

Body techniques of health: Making products and shaping selves in northwest Alaska

Techniques du corps pour la santé: fabrication de produits et formation personnelle dans le nord-ouest de l'Alaska

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Article abstract

This paper considers the connections between body technologies and wellness. Residents of northwest Alaska suffer disproportionately from social and behavioural illnesses. In Nome and Kotzebue, Inupiat and Yupiit women prescribe traditional activities, such as processing food and making tools and crafts from local harvests, to family members in an effort to promote their well-being. At the same time, Alaska Native institutions organise subsistence activities as a means to generate healthy living among tribal members. This paper seeks to understand why so many Nome and Kotzebue residents view traditional activities as a solution to locally perceived social ills such as substance abuse. The ethnography is based on two groups of women's collective efforts: processing of seal into *black meat* and learning to make grass baskets—activities locally identified as “traditional” practices. Firstly, this article highlights the body practices developed within spaces of women's collective production. Secondly, it describes the contemplation and narratives that emerge within these spaces. Lastly, it explores the relationship between body practice and verbal expression, and how this relationship promotes wellness. Analysing Inupiat and Yupiit traditional activities within the framework of technological process reveals how making traditional products also shapes healthy individuals.

Body techniques of health: Making products and shaping selves in northwest Alaska

Amber Lincoln*

Résumé: Techniques du corps pour la santé: fabrication de produits et formation personnelle dans le nord-ouest de l'Alaska

Cet article examine les liens entre les technologies du corps et le bien-être. Les habitants du nord-ouest de l'Alaska sont, de manière disproportionnée, victimes de maladies sociales et comportementales. À Nome et à Kotzebue, les femmes inupiat et yupiit prescrivent aux membres de leur famille la pratique d'activités traditionnelles, telles que la production de nourriture et la fabrication d'outils et d'objets d'artisanat à partir de matières premières locales, pour retrouver leur bien-être. En même temps, les institutions autochtones de l'Alaska organisent des activités de subsistance qu'elles considèrent comme un moyen de générer un mode de vie sain pour leurs membres. Cet article cherche à comprendre pourquoi tant d'habitants de Nome et de Kotzebue considèrent que les activités traditionnelles représentent une solution aux maux sociaux locaux tels que la toxicomanie ou l'alcoolisme. Cette étude ethnographique porte sur les efforts collectifs de deux groupes de femmes, dans le domaine de la transformation du phoque en «viande noire» et dans celui de l'apprentissage de la vannerie — activités qualifiées localement de pratiques «traditionnelles». Cet article souligne tout d'abord les pratiques corporelles qui se développent dans les lieux de production collective féminine. Deuxièmement, il décrit la contemplation et les récits qui émergent de ces espaces. Enfin, il explore la relation entre les pratiques corporelles et l'expression verbale, et la manière dont cette relation favorise le bien-être. L'analyse des activités traditionnelles inupiat et yupiit dans le cadre des processus technologiques révèle la manière dont la fabrication de produits traditionnels contribue à la santé des individus.

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This paper considers the connections between body technologies and wellness. Residents of northwest Alaska suffer disproportionately from social and behavioural illnesses. In Nome and Kotzebue, Inupiat and Yupiit women prescribe traditional activities, such as processing food and making tools and crafts from local harvests, to family members in an effort to promote their well-being. At the same time, Alaska Native institutions organise subsistence activities as a means to generate healthy living among tribal members. This paper seeks to understand why so many Nome and Kotzebue residents view traditional activities as a solution to locally perceived social ills such as substance abuse. The ethnography is based on two groups of women's collective efforts: processing of seal into *black meat* and learning to make grass baskets—activities locally identified as “traditional” practices. Firstly, this article highlights the body practices developed within spaces of women's collective production. Secondly, it describes the contemplation and

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narratives that emerge within these spaces. Lastly, it explores the relationship between body practice and verbal expression, and how this relationship promotes wellness. Analysing Inupiat and Yupit traditional activities within the framework of technological process reveals how making traditional products also shapes healthy individuals.

Introduction

Health and wellness are topics of concern in northwest Alaska. The region shares tragically high rates of suicide, homicide, and accidental death with other circumpolar communities (Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics 2002; Bioff 2005; Edwards 2004; Norbert et al. 2008; Wexler 2006, 2009; Wexler and Goodwin 2006). Most of the deaths are associated with heavy consumption of drugs and alcohol (Foulks 1980; Wexler 2006). Alaska Native institutions have responded by implementing a variety of programs for “wellness” or “well-being.” In northwest Alaska, wellness terminology flags contexts of mental, behavioural, and social problems associated with substance abuse. Social scientists and Indigenous leaders widely attribute Inuit health problems to destructive colonial pasts and rapid socio-economic changes (Cassady 2007; Napoleon 1991; Nuttall 1998; Wenzel 1981; Wexler 2006, 2009; Wexler and Goodwin 2006). In response, Indigenous leaders appeal to traditional activities as a way of promoting social welfare (Arundale 2003; Borré 1994; Fienup-Riordan 2003; Nuttall 1998; Reimer 1999; Wexler 2006, 2009; Wexler and Goodwin 2006). The Alaska Native institutions charged with providing social services for tribal members within the regions—Maniilaq Association for the Northwest Arctic Borough and Kawerak, Inc. for the Bering Strait region—each have wellness programs aimed at promoting cultural knowledge as a way to remedy addiction and its associated problems. Part of the Kawerak wellness program includes mentors who teach traditional skills like hunting, carving, and sewing in order to “encourage students to learn and document their traditional language and culture” (Kawerak, Inc. n.d.). Similarly, Maniilaq offers the “Mavsigviq family recovery camp.” According to their website, “individuals and families struggling with the disease of addiction go to the camp and begin the healing process while living a traditional Native, subsistence, lifestyle” (Maniilaq Association n.d.). These are just a few examples of the many programs offered throughout northwest Alaska that attempt to instil wellness via cultural affiliation.

Why do residents draw on traditional activities to treat or prevent substance abuse and grief from tragedy? How might cutting meat or weaving baskets encourage wellness? Anthropologists, among others, have studied the connection between cultural affiliation and wellness among circumpolar Inuit. Their studies have explored health and its connections with Inuit explanations of social problems and their prevention (Hensel et al. 2003; Wexler 2006; Wexler and Goodwin 2006), with healing narratives (Hensel et al. 2003); with faith (Jolles 2003; Turner 2003); with cross-cultural

communication about post-colonial relationships (Kawagley 1995; Nuttall 1998; Reimer 1999; Wexler 2006); and with cultural identity, historical consciousness, and their impacts on individual resilience (Kawagley 1995; Napoleon 1991; Wexler 2009). These studies have analysed Inuit health through cognitive and linguistic frameworks. To contribute to these studies, the present article will focus on routine skills that are used during traditional activities and on how local people conceive of the connection between such activities and wellness. It showcases one strategy used by Indigenous residents of northwest Alaska. Without ignoring cognitive and linguistic domains and while using ethnography built up from my participation in such activities, the article considers how traditional activities promote social welfare. It highlights the patterns of body use or, to invoke Mauss' (1973[1936]) phrase, "techniques of the body," bodily movements mastered during engaged practice—sewing, cutting, carving.

When understood broadly, technological process can shed light on wellness. I understand technology to include not merely different kinds of artefacts—knives, harpoons, or iPods—for purposeful activity, but more broadly the knowledge, dexterity, materials, and relationships inherent in their production and use (Dobres and Hoffman 1999; Ingold 1999, 2001; Pfaffenberger 1999). Rather than on products analyses, here I focus on the production of coordinated knowledge, skills learned over time, and sets of relationships that constitute implements (Dobres and Hoffman 1999; Ingold 2001; Pfaffenberger 1992), thereby enriching our understanding of performed activity. How might performing bodily techniques with local materials influence a practitioner's perspective? I argue that ways of thinking mirror body techniques—the rhythmic physical aspects of tasks, developed in traditional activities. By relying on Jackson's (1983) analysis of embodied knowledge, whereby, "patterns of body use engender mental images and instil moral qualities" (*ibid*: 336), and Langer's (1953) understanding of rhythm as a future-oriented perspective, I speculate that the rhythmic body movements give rise to productive dispositions that enable practitioners to draw from their past in order to plan their future, thereby assisting individuals in living well.

Methodology

The ethnographic descriptions come from my doctoral research and are based on my participation in two collective efforts. First, I took part in processing of *ugruk* (bearded seal) into *black meat* in Kotzebue over four weeks in 2006. Second, I attended a coiled grass basket class in Nome once a week for three months in the winter of 2006-2007. These experiences were followed up by interviews with the women participants during subsequent visits to the region in 2007 and 2009.

Socio-economic context

Kotzebue's population of roughly 3,100 is predominately Inupiat whereas Nome's slightly larger population is home to three distinct Alaska Native groups, including Inupiat, Central Yupiit, and Saint Lawrence Island Yupiget, as well as a large settler

population (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). As regional centres, both cities share similarities. Each is the location from which Alaska Native institutions wage health campaigns for the communities they represent. Kawerak in Nome serves 20 villages around the Bering Strait and Seward Peninsula. Maniilaq in Kotzebue serves 12 communities around Kotzebue Sound and its river drainage basins. Even as economic and transportation regional centres, Nome and Kotzebue have an integrated economy. After hours of paid work, there is a second mode of production widely referred to as “subsistence”; families supplement their paid employment with hunting, fishing, and gathering of wild food and materials. They endeavour to fill their freezers with local foods and their *qanitchaq* (entryway) with processed materials, which will be crafted into tools, garments, and commodities at a later time. All of these efforts—harvesting, processing and making of food and goods, and selling of commodities—form part of the subsistence way of life, which is spiritually, economically, and politically central to the lives of Alaska Native people (Hensel 1996; Lee 2003; Thornton 1998). Subsistence activities are socially valued and locally referred to as “traditional.” In this regard, the two towns can be usefully grouped together for this article.

For subsistence production, enjoyment, and well-being, women in northwest Alaska join forces in groups to process foods from local harvests and to craft tools and commodities from their by-products. In the summer and fall, women work “at camp” to process seal, fish, caribou, berries, greens, and roots and to prepare animal hides, grass, and other plant fibres. While living in Nome and Kotzebue, I often participated in these collective efforts. In July 2006, I took part in butchering seal with a companion and her crew. We spent long hours cutting large pieces of meat into chunks, slicing them into thin strips, removing the blubber from the meat, and hanging the strips on drying poles. Family and friends stopped in to visit and to share news, but most of our work occurred in comfortable silence. Our bodies moved to particular rhythms guided by the task at hand, our implements, and the available workspace, thus creating a reflective working environment. Knowing my friend had only recently returned to Kotzebue after a long absence and that it was her first time putting up seal meat, I asked her why she had taken up the chore. She responded that it was for her kids, “because we don’t have soccer leagues up here.” Then, under her breath, she explained that she was there also to persuade her sister-in-law to join because she was “going through a rough time” and needed to be kept away from drinking. My companion’s justification was not exceptional. Over the course of my 15 months of fieldwork in northwest Alaska, I was struck by how often people engaged in or encouraged their family to partake in subsistence or traditional activities as a strategy to promote social welfare.

Processing *black meat*

Bearded seal hunting takes place in Kotzebue Sound at the end of June and beginning of July. By then, the three converging rivers, Noatak, Kobuk, and Selawik, have opened up enough leads within the ice of Hotham Inlet, the body of water that parallels the Baldwin Peninsula on which the town of Kotzebue lies, so that boats may carefully navigate. The west beach in Kotzebue stretches roughly one mile. Its location

is ideally suited for processing seal and fish; it has both fresh water and prevailing winds, which fend off bugs and dry meat before rotting sets in. For these reasons, Inupiat families from all over northwest Alaska have for centuries processed *ugruk* along these shores.

In 2006 I joined two sisters-in-law and their older friend originally from Selawik at their west beach camp. It was the first time the sisters processed *ugruk* into the cherished *black meat* that distinguishes any Inupiaq meal and community potluck but whose preparation requires considerable time and effort. Meat is separated from blubber, cut into strips, and dried. Separately, the blubber is rendered into oil with time and a daily stir. Once each process is complete, the meat and oil are reunited in glass jars for the freezer (Figures 1 and 2).

For the several weeks of *ugruk* season, the group of women I worked with quickly slipped into a routine. Like the dozen other families at west beach, they rushed down to their camp after a day of wage employment. Hunters delivered seals to the campsite. Children from various families played along the shoreline while women butchered meat on the high beach. On two makeshift plywood tables, we slit the chunks of seal meat into long thin strips with ulus and carried the strips to a wooden rack with suspended horizontal poles to hang the strips to dry (Figures 3 and 4). Back and forth between the tables and rack, we cut and carried meat. We also removed blubber from the hide. Plywood square scraps were nailed to a sawhorse that stood at a 45° angle. The hide was nailed to the wood and we took turns wedging our ulus between the skin and the blubber, trying to smooth out the jagged cuts that displayed our novice status. We then sliced the blubber into small chunks on the table and put them into five gallon buckets to render. The buckets were covered with cloth and either stored in a wall tent or kept in the shade under scraps of wood.

At some point during the four weeks of *ugruk* processing, the crew fell into a rhythm of work. With time, we choreographed our movements with each other to avoid collision or a crowded table. From a slab of meat one woman sliced, while another woman grabbed strips she had recently cut and walked to the rack. At the same time a third woman returned from the rack, while the fourth woman picked up her ulu to begin the cycle of movement again or added a fifth and more unusual stroke by pausing to sharpen her ulu. With experience, we honed our techniques for smoother production. Bound by surfaces for cutting and hanging, the space was fluid and open so that we rarely were in direct face-to-face contact. Within this space of movement and body technique, the four of us worked quietly, absorbed by our task and thoughts, both of which seemed to follow the pace of our bodies.



Figure 1. Filling cans with pieces of dried *black meat*. Kotzebue, July 2006. Photo: Amber Lincoln.



Figure 2. Slicing partially rendered blubber and filling cans with oil. Kotzebue, July 2006. Photo: Amber Lincoln.



Figure 3. Processing camp. Kotzebue, July 2006. Photo: Amber Lincoln.



Figure 4. *Black meat* strips hang to dry. Kotzebue, July 2006. Photo: Amber Lincoln.

Making coiled baskets

While summer and fall are largely devoted to processing food and materials, winter is often dedicated to making products from the previous season's harvest. Because the weather is cold and the sunlight limited, people spend more time indoors. Women often gather together for "craft nights" to sew *itiquluuq* ('cloth shirts') or fur clothing, to bead jewellery, to make coiled baskets, or to knit hats and mitts. These products are then given to relatives as gifts or sold at holiday bazaars. Most craft nights are casually hosted at someone's house or a local community centre. One venue in Nome was the local senior centre. While all sorts of art and craft activities took place throughout the week, Thursday night was reserved for the basketry class. For three months, depending on the weather, I went to the centre and learned to coil grass baskets with seven other women.

In Alaska, it is mainly Yupiit women who gather and dry beach grass (*Elymus mollis*) to make coiled baskets, and mostly to sell as ethnic tourist art (Figure 5) (Lee 1999, 2004). Coiled baskets are started at the base of the basket and spiral out as the maker sews interlocking stitches with a grass threaded needle. The stitches loop around the foundation of bunched grass, and are sewn through the previous row so that the top row attaches to the previous one. In this way coiling imitates sewing. The baskets are often decorated with dyed grass or sea mammal intestine.

Those of us interested in learning joined the instructor in the craft area at the senior centre. A cardboard box on one table held extra needles, a water spray bottle, and long straight dried grass (Figure 6). The smell of the grass pervaded the room and reminded me of how it had been gathered. Earlier in September, I had accompanied the basketry instructor to Cape Nome where she picked both grass and blackberries. After many more harvesting trips our instructor collected and dried enough grass for the whole class. It was this grass that the basketry students were now using. Casually, women strolled in, pulled out their projects and some loose grass, then sprayed the grass with water and wrapped it in a moist towel to keep it pliable. They then threaded a needle with a split blade and tried to coil to the instructor's rhythm.

Of Yup'ik heritage, our instructor provided non-verbal instruction; throughout the class she both worked on her own basket and corrected each student's basketry rows. In turns, she inquired about each student's progress with raised eyebrows. This was our cue to adjust our chairs next to hers, to watch her hands, and to attune our body movements to her sewing beat. She held the basketry start between her pinkie and ring finger and the palm of her left hand. With the same hand, she pinched the foundation of bunched grass extending from the basketry start with her thumb and pointer finger. With her right hand, she stuck the grass-threaded needle into the lower row and looped the thread over the foundation. She then pulled it tight, the foundation fastened to the preceding row, and the taut thread now had a silky sheen, emerging flat and straight. These faultless stitches were examples for us to emulate.



Figure 5. Coiled baskets made by Alice Irrigoo, originally from Stebbins. Nome, September 2009. Photo: Amber Lincoln.



Figure 6. Basketry class. Nome, December 2006. Photo: Amber Lincoln

Before returning our baskets to each of us, our instructor realigned our rows and consequently our rhythm. With her steady beat in our ears, we calibrated our movements to mimic her pace. A rhythm in two beats develops with experience: the first is long and composed of one's hand winding the thread over the grass foundation and pricking the lower row with the needle; the second is short requiring the same hand to grasp and pull the needle and thread tightly through the foundation from the opposite side. The thread thumps against the rows when pulled taut: thus the beat is measured between a prick and a thump. Two beats make one coil; several beats make one row. Dexterity can be felt or heard in the process and seen in the product.

Rhythm and body movement

Just as the *black meat* processors coordinated their efforts through patterned body movements, so did a fluid routine characterise competent basket makers. In both activities, the patterns of body use developed into a rhythm that required less concentration on the actual procedure. The specific tasks of *black meat*—cutting, carrying, sharpening, or hanging—and the defined space paced our movements. Likewise, while making baskets, the instructor taught us a rhythm to steady our novice hands. She made this explicit when she re-directed the attention of a frustrated student: “[The thread] is like your kids, when you watch them too much, they are bad, don't pay attention and it will be better.”

Verbal expressions

The split attention that processing of *black meat* and basket making demand engendered a silent, reflective rather than verbal, responsive space. The ways of speaking and kinds of dialogues starkly contrasted with those of other gatherings of women, such as in the sauna. Visits to the women's sauna at Nome or Kotzebue's recreational centre were full of laughter and teasing. In my experience chit-chat and casual discussions were rare during basket making and meat cutting. Words were often thoughtful but restricted to fragmented utterances or abbreviated stories. These narratives were encouraging even when about difficult subjects. Oftentimes they were funny, underlain with self-mocking humour. Many drew on the speakers' pasts. Others were deliberately contemplative about the future.

During one evening of cutting seal meat, the youngest member of our crew broke the silence: “Do you think anyone's going to be putting up *black meat* in 50 years?” The two other women and I considered the question but made no verbal response. I wondered whether ideas about the continuity of traditions drifted into the minds of the other women and mixed with their thoughts as they had with mine. I silently recalled how, just earlier that week, I heard a middle-aged woman complain that no young women process *ugruk* anymore. That complaint made me wonder whether young women *ever* processed *ugruk*. Are they not too busy raising children? My two

crewmates were in their mid-30s and had just begun to experiment with putting up seal meat.

Several minutes after the young woman's question, the older processor who was helping the two sisters-in-law commented on her father's generosity. "He helped anyone who needed it," she said. "He even helped those archaeologists who came to Noorvik." Perhaps the older woman's own internal dialogue had absorbed the question about the continuity of tradition and had given rise to a response, which she punctuated by a few choice words. In assisting the sisters-in-law with *black meat*, the older woman was continuing her father's legacy. On the tail of the question, her comment may have been a subtle but optimistic rebuttal to the doubt that *black meat* will be put up in 50 years, since the older woman now saw herself as "helping anyone who needed it" just as her father had.

Bad news was similarly shared in sparse verbal form. Working on miniature baskets for earrings, our basketry instructor revealed the difficult emotions she was working through by sharing bits and pieces of her life throughout the three-month class. Her husband had recently died. Teaching basketry provided her with supplemental income and a space to work through her loss. One evening after a long silence, our instructor recalled her childhood. Speaking to nobody in particular, she described how, as a young girl, she was eating blackberries from a bowl. Her grandmother told her to eat two at a time. When she finished, only one remained. She was asked to do it a second time. Again, only one was left. Her grandmother then sadly turned away, telling her she would be alone when she was older. After a pause, our instructor turned to another weaver and asked mystified, "Do you think the old people could really know those things back then?" This question brought gentle laughter but no answer. Perhaps the rhythmic movement of her hands allowed her to grapple patiently with the complicated emotions surrounding her husband's death. Perhaps she was seeking strength in her grandmother's foresight.

Humorous stories were shared in a similar reflective form. I had barely begun my coiling one evening when an elderly Inupiaq woman, originally from King Island, looked up from her work with a smirk. While her hands kept up their methodical sewing pace, she explained that she had heard on the local radio station the week prior that Kawerak was offering an evening of beading. She convinced a friend to brave the cold and together they walked to the Kawerak building with their craft bags full of beads and thread. Once inside, they followed the sound of voices to the boardroom and sat down at the executive oval table next to twelve attentive men and women. They pulled out their projects, happy to work in a group, happy for the table with plenty of space. They soon noticed that no other beading projects lined the table. Looking up from her work and around the table, the King Island woman asked, "Is this the beading?" In unison, the Alaska Native board members answered, "We're not beading, we're meeting!" At this point, all of the women hearing the story, and even the storyteller, set their projects aside, bent over at the waist, and laughed. Some wiped tears from their eyes, cleaning the lenses of their glasses in the meantime.

The storyteller continued. Once they realised their mistake the two beaders collected their crafts and swiftly left the boardroom, slightly put out by the misunderstanding. A week after the incident, perhaps at the pace of her fingers, through her body practice of sewing, she had let go of any bad feelings, had laughed at herself, and had turned this slightly embarrassing miscommunication into a funny tale for the amusement of others. The story and the other verbal expressions were realistic but optimistic, amusing but encouraging, always striving for goodness but delivered to make you think. And once again, these behaviours emerged so readily amid the collective spaces of processing activities.

Prescriptions for well-being

During the last two basketry classes, a male relative of the instructor and his family attended. From rumours around town, I knew that he was dealing with distress. The anomalous sight of an adult man coiling baskets made it all clear. He was there to be with his family, to be around healthy people, to keep his hands busy, and to think about his life with his family. I do not know whether our instructor had convinced him to join the class, this seeming likely because it was not typically a male activity. Perhaps she felt that making baskets would be a helpful distraction during a difficult time.

Similar reasons drew people to process *black meat*. As described in the introduction, my friend encouraged her sister-in-law to partake in *black meat* production to keep her away from alcohol. In addition to these examples, several carvers credited their sobriety to “Eskimo carving.” Some of them were self-proclaimed recovering alcoholics. Carving supplemented their incomes and provided a means to contribute to their communities. Similarly, at different times, a handful of female crafters told me that their craftwork relieved their grief after a tragic death in the family. One Nome beader, in fact, explained to craft workshop participants at the Teller Dance Festival in 2009 that beading helped her “keep going” after her daughter’s death; her announcement was just days after a young woman had committed suicide in Teller. These examples illustrate that individuals perform and prescribe traditional activities in order to “treat” addiction and the grief from its associated ills.

This view has been institutionalised by Alaska Native organisations. Often at the expense of other programs and personnel, these agencies invest in carving and sewing workshops to counter addiction, suicide, and depression. In addition to Maniilaq’s and Kawerak’s ongoing wellness programs, there has been collaboration for other programs. For instance, in Kotzebue, four Alaska Native and borough institutions pooled resources to create the Sulianich Art Center. It is both an art gallery and a workshop that offers carving and sewing classes. In 2007, Sulianich collaborated with Maniilaq to offer *itiquluuq* and skin sewing classes to resident clients in Maniilaq’s alcohol treatment program (University of Alaska Center for Economic Development n.d.). These classes were not mandatory but many clients took them for additional support. The Sulianich coordinator and teacher, Victoria Owen, explained to me in the fall of 2009 that several clients continued in the sewing classes even after completion

of their treatments. To give another example, in 2005 Kawerak received \$1 million for their “Wellness from Within” campaign, designed to generate activities for healthy living and to raise awareness of wellness. Part of the grant paid for harvesting tools, such as berry-picking buckets. Posters were made to show the health benefits of subsistence activities.

What is it about these collective traditional activities that make so many Inupiat and Yupiit and Alaska Native institutions turn to them as a solution to substance abuse? There are a number of ways that these activities contribute to wellness. Many of them are antithetical to drinking and create a supportive environment for sobriety. Certainly, the physical exertion maintains fitness while the food produced is nutritious. They also create valued products and skills. As such, their practitioners are not only victims or perpetrators requiring treatment, but also productive members of an interdependent community. Such work shifts one’s focus away from one’s own transgressions and toward sharing products with kin. In a similar vein, Heil (2009) analysed well-being among Aboriginal communities in New South Wales from the perspective of a socially positioned participant in relationships and practices, as opposed to an embodied single self. Heil argues that Aboriginal people achieve well-being by immersing themselves in networks of obligation and responsibility.

Besides contributing to the community, these activities generate quiet spaces. They are distinct from the talk therapy used in many Western treatment programs. They offer none of the talking methods employed by Alcoholics Anonymous or similar addiction programs. Among her Cree patients from Quebec, art therapist and anthropologist Ferrara stresses the importance of non-verbal communication for healing. Western clinical work prioritises verbal expression in communication, unlike First Nations patients who may interpret silence differently (Ferrara 2004: 7). Ferrara argues that art therapy is a better approach to healing among Cree because it begins in silence and creates an activity of making, which is only then followed by a patient’s narrative. After creating art forms, her patients told stories about them, thus, ascribing order to their worlds and creating the means to understand their emotions (Ferrara 2004). The art therapy became a ritualised space, where Cree could re-affirm and balance their notions of self. Like the spaces of women’s collective activity in northwest Alaska, Ferrara’s work points to the importance of narratives that follow the creation of art or product within a deliberately created space.

Techniques of the body

As these explanations testify, participating in “traditional” activities has compound layers of meaning and creates multiple features that contribute to well-being. Here I would like to focus on just two features—the embodied nature of work and the narratives spoken while working—and their interrelationship—how thoughts and words arise amid rhythmic tasks. I suggest that the rhythmic body movements, the sensuous material used, and the kinds of expressed narratives intertwine and reinforce a pattern of thinking that encourages a practitioner not only to reflect upon her life but

also to draw from her past in order to plan her future—to turn difficulties into fruitful thoughts and actions.

With experience, a rhythm of work develops as one becomes proficient. The *black meat* processors and basket makers develop rhythmic body movements to perform their work and to coordinate their efforts better. Langer (1953) argues that rhythm above all else is a perception. As You (1994: 363) understands Langer, it “is the demand, preparation and anticipation for something to come.” It is a perception of expectation, a future-oriented process. Ingold (2009) highlights that no two rhythmic movements are exactly the same; one oscillation is in response to the previous one. Using the example of walking, Ingold explains that rhythmic movement builds on preceding movements. Footsteps “do not follow one another in succession [...] [r]ather, every step is a development of the one before and a preparation for the one following” (*ibid*: 98). Accordingly, rhythmic movement is a creative rather than repetitive process (Ingold and Hallam 2007; Lefebvre 2004). Based on Langer’s and Ingold’s understandings, we can summarise that bodily rhythm anticipates the future while developing out of the past; it connects the past with the future.

Might these rhythmic body-generated perspectives, which creatively merge past and future, reinforce thoughts and verbal expressions? Mauss (1979[1936]) argued that body techniques are employed for a reason. Bodies are not inert vehicles of symbolic meaning to be engaged by the acting mind; rather, bodies through their movements accomplish things (Asad 1997: 48). As such, bodies must be acknowledged for their role in social agency (Lock 1993). In his analysis of Kuranko initiation rites in Sierra Leone, Jackson (1983) provides further analysis for illuminating the agentive role of the body, in particular, how patterns of body use mediate mental dispositions. He argues that the mind, body, and habitus are mutually affected; changes to one’s body, are transposable to the other two. “Human experience,” he writes, “is grounded in bodily movement within a social and material environment” and behaviours and narratives in one arena inform other arenas (Jackson 1983: 330). Jackson (*ibid*: 328) also explains, “when our familiar environment is suddenly disrupted we feel uprooted, we lose our footing [...] we fall [...] but such falling [...] is not [...] a mere manner of speaking: it is a shock and disorientation which occurs simultaneously in body and mind.” Changes to one’s environment change one’s thoughts (feelings of disorientation) and body movements (falling). From this it follows that the rhythmic activity of making baskets or processing meat gives rise to an internal state of thinking that mimics this rhythmic pattern, i.e., a perspective that draws from the past in order to prepare for the future. Thus, thoughts and body movements are aligned.

Time is key to processing activities. Practitioners become sensitive to durations of time; how long materials take to dry; how long blubber takes to render; how long food products will last before being consumed or spoiled; and in what seasons they can be harvested. Durations of work promise moments of sharing the fruits of one’s labours with family and friends.¹ At the same time, and like rhythm, the past is sensuously

¹ This was brought to my attention by an anonymous reviewer.

constituted by the material and tools themselves (Seremetakis 1996). Techniques of the body are not single performances but learned over time, pieced together from observations and experiences, and built on memories of previous engagements: the smell of seal oil and grass, the taste of *black meat*, the calendar of events, along with the embodied gestures gained while first learning and then performing traditional activities from salient memories (Connerton 1989; Hallam and Hockey 2001). These memories help novices piece together information to accomplish tasks and help bring the past into one's present engagement and anticipation. Thus, people actively engage in their past and are reminded of their history while preparing food to share with family for the imminent winter, while crafting gifts for the upcoming holidays, and while making commodities for future craft fairs. The past is recalled while performing tasks for the future.

Many narratives told within the spaces of women's traditional activities optimistically attended to the storyteller's past while attempting to resolve difficulties for a productive future. While cutting seal meat, the older more experienced practitioner allayed the young woman's doubt about the future of *black meat* preparation by using herself as an example. As a child, she had learned to offer help to those in need. Her assistance with the sisters' meat cutting maintained this tradition. Her narrative and aid were hopeful illustrations that Inupiat would still put up *black meat* in 50 years. Similarly, during the basketry class, working through the loss of her husband, the instructor reflected upon her grandmother's words told to her as a child perhaps as consolation for her present condition and as a way to draw strength. Finally, the King Island woman who mistook a meeting for an evening of beading reflected upon the awkward event and transformed it into an amusing anecdote. These types of narratives readily emerged within the rhythmic techniques of the body and mirrored their movement. A practitioner's rhythmic technique isomorphically resembled her thoughts. Each stitch in coiling reacted to the previous one and foreshadowed the next. Each turn in the women's stories responded to the past to anticipate the future.

In addition to the transposition between mind, body, and habitus, Jackson further argues that patterns of body use can inform normative behaviour. He shows how bodily practices learned from everyday Kuranko activities, such as hoeing or building a fire, inform bodily movements during women's initiation rites. These "bodily practices mediate a personal realization of social values, an immediate grasp of general precepts as sensible truths" (Jackson 1983: 337). Knowledge, social norms, and cultural values can be transmitted to and understood by individuals, *bodily*. Nancy Ries (2009) offers a compelling example of how frugality is learned and then embodied in domestic techniques of post-socialist Russians. She describes how even the wealthiest Russians save the smallest palatable morsels when cutting apples and remove the thinnest shavings when peeling potatoes. Ries (*ibid*: 186) argues that peeling practices are "a largely unspoken, nearly unspeakable frugality embodied in everyday labor." Even novice imitation of expert technique manifests awareness of social values. Mimesis reveals respect for skillful people; in northwest Alaska, mimesis conveys respect for elders, since experienced practitioners are often the most accomplished ones.

Cultural values are embedded in bodily movement and become conscious when performed, thus offering a practitioner a set of principles to help guide her decisions. Each person finds her own meanings within these bodily movements because, as Jackson (1983) reminds us, body practices do not mean one explicit thing but are open to interpretation (*cf.* Lock 1993). Each practitioner grasps meanings as she perfects bodily movements, at her own pace, through her own interpretations shaped but not determined by her bodily movements within a social environment. Furthermore, in this process, personal autonomy is safeguarded—no one is told what to do. At the same time, within the spaces of collective rhythmic body practice, practitioners find unity, a common cause, and an impression of common consent (Jackson 1983: 339). Practitioners can therefore draw their own conclusions about embodied cultural values and apply them to their life difficulties within the supportive space of shared body movement.

In their quiet, reflective, and creative space, my fellow practitioners perhaps sensed that performing activities that they grew up with, which formed the backdrop of stories they had heard, feel good. Patterns of thinking correspond to techniques of the body; both share a rhythm that builds from the past to create the future. These activities reinforce normative behaviour. While working through difficulties, practitioners can draw from an array of cultural values to inform their decisions. The past is echoed in present activities, helping people to draw strength from family members, previous experiences, and culturally specific values for their upcoming plans.

Conclusion

Attending to the body within technological processes reveals how rhythmic movement shapes human experience. Inupiat and Yupiit practitioners resort to traditional activities to achieve wellness because they understand they can shape healthy selves through an experience that is grounded in the body and that at the same time produces crafts, commodities, and food. Practice-based technology theorists derive similar conclusions. They argue that technological process—the context of social relations, implements, and materials being performed by skilled agents for production—provides the daily engagements whereby individuals, in part, are moulded and social practices and values reproduced, reconfigured, or challenged (Dobres 2001; Ingold 1999: ix). Working in Alaska, anthropologists highlight the political role of Indigenous traditional practices, which create new conditions for activism to address socio-economic disparities and cultural autonomy of Alaska Native institutions from state and federal governments (Fienup-Riordan 2000, 2003; Lee 2002, 2003). It now appears that Inupiat and Yupiit in northwest Alaska are once again applying their traditional heritage to critical contemporary circumstances, to address and promote well-being. Drawing from their past, they craft their future.

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