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AT THE END IS *PIURAA*: THE RAVEN'S GIFT BY DON REARDEN

Abstract

This paper considers Alaskan author Don Rearden's novel *The Raven's Gift* (2011). The novel deals with environmental injustice, and is built around an apocalyptic plot, depicting the destruction of the Alaskan Yup'ik community through several forms of genocide, culminating with an artificially induced virus. However, the novel ends with a substantial degree of hope imminent in the concept of *piuraa*, which is pregnant with the spirit of the place and the nature of the Native culture. This concept is conceived in the imagination of a holistic circular cosmogony of the Native culture, and is contrasted to the linear spirit and nature of the progressive civilization which eventually must imagine ends of societies and cultures. Therefore, the paper discusses Rearden's novel against the background of some recent historical, ecocritical, and sociological studies, such as those of Francis Fukuyama, Jared Diamond, and Peter Turchin, as well as through the lens of indigenous epistemology as interpreted by Daniel Heath Justice and John Trudell.

Keywords: Don Rearden, *The Raven's Gift*, *piuraa*, Yup'ik, circular cosmogony, linear imagination, collapse of societies

Introduction

Piuraa is a word that the Alaskan Yup'ik people use to express good wishes when parting. Unlike the English conception of "goodbye" (contraction of "God be with you"), *piuraa* means "I will see you again." In its original meaning, as explained in Don Rearden's novel, *The Raven's Gift*, *piuraa* was used to express a wish that a person who we are departing from may stay what that person is, that is, a human being, a consciously responsible member in the chain of life, which is the only space of existence.

The novel is set in a Yup'ik village, an exotic cultural and social space where John Morgan and his wife, Anna adventurously pursue nine-month teaching positions. John and Anna are told that Yup'ik is "just a little north of heaven" (Rearden 9). It is one of the last places on earth in which the Native tongue is fluently spoken, and Yup'ik is among a few living subsistence cultures. While it is one of the world's largest waterfowl refuges, it is also abundant with salmon. Yet, the Morgans are also warned that it is where the government dumped radioactive waste and detonated bombs, for which reason the place has the highest rate of cancer in the country. *The Raven's Gift* is based on facts, and the author says that what really moved the novel was not the question "what if?" but the question "when?" the final destruction will take place (Rearden 278). Thus, the romantic venture of the Morgans is interrupted by an outbreak of an artificially created epidemic, when the isolated tundra communities collapse into chaos. Their members are dying so quickly that the living do not have time to bury the dead. After Anna dies, and after months of hiding, John comes out of his refuge in search of food. Wandering around the snowed-up tundra, he comes across individuals who, taken by the shock of loss and sickened with continual hunger, are in various states of psychological disorder. Some are suicidal, some are forced to consume refuse, others are reduced to cannibalism. There is also a mysterious hunter figure whose task is to collect samples of the survivors' blood, which possesses the virus immunization element, and then kill them all so that there is no one left to tell the story. John also comes across a blind girl, who joins him on the journey, first as a burden, but then as the only human voice of hope. Eventually, after many tribulations and a long struggle through the snow, John and the blind girl come across a group of survivors from the girl's community, which means that these particular individuals will be safe for a time.

However, the novel leaves us in an endangered environment with a decimated population and with several burdening questions intensely relevant for our contemporary world, in which we witness mistreatment of both the natural world and the marginalized, mostly indigenous, peoples on an almost daily basis, as will be specified. Written at the time that witnessed the appearance of numerous apocalyptic stories, *The Raven's Gift* does not just end with the question if the Yup'ik culture, as well as other indigenous cultures, will survive but also explores how to proceed to live as human beings in a threatened and threatening environment, what our particular responsibilities are as human beings for the situation that we find ourselves in, and, especially, where and how to look for answers.

Since the novel first appears to be an apocalyptic story, to understand why societies collapse and why one society wants to destroy another, it will be analyzed through two contrastive lenses: Western theories about the conception of history and collapse of societies, on the one hand, and Native cultural stories, on the other.

Historia Est Magistra Scientiarum

Contrasting two opposing ways of understanding life and living it, on both its contextual and visual levels, *The Raven's Gift* develops by questioning the effects of enlightenment and the prevailing visual metaphor of white civilization, i.e. that what we see is what there truly is. This visual choice serves to support the gap between the civilized eye – which sees Alaska as a wide white waste – and the Yup'ik appreciation of their Native place, which is a place full of life and cultural stories. While the place speaks with “otherness” to the foreign observer, this observer assumes the right to judge it inferior and to control it. As a metonymy of the dominant civilization's limited understanding of Native life, the narrative is blurred by the prevailing whiteness of the surrounding void of recognizable urban forms. At the same time, although told in the third person singular, the narrative is magnetized by John's experience of exhaustion and fear, thus affecting the reader's visual appreciation of the events too. It is only the blind Native girl, Rayna – whose name we learn only by the end – who gives a voice to the heightened awareness of the natural surroundings.

This suggests that the waste the “white” eye sees is a product of a sustained cultural learning, i.e. a learned habit of obliterating from its visual and episte-

mological horizons what does not suit the privileged forms of rationality, progress, morality, or aestheticism. As Vine Deloria (1994) and Joseph Bauerkemper (2007) argue, the Christian idea of miserable time and the Hegelian idea of history as a realization of absolute rationality have deprived indigenous life and culture of value and, thus, reasoned their suppression and appropriation, i.e. death. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama argued that the crash of communism, which the world witnessed in the same year, signaled the arrival of a system in which all the world problems, from criminal to ecological justice, are answerable through the application of liberal principles. However, in his 1992 essay, "The End of History and the Last Man," he expresses "profound pessimism . . . born of the truly terrible political events," which emphasize that human personality is only satisfied in a superior position. That fact has always led men "to assert themselves in new and unforeseen ways, even to the point of becoming once again bestial 'first men' engaged in bloody prestige battles, this time with modern weapons" (Fukuyama 1998). Ten years later, in *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnological Revolution*, Fukuyama fears that technology may alter human nature into a posthuman state, when humanity will stop being in control of its own production (16–17). Logically, therefore, "there can be no end of history without an end of modern natural science and technology" (Guerra 2002).

To understand the present situation, in his book *The World Until Yesterday* (2012), Californian geographer, Jared Diamond contrasts modern and traditional societies. He focuses on the Natives of Papua New Guinea, but also provides examples of Alaskan Inuit, California's Shoshones, Australian aborigines, northern Japan's Ainu, and Yanomamo of Brazil and Venezuela. The first topic of his concern is the want for land and, therefore, the concept of territory, which to many a Native society was unknown because all the natural resources were considered available to everybody. The Natives know the concept of sacred land, or storied space (as their cultural identification arbiter), which, therefore, cannot be a matter of possession or dispute.

However, being Native is not an ideal condition, and disputes do appear in Native societies. Yet, when it comes to solving them and shaping the compensation processes, they are significantly distinguished from Western disputes because all their participants are previously known to each other, either from already having been involved in some sort of personal relationship, or at least from knowing of each other by name or a father's name or group affiliation

(*The World Until Yesterday* 87). The reason for this is that these are small-sized societies of a few hundred individuals. Therefore, in traditional societies, any dispute that occurs is always with someone with whom one will continue to have an actual or potential relationship in the future, so that the damaged relationship is easier to repair (89). Unlike them, citizens of modern states live in societies of millions, and, as a consequence of this, are often forced to deal with unknown members of their society, for which reason establishment of guilt and punishment comes more easily. This is especially so when, as in the case of the novel, the antagonistic party is far away and unseen. Diamond further argues that social bonds in communities that cherish the notion of the chain of being save individuals from loneliness and alienation, which is a constant problem in world capitals, and which he practically blames for atrocities (457).

Passing from this to the effects of the contact with Europeans, Diamond provides ample illustrations of state or colonial governments eager to get indigenous people out of the way by conquering, dispossessing, or removing them from their homelands, or by turning a blind eye to their extermination (*The World Until Yesterday* 53). This has been done on the basis of their idea of “discovery” (cf. Wilkins and Lomawaima 19–63), and religions, which claim to have a monopoly on the truth, but also on the basis of their idea of free economy and liberal democracy. Diamond provides a list of forms of genocide, including cultural genocide through the destruction of peoples’ languages. In the chapter “How Languages Disappear,” he explains that the most direct way of eliminating a language is to kill almost all of its speakers. He gives an example of the last “wild Indian,” Ishi, who was the lone survivor after his Yahi tribe was annihilated in a series of massacres between 1853 and 1870, when the gold rush had brought white settlers to California (*The World Until Yesterday* 398).

Another way to eradicate a language is to forbid its use. For several centuries, the U.S. government insisted that “Indians” should be “civilized” and taught nothing but English. To this aim, Native children were removed from the “barbarous” atmosphere of their parents’ homes to English-language-only boarding schools, where the use of Native languages was punished with physical abuse and humiliation (*The World Until Yesterday* 399). To justify the policy, J.D.C. Atkins, the U.S. commissioner for Indian affairs from 1885 to 1888, explained:

The instruction of Indians in the vernacular . . . is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization,

and it will not be permitted in any Indian school over which the Government has any control. . . . This (English) language, which is good enough for a white man and a black man, ought to be good enough for a red man. It is also believed that teaching Indian youths in their own barbarous dialect is a positive detriment to them. The first step to be taken toward civilization, toward teaching the Indians the mischief and folly of continuing in their barbarous practices, is to teach them the English language. (399)

This seems like a strong argument, but, as history amply proves, monolingual utopia does not guarantee stability, peace, and tolerance.

In *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Diamond discusses the inability of a society to fight the ecological crisis it produced. He has in mind “human-caused climate change, buildup of toxic chemicals in the environment, energy shortages, and full human utilization of the Earth’s photosynthetic capacity” (*Collapse* 17), which will not lead to popular doomsday scenarios, as he says, but will more likely lead to

a future of significantly lower living standards, chronically higher risks, and the undermining of what we now consider some of our key values. Such a collapse could assume various forms, such as the worldwide spread of diseases or else of wars, triggered ultimately by scarcity of environmental resources. If this reasoning is correct, then our efforts today will determine the state of the world in which the current generation of children and young adults live out their middle and late years. (17)

Reviewing past societies that ended up destroying themselves, Diamond wonders about the reasons they failed to perceive the danger. He asks if it was “perversely wrought by people acting in full awareness of the consequences” (*Collapse* 33), i.e. on what moral basis some members of the group were allowed “to pursue goals good for themselves but bad for the rest of the group” (33). “Irrational behavior,” or a failure to attempt to solve a perceived problem, is differently called by social scientists, such as “persistence in error,” “wooden-headedness,” “refusal to draw inference from negative signs,” “mental standstill or stagnation.” Diamond also uses the psychological term “sunk-cost effect,” which stands for the situation in which “we feel reluctant to abandon a policy . . . in which we have already invested heavily” (442). Providing examples of oil, hardrock and mining, logging, and marine fishing industries, Diamond shows

how the so-called “rational behavior” works, that is, how it, while serving businesses, translates into “disastrous decision-making by a society” (442).

Summarizing the environmental dangers facing our world today, Diamond concludes that the major difference between them and the past societies has to do with globalization. Globalization “makes it impossible for modern societies to collapse in isolation” (*Collapse* 33), as was the case before, because every change anywhere in the world has helpful or destabilizing influences globally:

For the first time in history, we face the risk of a global decline. But we also are the first to enjoy the opportunity of learning quickly from developments in societies anywhere else in the world today, and from what has unfolded in societies at any time in the past. That’s why I wrote this book. (33)

Anthropologist Peter Turchin adopts medieval Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun’s concept of *asabiya*, which refers to social solidarity with an emphasis on unity, group consciousness, sense of shared purpose, and social cohesion, originally in a context of tribalism. Naturally, societies grow stronger with the growth of their *asabiya*, and collapse with its disintegration. Exchange of generations and changing civilization eat up group solidarity, while assimilation processes are destructive to tribal cultures. Both these concepts are true of tribal societies, but also of their white neighbors, who are abruptly destroying natural resources on the basis of the *asabiya* of greed.

In *War and Peace and War*, Turchin explains that groups with high *asabiya* arise on metaethnic frontiers, places where group competitions are very intense, and areas where an imperial boundary coincides with a fault line between two metaethnic communities (6). The empires put a lot of military pressure on the people beyond their boundaries, while the frontier populations are attracted to the imperial wealth, and they do not hesitate to attain it by trading or raiding. In that kind of combat, the weakly integrated groups can crumble or disappear, whereas groups based on strong *asabiya* can thrive and expand. To an American, the word frontier immediately conjures up visions of the Wild West, in which the contact of two civilizations, “Indians” and cavalry (48), led to conflict and genocide. On one side were the Europeans with a monotheistic religion (mostly Protestants), whereas on the other side were various Native societies. While the American melting pot brought the warring European nations

together against their common enemy – the Natives – in a unity defined by race (immigrants who belonged to non-White races were not accepted as the “Americans”), the American *asabiya* grew stronger than that of their opponents, who struggled to unite and stop fighting among themselves and against Whites. The Whites made strong associations and, eventually, the United States of America. Turchin explains:

As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power . . . which serves as an example; when it speaks, men listen. (52)

Moreover, societies are not closed systems; they are affected by and afflicted with a variety of external forces, such as climate change, the arrival of a pandemic, or the invasion of an army (Turchin 259). Therefore, the dynamics of real human societies cannot be accurately predicted far into the future because of the nature of chaotic behavior, free will, and natural disasters (11). Turchin asks many questions at the end of his book, such as:

Can we design societies in such a way that *asabiya* is not constantly being degraded? Do humans always need the threat of imminent danger from some outside enemy to cooperate effectively? Will intra-elite competition escalate into violence and cause Western states to collapse even in the presence of democratic institutions, designed to channel conflict into peaceful forms? (356)

Yup'ik Struggles

The Raven's Gift fictionalizes several important historical and social moments discussed by Fukuyama, Diamond, and Turchin. In the first place, we witness how one society's powerful *asabiya* inflicts decline of the *asabiya* of the other, in the metaethnic setting of Alaska, the furthest frontier of the American empire, populated by weakly organized communities scattered around the isolated tundra. While the abstract white emptiness of the landscape we encounter in this book may be metaphorical of the Hegelian desire, it is full of meanings for its indigenous peoples and presents a horizon of cultural identification. The dominant civilization's failure to perceive this storied space feeds its acquisition appetite. We also witness all the forms of systematic destruction described by Di-

amongst – from the corruption of natural resources to the corruption of humans through a variety of assimilation activities aimed to reduce the Native community to a consumerist society and open a new market for economic expansion.

This story is not new, which is a fact the novel emphasizes by abiding by the prevailing structure of apocalyptic stories – as it seems that there is no other way to react against disintegration. The narrative, therefore, develops in the third person singular and opens *in medias res* to show John “crawl[ing] on his stomach through the snowdrift and lift[ing] his head over the edge of the riverbank” (Rearden 5) to see if there is any life left in the village. What he sees is the absurdity of devastation:

The carnage was the same as in the other villages. The shack houses had been burned or pilfered and what remained made little sense. Out of the broken window of one house dangled a large black television, its cord running up into the darkness beyond the window frame, as if somehow holding on. (7)

After this, the narrative goes back to the beginning of the problem, when it becomes fragmented and unchronological. In other words, while following John’s progress through the snow, which, because of the surrounding whiteness, is considerably vague, the narrative turns to the events preceding the catastrophe, i.e. those in which the Morgans believed in their romantic escape, depicting their idealistic endeavor to offer some meaningful education to their students, as well as the tribe’s complaints about its numerous misfortunes, and, finally, the first realization of the quickly spreading destructive virus. These juxtapositions of contrastive events also proceed through chapters that are not titled but are connected with a motif. This motif is presented in a form of space, a person, or a story whose meanings alter in different contexts, and which also serve to stress human unwillingness to accept the truth. Such an example is the image of a school that used to be “the centre of the community. Its heart” (Rearden 95), but which, in the chapters to follow, connects a setting of a scavenger post-apocalyptic episode with a pre-apocalypse school ceremony. In the chronological proceeding of the events, the narrative depicts three conditions, which we will name by using the visual metaphor discussed at the beginning: 1. the condition of seeing and not foreseeing, 2. the condition of seeing and not accepting, and 3. the condition of acceptance. This development can also be described as John’s progression from an enthusiastic romantic, venturing into an exotic region of

the Earth, to a disillusioned humanist who is aware of the destructive effects the white civilization has had on the Earth.

In the first condition, of seeing and not foreseeing, the protagonists are two idealists brought into the snowed-up tundra village on a plane that is late due to a blizzard. They are told that the housing is “pretty shitty really” (Rearden 9), but they do not foresee a shaky hut, without running water or telephone. Artificial and toxic materials are what the houses are made of:

The weathered plywood houses stood without paint. Beside the houses rested the rusted carcasses of boat motors and old red three-wheelers and four-wheelers with flat tires, white five-gallon buckets, shredded blue tarps that covered sheds and flapped in the wind. . . . everything possessed a worn appearance, as if the hand of a god brushed and burnished each time in just the right spots so that outsiders would know the irrelevance of time in such an ancient land. (15)

The Morgans learn that the place is isolated and food scarce, but they embrace the idea of exotic hunting versus the everyday aggression of a market economy. Soon they witness that the warm weather conditions – “the earth is melting away,” an Alaskan boy says in the novel (Rearden 87) – does not allow moose hunting. Where game live is a long way to travel, and using sledges is difficult if the snow is not frozen. At the same time, the prices are twice as high as those in California, “gas is too much . . . eight fifty something” (141), for example, while one cucumber is \$6.99 without tax.

Apart from the climate changes, abiding by the traditional way of nourishment and living is further undermined by Western education in the form of school and TV. The Morgans are told that the Natives are delicate subjects to teach. They realize that “the village kids had already known more teachers in their life than most graduate students” (Rearden 108). By only “a quick glance at the file cabinets with different folders from different years,” they realize that “the turnover in teachers from year to year is incredible” (108). Most importantly, those children do not study the history of their people, as a potent uniting agent, but are taught that Columbus is the historic hero brought on the wings of European Renaissance *asabiya*, science, and technology. One of the students writes in her homework:

Dear Columbus, in all my years in school I remember only one name in history. That name belonged to you. I thought you were a brave hero, but the first words you wrote in your journal about those Native people? You thought they would make good slaves! Is this why you have your own holiday? Does our country celebrate you because you taught *kass'ags* how to treat us Natives? Are you a hero in history because you showed the world we didn't matter? The Native people should have taken their children and run away when they saw you coming. (127)

The Morgans observe that the young in this area have never had teachers to support their self-respect and make them pursue higher education. While this chagrin of the Morgans is nourished by the Western ideal of education, at the same time they understand that it is the same civilizing agent that has supported progression in contrast to the centrality of home as a unifying cultural principle. On the contrary, for this distinct culture to survive, the young should stay at home. "Education at once seems like the answer and the problem" (Rearden 147), John thinks. If youth go away to college, there is nothing that will bring them home because home offers no employment. The home is, thus, already destroyed in its ancient sense and turned into an object to accommodate the West's market needs.

As for the TV's role in the ethnocide, a villager complains that the world can only see Alaskan children around Christmas and the New Year's Eve, "when they are getting handouts from Santa in Blackhawk" (Rearden 182). In this way, by serving the semiotics of the altruistic progressive civilization, the children also feed up the consumerist desire and the fantasies of the exotic. Another student underlines the destructive influence that TV, with its images of economic prosperity, has on the Native cultural stories, self-identification, and self-respect. In his house,

there is always someone watching movies or shows. I'll put the pad down, on our plywood floor, somewhere I can still see the screen. I don't see little houses like mine on those shows, and I never once seen someone sleeping on foam mats in houses with no water, only one or two bedrooms. Thirteen maybe fourteen people. Babies crying. My sister and her boyfriend humping, like no one knows what they are doing under those blankets. I don't never see real life like that on the TV. That world is supposed to be the real world. I hear teachers say that. "Back in the real world," they say. I've never seen their real world, just TV. (146)

Allied to this simulation of “real life,” the concept of employment is another vehicle corrosive of Native life. People start talking about new prospects of a gold mine to open: “in Bristol Bay . . . [t]hey say it’s going to be one of the largest open-pit mines in the world. Five hundred billion dollars’ worth of gold” (Rearden 145). Many a Native culture in need has faced the same problem when attacked by the Western market economy. Namely, to attain the ideals of material comfort, a tribe often has to concede to a change of their natural surroundings while knowing that it means the most dangerous impediment to traditional life. In particular, with the introduction of the mining industry, this place will stop being “the world’s last great wild salmon run” (154). As hunting becomes rare, fishing will stop too. Heavyhearted, a village man complains, “How can people like us, with nothing, have a voice against money like that?” (154). Apart from the fact that gold will be soon taken out and the money will be spent, a lake of toxic waste will remain, threatening not only whatever salmon industry is left but also the general health of the population that drinks water and eats food laden with heavy metals. This actually happened in 2010 with the Alaskan mine in Bristol Bay, and was considered to be a cultural genocide. The people organized within a movement called “Stop Pebble” to fight against the crime. The same happened in Northern Quebec when it was discovered in the year 2000 that mining companies had been poisoning the drinking water of the Ouje-Bougoumau Cree for over fifty years, as documented in the film *Heavy Metal*, directed by Neil Diamond. In a similar vein, *Collapse* by Jared Diamond provides several examples of serious environmental problems caused by hard-rock mining, which involves water pollution by metals, processing chemicals, acid drainage, and sediment. Diamond details:

Metals and metal-like elements in the ore itself – especially copper, cadmium, lead, mercury, zinc, arsenic, antimony, and selenium – are toxic and prone to cause trouble by ending up in nearby streams and water tables as a result of mining operations. . . . Quite a few of the chemicals used in mining – such as cyanide, mercury, sulfuric acid, and nitrate produced from dynamite – are also toxic. More recently, it has become appreciated that acid draining out of sulfide-containing ores exposed to water and air through mining causes serious water pollution and leaches out metals. Sediment transported out of mines in runoff water may be harmful to aquatic life, for instance by covering up fish spawning beds. In addition to those types of pollution, the mere consumption of water by many mines is high enough to be significant. (*Collapse* 463)

Because of this, American states began to require mining companies to guarantee financial assurance that enough money would be available for the cleaning of the place, but, unfortunately, the projected finances are rarely enough for needed restorations (467). Significantly, a lot of these operations have taken place on tribal lands across the U.S. and Canada. The latest case is that of pipe lines spreading through North Dakota and some parts of the Native sacred land.

In Rearden's novel, the Morgans also learn that a lot of adult males capable of military service have left the villages: "We have the highest percentage per capita of military members in the country," says another Yup'ik. When this happens, in the first place, families, which are left without the father figure and food provider, need significant adjustments. Apart from that, the villagers say that they are "so sad for them over in that awful desert" (Rearden 36), in Kuwait, a place with a drastically different climate and soil. Removed from the natural surroundings, to which they are genetically predisposed, the soldiers keep writing back home that they dream of snow and ice (169).

Added to these deprivations, during their flight, the Morgans meet a nurse, who tells them stories about numerous poisoning cases, especially of botulism: "We are like a CDC [Centre for Disease Control]," she says, "hot zone practically, all kinds of exciting diseases, new and old. We've always got government scientists and know-it-all doctors up in our business with their half-baked studies and new protocols" (Rearden 21). Finally, the Morgans hear that there are a lot of cases of suicide as a result of the hopelessness of the people tortured between, to use the Arnoldian metaphor, the two worlds while not being capable of sticking to any because the old one is unstoppably receding, and the new one is intensely unwelcoming.

The first symptoms of the epidemic start appearing after the village gathers in the school for a Christmas celebration and after a hurricane hits the delta. When the Morgans learn about the epidemic, it seems that the "KYUK" morning news do not really find it a major problem:

Top stories we are covering for today: The school district battens down the hatches for what might be a record blizzard, the father of the K300 Sled Dog race has decided to run the Iditarod one last time, and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health corporation struggles with a flu outbreak in Hooper Bay. But, first national news. (215)

The national news relates to the mainland U.S.A. However, a couple of days later, the radio only briefly mentions the disastrous news about the destiny of people living too far away, and passes on to more interesting economic ventures: “a respiratory infection . . . has hit many area villages. Local health officials call for help from state, and federal agencies respond to the growing number of sick infants. And the controversial free fuel program from Venezuela will continue this year. . . .” (Rearden 227). After a while, every radio connection is cut. Someone asks: “Why would they want to keep us from getting radio?” (235) and receives the reply: “There are populations in this world who are the expendable people in the eyes of all governments” (235).

In the condition of seeing and not accepting, Anna, John’s wife, dies, and the whole village seems dead. After months of hiding in the village school, John does not see anyone. His hopelessness is not only supported by the deserted landscape, the apocalyptic northern waste, but also by an abstract white page on which he cannot write anything, and which is a metaphor for the uselessness of his knowledge, his English language, and the absence of communication and sympathy:

The pencil didn’t move. . . . He imagined that the pencil would start moving, as if some unseen hand would wrap itself around his and write. He would call out to the spirit and become a human Ouija board, and he would have the answers he needed. They would tell him it was okay through the scratch of the pencil against the notebook paper.

The pencil didn’t move, and he was too scared to call out because he knew no one would answer. (Rearden 31)

To survive, John behaves as a typical scavenger hero. Looking for food, “he starts with the school, the heart of every village: the sanctuary for kids, the public meeting place, the dance hall, the non-stop basketball court, and the community dining room. If he were to find anything of use, it would be here” (54). However, in the absolute silence of the surrounding death, the school halls are either empty or turned into mass graves.

Eventually, John comes across an almost dead Yup’ik blind girl, and he fights between two impulses: to let her die or to help her live. Her life will mean less food for him and a risk that she might want to kill him as the most immediate danger to her own survival. Yet, he nurses her back to health and continues with

her through the tundra in search of refuge. We learn her name, Rayna, only later in the story as John rejects the development of any kind of intimate relation with her, understanding her only as a physical burden to his existence. However, Rayna talks all the time, which he sometimes appreciates because her words divert his thoughts from hunger, cold, and exhaustion. Although her presence and her words are his only connections with humanity for a long time, he often finds her numerous questions too naïve and, therefore, tiresome. She asks: “Why didn’t anyone come for us? Did they want us all to die?” (Rearden 52). She also wonders: “What’s the rest of the world doing right now? . . . Are they starving too, or are we the only ones who’ve been forgotten?” (135).

However, they are not the only survivors. On their struggle through the snow, John and Rayna meet a few people who, crazed with hunger, have turned into cannibals. Some have drunk the last methyl alcohol remaining in villages. Seeking shelter in a seemingly unoccupied house, John and the blind girl also come across an old woman. With a stubborn decision to spend the rest of her life as a decent human being, the old unnamed woman cooks a soup for the newcomers from a smoked duck she has saved. When John refuses the soup on account of the bird flu, she explains:

People didn’t die from birds. The earth didn’t make this disease. . . . Yup’ik people been eating birds forever. Yup’ik people been seeing bad sickness since when *kass’aqs* come here. Not the ducks. Not the birds that did it to the people. I’ve seen these kind of diseases before. When I was little *piipiq*. Smallpox, measles, influenza – so bad mostly everyone all on the river and the tundra villages die. (Rearden 41)

This time, she suggests, the process was consciously undertaken, and she narrates how her village was devastated when it was, very symbolically, significantly concentrated in its school:

They heard the sickness was in the village and made an announcement on the VHF radio. . . . Everyone go to the school for a meeting, even the children. They said everyone had to go because the sickness was coming. Everyone would be safe at the school. I went and hid in the steam bath. I didn’t think they would say bring children to an important meeting. (Rearden 118)

Accordingly, the most difficult notion one has to accept is that the disease was artificially devised and that the extermination of Alaskans was planned. Alaska is explained as “the perfect area for the hundred percent quarantine. . . . You kill two birds with one stone. You keep the pandemic from mainstream society and you find a simple solution to people draining taxpayer dollars. Those same people who sit on vast gold and petroleum reserves” (Rearden 206–7). The worst question, however, is: Even if one survives, does one want to continue living with the people who created the disaster (231)? In this phase of realization, Rayna, who can understand her identity only in, to use the Lakota concept, “the sacred hoop” of people and place, explains her loss: “I feel empty, you know? Hollow like a drum. My heart’s a drum, a tundra drum that pounds and there’s no one to listen, no one to dance. I have no one. Nothing. I can’t even see all that I’ve lost. I’ve lost everything. My family. My cousins. The village” (143).

Seeing Connections

The survivors’ daily struggles through wind and snow are interrupted with evening Yup’ik stories. Most of them are told by the old woman, whose function as a storyteller is to oppose the Western narratives and fight the hopelessness. One of the stories she tells is about the Big Mouth Baby. The story has several versions, but they all revolve around three predominant tales. One is about an especially conceited woman who wants a baby, but not a husband. She goes to a shaman, who tells her that whatever her baby looks like, she should love it and show it to everybody. However, the baby turns out to be unspeakably ugly, with an awfully large mouth. In her vanity, its mother keeps hiding it from the world until the baby struggles out of its cradle and eats the neighbors. In another version, the parents get yet another baby and are advised to apply some seal oil around its lips every night. When one night they forget to do so, the baby gets out of its cradle and starts eating its own mother. In the third version, hunters from the village decide to feed the big mouth baby with large quantities of food so it does not eat the village people (Gant 2014). Rearden explains this story as a key to the novel, and the novel itself as “essentially its novelized version” (Diamond and Krivokapić 229). The metaphoric significance of the story resides in an old idea, says Rearden: “If we don’t take care of our children, if we don’t follow the rules of nurturing them, they will turn to monsters and eat us. . . . To me this story is one of those pieces of our human DNA. An ancient story embedded with all the wisdom we need to function as humans” (230).

A lot of the stories we find in the novel are about shamans and their power, which comes from the deeply ingrained cultural understanding of the relations of beings from both an empirical and non-empirical cultural environment. The old woman says that shamans could

talk to animals, giants, and even the little people. . . . good shamans could heal the sick and change the weather and bring animals during times of starvation. . . . Yup'iks could become animals and animals could become Yup'iks. There was just a thin skin, like the surface of the water or young river ice, that separated the worlds. (Rearden 158)

Rearden explains how a series of epidemics, infiltrated with the arrival of the Whites, brought an end to the shamans' powers in the region:

Only the missionaries and doctors had the cures. Thus shamans were stripped of their ability to heal, viewed as demon worshippers and killed or forced to reform. I guess in my story I see the shaman returning with the epidemic to share their knowledge and bring healing to the people. . . . They say shamanism travels in the bloodlines out there and that there are still some shamans today. (Diamond and Krivokapić 230)

Rearden says that he sees Rayna as a young shaman in training. This especially becomes evident when she remembers her capability of seeing connections between all the living beings:

. . . one of my favourite times, is getting down close to the tundra, with my face almost in it and just staring at all the plants and berries. My *uppa*, my grandpa, he was always smiling, he told me to do that once. He said, "Look down there, get real near the ground and see all that life. All those little tiny flowers, and moss, and lichen, the berries, the mushrooms, so many special things in one little space – then look up and out across the tundra and see how much there is out there. Don't ever let no one tell you this is a land of nothing," he said, "never let them tell you that. Everything you need to survive is right there." He said that to me and I'll never forget. (Rearden 217)

Appreciation of this chain of beings makes the core of indigenous life philosophy. On the contrary, as Sioux thinker, activist, and poet, John Trudell explains, civilization is the process "based upon the reality and concept of death,"

which “has been the most bloodthirsty, brutalizing system ever imposed on this planet” (Igliori). It enforces onto human beings the authority of government, military, and destructive education that prevents establishment of the right relationship to life. Blinded by religions and ideologies, the human being forgets that “all of the natural world has a right to existence and we are only a small part of it” (Igliori). Yet, our genetic memory still spreads to the old times when “every human being recognized this reality that the Earth was the mother and the sky was the father. . . . We recognized that in our poeticality as human beings, our relationship was to that” (Igliori). Trudell’s words do not come from a naïvenativism, but from the very core of the indigenous intellectualism and activism. Likewise, one of the leading Native philosophers, Daniel Heath Justice insists that indigenous communities are based on the principle of relations, which are “a delicate web of rights and responsibilities” (154). Native self-determination does not come from a mere physical and geographic fact, but from an inner sophisticated landscape that envelops the immediate surroundings and keeps it in memory and stories: “Tribal people have deep bonds with the earth, with sacred places that bear the bones and stories that tell them who they are, where they came from, and how to live in the world around them” (163). This concept or “kinship,” Heath Justice argues, “isn’t a static thing; it’s dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness” (163). Therefore, “kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most indigenous contexts, is something that’s done more than something that simply is” (150). This is the basis for the establishment of a particular nationality, which is not a political unit, but a “constitutive measurement of selfhood” (151). Native creation stories, fiction, essays (for example, the most famous novels, such as *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, the study *The Sacred Hoop* by Paula Gunn Allen, and many others) always argue that the health of an individual relies on this principle of community, as opposite to that of individualization, separation, disconnection (from the roots), and exclusion.

Conclusion

Instead of linear, progressive, and, therefore, incoherent thought, tribal holistic cosmogony offers the knowledge of real power, as Trudell says. Thus, he reminds us that the military does not have power and that, instead, there is only military terrorism. Likewise, “there is no such thing as economic power; there is only economic exploitation” (Igliori). The real power abides in the conscious-

ness of cooperative living with the whole net of beings, in whose circularity the past and the future become a part of the present, and within which human beings, as bearers of intelligence, recognize their human responsibility.

We are a spirit, we are a natural part of the earth, and all of our ancestors, all of our relations who have gone to the spirit world, they are here with us. That's power. They will help us. They will help us to see if we are willing to look. We are not separated from them because there's no place to go – we stay here. This is our place: the earth. This is our mother: we will not go away from our mother. (Igliori)

Having presented the two opposing types of imagination and thinking – one linear and progressive, which appears destructive to the other and to itself, and the other one circular and so-called stagnant – our discussion also attests to its own timeliness by embracing the widely spread indigenous belief that the environmental injustices we are witnessing can only be righted if the world accepts tribal philosophy and human original responsibility towards the Earth, as contained in the Yup'ik word *piuraa*. This hope is also pronounced in the title of the novel, and the hope is the raven's gift. Namely, on the fourth day of their toil through the snow, John and Rayna hear “an odd sound . . . the sound of a single drop of water, magnified” – whose visualization again brings forth the concept of circularity – made by “a giant raven . . . staring down at them” (Rearden 112). When, having in mind the prevailing symbolism of black birds in the white culture (as heralds of death and devastation), John supposes that the bird is trying to scare them, Rayna explains that ravens are special beings for the Natives, believed to be the creators of the world and the life in it, and that, therefore, the bird might be trying to tell them something. She asks John to describe the raven's flight, which she does not see. When he explains that it has dipped its wings, Rayna suggests that they follow its direction and says: “I hope that's what he was doing. I hope. I hope. My dad said that hunters watch the raven and if he flies upside down he's dumping luck off his back. Maybe he dumped some luck on our trail” (113). And the “coal black” bird did. Luck came in the form of love and survival through re-uniting with tribal people. The novel's important message, therefore, is that survival depends on the acknowledgement and appreciation of the relations, and not on the rude force and acquisition.

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NA KRAJU JE PIURAA: GAVRANOV DAR DONA REARDENA

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Ovaj rad analizira roman *Gavranov dar* (2011.) aljaškog pisca Dona Reardena. Roman se bavi uništenjem prirodne sredine te se razvija kao apokaliptična pripovijest o genocidu nad starosjedilačkom Yup'ik zajednicom koji se vrši na razne načine, a kulminira umjetno izazvanim smrtonosnim virusom. Ipak, roman završava tako što budi nadu immanentnu starosjedilačkom konceptu sadržanom u riječi *piuraa* kroz koji se izražavaju duh mjesta i priroda starosjedilačke kulture. Taj koncept čini srž starosjedilačke kružne holističke kozmogonije i izravno je suprotstavljen linearnom duhu i prirodi progresivne civilizacije uz koju se neumitno veže pretpostavka kraja, odnosno propasti društava i kultura. U skladu s tim, koncept *piuraa* u Reardenovu romanu analizirat će se uz pomoć recentnih povijesnih, ekokritičkih i socioloških pristupa, poput onih Francisa Fukuyame, Jareda Diamonda i Petera Turchina, kao i kroz prizmu starosjedilačke epistemologije kako ju tumače Daniel Heath Justice i John Trudell.

Ključne riječi: Don Rearden, *Gavranov dar*, *piuraa*, Yup'ik, kružna kozmogonija, linearna imaginacija, propasti društava