
The Great Migration of Whys

ABSTRACT Nunalleq is a pre-contact Yup'ik village (1350–1660 CE) massacred during a centuries-long conflict known today as the Bow and Arrow Wars. As global temperatures fell during the Little Ice Age (1300–1800 CE), conflict intensified along the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta as food raids and village burnings became commonplace among warring Yup'ik communities. The following essay considers the events of Nunalleq alongside a new era of migration as Yup'ik prepare to move farther inland in response to human-induced climate change. Specifically, I reflect on the relationships between Yup'ik material culture and oral history, and how these histories adapt over time. This writing is an experimental ethnography based in archaeological excavation and participant observation. This writing is oral history. This writing should be read aloud. **KEYWORDS** Yup'ik; Oral history; Migration; Ethnography

In situ,

Different than *Wasi'chu*—white man,
Different than *Gussak*—white man,
Different in dirt,
Different in dance.

Tonight there will be dancing. Four flat-faced drums will pound three beats. Outside lampposts with powerlines slung low like half-drawn bows will illuminate gravel parking lots. Inside, in a dusty armory, we will sit shoulder-to-shoulder on low wooden benches. I will study you. There will be ice cream for the kids, and blankets will shroud each window. I will sit next to Rick, and he will tell me—in hushed tones—about the old ways. About gloved hands that summoned *Ellam Yua*—the unified spirit that inhabits all animals, objects, humans. About five-day dances where drum and rhythm remained unbroken. About masks that let humans transform to animals and animals to teachers so that we may learn *qan-ruyutet* (oral histories about the right ways of living). And about how these masks were broken and discarded after each ceremony. Masks so powerful that they only danced once.

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At Nunalleq—a 400-year-old, pre-contact Yup'ik village—we find many masks danced, cracked, thrown away. We find moose, and seal, and caribou masks on grass mats. But we also find those of the mosquito: *Ellam Yua* inhabits all. We know not to disturb them; to keep them lodged in dirt—in *situ*—troweling carefully around these past dances. With care, we uncover materials and tell stories. And this is how I think of migration: as a lifelong eddy of materials found in rhythm; as a more-than-human dance; a dance where things are found, lost, and re-found. My trowel finds your mask. Your drum, like your midnight sun in July, loses the time of clocks. Your drum finds old stories.

Drums, masks, and mats are objects of migration that imply context. But your *in situ* is not my context. Nor shall it ever be. For the ethnographer, *in situ* means local knowledge; it means three beats and flat-faced drums. For the archaeologist it means dirt; it means stratigraphy, samples, and screens. For me, though, it means liminality. So, I look for *in situ* in places where dirt and dance collide in migration.

Dances of dirt and water tell stories at Nunalleq. Today, we found a mask fragment as raindrops slid down a plastic white tarp roof. With the rain, the air changed, which meant no more mosquitoes; no more no-see-ums, which buzz and worm their way past mosquito netting; and no more buggy hours hunched over two square meters. But soon the rain made everything damp and mud and slick as though the tundra were a mossy sponge wrung tight by two strong hands. We ran to jackets, cursing loudly when forgotten ones were found waterlogged or when fresh holes appeared in our boots or bibs. Noses ran, and hands and feet turned cold. A German surplus wool sweater was borrowed. In the summer, in a tent, I saw my breath.

Stories migrate over time to find new rhythms. Today, I stood shivering in a white tarp tent, but 400 years ago, you stood in dirt. To build this house, you cut sod blocks with slender, curved root picks made of ivory or antler; you stacked these blocks between timber posts, pinning each one in place with sharpened sticks. And the most important room would have been the *qasgiq* (communal men's quarters), where at the age of five, your boys left their mothers to “steal a few words” from *Nukalpiaq* (A good hunter and provider, and a male of high social standing).¹ Here, they learned the stories, songs, and dances of your elders. It was communal. It was instruction. It was dancing.

They say there are two ways to learn *qanruyutet*—through *alergutet* (prescriptions) and *inerqutet* (prohibitions).² And it is said that no animal or

human is born conscious—it is only through oral history that we become *ellange* (aware). And they say that the first animals cast off their beaks and muzzles to become human, and that, like Yup'ik, they learned *qanruyutet* in *qasgiq*.³ So, *alerquutet* teaches young boys to clear ice for seals in the winter, and *inerquutet* reminds them that animals hide from boastful hunters.⁴ But *inerquutet* also reminds young seals to stay awake before death so that their souls may survive the hunter's blow, and *alerquutet* teaches them to give themselves up to hunters who remember the stories and live *qanruyutet*.⁵ And so, oral history becomes a more-than-human dance of migrating souls. *Ellam Yua* inhabits all.

It is said that one who learns *alerquutet* must keep these lessons close, as if tied to one's ankles like shoelaces, so as to not forget them.⁶ And they say that a child who does not listen to *inerquutet* is more unpleasant than stinky things.⁷ And it is said that animals give themselves to those who learn their history, but those who live for themselves go hungry. And so, they say, "*Umyuan niicgniur-aqsaunaku*" (Do not listen to your own mind).⁸ We must learn from stories, and we must learn from our mistakes, which become *neq'ayarat* (devices that help one remember or call something to mind). A mistake alone is death, but mistakes that become *neq'ayarat* teach us the dangers of anger, revenge, or violence.⁹ And so, 400 years ago when Nunalleq burned, it became *neq'ayarat*.

Nunalleq: The Old Village

At Nunalleq,
When seasons change,
Men must hunt; boys must learn.
So darts teach boys how to aim.
And when villages meet they trade thin tally sticks to remember wins and losses.
Until a boy loses his eye to a jade-tipped dart,
And a vengeful father takes revenge,
Seeking two eyes for one eye lost.

At Nunalleq
In revenge,
A raid is planned.
And strong warriors take to gut-skin kayaks,
With cable-backed bows and slate blades.
To take many eyes for two lost ones.

But men hunt in great migrations.
Here today, gone the next.
So strong warriors take a hostage.
And she listens,
before escaping,
So that an ambush may be laid,
So that Nunalleq may burn.

At Nunalleq,
When the village saw strong warriors,
They did not see familiar faces, nor bows, nor kayaks,
So children wearing thin-stitched parkas.
And elders wearing ivory labrets and red-ochre bangles.
Fled to tundra.
Hoping for adoption, hoping for migration.
But the seal oil was already in clay pots.
The slate already ground to points.
The arrows already nocked.

At Nunalleq,
The roof burns; sod crumbles.
And grass rope binds frail hands, young feet.
Until seasons change once more.

They say, “*Ciutek iinguuk*” (ears are eyes).¹⁰ But what happens to an oral history when ears no longer listen, and eyes no longer see? And what happens when an oral history migrates among tongues that were not there? Nunalleq teaches us that some stories hide in dirt, others migrate, and some are lost forever. We dig to make sense of *qanruyutet*, and we weave stories from material culture. So, we churn black earth to find charred sod and oil-slick house floors that tell stories of an attack. And we find hair and seed samples that tell stories of who lived with whom, and what they ate. And we find four unbroken masks that remind us that not all dances will be danced. Not all stories will become *qanruyutet*. Not all stories will survive migration.

Migration transcends space and time: It is material; it is ecological, and this material ecology dictates how we use items, how these items come to define us, what we believe, and how we act. In this way, all migrations are material, and all materials imply migration: Four hundred years ago, jade traveled

thousands of miles in gut-skin kayaks to become drills and dart tips. Then—in a hungry time—an errant dart began a war, and now king, silver, and sock-eye salmon swim upstream every summer in a river named *Arolik*. It is a river named after the ashes of Nunalleq, and it is a river named to remember that some stories dance over time.

Life and death are held in balance by migration. Upon this dance the world's rhythm rests. So, I look for migration in a story of materials used, forgotten, and abandoned. I listen when elders speak because I know that ears are eyes, and I learn to see new rhythms across time. When we find ivory toggle-tip harpoons at Nunalleq and I see their steel offspring for sale at the hardware store in Quinhagak, I think about the first seal who—finding the pronged-point lodged firmly beneath skin and blubber—could no longer dive under ice flows to slip the grasp of strong hunters. And when we find polished slate ulu blades, or fish for king on the Arolik, I wonder how stories migrate: What changes; what is cast aside, and what endures? At Nunalleq, 400 years ago, stone ground stone to find the perfect knife for filleting fish. But today, you can make an ulu with a worn circular saw blade and an angle grinder. Though the materials change, the rhythm remains the same. And they say we teach through *elucirtuutet* (rhythmic action).¹¹ So let me take you fishing.

They say the ulu is a knife for fish: Like the moon, which leaves sickled halos in thick mist, an ulu blade makes its own light as silver-scaled, fleshy tendrils fall—pink, wide-eyed, gasping—onto the pebbled banks of your grandma's fish camp. To get to grandma's fish camp you migrate upstream, like the salmon you seek. And you will bring a walnut bolt-action .308 with your uncle's initials carved into the buttstock. And you might bring firecrackers, but you will cram five rounds into the magazine, hoping for a sixth, when you spot wet bear scat or paired paw-prints where the little ones have palm-sized pads. And you will wait. And if all goes well, the *Gussaks* catch many king, the rifle never leaves your skiff, and you will use that ulu.

But first, catch and release: Tiger stripes mean chum, and chum is dog food. Pink bellies and humped backs are keepers, and keepers demand a driftwood stunning stick. Thump. Now that the fish is stunned, push past the flap of skin over its gills, grasp the gills with one hooked finger, and pull until there is a soft, wet snap. Bleed your fish so that the meat does not spoil. Warm and blood make waste, and this is not yours to waste. Be clean; be *iqailnguut*.¹² They say only *Gussaks* play with food.

Now it is the ulu's turn. The first stroke, made with your body weight and a rocking motion, cleaves head from body, body from brain, and brain from a heart still beating. The second stroke, a languid arc more graceful than the first, separates belly skin from bowels. The third and fourth strokes, made on both sides of the spine, free fillet from carcass. Now wash that fillet in the shallows. Return what remains to the river. Remember: The ulu is a knife *for* fish. The ulu is life. And the ulu teaches us that, sometimes, a heart beats on beyond the body.

What changes in migration? What stays the same? They say the first man came from a pea pod made by Raven. And that when he emerged, on the fifth day, Raven stood before him. And as man looked upon Raven he saw a creature not unlike himself. And man was hungry, tired, cold, alone, so Raven donned his mask, changed shape, and flew to find what man needed.

And they say that salmon and seal only offer themselves to good people, and good people never waste what is offered.¹³ But now the elders shake their heads when we talk, telling me that we waste so much, *Gussaks* especially. And I nod my head, knowing this to be true, and I think about the ravens I see at the dump in Quinhagak, dancing between bits of garbage in the black, acrid smoldering smoke of forgotten things. If Raven shed his mask today, what would he tell us?

They say last summer, silver salmon were two weeks late on the Arolik, and, in the fall, snow did not appear when it should have. And they say "*Elpeci-gguqwaniwa ngeinguuci*" (You are the last generation, after which change will occur).¹⁴ And they say that this is the beginning of a new migration. As tundra disappears so will cloudberry, salmon, geese, and caribou. Already plans have been made to move inland. But what will happen to *qanruyutet*? What will happen to the right ways of living?

They say if we break the rules—if we live *umyugiuryaraq* (bad living)—*Ellam Yua* will bring us to our senses.¹⁵ But so much today does not make sense: It was not the Yup'ik who drank oil in great machines; it was not the Yup'ik who built massive factories, and it is not the Yup'ik who fish for sport. But it is the Yup'ik who must migrate. So, they say "*Ciunerpeceni caniqauq tauna tekitarkarcu*" (Your future is placed in front of you, and you cannot go around it).¹⁶

And they say the ocean—with her restless ice floes, shoals, and sandbars—cannot be learned like tundra because tundra does not melt; tundra does not

float away; tundra does not disappear.¹⁷ But, today, tundra moves like ocean to unknown rhythms. And so begins a great migration of whys: Why do sockeye, silver, and king run so different now? Why did the Quinhagak fish plant close three years ago? Why do teenagers take to bushes with damp, drunken breath? Why does the Bering Sea—with her vast sand spits like crooked teeth—now swallow melting tundra whole like the mighty halibut? Why, ten years ago at Nunalleq, did old ways of living wash ashore? Why do some dances go undanced? Why do some masks remain unbroken? ■

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NOTES

1. Ann Fienup-Riordan, “Metaphors to Live By: The Boy Who Went to Live with the Seals and the Girl Who Returned from the Dead,” in *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup’ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 3–46.

2. Fienup-Riordan, “Metaphors to Live By,” 37.

3. Fienup-Riordan, “Metaphors to Live By,” 3.

4. See Fienup-Riordan, “Metaphors to Live By,” 6; “The Relationship between Humans and Animals,” in *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup’ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 52.

5. Fienup-Riordan, “The Relationship between Humans and Animals,” in *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup’ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 53.

6. Frank Andrew, “They used to tell us that we should tie our instructions to our ankles with our shoelaces so that they would not become untied,” in *Yup’ik Qanruyutait: Yup’ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 27.

The use of “They say,” as anaphora, is a common figure of speech within Yup’ik oral history. For more on the linguistic structure of Yup’ik oral history, see Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words of the Yup’ik People: We Talk Because We Love You*, trans. Alice Rearden (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), xxxix–xliii.

7. Frank Andrew, “They say a child who is not raised carefully can potentially be more unpleasant than stinky things,” in *Yup’ik Qanruyutait: Yup’ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 127.

8. Fienup-Riordan, “Humans and Animals,” 57.

9. Fienup-Riordan, “Humans and Animals,” 56, 57.

10. David Martin, “They say ears are eyes,” in *Yup’ik Qanruyutait: Yup’ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 17.

11. Paul John, "We taught them through our actions," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 207.
12. Frank Andrew, "They called those who did not mess up food *iqailnguut*," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 87.
13. Theresa Moses, "They said if we collected them, they would soon be enough to make a parka," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 89.
14. Elsie Mather, "They say you are the last generation," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 271.
15. Frank Andrew, "If we keep breaking the rules, they say Ellam Yua will do something so we come to our senses," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 41.
16. John Philip Sr., "Your future is ahead of you," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 95.
17. Frank Andrew, "They say the ocean cannot be learned," in *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik Words of Wisdom*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 90–91.