognition. By showing that these forms were universally adopted when alphabets were invented, I hypothesized that since we are universally hardwired alike, we are behaviorally more alike than different.

Bill and Elisabeth and other members of the Council were fighting against the invasion of tourism. Younger members of the Council considered them reactionary, wanting to realize the revenue that tour groups would bring if they added incentives such as golf courses, hunting and fishing.

“Allow only single or coupled travelers,” I suggested when Bill asked my advice. “Tour groups will signal the demise of Cambridge Bay as you know it.”

I told him about Tibet, Bhutan, and Japan and many other lost cultures I had visited.

I considered the “advanced culture” of the United States and Canada. In the 1960s “Be Here Now”, the best selling book in modern psychology by Ram Dass, exhorted us to live in the present as all else is illusion. While the New Age consciousness movement became an ever-growing business, those who had lived that way for millennia were paradoxically being forced into oblivion by the very countries that were unknowingly heralding their worldview as messianic.

Bill had said he would take me to the airport. I asked if he would consider coming to universities and conferences in the US to talk about the Eskimos from his life-long, informed perspective. Bill related as he would soon celebrate his 65th birthday, one of the few men to reach that age, he would retire from his many directorial posts and would consider such an invitation. He told me he truly understood why I came and what I was doing in my life to benefit his culture, and he thanked me. He invited me to join the six-month tribal hunt and told me that his family would adopt me for this purpose. In this way I would learn a great deal more about the Eskimos. I had passed the test. He then asked if my husband would allow me to join the tribal hunt for six months. I told him I had no husband. Ah, he reflected, no man could allow a woman so much freedom.

The next morning, there was a message that Bill had to leave town very early to attend to an emergency in another distant settlement. When it came time to pay my bill I asked Sean why, in my experience, Cambridge Bay was the most expensive place in the world. Two reasons, he said: First, since the tribal hunt was no longer the source of food and subsistence, everything had to be imported by ship or plane, season and weather permitting. Second, they want to keep white people out of Cambridge Bay,

acknowledging the damage that had been done to the land and culture by white outsiders. Sean then informed me that my bill had been cut in half in appreciation of what I was doing on behalf of Eskimo culture. During the short drive to the little airport, Sean told me that Bill was also the founding director of the Arctic Lodge. It had been his decision to halve my bill.

I was viscerally struck by the heartbreaking poignancy of the 23,000 Eskimos spread over the largest territory in the world at the threshold of extinction. I wanted to believe that relentless and inevitable as globalization, consumerization and desacrification may seem, this culture may possibly survive because of its extreme climate and remoteness. The fact that contemporary Eskimos do not fare well in urban settings may be a blessing in disguise, as they return to their origins. The zeal to restore native rituals as much as possible within the original surroundings by activists such as Bill Lyall may yet take hold and win the despairing youth. The advent of electricity and modern conveniences within the ancient context may make life more palatable to the youth and give them greater incentive to live there. Restoration of the lost arts, language, and culture may revive that formerly pure life and instigate an indigenous economy. And retaining the high dollar cost of visiting this special enclave would act as a deterrent to those who wish to “knock off” one of the last sacred outposts of the world.

Cultures and indigenous practices have historically been expunged for the profit of those with economic power. Nuance, idiom, and subtleties available only through the original languages and writings are inevitably lost while alphabets become Romanized for computer convenience. History can easily be revised to suit the government of the moment, as fewer scholars are incentivized to study ancient languages. Business deconstructs culture while English homogenizes purpose and meaning.

Healing and spiritual practices administered by shamans that have proven effective in so many indigenous cultures are being excised in favor of western protocol, as ironically, we in the west realize that these ancient practices are indeed efficacious and are used more and more to augment western medicine.

Since my visit the number of suicides in Nunavut has increased steadily. Nunavut Police reported that 32 people died by suicide in both 2015 and 2016. Of the 32 reported suicides in 2016—all between the ages of 15 and 49—one in four were female.

The booming business of tour groups to indigenous areas has grown rapidly as well-heeled educated baby boomers live longer and demand stimulating “rough” adventure in five star comfort. Despite opposition of Bill Lyall and other activists of the town Council, the first massive cruise ship, *Crystal Serenity*, brought a new era of Arctic tourism to Cambridge Bay in late summer (August 31, 2017). The visit was encouraged by artisans who can earn thousands of dollars in tourist sales in one day. While the population of Cambridge Bay is still only 1,300, 600 crew and 1,000 passengers, each of whom paid from \$30,000 to \$120,000 for the month-long trip, invaded the tiny town in many groups over a period of a week. While dollar economies are created by tourism, the essence of that which tourists come to see is destroyed.



150 tourists from ship a day

As cultures are vanquished and sacred sites secularized, we must move instead toward sacralizing relationships. In order to preserve that which binds communities together, we must become the gods, individually and collectively. Divinity is in humanity and spirituality is in behavior. By being appreciative and sensitive to the differences while basking in the commonalities, we can consecrate relationships that will propel action toward the greater good.

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References:

November, 1910: A joint agreement between the federal government and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches establishes the structure of Indian Residential Schools and the contractual obligations of churches running them. Duncan Campbell Scott refers to the policy of the government as that of seeking a “final solution to the Indian Problem.”

June 12-14, 1998

The first independent Tribunal into Canadian residential schools is convened in Vancouver by IHRAAM (International Human Rights Association of American Minorities), an affiliate of the United Nations. Evidence is submitted by dozens of aboriginal witnesses to crimes concludes that the government of Canada and the Catholic, United and Anglican churches are guilty of complicity in Genocide, and recommends to the United Nations that a War Crimes investigation be held.

January 2011 to April 2012

Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Inuit Sub-Commission. From, the Inuit Sub-Commission carried out the work of the TRC in Northern Canada. Headquartered in Yellowknife, NT, the Sub-Commission ensured that Inuit Survivors of physical, sexual, emotional abuse in the residential schools were fully included in the national truth-telling and reconciliation process.