



Exclusion by Assimilation

Native Social Engineering in Alaska

JENNIFER W. HOWK

“Disaster is like everyday life, but more so.”
—Rebecca Solnit

Kivalina is an Iñupiat village of 350 people that sits on two square miles of doomed Alaskan coastline. The state of Alaska and the U.S. government consider Kivalina “imminently threatened” by climate-driven erosion and flooding, and the village must relocate—very soon—to survive. Every year, Kivalina is battered by hurricane-strength storm systems twice the size of Texas that threaten to wash the tiny village away. On a good day, these storms flood the village, foul the village’s water supply, force children and elders to evacuate, and worsen erosion. On a bad day, a single storm can move the crumbling Bering Sea coastline 100 feet inland, and sweep anything standing in its path out to sea.

The residents and leaders of Kivalina know all too well that they have to relocate their community before it completely washes away. They have been vigorously debating the issue for twenty-five years. A large map on the wall of the city manager’s office marks potential relocation sites

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within a ten-mile radius of the village. Decades of grant paperwork and various appeals line the office’s sagging shelves: the state estimates relocating Kivalina will cost well over \$500,000 per resident.

“We can’t move an inch without help,” the city manager explained to me. “We need a lot of help.”

Kivalina is just one of two hundred primarily indigenous Alaskan villages across the state that are under climatic siege. Thanks to a variety of potent feedback loops, the effects of climate change in the Arctic are between two and four times more rapid and extreme than the global average. A powerfully destructive cocktail of disappearing

summer sea ice, sea level rise, permafrost melt and erosion, and stronger seasonal storms has already begun to disrupt traditional food security and livelihoods, destroy homes and schools, and level fragile village infrastructure. But Kivalina, like most Native Alaskan villages, is in no position to finance a relocation effort. Its citizens are lucky if they can afford fuel to survive the winter.

Statewide, Alaskans enjoy the second-highest median income in the country, but the state's wealth is separate and unequal. The income of Native Alaskans—especially in remote villages like Kivalina—is less than half that of non-Natives. That disparity is further aggravated by the high cost of living in rural Alaska, where a gallon of fuel and a gallon of milk each typically cost over \$10. Native Alaskans are nearly three times more likely than other Alaskans to live below the poverty line. They comprise a third of the prison population, even as they are less than

help," he said recently. But statehood ended the nomadic way of life for Native villages like Kivalina, Newtok, and Shishmaref, and imposed a new kind of "modern" permanence. A core condition of Alaska's formal admission to the union in 1959 was demographic stability and transparency. Statebuilders transformed previously nomadic groups into permanent settlements with permanent structures like schools, post offices, and airstrips, and assigned them new institutions like legislative districts and markets. Stability and transparency were essential to create—from scratch—effective systems of taxation, redistribution, participation, and representation across the vast, sparsely populated territory. But Native Alaskans, who had not participated in Alaska's sale to the United States from Russia in 1867 nor been conquered in any war or entered any kind of treaty with the territorial government, vigorously contested the state's efforts in a variety of ways. For

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a fifth of the total population. Nearly thirty percent of rural Alaskan homes don't even have sanitation systems.

Kivalina and at least thirty other Native villages are urged by both state and federal authorities to move from their current sites as soon as possible. Another 153 villages, in total representing nearly 90% of the state's rural, predominantly Native Alaskan population, face very significant—and very expensive—damage to homes, businesses, and infrastructure. While not quite as dramatically and immediately imperiled as Kivalina, they too must adapt one way or another as their way of life is disrupted and the ground shifts unpredictably beneath them.

Time is running out, and the water is creeping closer. And Kivalina, like all but a handful of villages like it across the state, is without a plan. The front page of its relocation website currently reads: “For a host of reasons, previous relocation efforts in Kivalina are stalled, leaving the community looking for alternatives.”

“Fifty years ago we would not be asking for this help”

In 1953, the last time Kivalina faced serious erosion, it moved to its current location with very little fanfare, and rebuilt sod homes with no assistance from the then-territorial Alaskan authorities. When the river forced the village of Newtok to higher ground in 1950, villagers simply dismantled the church and dragged materials a few miles away by dogsled. Tony Weyiouanna, the village transportation manager in the village of Shishmaref, agrees: “Fifty years ago, we would not be asking for this

the first several decades of Alaskan political development, statehood was an uncertain and contingent process that negotiated competing claims of territory and citizenship in a shifting, complex, post-colonial paradigm of federal and state Native policy and sovereignty.

Nowhere was that struggle more charged than the battle over competing land claims. Forced to delineate formal borders for the first time, Native groups made competing territorial claims against one another as well as against the state. By May of 1967, Native organizations had laid claim to more land than actually *existed*, and the Department of the Interior issued a land freeze until the “chaos” of claims could be resolved.

Black Gold broke the freeze. The discovery of North America's largest oil field in Prudhoe Bay in March of 1968 forced the land claims and the broader “Native Question” to the top of the developmental agenda. Prudhoe compelled the state to get serious about settling the rules of the game. Legally, in order to build an immense infrastructure of petroleum extraction and move the oil across a roadless wilderness and a couple of mountain ranges 900 miles to market, the indigenous claims locking up vast tracts of land had to be settled as quickly as possible. And politically, the struggle over territory and debate over the limits of Native tribal sovereignty was occurring during a period of unprecedented upheaval and activism in the American Indian community. The very real, looming prospect of Native Alaskan separatism alarmed organized Native groups and leaders seeking to benefit from the resource boom, and threw state and industry leaders into overdrive

to negotiate a deal.

The result of that hurried negotiation was a sweeping, market-driven approach to social and economic engineering in 1971: the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), known colloquially as the Great Experiment. And it certainly was an experiment. In one fell swoop, ANCSA extinguished all aboriginal title to traditional lands in exchange for 44 million acres of land and \$962.5 million in financial compensation, to be owned and administered by twelve regional and 200 local Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs). Overnight, longstanding indigenous institutions were displaced by new state policies and regulations. Subsistence economies were expected to seamlessly absorb and adapt to market rules, and vice versa. Community social relations were subordinated to new legislated hierarchies of group membership and correspondingly stratified access to the benefits of the new profit-driven Alaska Native Corporations. It was the largest peaceful redistribution of wealth in human history, and no one really had any idea what to expect. “We believed then, and I still believe now,” one former Senate aide explained twenty years later, “that we were creating a revolution.”

For the first fifteen years, the ANCs struggled. Many fell into bankruptcy and political disarray, and improvements in village life were inconsistent. Willie Hensley—a key Native leader, founding director of the state’s largest ANC, and future legislator and oil lobbyist—has described those years as “the twilight of the stone age” in rural Alaska. “We spent our first years learning to spell ‘corporation,’” he told one journalist.

As the system threatened to collapse, Congress stepped in and changed the rules, and gave the ANCs access to an array of special loopholes and privileges. Since 1986, all thirteen regional and 198 village-level Native

corporations have been eligible to participate in the Small Business Association’s Business Development Program. The program is intended to provide incentives and support for minority-owned and economically disadvantaged small firms, including help obtaining federal procurement contracts. As a transition program, it requires participating firms to annually prove economic and social disadvantage—except for Alaska Native Corporations, which are protected as “permanently disadvantaged” *by statute*. This remains true even as some ANCs have created subsidiaries run by non-Native managers who bring in enormous federal contracts worth billions of dollars—indeed, several ANCs number among the top 100 federal contractors, keeping company with Lockheed Martin and Bechtel. Among other things, they have in the past several years been awarded contracts to feed coca eradicators in Bolivia, provide security for troops in Iraq, educate Marines in motorcycle safety, and, perhaps most ironically, build new portable schools in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina.

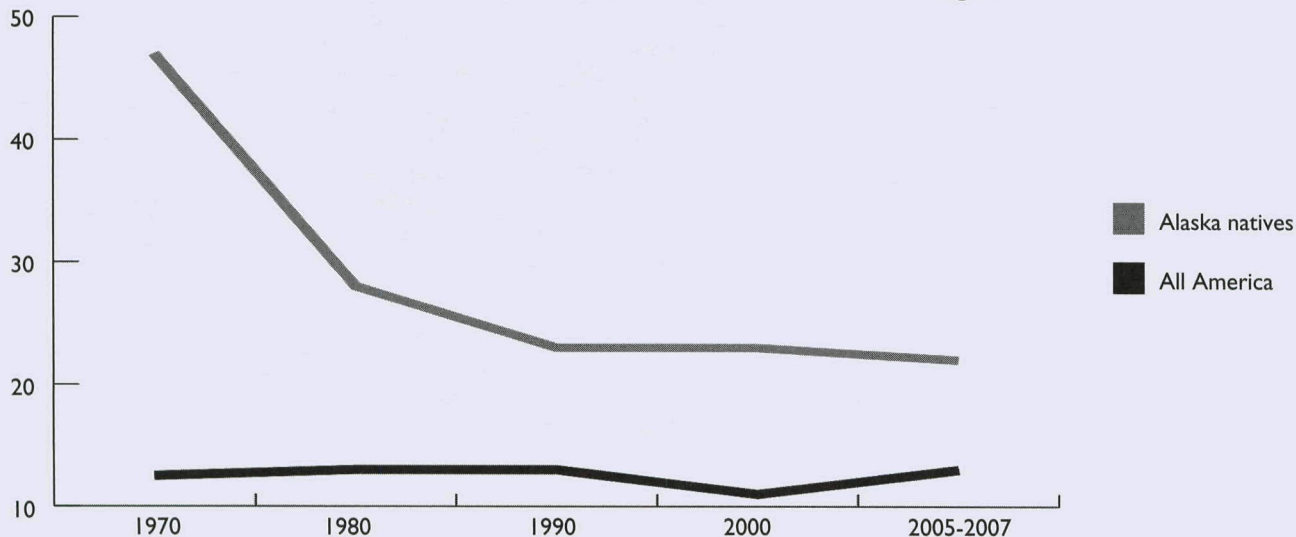
With autonomous subsidiaries operating thousands of miles from Alaska, internal non-Native management, and very often with no financial reporting requirements, ANCs are both profoundly unaccountable to their shareholders and powerfully and paradoxically invested in Native vulnerability as the premise of their continued success.

Assimilation without representation: manufacturing a perpetual underclass

ANCSA was intended to be an engine of economic development for rural Alaska: an empowering alternative to the isolation, segregation, and burgeoning political radicalism of the continental U.S. reservation system. From the beginning, however, the agreement was premised upon and legitimized by a powerful set of assumptions that ascribes to Native communities a special kind of instability

Native Alaskans Not Doing So Well

Percentage of Alaska natives living below the poverty line, compared to the national figure



Source: 2009 report by the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska Anchorage.



Alaska natives form a human banner on the banks of the Porcupine River near Ft. Yukon, Alaska July 21, 2010 with a message to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil development.

and risk. Just beyond fragile stability, according to this set of assumptions, awaits certain disaster—a return to the confusion of the land freeze and warring tribal interests stirring up trouble and slowing down resource development. For this reason, political leaders have explicitly argued before and after ANCSA that Native autonomy and full indigenous title to the land would “balkanize” the state and potentially spark an oil war. Indeed, the state has repeatedly gone to great lengths to defeat indigenous claims to tribal sovereignty, including (successfully) taking the issue all the way to the Supreme Court in 1998. Native communities, the state argues, forfeited their claims to federally recognized tribal sovereignty and ceded their political autonomy to the state as a condition of agreeing to ANCSA. It was assimilation without representation.

As the state systematically stripped Native communities of social and political self-determination, it concomitantly assigned “village Alaska” the neocolonial status of a problem to be solved. Aided by a unique geography and segregated population distribution, two distinct Alaskas soon emerged: urban and rural, white and Native, rich and poor. The “problem” of Native Alaskan vulnerability became a powerful source of legitimacy and leverage not just for the ANCs, but for three other key groups as well. First, it helped insulate urban policy makers from the potential volatility of Native political separatism without compromising their apparent commitment to “cultural values.” Second, organized Native interest groups gained recognition of and intermittent compensation for core claims of poverty, political marginalization, and inequality. And finally, technocrats—scholars, legal and nongovernmental advocates, and specialized bureaucrats—found themselves with a whole new research industry and job security evaluating the socioeconomic state of rural Alaska, and an endless supply of assessment and empowerment

projects.

The benefits accruing to these key groups from the protection and maintenance of Native Alaskan vulnerability came at the cost of undermining incentives to transcend it. The Great Experiment therefore became, in practice, a Great Compromise: cultural lip service without political or economic autonomy, and raw market exposure with no social safety net. Rural development projects valorized “traditional values” with one hand and undermined subsistence hunting and fishing access with the other. Elites lamented the socioeconomic status of “a people in peril” while going to war against tribal sovereignty.

Alaska Native Corporations classified as “permanently disadvantaged” by federal statute became billion dollar businesses that now dominate the state’s economic landscape. Kivalina’s parent corporation, NANA, was Alaska’s third-highest grossing company in 2012. On its website, NANA claims that the corporation “is like the traditional Iñupiat hunter, working hard to provide for the community.”

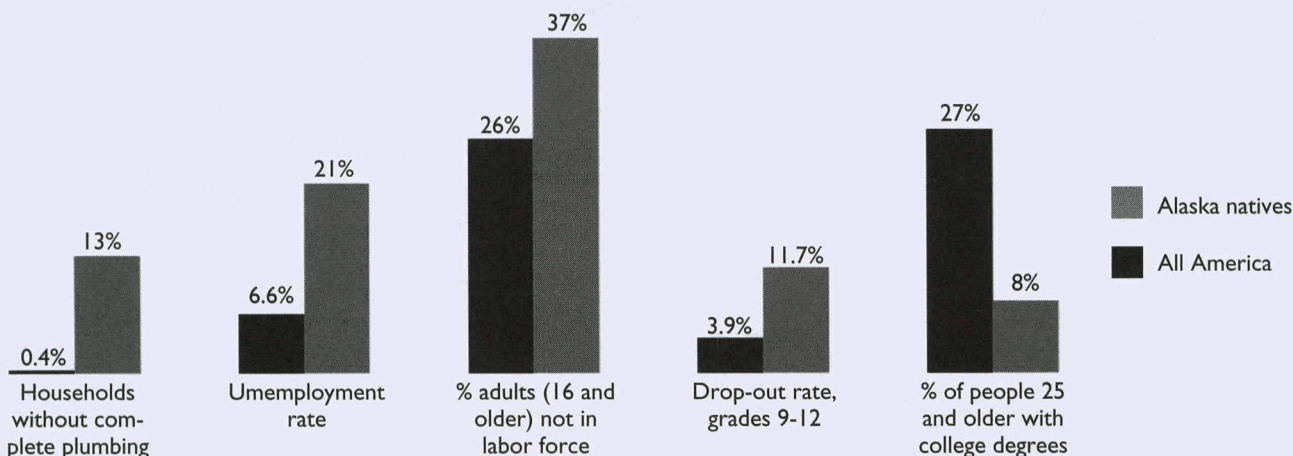
In short, Alaska’s experimental approach to rural development and indigenous empowerment has utterly failed the population it purports to serve. Indeed, four decades of manufactured vulnerability and absentee paternalism have unleashed a slew of unintended consequences far worse than the dilemmas that motivated ANCSA to begin with. Most critically of all, Native Alaskan vulnerability has in some ways become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not only are most rural Alaskans only marginally better off along most social and economic measures than they were before statehood, but they are now also uniquely vulnerable to the worst consequences of climate change.

Power, not Permafrost

Every ten years, in the darkest depths of January, the director of the United States Census Bureau and a handful of intrepid staffers travel by dogsled to one of Alaska’s tiny circumpolar communities—in 2000 it was 700-person Unalakleet, in 2010 Noorvik—to personally administer the very first census questionnaire to an obliging octogenarian. Against this impressive backdrop, a press conference is held to affirm how important including *every single citizen*—even the most exotic and remote—is to the functioning of American democracy, and to officially kick off the massive civic effort. In 2010 in Noorvik, residents greeted director Robert Groves wearing t-shirts that read “I’m Iñupiaq, and I count.” During his visit, Groves attended a traditional

Alaskan Natives Still Fall Behind American Averages

Economic indicators, Alaska natives and all Americans (averages, 2005 - 2007)



Credits / Source

potlatch, ate muktuk, and went on the radio in Kotzebue, Noorvik’s local regional governance center, to exhort Native Alaskans to stand and be counted. “This is the basic building block of democracy,” he insisted.

Despite such theatrics, in 2010 Alaska surprised absolutely no one by once again claiming one of the lowest census participation rates in the union—eleven points behind the national average. (The Noorvik tract was even worse, 21 points behind the average.) But census participation in Noorvik likely had very little if anything to do with Groves’s visit: problems of geography, seasonal employment, and regional school enrollment among other things contribute to a notoriously unreliable count in most remote areas of the state. The contradictory spectacle of the circumpolar census is vulnerability politics in action: an exquisitely mixed message from the state that celebrates traditional rural life and affirms its utter political insignificance in the same breath. Participation is the building block of democracy—except for when it isn’t.

Institutions shape socioeconomic outcomes, and institutions also shape patterns of citizenship. The institutions imposed upon Native Alaskans have done both, to detrimental effect. A vast gulf of inequality remains between urban and rural Alaskans, and the promises of ANCSA have gone unfulfilled in most villages. But the failure of “The Great Experiment” goes far beyond intransigent underdevelopment. Alaska’s policies toward its Native population have also shaped a new kind of citizen: one for whom political recognition and resource allocation is conditional upon the demonstration of scarcity and distress. As an informal social contract between the state and its most disadvantaged residents, the performance of vulnerability as a kind of political currency both perpetuates dependence and corrodes democracy.

Permanent, institutionalized vulnerability is troubling enough when it simply serves to discourage dissent and protect resource development, as it has in Alaska for four decades. But climate change and its destabilizing conse-

quences have transformed the status of Native Alaskans into potential moral catastrophe for the state.

Conclusion: canaries in the coal mine

It is a great, unappreciated political irony that the center of U.S. petroleum production also happens to be the developed world’s early warming system, and home to its first wave of climate refugees. The melting Arctic is itself an engine of serious climate feedback effects: melting permafrost generates methane, a greenhouse gas some 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Arctic sea ice retreats further each year, and some estimates now anticipate its complete disappearance within the next two years. The new climate realities of a permanently altered Arctic have pulled back the curtain on the fossil fuel industry right in its own cozy, tax-sheltered, all-American backyard. At this point even Sarah Palin admits global warming is real.

The plight of climate-imperiled Native villages throughout Alaska also sheds much-needed light on forty years of failed indigenous policy. The price of resource development has been the invention of a permanent underclass, whose only access to the benefits of full citizenship is through the expression of distress. Yet even the ultimate declaration of distress—full-fledged, climate-driven destruction in villages like Kivalina—cannot and will not engage the intervention of a state that has completely excused itself from direct responsibility for and accountability to its Native population.

Rural Alaskans will continue to face immense challenges, and their capacity to successfully address those challenges must come—as it always has—from within communities themselves, not the state. And Alaska must end its Great Experiment in Native social engineering. The true extent of the damage it has done will only become more clear in coming years, as adaptation to environmental change will increasingly require access to the very same tools that half a century of Alaskan policy has worked so effectively to corrode. ■

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