Precarious Indigeneity:

Ainu Identity-Making in (Digital) North America and its Rootedness in North American Indigenous Experience

by

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Abstract

Based on digitally-mediated fieldwork conducted in 2020/2021, and building on existing scholarship, this thesis works to understand how Ainu in North American experience Indigenous identity-making. Working with eight young adults of self-identified Ainu ancestry at various stages of their Ainu journeys, but all started within the last few years, I ask how Ainu and Ainuness is learned and understood through their primary connection and access to Ainu community and culture: digital spaces. From this, I argue that whereas Ainu identity-making of those who grew up and live in Japan is rooted in Japanese Ainu experience, American Ainu identity-making is largely informed by and rooted in North American Indigenous experience. With this comes uniquely North American-based experiences and anxieties of culture appropriation, identity gatekeeping, and Indigenous authenticity. I argue that such narratives can best be understood through what I call *precarious indigeneity*—that identity-making as Ainu in North America is inherently unstable and insecure due to the aforementioned anxieties. Through this thesis, I aim to provide another way to reimagine Ainu identity-making that speaks to the realities of learning what it means to be Ainu and Indigenous in present day and as multiethnic and digitally connected individuals and communities rooted in North America.

Keywords: *Ainu, indigeneity, identity-making, precarity, digital spaces, urban Indigenous studies*

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Figures

Though my research primarily focuses on Ainu, rarely have I come across a map of Indigenous lands in Japan that shows BOTH Ainu and Ryukyuan (Okinawan) traditional lands. In an effort to decolonize Japan maps, I created a map that includes both of these people's traditional lands.

When searching for Ainu, traditional homes and environments were frequently shown in the search results. This imagery represents the traditional nature of much of the discourse of Ainu history and Ainu today.

This illustration is inspired by popular, but degrading and inappropriate imagery used in A. H. Savage Landor's 1893 publication of "Alone with the Hairy Ainu" and Ainu people and village tourist advertisements in the early 1900s.

Examples of direct messaging I received from a select few strangers in response to an Instagram advertisement I put out requesting for participants for this research. In the messages, they kindly notified me of my poor Japanese grammar and writing, while also offering me an accurate and appropriate blurb.

This illustration was inspired by the many Instagram, TikTok and other online Ainu content I came across throughout my research, which was near same to the participants own findings. Elements include two bear heads, representative of the Ussuri Brown Bear, native to Hokkaido, Japan and prominent in traditional Ainu ceremonies; linework of land and water, symbolic of the notion that all Ainu are inherently connected to land, ocean and nature; and a woman in clothing with traditional Ainu design motifs, which represents the traditional image of Ainu that participants routinely came across.

Preface

There was a global pandemic.

I played Sims 4 way too much but also not enough.

My anxiety killed my motivation.

I got a puppy.

CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

1.1 "Say No to Plastic Shaman"

On December 9, 2020, Tessa[1], a prominent member of the *Ainu in Diaspora* Facebook group and community, posted a photo on their personal Instagram account of a young Asian woman in traditional Ainu dress and tattoos (face paint). Plastered across the photo were big bold red letters that read, "SAY NO TO PLASTIC SHAMAN," with the following captioned underneath:

> So some hafu white girl…calling herself an Ainu shaman wants to show up to Seattle and tell the BIPOC community what's up. What's a hometown kid to do?... She's not talking to me now that she can't bilk that sweet Indigenou$ Ance$tral Knowledge.
>
> …Within…Ainu In Diaspora group she has stepped in front of elders and knowledge keepers assuming positions of authority with no prior discussion, nor consent of the group runners. Maya[2] told us that she holds an Ainuic haplotype, and that someone told her she was special, and she is using this as justification to sell herself as a tourist minstrel Ainu without she herself having to experience the same financial and socio-economical burdens our Utari in Ainu Moshiri have to endure under direct colonization to survive and thrive through heritage craftwork.
>
> …As an ambiguously Asian woman (she has lied every step of the way about her actual heritage) she has chosen to Orientalize herself as a "shaman" and grift an under educated Western audience who wants to buy off their white guilt for $1800… Maya walks like a colonizer and works like an information poaching culture-vulture. She has taken things my community educated her on, and presented them on her platforms without mention or credit of her sources to present herself as a gatekeeper of Indigenous secrets.
>
> #Ainu #Indigenous #Seattle #Washington #shamanism #reiki #culturalappropriation #BIPOC #racism[3]

Swiping right on the photo, viewers were then given a glimpse at snapshots of private conversations between Tessa and Maya, arguably as a sort of proof of the aforementioned claims, as well as more explicit information about the identity and personal experiences of Maya.

---

[1] Name changed
[2] Name changed
[3] A small section has been omitted for clarity and to protect identities.

At the time of Tessa's post, I had just finished interviewing six out of eight of my participants and was nearing the end of my four-month long digitally-mediated fieldwork. Staring at my cellphone, my collection of over two hundred TikTok videos and Instagram screenshots were an exciting, yet daunting, reminder of the next few weeks I'd spend uploading and organizing everything onto my personal laptop. Convinced there was still more to find, and naïve to the fact that there is such thing as 'too much research', I decided to do one last scroll through my Instagram feed.

The first few posts were by a few artists I followed previous to starting my research. Muted bright blue seed beads and soft pastel faces danced below my thumb as I hastily double-tapped my likes and continued my search for the several Ainu-related accounts I had recently begun following. Soon, after one long upward swipe of my thumb, waves of Ainu embroidery flooded my screen—something I became accustomed to among Ainu accounts—eventually followed by a few advertisements for Ainu souvenirs from Hokkaido Museum gift shops. Finding nothing of seeming interest, I hit the Instagram home bottom, giving my feed a final refresh before I closed Instagram for the day. Immediately, those bid bold red letters flashed on my screen, "SAY NO TO PLASTIC SHAMAN." Recognizing the woman in the photos as one of the many Ainu-accounts I followed, I immediately clicked on the post, curious as to *why* this account was labeling Maya as a supposed 'plastic shaman' and why it mattered to us, the poster's online community. Upon careful reading, it quickly became apparent to me why this post was so important: yet another person was seemingly falsely claiming an Indigenous identity and "exploiting" Indigenous experience and culture.

1.2 "What Does It Mean to Be Indigenous?"
In this research, I explore how younger generations of *self-identified* Ainu, an Indigenous group of Japan (un)intentionally use digital spaces, such as Instagram and TikTok, to inform and shape their own processes of Indigenous identity-making. From this, I suggest that whereas Ainu in Japan largely form a sense of identity rooted in local histories and notions of indigeneity, Ainu in North America are instead forming a sense of indigeneity that is inherently and uniquely rooted in North American Indigenous experience and histories. I argue that due to this rootedness in North American Indigenous experience, American Ainu are acutely aware of and embody North

American-led notions of Indigenous heritage, including *cultural appropriation, identity gatekeeping*, and *Indigenous 'authenticity.'* As a result, I suggest that these particular American Ainu uniquely experience a form of *precarious indigeneity*, where their Indigenous identity (i.e. claims to) and processes of identity-making are inherently unstable in these main ways:

a) Their understanding of Ainu culture and being is primarily learned through (curated) English digital spaces that create a specific (traditional) image of Ainu that often does not correlate with their own diverse, multiethnic and contemporary self-expressions, resulting in a hesitancy towards claiming an Indigenous identity, arguably due to North American notions of cultural appropriation and Indigenous authenticity.

That is not to say that concerns about Indigenous authenticity is not present and felt among Ainu in Japan, but rather it is the double exposure to feelings of cultural appropriation and Indigenous (in)authenticity that suggest a North American-informed experience, as explicit fears of cultural appropriation is arguably rooted in North American experience. Similarly, as these digital spaces are largely in English, they are arguably geared towards a global (and North American) audience for the purpose of educating others of the history and (traditional) culture of Ainu, and in effort to promote tourism to Ainu villages and Hokkaido/Japan more broadly;

b) Their self-identification as Ainu and thus, Indigenous in North America, puts them into conversations of North American Indigenous experience that emphasize the issues of settler colonialism and colonial violence, which often do not match their own experiences for most of their lives, as being seen and understanding themselves as (mixed) Japanese, resulting in persistent feelings of having a 'non-Indigenous' experience.

Though there is a long history of Japanese discrimination and colonial violence in North America, and many participants experienced this growing up, in the context of Ainu history in Japan, ethnic Japanese (Wajin) are seen as the colonizers (Watson 2014; Siddle 1996). In an odd case of double colonialism, where both their Japanese and White ancestry are rooted in colonial empires, most participants felt that regardless of the

colonial violence they faced as Japanese, they still inherited a predominantly settler identity as they live in North America. In other words, they are often seen and treated as Asian American first and American Ainu, or Indigenous, second;

c) Their Ainu lineage is often undocumented, hidden or 'erased', and as a result, cannot be proven through North American Indigenous expectations of documentation and nation (*kotan* or tribal) membership.

Though some American-Ainu can trace their lineage to the island of Hokkaido, which Tokyo recognizes as Ainu traditional territory, it is most often only through family whisperings and nuances family practices, such as through cooking. As such, despite Japan's meticulous practices of physical documentation of (paternal) genealogy, due to the systemic erasure of Ainu names and ancestry through such practices, many Ainu have no knowledge of their ancestral *kotan* (see Okada 2012). As a result, many cannot prove their membership to an Ainu *kotan* (tribe) nor do they have access to these histories. Thus, these oral histories (whisperings) and tradition become the only way in which American-Ainu can 'prove' their Ainu ancestry. This complicates American-Ainu claims to indigeneity as North American notions and expectations of tribal membership arguably dominate the legitimacy of American-Ainu claims, especially among those who are seen by others as "exploiting" Ainu culture and knowledge; and

d) Their expressions of their Indigenous identity often do not fully meet North American expectations of indigeneity, wherein Indigenous-settler dichotomies (i.e. Indigenous identity vs. settler identity) and specific (traditional) enactments of indigeneity are the expected norm, putting them at greater risk of being subject to identity revoking.

Borrowing from scholarship of Indigenous experience, like Bonita Lawrence (2004), Renya Ramirez (2007), and Mark Watson (2014), North American notions of Indigenous authenticity and identity gatekeeping greatly shape the experiences and identity-making of those with non-traditional experience (i.e. growing up at a distance from traditional territory and culture). There are seemingly specific ideas of how to be authentically

Indigenous and as a result, for these members (American Ainu) having their expressions of indigeneity deviate from the expected norm means they are increasingly subject to identity disputes. In other words, I suggest that those who creatively enact indigeneity in ways that are seen by most as not rooted in or honouring ancestral traditions and are of a more contemporary (colonial/Japanese) expression, are more likely to have their claims to Indigeneity disputed and invalidated by others.

When put together, I suggest that these instances of identity vulnerability, confusion, and insecurity (re)produce an experience of Ainu identity-making that is precarious in a way unique from Ainu who grew up in Japan. This is not to say these North American notions of, for example, cultural appropriation do not occur in Japan nor am I saying that we should not use such concepts to meaningfully interrogate Ainu experience and histories in Japan. I am instead suggesting that Ainu identity-making in Japan is not as deeply rooted in these understandings, but Ainu identity-making in North America is rooted in these understandings. I am also not suggesting that this precarity is inherently negative; these insecurities are just one aspect of Ainu identity-making processes. Furthermore, my use of the term "precarity" is not the same as socioeconomic precarity, created by factors such as Ainu's land dispossession and employment discrimination (Watson 2014). I am referring to a kind of precarity (uncertainty and insecurity), in terms of identity-making that is due to American Ainu's rootedness in North American Indigenous experience. It is a type of precarity inherited and felt not just because they areaway from their Ainu homeland (i.e. because they are diasporic) but because they are diasporic and so much more

1.3 Thesis Organization

The thesis has six chapters and is organized as follows: In Chapter 1, I detail the Instagram post in which my thesis is centered on and introduced the main aims and organization of this thesis. Following this section, I briefly discuss my own positionality and research inspirations. In Chapter 2, I discuss English-language scholarship of Ainu in Japan and North America. I start by discussing the 'basics' of Ainu culture. Rather than cover the entire breadth of Ainu scholarship, I mainly focus on the histories and experiences that I have identified as being most foundational to Ainu identity-making in North America. This includes, for example, Japan's treatment of Ainu

past and present, common depictions of Ainu and Ainuness, and Ainu membership in Japan. This section concludes with a brief discussion of the lack of scholarship of Ainu in digital spaces and how digital spaces are understood (as cultural hubs) and situated in this thesis and to my participants.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methods of this research. This includes detailing how I used digital spaces, primarily Instagram and TikTok, to conduct this digitally-meditated fieldwork. I introduce how I used hashtags, my general observation and interview methods; and my eight participants. I end this section by commenting on how my being Indigenous was seemingly vital to the successes and arguable ease of my interviews and engagement with participants. In Chapter 4, I explore and detail the shared experiences of my participants' individual identity-making journeys, including how they reckon their Ainu ancestry. In it, I discuss how they discovered their Ainu roots; how they started their journeys of learning what it means to be Ainu; tools they use to learn of about Ainu and Ainuness; various obstacles they face, including issues of accessibility and limited resources; and how they engage with Ainu-related content and community online.

In Chapter 5, I present a critical analysis of American Ainu identity-making. I explore how these processes of identity-making are largely rooted in North American Indigenous experience, mainly due to their upbringing in North America. Most significantly, I conclude this section by suggesting that American Ainu identity-making is inherently precarious—that due to identified reasons, it is an inherently unsettling process and experience. My thesis ends with Chapter 6, where I present my conclusion and hopes for the future of this research. Though my thesis follows a typical structure, I have included several vignettes, examples of creative writing, imagery, and collage. While I explain the meaning behind some of them in their respective chapters and sections, not all are explicitly discussed; some are left for interpretation, as they are intended to speak to the general theme of the chapter or section that they are in. As my research was mainly conducted through Instagram and TikTok, I felt that having these visuals placed between often large chunks of text would be an homage to how many of my participants and myself through this fieldwork, learned about Ainu and Ainuness.

1.4 I Am Not Ainu

This research is inspired by own experiences and negotiation of indigeneity in Canada. Growing up off-reserve and away from my Indigenous side of my family, has greatly limited my exposure to, understanding of, and connectedness to my own Indigenous community and culture. Even though I have since reconnected, as someone who didn't grow up with those things and has somewhat different avenues of self expression, it has been a long and hard journey. I have continuously struggled with trying to bridge the gap between what being Indigenous means and feels to me and what others expect me to be because I am Indigenous.

As later discussed throughout this thesis, similar to Ainu, a lot of scholarship and media consistently reproduce this image of indigeneity as very traditional, mirroring arguably historical and fossilized depictions of what being Indigenous looks and feels like. But like many of my Indigenous peers, those depictions do not speak to my particular experiences. Additionally, I don't just cease to be Indigenous when we partake in things outside of our ancestral traditions. As long as we honour, respect and embody the teachings of our Elders and ancestors, we are still Indigenous no matter how we choose to express our indigeneity. As an Indigenous researcher myself, I feel that experiences like the ones discussed in this thesis are vital to how academics, the public and even ourselves understand and relate to Indigenous identity-making. However, it is important to note that while I am Indigenous, I am not Ainu. As a result, this thesis is limited in the following ways. First, as I am still very much a complete novice in Japanese, I cannot read most of the Japanese-language scholarship and I cannot have a complex conversation in Japanese with Ainu and Japanese peers. While I am proud of this thesis, this is a shortcoming in my research; my literature review is only based on English-language scholarship, which was predominantly written by non-Ainu scholars.

Second, and closely related is the fact that in a lot of Ainu scholarship and general discourse Ainu voices are rarely heard. That is not to say that their experiences are neglected—they are often at the center of such research—but rather they are not always represented in a way that presents Ainu as living people with unique feelings and voices—they are talked about, described

and analyzed, but their voices and what they have to say themselves, is not always put to paper. This is also an issue I see in Indigenous scholarship around the world, and especially in Canada—that we may be frequently talked about, but rarely do we get to do the talking and represent ourselves, instead of scholars and others doing it for us. While I too am another non-Ainu scholar sharing Ainu stories, it is my hope that my own positionality as an Indigenous person can offer a new kind of thoughtful, trans-Indigenous engagement with the narratives presented in this thesis.

When working with Indigenous folks, I strongly feel that first and foremost, scholarship is for the Indigenous people we work this. No one can contribute to meaningful reconciliation anywhere in the world if they are not doing their part to not only elevate Indigenous voices, but making sure they are actually heard—and that includes being much more thoughtful in: how we represent these Indigenous folks in our own works and own conversations; the accessibility of such works and conversations, including ensuring scholarship is translated into the appropriate and best accessible language in a timely manner; and that we do our absolute best to foster *space* for a more expansive understanding of indigeneity that is of and beyond these traditional depictions and understandings, and that instead invites insight and understanding into the unique and diverse ways in which indigeneity is contemporarily enacted.

CHAPTER 2:
THE 'BASICS' OF AINU

2.1 "They're Indigenous to Japan"

The Ainu are one of two widely recognized Indigenous people of what is now known as Japan; the other is the *Ryukyuan*, also known as Okinawans. However, Ainu are the only group with formal government recognition as Indigenous *to* Japan. Like many Indigenous groups, they have their own ancestral culture—including beliefs, dress, language, crafts (practices), and tattoos— that is uniquely different from the non-Indigenous groups who now reside in the same or similar regions. Much scholarship of Ainu details centuries of history and is filled with many important, yet often overlooked, moments and events in time. While these histories do in fact warrant their own explorations, as noted in the many publications by historians and 'anthropologists'[4] (see Richard Siddle 1994 and Scott Harrison 2008), and they do lay a foundation for the work of this thesis, I feel it is not necessary to relay every detail of these long histories of Ainu. As my work privileges the contemporary experiences of Ainu identity-making—not the origins of Ainu—I have chosen to instead only focus on, in a way, the *basics* of Ainu (i.e. an introduction to how the Ainu situation today came to be).

In this chapter, I start by introducing the basics of Ainu, with a heavy focus on Ainu histories and experiences in Japan. While there is much to be said of the intricacies of certain cultural practices, such as crafts and embroidery (see lewallen 2016), I privilege certain aspects of Ainu histories and being that I feel are especially significant to contemporary Ainu identity-making. With this, I introduce the recently popular framing of Ainu who live outside of Hokkaido as

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[4] I use this term lightly as while by definition these men were anthropologists, from the perspective of an Indigenous women in the present day, these white male anthropologists were more like colonial explorers who violated Ainu peoples, histories and ancestral remains. However, for those that know of the history of the discipline of Anthropology, these explorers were once the norm for anthropologists. I like to think we, as scholars, students, and as a discipline in general, are in the process of moving past this violent way of conducting 'research', where ethics, meaningful engagement, and most importantly, ongoing informed consent is at the forefront. Though many Indigenous anthropologists may just disregard these past explorations and writings, as my supervisor has repeatedly informed me, and I completely agree with, it is important we understand and appreciate, as violent as they may be, the stepping stones on which we, myself, am standing on—that without their violent work, I would not have the opportunities nor foundational information useful to conduct this research in present day. In this way, I am not thankful for the work they've done, nor am I justifying how they conducted 'research', but rather, I am acknowledging the crucial role they've played in how I conduct, and don't conduct, research today.

diasporic and use of the concept *cultural hubs*. Next, and closely related, I focus on Ainu identity and Indigenous membership. In this, I highlight a) how Ainu-Wajin Japanese relations have greatly shaped Ainu indigeneity and b) the often-overlooked global connections of Ainu, albeit very briefly. In the last section, I detail how digital spaces are used and seen within my research, as well as its lack of presence in Ainu studies. Mainly, I suggest that digital spaces can be seen as real-world, albeit virtual *cultural hubs*, as opposed to *mediators* that put the 'traditional' into the 'modern.'[5] This is follow by briefly detailing how and why, despite its importance in other studies, the innovative nature of digital spaces is not core to my research. By emphasizing these particular aspects of Ainu history and experience, I aim to provide a foundational understanding of Ainu and Ainuness.

2.2 Ainu Studies 101
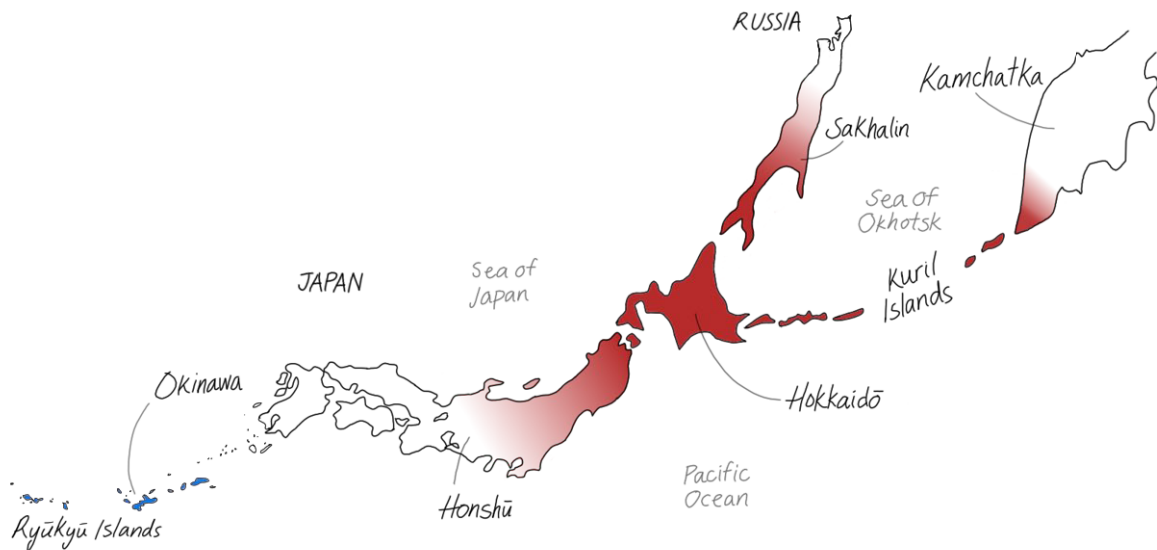
Figure 1: Map of suspected Ainu (red) and Ryukyuan (blue) ancestral lands, with darker hue symbolizing most well-known recognized lands. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

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[5] This idea refers to the common practice in scholarship and public discourse, that situates any uses of and engagement with new modern technologies, such as cellphones and internet, as something outside of the traditional norm for Indigenous—as an "innovative" tool to bring traditional culture into the modern, digital age. If most Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks in their 20s in North America are privy to these new technologies and all live their lives in the same globalized, digitally connected world, why are only Indigenous peoples' uses of such technologies most often seen as innovative tools (i.e. mediators)?

Historically, Ainu lived and travelled throughout the northern half of Honshu (mainland Japan), the northernmost major island of Hokkaido (Ezo), the Kuril Islands, Kamchatka Peninsula, and southern Sakhalin (see Figure 1) (Tsunemoto 2001; Cheung 2005; lewallen 2016; Okada 2012). Today, the Tokyo government only recognizes Hokkaido, the northern most island of Japan, as the traditional territory of the Ainu. Hokkaido is also the most cited geographical region in which Ainu are seen to reside and exist in.

2.2.1 History of Ainu
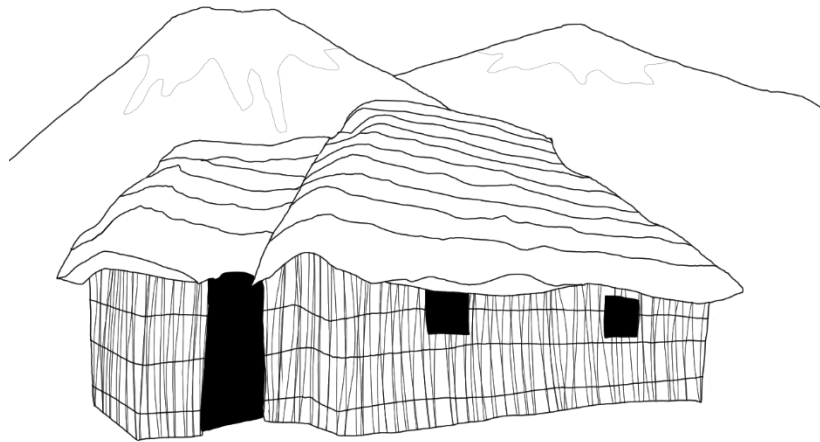
Figure 2: Ainu dwelling. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

At one point, Ainu society centered around river systems of inland Hokkaido, where communities, *kotan,* of a few households (see Figure 2) co-operated in the day-to-day labour of salmon fishing, deer and bear hunting and gathering edible plants (Siddle 1996). These small Ainu communities typically consisted of only matrilineal kin—in some cases a clan—and not in large communities of multiple families, much like many communities are today (Geiser 1971). During the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), the Japanese empire estimated that there were 20,000 to 30,000 Ainu who were loosely under imperial rule, most of whom resided in their ancestral lands of Hokkaido and the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands (Siddle 1996). However, Wajin were not entirely absent from Ainu lands. Beginning in the 1800s, Wajin fishery and merchant outposts were established along Hokkaido's coast and by the 1840s Wajin began moving permanently to

these lands as the Japanese empire expanded its territory (Geiser 1971: 70). Not only did this impede Ainu belonging in these lands, but it also greatly limited food sources and the very livelihood of Ainu.

Furthermore, during the mid to late 1800s, land claim tensions between Russia and Japan forced many Ainu communities from the then Russia-owned Sakhalin and Kuril Islands into Japan-owned Hokkaido, further solidifying Wajin subjugation. From the Tokugawa era (1603-1868) to the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan and its residents went through great social and economic changes that propelled Japan into the new age (Howell 2004). However, the emergence of nationalism both during and post-World War II encouraged and ultimately pushed Japan into an understanding of itself as a homogenous and mono-ethnic country (Howell 2004). In turn, this promoted the emergence of a Wajin—Japan's non-Indigenous ethnic majority—Japan (Watson 2014).

The Japanese state, which has within the last few centuries described itself as mono-ethnic, enacted laws well before WWII that furthered this agenda. In 1872, Ainu were included in Japan's new family registration, which was one of the first formal ways colonial[6] powers tried to assert Ainu as Japanese and label them as "former aborigines" (Gordon 2014: 74). In 1899, the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act was established. This act was used as a means of restructuring Ainu social order and restricting cultural practices, including "customs, language, and means of livelihood" (Cheung 2005: 198; Tsunemoto 2001: 120). Part of these assimilation tactics were done through the establishment of 'native schools', like residential schools in Canada (lewallen 2016). In 1997, this act was replaced with the Ainu Cultural Promotion Law, which aimed to preserve Ainu culture and many hoped would help foster Indigenous rights (Hohmann 2008: 20; Cheung 2005: 198). However, it wasn't until 2008 that the National Diet—Japan's legislature—officially recognized Ainu as Indigenous people of Japan (Htun 2012: 2; Cheung 2005). Since household census surveys only measure state recognized nationality and not ethnicity or identity, the Ainu population, according to a 1999 independent survey, was estimated

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[6] While Wajin did not operate and govern by way of a colony or colonies [well, Japan was a big colonizer in Asia], I am using the term 'colonial' to signify the settler colonialism-like ways Wajin enforced control over Ainu peoples and land.

at 23,767 but could be as high as 200,000 (Htun 2012: 4; Tsunemoto 2001, 120). Despite being part of the national census, Ainu were considered to be outcastes of society and were in turn often denied membership into the Japanese population. Even now, some are considered to be "not fully Japanese", and in some cases "not fully human" (Siddle 1996: 73-4).

2.2.2 Membership and 'Urban' Ainu

Across Japan, formal membership of Indigenous status does not exist (Siddle 1996). According to the Hokkaido Ainu Association, cited by Watson (2014), formal claims to Ainu status are dependent on the following criteria:

a) they must reside within Hokkaido;
b) hey must be of Ainu ancestry through blood, adoption, or marriage; and
c) they must *choose* to identify as Ainu.

Anyone that falls outside of these criteria, including Ainu relocated to Tokyo due to limited employment in Hokkaido (Watson 2014), are not recognized as authentically Ainu by governing authorities, like the Japanese government. That is not to say someone cannot self-identify as Ainu outside of Hokkaido, but rather, much like Indigenous discourse elsewhere, to self-identify as Ainu outside of one's 'homeland' is to be seen as always needing to 'renew' one's indigeneity, primarily due to distance from such homeland (Ramirez 2007; Lawrence 2004). This concept of needing to 'renew' stems from not only ideas of homelands, but also from dominant narratives that suggest being Indigenous and being a settler, in this case Wajin/Japanese, are distinctly different (Morris-Suzuki 1998). Thus, claiming an Ainu identity means that one cannot, or should not, 'perform' as Japanese[7]—possessing or expressing qualities seen as part of settler identities, such as interest in high fashion or Japanese popular-culture, is often viewed as incompatible with indigeneity (Lawrence 2004).

While knowledge of Ainu dates back decades, most focused research of Ainu outside Hokkaido, also called 'urban' Ainu, only emerged in the mid 2000s (see Uzawa 2019; Nakamura 2015;

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[7] In this sense, being Wajin and Wajinness is conflated with being Japanese and Japaneseness, similar to ideas around White and Whiteness.

Watson 2014 and 2010; Cotterill 2011; Sekiguchi 2007).[8] Since then, most scholarship of urban Ainu has only focused on the Kanto region in mainland Japan (south of Hokkaido), with the exception of new scholar Hayashi-Simpliciano (2020) who focused on Ainu in Hawai'i and the Western Coast of the US. Though this scholarship is limited, scholars have provided important insight into urban Ainu experience. For example, many scholars suggest that Ainu in mainland Japan all struggled with identity-making and inclusion in formal Ainu policy-making. This is largely due to the fact that they reside outside Hokkaido and thus, outside of Ainu traditional territory. Paired with dominant understandings of indigeneity—that to be authentically Ainu one must be traditional and not urban--to be 'urban' is to arguably cease to exist as undisputedly Ainu and to be seen as, more often than not, too Japanese to be Ainu. As a result, for urban folks that still self-identify as Ainu, it is understandably a complex process of diasporic self-negotiation, cultural revitalization, and reconciliation that relies heavily on Indigenous cultural hubs (Uzawa 2019; Watson 2014; Nakamura 2015; Cotterill 2011).

2.2.2.1 Diasporic Ainu and Cultural Hubs

The original usage of the term "diaspora[9]," referred to the physical displacement of Jewish persons from the biblical homeland and their shared experience of land and cultural distance. By the 2000s, scholars have applied this concept to include many Indigenous groups, including Hawai'i Natives and urban Cree in Canada (Chang 2016; Watson 2014; Cohen 2008; Lawrence

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[8] As Ainu land was historically rural, 'undeveloped' land and Ainu culture was seen as being anchored to this land, the concept of 'urban' seems to have been born out of the understanding that, compared to urbanized, and more modern, Wajin land, Ainu land was rural (traditional) and Wajin land was urban (modern). Though used in the context of people, and not land, this distinction is most evident in Richard Siddle's (1996) widely cited historiography of Ainu in Japan, when they say, "…Ainu women were more loyal and more mature than modern urban [Wajin] women" (139). As a result, the term 'urban' was placed on Ainu who had migrated and now resided in what was seen as urban (modern) lands, such as Wajin cities, to distinguish them from Ainu who stayed in what was seen as Ainu traditional lands. On this note, it is extremely important to understand that in Japan, and elsewhere in the world, even if Ainu (Indigenous) land was 'developed', such as in terms of agriculture or 'Ainu urbanization,' since it was developed by Ainu, with Ainu technology and based on Ainu livelihoods and culture, Wajin, who at the time, believed their technology and ideas of (industrial) development were superior, always viewed Ainu lands as "unused lands", and thus, as undeveloped, rural lands (Siddle 1996: 140). Over time, especially as some Ainu traditional lands too became urbanized, as understood by Wajin, this idea of 'urban' came to signify lands that were urbanized and outside of traditional lands. Arguably, this was to signify that, regardless of the level of urbanization, these 'urban' lands were not, in a way, the natural lands of the Ainu, as perhaps, Ainu land was seen as only being 'authentically' Ainu if it was, by Wajin understandings, rural and undeveloped. Since then, urban has transformed once again, to now encapsulate any person of Ainu heritage and identity, that is either in urban (modern), non-traditional lands and/or is of a cultural distance from traditional Ainu culture.
[9] Derived from the Greek word "to scatter", diaspora refers to the forced migration of any group from a country or region; or the dispersion of any group from its traditional homeland (Brubaker 2005; Anthias 1998).

2004). In terms of Ainu, the diasporic framework is applied to those who are predominantly seen as having lost—and in many cases intentionally discarded in an effort of survival—their Ainu identity and culture (i.e. urban and non-identifying Ainu). By strategically situating them as diasporic, scholars aim to bring attention to how these urban spaces systematically encourage the further erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples while at the same time also celebrating how urban Ainu can collectivize and find belonging in these non-Indigenous environments (Uzawa 2019; Watson 2014; Cheung 2005; Nakamura 2015; Cotterill 2011).

To emphasize efforts of identity-making and belonging-making, scholars use the concept of "Native hubs" as introduced by Renya Ramirez. According to Ramirez (2007), Native hubs are seen as spaces that aim towards enabling, fostering and curating Indigenous personhood through social activity (Ramirez 2007: 3; Watson 2014: 31). Hubs can take the form of cultural centers, Indigenous-led gatherings and events, and Indigenous websites and blogs (Ramirez 2007). For urban Ainu who are at a distance from their homeland, these newly formed spaces then serve as places in which diasporic bodies can actively engage with their homeland and thus, authentic cultural identity and heritage (Brubaker 2006; Cohen 2008; Lawrence 2004). It is important to note that these hubs are not made Indigenous by way of the physical materials used to build them, such as traditional wood carvings and regalia, but through the Indigenous people that use and engage with them (Lawrence 2004; Ramirez 2007).

The cultural hubs described in scholarship vary dependent on the types of spaces available to Ainu folks. For example, Uzawa (2019) mainly discusses what they describe as the hub of Sapporo University's Urespa Club in Hokkaido[10], while Watson and others discuss places like Tokyo's Rera Cise restaurant (now closed) in Honshu. The purpose of the Urespa club, a curriculum-based social club established in 2010, is to bring together Ainu and Wajin students to reconcile (repair) and foster new meaningful relations that will help transform Ainu-Wajin relations in Japan (Uzawa and Watson 2020: 57). In it, students co-learn Ainu language and

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[10] Although Uzawa's research takes place in Sapporo, Hokkaido, the traditional territory of Ainu, and therefore, may not seem to some as diasporic, Uzawa has thoughtfully applied the diaspora framework as a way to highlight the distance and differences many of the Ainu participants feel. This includes experiences and feelings of lacking traditional cultural knowledge and access to knowledge, and having life experiences and an identity that feels more Japanese than Ainu.

practices, as well as engage in various Ainu-related discussions (Uzawa 2019; Uzawa and Watson 2020). For Rera Cise, an Ainu-owned restaurant that specialized in traditional Ainu cuisine, it was a place where many Ainu and non-Ainu gather to discuss and engage in Ainu-related interests over a friendly meal (Watson 2014; Uzawa 2019). For many urban Ainu, these few spaces—out of the thousands of other public spaces in mainland Japan—often serve as the only Indigenous inclusive space in an otherwise non-Indigenous environment. Regardless of physical locations, these hubs are essential for creating an easily accessible and open space for learning of Ainu traditions (Watson 2014; Uzawa 2019; Nakamura 2015). Through these hubs, urban Ainu are able to transform non-Indigenous spaces into Indigenous inclusive spaces. Otherwise known as place-making, this process allows for Ainu to root themselves in these urban spaces and participate in hands-on learning and practicing of Ainu culture, which would otherwise be unavailable.

2.3 Ainu Recognition and Membership

Figure 3: Ainu man with tourist advertisements. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

In Japan and elsewhere in the world, colonial governing authorities have a long history of regulating Indigenous membership, as well as choosing which aspects of Indigenous culture and identity are emphasized and which are erased. In an effort to foreground some of my claims in

Chapter 5—specifically, how Indigenous members in power can shape other Indigenous folks'
identity-making processes—it is important that I first introduce how non-Indigenous authorities
have shaped dominant representations and understandings of Ainu. Specifically, I want to invite
insight into how being Ainu in Japan, including Ainu-Wajin relations, arguably dominates both
local and global discourse of what being Ainu looks like (Cheung 2005; Tsunemoto 2001;
Nakamura 2015).

2.3.1 Ainu-Wajin Japanese Relations

As shown in the previous section, Ainu have had a long and complicated relationship with the
Wajin of Japan. While some of this tension can be seen as simply a matter of ignorance towards
difference, much of the Ainu situation today is largely understood to be a result of the nation's
historical and ongoing colonial violence[11] against Ainu. For example, with regard to the 1871
Census Registration Act, Vincent Okada, a respected scholar of Ainu, describes its Wajin
Japanese name requirements as an "assimilation policy of ethnic [Indigenous culture and
identity] cleansing" (Okada 2012). Through these many instances of systemic colonial violence,
many Ainu in Japan today have been assimilated into Wajin life, and indoctrinated into believing
that to be Ainu is to be a second-class citizen (Siddle 1996; Okada 2012). As noted earlier, this
discrimination of Ainu has led to many Ainu hiding or 'losing' their Ainu identity. This negative
attitude towards Ainu has created a lasting stigmatization of Ainu as a 'moral problem'—that
Ainu, who are widely seen by Wajin as unproductive members of Japanese society, are
contributing to the declining welfare and prosperity of the nation (Okada 2012). Due to this, a
large population of Ainu do not publicly disclose their ancestry and/or identity in fear of
discrimination by the public, close friends, and family (Cheung 2005).

Though these issues were last reported on around a decade ago, they are still very much present
in today's society. Recently, a handful of non-Ainu Japanese citizens even complained about the
governments 'special treatment' of the Hokkaido Ainu. This was because the government had

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[11] It is important to note that this concept of 'colonial violence' is not widely adopted by Ainu in Japan today. It is a
term that is often used by non-Japanese scholars of Ainu, as well as by the majority of participants in this study.
Given that my research privileges my participants' experiences, I feel it is only fitting to use such language when
discussing Ainu and Japan history as it is directly providing the sociocultural context for my research findings. Thus,
this concept is not necessarily applicable to Ainu experiences outside of this thesis—the reasoning for this will be
further explained in later chapters.

spent a large amount of funds building a new Ainu Museum and memorial site (Upopoy) and assisted in cultural revitalization initiatives ahead of the 2020 Winter Olympics.[12] While some may see these efforts as an act of reconciliation, others see it as just another effort to foster the tourism economy.

Even in present day, Ainu tourism remains as the most economically profitable expenditure within Hokkaido (Hiwasaki 2000). Though governments and companies are not advertising "Japan's Hairy Ainu" as they did in the past, arguably, they are still promoting such limited representations of Ainu. Most notably, in 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020) agreed to allocate substantial government tax funds to build an Ainu Museum, later named *Upopoy*, to serve as "…a symbolic place of Ethnic symbiosis."[13] Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (2020—), who was chairman of the Ainu Policy Promotion Committee and museum project lead, said at the time of the project:

> We will be able to promote the amazing culture of the Ainu to the world by finishing the construction of Upopoy before the Olympics and Paralympics of 2020.[14]

Similarly, Hokkaido University professor and member of the Ainu Policy Promotion Committee, Shuzo Ishimori, was quoted as saying:

> …along with the increase of inbound tourism, we can expect more visitors from other countries. At Upopoy, if the Ainu culture is successfully revitalized and created and those international visitors are able to "have fun interacting with the culture" the tourism of Hokkaido will be taken to the next level. To achieve this goal, it is essential that the government, the industry and the academia work on Upopoy together.[15]

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[12] From "200億円をブチ込んだアイヌ博物館「ウポポイ」が隠した"差別"" (20 billion yen was put, the discrimination which "Upopoy" didn't show), translated. Also, since spending these monies, the scheduled opening performance of Ainu dancers for the Olympics has been cancelled. No reason was given.

[13] "200億円をブチ込んだアイヌ博物館「ウポポイ」が隠した"差別"" (20 billion yen was put, the discrimination which "Upopoy" didn't show), translated.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

Though seemingly promising, once finished the museum was unfortunately met with much criticism from both Japanese and Ainu. For some, it was an issue of 'inappropriate' government spending, as the final cost of the project totaled roughly 20 billion yen (~$229.3 million CAD).[16] Whereas for others, and in my opinion a much greater problem than fund allocation, it was an issue of the museum's misrepresentation of Ainu and Japanese histories. According to some visitors, the "…dark parts" of Ainu history, including mentions of Japan's Ainu assimilation policies and Japan's "…long-existing discrimination against the Ainu," are completely left out of the Ainu exhibit.[17] As a result, arguably, those who have no knowledge of the history of Ainu treatment in Japan, will no doubt learn nothing of it from this particular museum, as vital histories of Japan's colonial past are not explicitly exhibited

Such careful curating of Ainu histories and culture within the Upopoy museum is not an isolated event. In other museums in Japan, Ainu exhibits can be underwhelming and again, 'full' Ainu representation are often quite limited. As one Japanese visitor recalled about their visit to an exhibit in a museum in Hokkaido, Japan, "… It was just a small room" (Interview, November 14, 2020). Even at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC, Canada, which has recently hosted a few significant Ainu-focused events and performances,[18] the few times I visited the MOA in 2019, the few Ainu artifacts they possessed were not on display. As such, when I looked on the MOA's public artifact database next to the Japan exhibit, I could find absolutely no explanation as to why over 100 Japanese artifacts were on display, while the Ainu ones were not. Though this could simply just be an issue of bad timing on my part, it does beg the question: why is Ainu representation so limited, both in and out of Japan?

2.3.2 Global Connections
Though the study of Ainu peoples dates back centuries, most of what is known is anchored to the region of Hokkaido, the only geographic region recognized by the state of Japan as the Ainu's

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[16] Based on currency conversion rates on March 29, 2021.

[17] "200億円をブチ込んだアイヌ博物館「ウポポイ」が隠した"差別"" (20 billion yen was put, the discrimination which "Upopoy" didn't show), translated.

[18] These events included a well-attended conference on Hokkaido 150-year anniversary, (2019), Ainu performance at MOA (2019), and a virtual series of talks of Ainu and Okinawan Indigeneity and Policies in Japan (2021).

traditional territory. Similarly, it is only within the last decade that studies of urban Ainu have gained any traction. For example, Mark Watson's (2014), *Japan's Ainu Minority in Tokyo: Diasporic Indigeneity and Urban Politics,* mentioned in Chapter 3, is the only English-published book that focuses solely on the lived experiences (and indigeneity) of urban Ainu in Japan. Since then, only a handful of scholars have focused on urban Ainu outside of Hokkaido (see Nakamura 2015, Uzawa 2019, and Hayashi-Simpliciano 2020). Yet, as shown in Figure 1 and throughout this chapter, both in the past and present Ainu have traversed many lands and waters far beyond just Hokkaido.

Especially since the 1960s, Ainu relocated from Hokkaido to Honshu for better employment opportunities, (Nishimura 2016), while others relocated to Hawai'i and the US West Coast (see Hayashi-Simpliciano 2020). In terms of general travel, Ainu have extensively sought, in a way, transnational Indigenous diplomacy[19], beyond Japan. This includes, but is not limited to such trips like: in the 1970s , select Ainu delegations visiting Mao-era China to learn of cultural initiatives for ethnic minorities[20], as well as a trip to Alaska to learn of autonomy as understood by "Eskimos" (Siddle 1996: 177); in 1989, Ainu sculptor Nuburi Toko and his son, Shusei Toko, travelled to Burnaby, BC and spent time with local First Nations, as part of his trip to create and install an art installation titled *Kamui Mintara* (Playground of the Gods), a gift from Burnaby's Japanese twin city of Kushiro.[21] More recently, in 2019, several Ainu student groups travelled to Māori-New Zealand as part of a cultural exchange.[22] Furthermore, according to Hayashi-Simpliciano (2020) and later shown in this thesis, Ainu too already have deep connections and roots outside of Japan, such as in North America. In this way, Ainu have long been globally connected and thus, transnationally rooted.

2.4 Ainu in (Transnational) Digital Spaces

At present, there have not yet been any English-language scholarship that focuses solely on transnational Ainuness, including Ainu presence and performance online. That is not to say Ainu

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[19] A term presented to me by my supervisor, anthropologist Dr. Michael Hathaway at Simon Fraser University.
[20] From forthcoming project led by Michael Hathaway and Scott Harrison, *titled Rise of the Indigenous Pacific Rim: Japan, Canada, and China*
[21] https://www.sfu.ca/brc/imeshMobileApp/imesh-art-walk-/playground-of-the-gods.html
[22] https://www.teaomaori.news/ainu-people-look-maori-ways-revitalise-culture

presence or spaces online is not referenced in some texts (see Hayashi-Simpliciano 2020), but rather they do not explicitly focus on how Ainuness online shapes Ainu identity-making in North America. Yet, Indigenous peoples around the world, Ainu included, have an arguably large online presence. It is also likely that since conducting this research and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, this presence has increased as numerous spaces and livelihoods moved online to accommodate strict travel and in-person restrictions. Though we may see more scholarship focusing on the more nuanced aspects of Indigenous and digital entanglements in the near future, at the time of writing this thesis I am left scrambling for resources on online Ainu indigeneity.

Given that the majority of greater society is entangled in various new technologies and thus, digital spaces, why do scholars often neglect such online presence? Is it because the 'digital,' including social media, is still a relatively new research area? It is because there is still hesitancy towards the 'realness' of online spaces? Or, is it because when most people, scholars included, think of Indigenous people they think of traditional lifeways and thus, non-modern and non-digital lifeways? Upon writing this thesis, I am still unsure the reasons but of course, as an Indigenous woman, who is continuously asked if I want to, "move back to your [my] reserve and connect more to the land," I definitely have my suspicions. Regardless, from what little scholarship there is, I hope to foreground how both myself and my participants view and use digital spaces within the scope of this research.

2.4.1 As (Not) Mediators

First and foremost, when searching through scholarship of indigeneity and online/social media, the majority of scholars are primarily looking at how Indigenous folks are using digital technologies as a tool for: a) revitalizing, preserving and/or sharing 'traditional' Indigenous culture, practices and knowledge (Lumby 2010); b) hosting and spreading Indigenous politics and activism across local and global contexts (Lumby 2010; Robins 2000); and/or c) creating and participating in a community that seeks to acknowledge and (re)affirm the shared experiences of colonial-led trauma, discrimination, oppression and cultural genocide—a virtual diaspora of sorts, or as Benedict Anderson would say, an imagined community (Lumby 2010: 66; Anderson [1983] 2016: 6). In other words, much like studies of urban Ainu, studies of Indigenous peoples in digital spaces arguably frame the 'digital' as a mediator or bridge between the 'traditional'

Indigenous person and the contemporary (modern and digital) world. This idea is also reflected throughout Indigenous studies globally and mirrors most nation-state Indigenous policies, where only those who actively engage with and pursue historically traditional ways of being (see Canada, Japan, Brazil, etc.) are seen as authentically Indigenous. Although not always explicitly stated, this likely stems from settler narratives of Indigenous peoples as "primitive" and settlers as "advanced and modern". From this comes a presumed incompatibility between the 'traditional' Indigenous body and contemporary digital technology and as a result, few studies of Indigenous peoples in digital spaces. That being said, this framing does not take away from scholars understanding of the 'power' of digital technologies and spaces.

2.4.2 As Cultural Hubs

According to Bronwyn Lumby (2010), digital technologies and thus, digital spaces, have the ability to (re)produce a public image of indigeneity both to a broader community and within their own community (68). Therefore, digital spaces can serve to foster a sense of belonging and community among Indigenous peoples. While insightful, this idea is not new; with regard to in-person spaces, the ability to transform and shape people's sense of community is greatly discussed in various scholarship, again most notably in Anderson's ([1983] 2006) *Imagined Communities.* However, I feel digital spaces within Ainu identity-making can be best understood through Renya Ramirez's (2007) concept of *cultural hubs,* as referenced by Watson (2014).

As discussed, the explicit application of cultural hubs in Ainu studies is relatively new with the most notable use of being in Mark Watson's (2014) study of urban Ainu experience. In it, they reference cultural hubs as places in which Ainu are uniquely establishing and fostering Ainu community, belonging, and connections to Ainu culture while outside Hokkaido (31). Though digital spaces are not a large focus of Watson's ethnography, it is still suggested that such spaces play a role within urban Ainu community and identity-making in Tokyo. While not as obvious, I also believe the presence and significance of cultural hubs—the idea that Indigenous designated spaces are *needed* for urban Ainu to connect to their homeland and traditional culture—is also present in the larger range of Ainu studies. For example, in Siddle's (1996) historiography, they mention how in 1978, urban Ainu member, Sakai Mamoru, established the *Ainu Kaiho Kenkyukai* (Ainu Liberation Study Group) in Tokyo, Japan (1996: 172). As this group is a social

gathering of Ainu and based on Ramirez's concept, this group can be seen as a type of cultural hub that served to provide an Indigenous designated space for Ainu where no other space really existed in Tokyo. In this way, despite not being explicitly identified as a *cultural hub*, the inclusion of such a space in the Siddle's narrative lends to awareness and importance of Indigenous designated spaces within Ainu livelihoods.

Though these particular spaces do contribute to one's enactment of indigeneity, most scholars only focus on 'real world' spaces, in turn neglecting the many spaces that exist online. In this thesis, I am more interested in understanding how *digital* spaces, in this case Instagram, can be seen as a (virtual) real world place in which are deeply entangled with—much like Rera Cise, the Ainu restaurant, and the Ainu Liberation Study Group, Instagram has the ability to ultimately shape Ainu indigeneity. Specifically, I focus on how self-identified folks in North America are navigating and curating this digital space, and in turn, how they are both producing and reproducing local and global understandings of indigeneity. From my research, I hope to foster a deeper, more tangible understanding of a) what indigeneity looks like in our contemporary, transnational and digital age and b) what varying roles Indigenous individuals, groups, and other powers play in these processes. It is in these ways, that I see digital spaces as another form of cultural hubs beyond just a tool for cultural renewal and a mediator that puts the traditional Indigenous person into the modern world.

Within this thesis and based on my interviews with participants, digital spaces like TikTok or Instagram are seen and engaged with as a form of cultural hubs and in turn, an extension of the real world. Therefore, not only do my participants see these digital spaces as a normalized spaces within their everyday interactions and environments, but they are treated as such with this thesis. Instead of looking at the innovative nature of such spaces, I explore how digital spaces, like any other real-world spaces, shape the experiences and feelings of American Ainu identity-making processes. That is not to say digital spaces are not remarkable—because they truly are when we think about the intricacies of such spaces—but rather being of younger generations, such as *gen z* or *millennials*, these spaces are already deeply embedded in our everyday livelihoods. They are not 'new'; they are *normal.* It is for this exact reason that I have chosen not to focus my thesis on

how digital spaces are unique tools or mediators in Indigenous peoples lives. Simply put, such discussions are largely irrelevant to my participants experiences.

As shown in this chapter, prominent English language scholars of Ainu, have a tendency to discuss indigeneity and Indigenous experience in relation to both geographically and socially local (traditional, i.e. not global and digitally connected) experiences (see Watson 2014). As a result, most of what we know from scholarship of Ainu revolves around post-contact histories and Indigenous-settler (Ainu-Wajin Japanese) relations within Japan. Furthermore, compared to Ainu in Hokkaido, it can be very difficult to even identify those of Ainu ancestry outside Hokkaido since these particular (urban) Ainu are mostly excluded from both the formal and informal Ainu political and social realms (Watson 2014; Nakamura 2015). Not only does this result in the exclusion of many global Ainu experiences, it also neglects to meaningfully recognize the many diverse and multiethnic ways in which Ainu indigeneity is experienced and enacted in present day. Though there has been some recent research into Ainu in North America, there is still much to be said and understood about the multifaceted, yet shared, experiences of being Ainu while at a great distance from the perceived Ainu homeland and in turn, traditional Ainu culture and history. Before I discuss such experiences, I will first introduce my research methods and most importantly, the participants of this research.

CHAPTER 3:
LIKE, FOLLOW, DM AND REPEAT

3.1 "Do You Need Help?"

Instagram User

> Hello!
> I am a Japanese student who has been learning English. I saw your post, so I translated your Japanese so it is more correct.

Instagram User

> Hi!
> I just saw your post. I am not of Ainu ancestry, but would you need help with the translation?

Instagram User

> Hello!
> I saw your post. I am just Japanese and have nothing to do with the Ainu. But I translated your English sentences into proper Japanese.

Figure 4: Instagram messages. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.
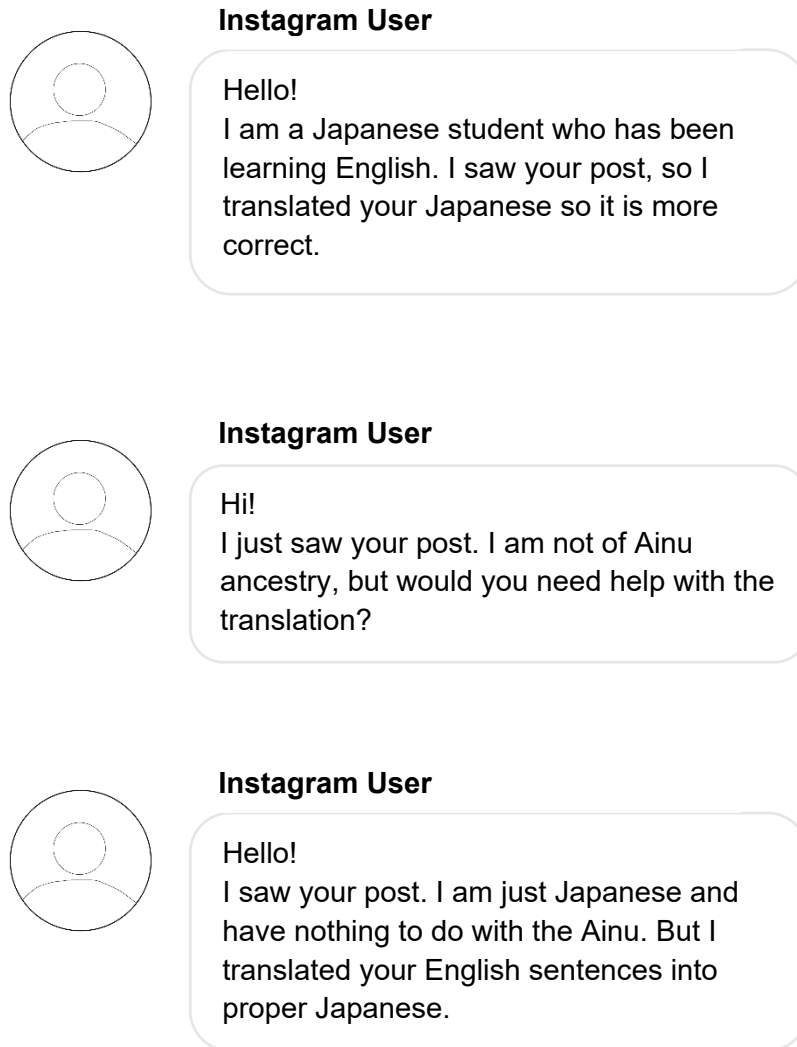
The messages above (Figure 4) were sent to me from strangers who had recently seen my Instagram post, where I briefly detailed my thesis project in Japanese and English, along with contact information for anyone interested in participating. It was one of my only recruitment methods, discussed more later, and I had personally translated my English blurb into Japanese.

When starting this research, as an avid watcher of *Sailor Moon* (not dubbed) and having recently completed my first year of (elementary) Japanese study, I truly thought my Japanese skills would be adequate enough to communicate with people in Japanese. As shown above, clearly, I was wrong—perhaps, even slightly delusional. However, my efforts were not in total vain; besides looking like a complete fool, the post resulted in several folks reaching out to me. While some kindly corrected my poor translation, others expressed their own interests in Ainu, with some even recommending where to look online and what books to read to aid my research. Though no participants came from this post, it did ultimately shape my entire research from Ainu in Japan to Ainu in North America; I ended up using English language resources and eventually, reached out to English speaking participants who all either lived in North America or had gone to school here.

In this chapter, I introduce the methods of my research, which was conducted over roughly a four-month (17 week) period, from September 2020 to January 2021, with the exception of one interview which was conducted in May 2021.[23] As the core site of my fieldwork was digital spaces, specifically TikTok and Instagram, I start the next section by introducing my field sites and discussing the methods used during my fieldwork. This includes looking at: how observations were conducted, including strategies used; how interviews were conducted, including who my participants are; and how being Indigenous myself and in my 20s allowed for certain stories to be exchanged, that perhaps otherwise may have been inaccessible to a non-Indigenous researcher.

Due to my efforts to anonymize my participants, this section does not go into great detail about their life stories and backgrounds. Instead, I only discuss their personal experiences in Chapter 4 and 5, and for the most part, share these individual stories collectively—I present them as "Ainu American" experiences, as opposed to "Hana's experience" or "Dustin's experience." That being said, though I present them as a collective narrative, I want to make it clear that each individual has a unique and equally important experience. As such, each person's narrative has certain nuances and speaks to different upbringings and cultural backgrounds. However, for the purpose

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[23] This was a result of scheduling conflicts and poor time (anxiety) management on my end—I am eternally grateful to this participant for being so kind and understanding.

of this thesis and to present a more fluid, shared narrative, I mainly discuss their experiences collectively. From this particular chapter though, I hope to provide insight into how my research was conducted and highlight the importance of meaningful, reciprocal research, especially when working with young Indigenous folks.

3.2 Conducting "Digitally-mediated Fieldwork"

For this research, my two main ethnographic field sites were *Instagram* and *TikTok,* with spaces like *Tumblr, Facebook* and even *NHK News[24]* serving as places for general observation. While *Twitter* is arguably a prime site of research—and it was suggested to me by many colleagues of mine—I felt that the type of content and engagement that often occurs in this particular space was not a good fit for the research I was doing; I wanted to privilege spaces that were heavily visual based, such as photography or videos. As such, I felt Twitter in comparison to Instagram was largely text based and seemingly much more political in nature. Though there are likely many studies that discuss in depth what visual media in particular can uniquely offer, as an Indigenous artist myself, this decision was driven by my bias towards visual art. I have also spent so much time *reading* about Ainu in preparation, that I wanted to finally *see* what being Ainu looks and feels like—I wanted to finally understand not what scholars were saying about indigeneity, but instead see with my own eyes (or more accurately, through my participants eyes) how indigeneity is visually depicted.

As a colleague of mine suggested, "being Indigenous *is always* political in a colonial society," however, my initial observations of twitter told me that *activism* was a core aspect of this space. While important, I was more interested in exploring the more personal experiences, feelings, and engagements that occur in people's identity-making processes. Specifically, I aimed to identify and explore the *everyday* enactments of indigeneity. I felt that Instagram and TikTok would best allow me to focus on the *everyday*, as most users, myself included, seemed to use these spaces to primarily document their daily lives. Yes, activism was one of the many ways people used their platforms, but for many individuals, it was not central to their online profiles. Instead, people mostly documented things like, sceneries they enjoyed, places they visited, their meals, their own

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[24] NHK stands for *Nihon Hoso Kyokai* (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) and is Japan's only public broadcaster, as well as leading news sources for global audiences interested in Japan news.

art and other art they liked, as well as numerous selfies. Essentially, they consciously curated a college of sorts, consistent of images and videos that represented their own various likes, dislikes, experiences, and so forth, for others to see. In other words, they documented how they see the world and more importantly, how they see themselves.

<u>3.2.1 #AINU</u>

To find Instagram and TikTok posts that were by Ainu people and/or Ainu focused, I employed a relatively easy tactic for both: I searched and followed the hashtag "Ainu." Much like *keywords* when searching for specific topics in scholarship online, these *hashtags* are used to identify digital content of a specific topic. For example, if I wanted to search for photos of Hokkaido, Japan I could search the hashtag "Hokkaido" or in Japanese "北海道" and this would show me all images or videos tagged with this hashtag. Of course, it is very likely that many Ainu folks do not tag their photos as "Ainu." However, as confirmed through our interviews, these tags are the exact ways in which my participants were able to find Ainu related content. Thus, by employing this method, I had exact same access to the exact same media that my participants engaged with in their own research of Ainu.

Once I identified and collected the many Ainu photos and videos, I was able to document and eventually analyze this media. As shown in Figure 5, I aimed to then use these photos and videos, as well as captions and comments, to inform my interview questions for participants.[25] However, this is not actually how my observations panned out. While I did ask participants about how they used social media and what it meant to them, I ended up primarily asking what they thought of other people's posts. For example, I explicitly asked how such posts shaped their understanding of what Ainuness most often look like; if they saw themselves represented in these posts; and why they commented on or 'liked' the post itself. In this way, my approach was similar to my initial intent, except I instead asked what they thought of the post itself, rather than

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[25] While many TikTok videos have been republished on various news outlets, in keeping with the informed consent and ethical protocols of this research, I will not be including links or screenshots (that show the creators face) in this thesis. Instead, I will use quotes from the audio of videos, as they are not easily searchable, and only images that are already widely circulated, as they will not identify any creator and/or Ainu member. This will not take away from the intent of this section or the participants own research/observations, as the material included in this section is still the same as the material referenced in our interviews.

the intent behind the post. That being said, I did approach Tessa and their post in the same way shown in Figure 5.
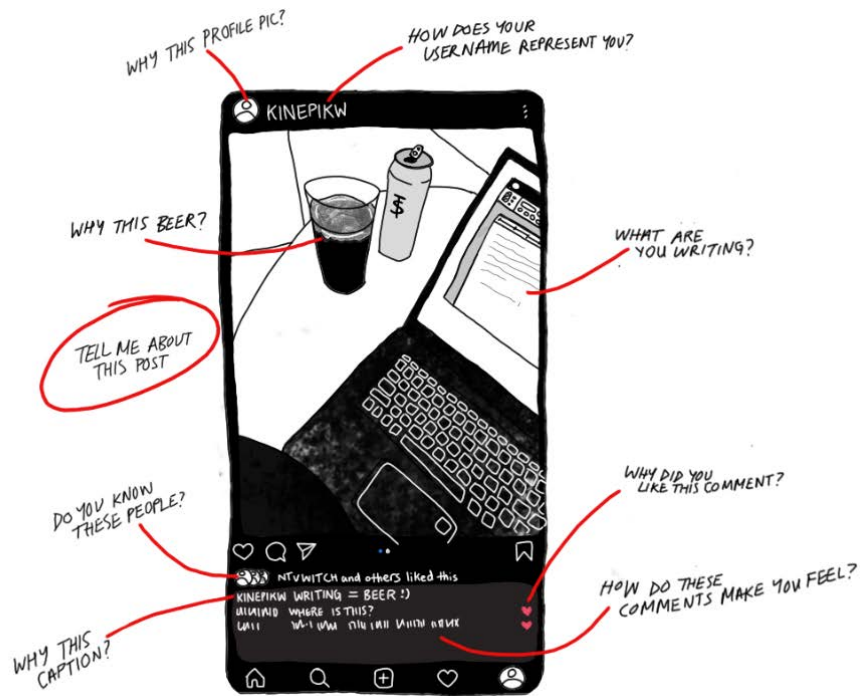
Figure 5: An example of media elicitation. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

It is important to note that given the ease of access to online spaces and media, in this thesis I have omitted or slightly changed any 'data' from observations that could affect my participants anonymity. This includes key phrases and quotations; images and screenshots; user account names; user account profile biographies; site links, etc. The notable exception is Tessa's Instagram post and some of the attached comments. Though I have changed their name in this thesis, because I have included their entire post in Chapter 1, their post, account and thus, identity are easily identifiable. However, their post was made to several *public* platforms and their identity is already disclosed in Hayashi-Simpliciano's (2020) dissertation, as well as very well known in the American Ainu community. With regard to Tessa's name change in this thesis, as well as Maya's, even though they are both easily searchable, I did not want my thesis and in turn, Tessa's Instagram post to be one of the first search results for their names when searched on a platform like *Google*. This was less of an issue with academic ethics, and more of a personal choice that has to do with personal reasons I cannot discuss in this thesis.

Going back to the use of #Ainu, this method was also how I found all of my participants. Though a few were identified by their own posts, which were tagged as Ainu, others were identified by their comments, likes and follows. For example, one participant[26] commented that they had recently discovered their Ainu ancestry and was excited to explore it. Whereas for likes, I manually checked who 'liked' an Ainu tagged post. I then looked at every individual person's profile (own account page) to find clues that they were Ainu, such as having Ainu in their profile biography or having a post of their own saying they were Ainu. Similarly for follows, I would find a self-identified Ainu person's profile and check for aforementioned clues on every individual person's profile who followed that particular Ainu account. This entire process was extremely tedious, but it definitely paid off; I was able to identify and invite about thirteen people who self-identified as Ainu and successfully recruit eight of them. However, this method is also why my research, much to my excitement, ended up having seven out of eight participants based in North America. The eighth participant lives in Japan, but has spent a few years in North America and is quite knowledge and understanding of North American Indigenous discourse

Because I used the English hashtag of "Ainu", most of my results were by English-speaking users and thus, most often catered to North American audiences (see Chapter 4). Though yes, English is spoken around the world, most of the Ainu related content was predominantly engaged with by a North American audience. This was evident in that many profiles of people who liked or commented on such posts and content, self-identified in their profile biographies or through photos that they resided in North America. As a result, when I used my search and recruitment tactics discussed above, I ended up with participants from mostly North American countries (i.e. the US and Canada). Similarly, because Instagram and TikTok specifically are generally used by younger audiences, the participants I recruited from these spaces, all ended up being in their late teens and 20s (i.e. young adults). Regardless of how this participant group came to be, I did find this research to be less intimidating, and in relatively easily conducted, as both myself and participants were able to fluently and comfortably converse in English. Furthermore, since most of us were all living in North America, it made making more nuanced connections, such as bonding over our love for American cafes and lattes, much easier.

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[26] I am purposefully not naming them so that others do not find their comment and identify them.

Unlike conducting fieldwork in a foreign country, this method of recruitment also seemed a bit easier in that contacting and communicating with people online is arguably much easier. After identifying potential participants, I would direct message (DM) them my recruitment blurb, then within a couple weeks we would be sitting face to face through a computer screen. Again, unlike typical fieldwork, there was no living in their neighbourhoods, slowly getting to know them, and building relationships, then asking for their participation. It was quite literally,

> Hi, my name is Cheyanne.
> I'm doing this research.
> Would you like to be a part of it?
> Please DM or email me.

This was followed by either a "yes" or "no," or questions about the specifics of what was needed from them and what types of questions I would ask in our (potential) interviews. For those that agreed, I'd email them the consent form and we'd schedule a quick meet to verbally review my research. This was then followed by a later scheduled actual interview.

As shown, without "#Ainu" my research would have been next to impossible during this global pandemic. Though I could have likely still found participants by, for example, joining the *Ainu in Diaspora* Facebook group and reaching out to members, by instead using media tagged as Ainu I was able to reach out to a specific set of individuals who come from diverse backgrounds. That is not to say those in the Facebook group are all the same. Rather, because many of the participants I found through Instagram and TikTok are not part of this Facebook group, they have different exposures and understandings of Ainu and Ainuness that is not always found on Facebook. I also purposefully chose not to ask for permission to enter this Facebook group, as after careful discussions with Tessa and others, I felt as a non-Ainu person it would be unethical and inappropriate for myself to enter into this community space in an effort to extract information for my research. I did not feel I could truly offer anything to this group that would result in meaningful reciprocity. Furthermore, unlike on Facebook, I suggest that Instagram and TikTok users can maintain some level of *anonymity* and *agency*; they are not required to publicly

identify themselves or their names, nor are they required to gain *permission* to access to the majority of Ainu content.

Unlike joining a private Facebook group, they can *choose* to observe Ainu and Ainuness at a distance, as in not liking, following or commenting Ainu content, and *choose* not to disclose their Ainu ancestry and claims to Ainu identity to others publicly. When one needs permission to join a private Facebook group, on the other hand, one is expected to explain to an administrator, like Tessa, why one wants permission to join. From this uniquely afforded anonymity and agency in digital spaces, I suggest that 'new' American Ainu, like many of my participants, are in turn afforded more space to reckon their Ainu ancestry and foster an Ainu identity away from the public, and away from scrutinizing eyes. In other words, they are able to learn what being Ainu and Indigenous means to them before others have a chance to confirm or deny their Ainuness, either through outright denial or repeated questioning of one's proof of ancestry. Arguably, my interviews with participants also gave them this chance; my role was to listen their stories, as well as share my own stories without prejudice.

3.2.2 Sharing Life Stories

> *Fidgeting in her seat, Maria pulls her long dark hair behind her ears, as she half-frantically tries to rearrange various objects around her. Her backpack and laptop rest on the seat beside her, while her smartphone and large tumbler of tea sit wedged between us. Suddenly self-conscious, I quickly adjust my own surroundings, making sure my notebook and pen, as well as fresh mug of coffee, are all within reaching distance in front of me—I don't want to block her view with my cup but I can already feel my throat drying with anxiety. I assure her we have plenty of time but she insists on apologizing for not being ready. Her reddening cheeks and nervous laughter tell me she's a bit flustered, but her wide grin and excited casual chatter tell me she's likely just trying to be polite. Finally, we are both settled and I explain to her again how my research consent works, how her interview will be used, and ensure I have her permission to record our interview. Her head bobs along, ending with a strong but airy, "Yes." I reach to hit record but quickly stop; her shoulders stiffen and her eyes dart to the side while raising her arms into a 'wait' position. My breath catches and I pause, straining to hear whatever it is she's hearing. After a tense moment, Maria looks back to me and bursts into a light laughter, "Sorry, I thought I heard someone coming." The tension in my stomach bubbles into a sigh of relief and I start the recording. Reaching for her tea, Maria adjusts her laptop for the last time and together we start our interview—Maria in her car in her home's drive way in New York, US and me at my makeshift desk in my bedroom in Vancouver, BC.*

My interview with Maria was the very first interview I conducted for this research. I was incredibly nervous, as this was my first major project, and I still didn't know how we would get

along. Would she be comfortable talking to me? Would it be easy to ask her questions? Would she even like me? Though seemingly odd, it was incredibly important to me that my participants actually enjoyed talking with me and thus, to an extent, liked me. I wanted them to feel excited to share stories with me, not like I was just solely extracting information from them.[27] Similarly, I wanted to also share my own stories with them, as a sort of reciprocity—if I was going to learn all this information about them, they should have an opportunity to learn about me too. Much to my relief, from what they told me they did in fact enjoy our interviews, as did I.

As mentioned before, for this research I interviewed eight individuals of Ainu descent. Their names (pseudonyms), ages, ethnic *self-identity*, and regions of residence range as follows:

Alex	26	Japanese/Ainu//White	Hawai'i, US
Dustin	19	Japanese/Indigenous/Ainu	Wisconsin, US
Emi	18	Black/Japanese	Minnesota, US
Hana	27	Japanese/Ainu/White	Nevada, US
Jude	22	Japanese/Ainu/White	Kyoto, Japan
Cole	17	Indigenous/Romani/Jewish/Black	Ontario, Canada
Maria	25	Japanese/Colombian	New York, US
Ren	29	Ainu/White	New York, US

Though my research does not pose a great physical risk to my participants, all participants have been anonymized. This has been done for a few reasons. First, some did not want their families knowing what they said in our interviews. Specifically, since they were sharing, for example, their anxieties and frustrations over their Ainu ancestry being erased, they did not want family reading this and "feeling guilty." As such, they did not want others reading this who could then tell their family members about my participants feelings and experiences. Second, and closely related to the first, some wanted to protect their families. For a few participants, the family

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[27] Incidentally, because I knew most were politically left-leaning, I even purposefully scheduled my interviews for after the 46th US Presidential Elections, which occurred mid-November. I wanted to ensure that the results wouldn't dominate our interviews, especially if now Democrat President Joe Biden lost to Republican D***** T****. In fact, Maria's interview occurred the weekend after the US election and Maria and I even shared in our excitement and relief; finally, we might actually see an end to white supremacy in the government and an end to this global pandemic—a pandemic that severely impacted our daily lives, but also (less importantly) my research.

members who are of Ainu descent experienced trauma either directly related to their Ainu heritage or general upbringing. Thus, they did want to, in a way, *expose* their loved one's trauma to the world, especially since someone their family knows could read this thesis. On this note, I have also taken the extra step of not including most of these family stories. That being said, when I do need to reference them, I am very conscientious of how I write about them and do my best to omit what I can.

Third, as I discuss some participants' reactions to Tessa's Instagram post, I worry about damaging those potential relationships. I do not want to create an environment where those particular participants cannot engage meaningfully with the Ainu in Diaspora community, and more broadly the American Ainu community because of how they feel about that Instagram post. That is not to say Tessa or anyone else involved would ostracize any of these individuals. Rather, I do not want to place any strain on these relationships., especially when I do not need to. Lastly, and personally the most important, I do not want to put narratives out into the world that will forever be attached to my participants names. All of my participants are in their late teens or 20s and as young adults, beliefs, feelings, opinions, ideas, etc. often change over time. Thus, I feel it is crucial that I do not create a narrative of someone that perhaps in even just five years does not represent how they understand themselves.

On another note, as the majority of my participants do not identify within binary genders and in an effort to further anonymize them, I have chosen to omit their specific gender identities. This is not to erase their gender nor am I suggesting that gender does not play a role in their experiences. For some, being non-binary, queer, or two-spirit is extremely important to their identities and life experiences. Instead, I have chosen to omit gender identity as gender plays a very minor role in this thesis—I do not engage with gendered aspects of identity-making. In this way, like my attitudes towards the *use* of digital spaces discussed in Chapter 2, I do not explicitly critically engage with and discuss gender, so it is not included in this thesis.

For our interviews, I primarily used the US-based video conferencing platform, Zoom. and reserved more casual settings, such as general meeting organizing, follow-up questions, and thesis updates, for either email or more often, Instagram DMs. Only two interviews were

conducted through email exchange; these participants found it easiest to organize and communicate their thoughts through written emails, as opposed to talking on the spot, face to face. As a result, the Zoom interviews were semi-structured and the email interviews were structured. For the semi-structured interviews, I found Zoom to be easiest to conduct and record interviews for future transcripts, whereas direct messaging someone was easiest to get a quick response from participants. I also believe it helped foster a more casual relationship between myself and participants; exchanges quickly become very informal, allowing for arguably better and more trustworthy relationships. However, as I show in the next section, the casualness of these relationships also had a lot to do with my own positionality.

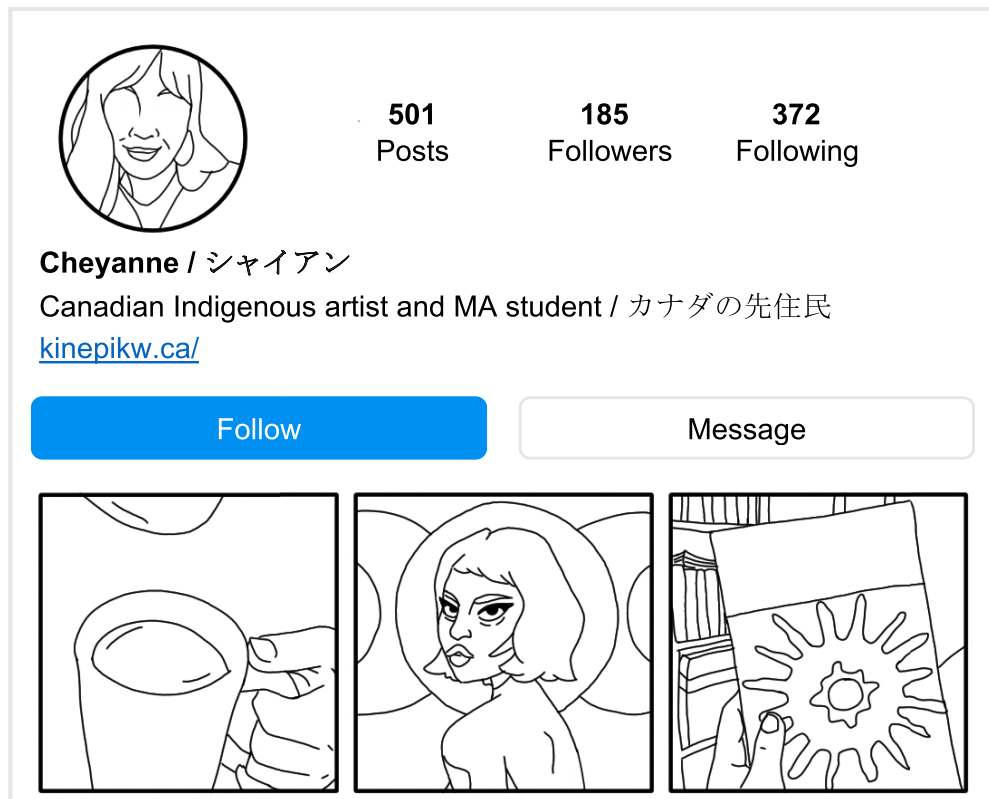**3.3 "Only because you're Indigenous too"**

Figure 6: Personal Instagram profile page. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

Speaking with participants, often when we think of anthropology and anthropologists, we conjure an image of an older white man, who is slightly out of touch with 'new' technologies and

what it is like to be, for example, twenty-five trying to figure out "who am I?" So, when I introduced myself to people, many were arguably quite surprised and intrigued with my research. When I started this project, I was 26 years old (now 27), and like my above profile biography says (Figure 6), I self-identify as Indigenous, specifically Dunne-Za and Cree from West Moberly First Nations in BC, Canada.[28] Thus, just like my participants, I was of Indigenous ancestry and in my 20s. As such, I grew up and am living in Canada, but am also privy to US histories, society and cultures. But most importantly, as a young mixed-Indigenous person who grew up off-reserve and struggled with their own identity, I too, to an extent, personally understand the difficulties that come with fostering an Indigenous identity and trying to belong to an Indigenous community. In this way, unlike with older white men, my participants could easily see that my own experiences somewhat mirrored their own.

As touched on in Chapter 1, I understand firsthand the complexities—the struggles and the celebrations—of being mixed and Indigenous. Like many of my peers, I grew up estranged from my Indigenous family and culture and had little understanding of Indigenous histories, whether in Canada or elsewhere in the world. It wasn't until college that I finally understood what it meant to be Indigenous and part of a collective group of systemically disadvantaged peoples. Yet, I still felt at a distance from my Indigenous culture; I was and still am concerned that I never will be "Native enough" due to my apparently different experiences as someone who only recently self-identified as an Indigenous person. Explored more with participants in Chapter 5, these feelings greatly impact(ed) how I foster my own sense of indigeneity and (non)belonging to Indigenous communities. Furthermore, as a 'new' Indigenous person and as someone who isn't always racialized as Indigenous due to my mixed physical features, it also makes it difficult to feel comfortable identifying and critically engaging with the many seeming problems within Indigenous discourse; I have not experienced the same amount or types of discrimination as some of my peers, so I may not always inherently understand the nuances of these problems.

Though I touched on issues of Indigenous discourse in Chapter 2, such as the (re)production of Indigenous folks needing to be 'traditional' to be seen as authentic, I feel it is important to

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[28] In my Instagram profile, the reason I did not specify my Indigenous ancestry and instead opted for "Canadian Indigenous" was so I could have a direct English-Japanese translation.

highlight my own hesitancies within this research. Having only come into my indigenous identity within the last seven years, there are many ways in which I am still learning compared to other Indigenous folks my age. For example, as of right now, it would be impossible for me to describe in depth and with great accuracy the *60s scoop* or *highway of tears.* That is not say I do not know what they are nor the importance of them, but rather, I just could not explain (on the spot) precisely how everything came to be, all those involved, and how it impacted those involved and subsequent generations. In this way, I am lacking Indigenous knowledge that, based on how many non-Indigenous *and* Indigenous people talk to me as if I am an expert on these things, seems essential to 'real' or authentic Indigenous people and identity. Much like how my participants feel—again, proposed and discussed later in Chapter 5—I continuously can't help but feel like I am an "imposter" because I claim an Indigenous identity. However, I also feel that puts me in a spot of advantage, as both myself and my participants are in similar points in our journeys: we are all still learning what indigeneity means to us.

Due to my own feelings and experiences, validating other mixed-Indigenous folks experiences is extremely important to me. It is also what has driven me to conduct this research and more long-term, what has driven me to this career as an anthropologist and hopefully one day, a university professor. I want to be in a position (of power) when I can help shape and reimagine dominant narratives of indigeneity. Though my research focuses solely on Ainu experiences, and I am not Ainu myself, my goal is to help elevate American Ainu voices and experiences in this thesis. As such, I aim for my thesis to ultimately contribute to broader narratives of Indigeneity, not just of Ainu indigeneity. As a young Indigenous scholar, I feel I am uniquely positioned as my own understanding, writings, and experiences—which I share with my participants—create many privileged opportunities of meaningful, engaged, and understanding communication. In other words, If I was not Indigenous and in my 20s, I strongly feel that this research and the stories shared by participants, would not have come to fruition in the ways it did.

In this chapter, I introduced and discussed the methods of the research in which my thesis is built on. This included detailing various insights into my observations, interviews, participants, and own positionality. I also highlighted why my thesis does not cover certain seemingly important factors, such as gender identity. Simply put, it is not largely relevant to the intent of my thesis; I

am presenting an argument that suggests American Ainu experience is largely rooted in North American Indigenous experience. Though gender, specifically women's rights and experiences are integral to North American Indigenous discourse—in that many Indigenous women were (are) disproportionately systemically disadvantaged compared to Indigenous men (i.e. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and loss of status for Indigenous women who wed non-Indigenous men)—I determined that such engagements with this gendered discourse, based on their gender identities, did not play a large role in causing variations between participant experiences. Furthermore, as most do not even subscribe to a gender binary, I have strategically written this thesis, especially the next chapter in a way that predominantly avoids gendering people. By discussing such considerations and more broadly my methods, I aim to provide a foundational context for the ethnographic narratives, including some cultural nuances, that are detailed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4:

AINU ANCESTRY RECKONING AND IDENTITY-MAKING

4.1 "We Have Russian Blood"

It starts with a family whisper.

…my grandma, on the other hand, had always said, like,
Oh, we have Russian blood.
What? What is that supposed to mean?
But we're Japanese.
[Auntie] what did that mean?
Like, did grandma ever go into it before or whatever?

And [later] we were talking about the Ainu and my auntie was like,
Oh yeah, that's what she [grandma] was talking about.
I was like,
Oh, that makes sense,
because I know that they are also in Russia…
So I was like,
Oh, okay.

Then it [what my grandma said] kind of all fell into place.
Like, it made more sense.

…sharing, like, little tidbits, breadcrumbs with us, I guess, over time.

– Alex (Interview, December 5, 2020)

Then putting the pieces together.

…my grandpa would always make fun of her [my grandma] and, like, say,
She's mountain folk.
Jokes like that.
And when she would bring back souvenirs,
when she would go visit Hokkaido…
she [would] come back with these souvenirs
that didn't look Japanese at all.
They looked Native American honestly.

I grew up around these like wooden carved pieces in my life
that I thought were Native American,
learning later, that they were Japanese
and then learning shortly thereafter, [they were] not [Japanese].

You know, [I learned] what they actually are [Ainu]
and what all of this actually means.

-   Ren (Interview, December 5, 2020)

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Things falling into place.

        …little things throughout my childhood…
It's kind of been a lifelong process of, like,
taking these contextual clues and putting them together.

        …using these contextual clues to kind of confirm that [Ainu ancestry].

…my grandmother…told me that we were bear people
and she gave me a little pendant that was, like,
a stone carved bear.
[she also] told my father to plant a willow tree
when my son was born…

[As] I've come to learn more about Ainu culture,
there are a lot of rituals with Willow specifically…
        none of us really understood what that was [then].
But now…looking back, I'm like,
        It makes a lot of sense.

-    Hana (Interview, December 19, 2020)

Then feeling even more uncertain.

I guess I don't feel like I'm *super* Ainu
because I'm all the way in the US, like,
        I don't even know my family there [in Japan].

I feel really far removed from my ancestry,
        even though it's there.

It's like it feels almost like an imposter,
        yeah, imposter syndrome
to just be like,
I'm Ainu.

-    Maria (Interview, November 15, 2020)

As shown above, for many 'new' Ainu, like Alex, Ren and Hana, their discovery of Ainu *roots* often comes from family whisperings and "little bread crumbs." It is only through putting the pieces together that they were able to discover their Ainu roots and subsequently embark on a new journey of self-discovery. However, these journeys have been far from easy. Unlike many Ainu in Japan, for them, they have limited access to Ainu histories and culture not only due to their geographical distance, their lack of fluency in written and spoken Japanese, but also due to the *erasure* of Ainuness in their own families and conflicting understandings of what it means to be Indigenous as Ainu in North America.

In this chapter, I introduce the experiences of the eight participants of this research and discuss their individual, yet shared, processes of ancestry reckoning and identity-making thus far. Drawing mainly on our one-on-one interviews, I explore the complexities, celebrations and nuances of discovering and investigating their family ancestries and histories, and their journeys of identity-making. Together, we unfold how Japan legacies and '*diasporic*' being, dominate and shape not only how they access and learn their Ainu histories and culture, but also how they begin to make Indigenous connections. The aim of this chapter is to recognize and highlight the typically undisclosed struggles that come with making an Indigenous identity later in life, even as early as one's late teens. This chapter does not deeply analyze how North American Indigenous experience dominates these young Ainu folks lives per se, but it does provide some notable insight into how one's residence and livelihood in North America fosters a unique experience of Ainu discovery and identity-making that is somewhat different than Ainu living in Japan and is otherwise not interrogated in most scholarship of Ainu. In fact, seemingly only one scholar of Ainu has focused solely on Ainuness outside of Japan.

In Ainu scholar Ronda Hayashi-Simpliciano's (2020) dissertation, they employ the theoretical framework of diaspora and double consciousness to interpret diasporic Ainu experience in North America. In it, they reference how the "Japanese gaze" shapes Ainu negotiations of identity and belonging, including, though not explicitly mentioned, how diasporic Ainu perform, or do not perform, as Ainu. In other words, they suggest that the Japanese gaze and to an extent the White gaze[29]—similar to Roslynn Ang's notion of the settler gaze for Ainu in Japan (2018)—primarily shapes how Ainu understand and present themselves to both themselves and the greater public (Hayashi-Simpliciano 2020). Hayashi-Simpliciano argues that these *performances* are best understood as a result of Ainu folks constantly negotiating how they are seen by others through such gazes, including their *othering* and being regarded as what Batchelor once described as a "hairy Ainu" (2020).

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[29] Such as the gaze of White explorer Rev. John Batchelor, author of *The Ainu of Japan: the religion, superstitions, and general history of the hairy aborigines of Japan* (1890) and *An Itinerary of Hokkaido, Japan* (1893).

The framework employed by Hayashi-Simpliciano (2020) provides many insights into the American Ainu identity-making process, especially of diasporic Ainu who are intimately connected to both the real and imagined geography of Japan. In particular, they offer insights into those whose Ainu identity is largely informed by the Japan Ainu context, including Ainu-Wajin relations and the Wajin gaze (i.e. how Wajin attitudes towards Ainu and Ainuness shape Ainu experiences and identity). My thesis differs in that my research instead privileges identity-making of individuals who are still in the very early stages of learning who Ainu are and what it even means to be Ainu and Indigenous. Additionally, unlike Hayashi-Simpliciano, I am (more so in the next chapter) moving away from a Japan Ainu informed/based narrative and instead exploring and arguing how North American Indigenous narratives largely inform these particular Ainu negotiations of identity-making. My aim for this chapter is to compliment and extend, for example Hayashi-Simpliciano's narratives, and lay the foundational work for exploring how both American Ainu *performance* and one's intimate proximity to North American Indigenous experience foster identity-making experiences that are uniquely complex and *precarious* among Ainu in North America.

4.2 A Discovery of Ainu Roots

> Since March, when we kind of started this quarantine, I just spent so much time just on my own… it was kind of a very emotional time. So I was just doing a lot of, like, reflecting and spending time on my own. And sometime in June, yeah June, I became really interested in finding out more about where my roots are from. It's not something I ever really, I guess, gave a lot of thought to. But I was asking myself, like,
>
> <div align="center">
>
> Who?
> Who am I?
> Where are my roots from?
>
> </div>
>
> Like, I guess I never really like felt any interest in kind of understanding my mixed ethnicity and this year was really a time where I felt a need to explore that. And so I was asking myself, like all these questions [and I realized] I don't even know where my roots are. I don't even know who my ancestors are and it just became this question where I just,
>
> <div align="center">
>
> I needed to know.
>
> </div>
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> <div align="right">
>
> - Maria (Interview, November 15, 2020)
>
> </div>

Like Maria, for many the global pandemic brought with it a lot of time for self-reflection and new discoveries. While some were off learning how to make polymer clay earrings, others were

finally starting their investigations into their ancestral roots, or as Maria said, who they *really* were.

4.2.1 DNA Testing and Blood Quantum

For the participants of this research, while their journeys really came to fruition over the last year or so, it actually began years prior. Family whisperings and this need to know their *roots* drew many to the popularized DNA at-home testing kits, like *23andMe.* In fact, six out of eight participants admitted to using such tests to get a better sense of where their ancestors came from. Despite knowing they had, for example, "Russian blood" or that they were half Japanese, these tests served as a way of arguably formal 'proof' of such ancestries. For them, and perhaps due to DNA tests trending in North America, especially on *TikTok* and *YouTube*, taking a DNA test was the next logical step in their journey of self-discovery.

However, locating Ainu ancestry in particular is much more difficult and is rarely 'proven' through DNA. For example, there is arguably no definitive way to identify and thus prove genetic ties to a sort of 'Ainu haplotype' through these tests. Instead, users are given estimates of their genetic makeup by matching their DNA with the DNA of known groups and individuals whom are of specific ethnic origins, migration patterns, and physical geographies. Shown in Figure 7, for someone of Japan ancestry, users are then able to see the specific prefecture in which their ancestry is rooted. When comparing these identified regions with their own, say, family whisperings, individuals like Hana and Alex can to an extent confirm that their family is of Ainu ancestry if they are shown to be from the traditional Ainu territory of Hokkaido, Japan.

East Asian & Native American   51.1%

  >> Japanese & Korean   50.8%

    >> Japanese   50.6%

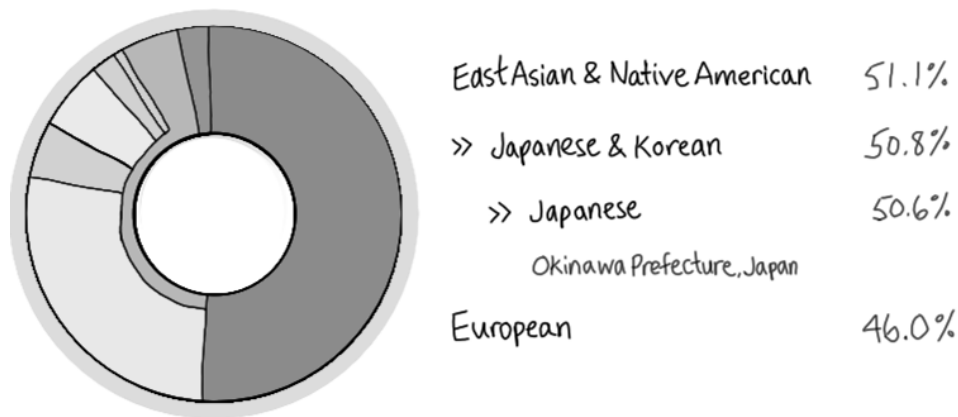   Okinawa Prefecture, Japan

European   46.0%

Figure 7: An example of DNA test results. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

Though not concrete as perhaps being able to trace the exact *kotan* or tribe of one's ancestry, having marriage registration document, or family photographs, DNA tests can provide a degree of comfort to those seeking to understand themselves and their families' lineages more. These tests can then serve as the motivation needed to continue their journey of self-discovery, including self-reconciliation. That being said, even just the presence of DNA testing among these American Ainu and more broadly among Indigenous folk in North America, does bring up an important question: aren't DNA tests a form of blood quantum and thus, an extension of colonial ideas of 'legitimate proof' of Indigenous ancestry? As Indigenous peoples, why are Ainu then relying on such methods?

As Hana pointed out in our interview and Tessa in their *Instagram* post, blood quantum is a complicated issue. For many Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks, blood quantum can be seen as a concrete and reliable, albeit colonial, way in which Indigenous ancestry can be confirmed or denied (Tallbear 2013). For those less familiar, blood quantum is a type of measuring system created and used by historically colonial governments, such as Canada and the United States, to regulate who can and cannot claim an Indigenous identity and thus, formal 'Indian status.' Essentially, it is used to measure how much 'Indian blood', or in this case Ainu blood, a person has; if a person's blood is seen as too diluted (i.e. only one-sixteenth Indigenous), more often than not through white or Japanese (Wajin) blood, they may be seen as in a way too distant from their Ainu ancestry. Even within my own nation, West Moberly First Nations, only those with a

minimum of one-eighth Indigenous blood quantum are eligible for membership with the nation, and thus, can register for government Indian Status. Though blood quantum has little to do with Ainu membership in Japan, the diluteness and as a result, increased cultural distance is arguably still felt by some folks of Ainu ancestry (Ishihara 2021). Yet, it is very rare for any Ainu, let alone any Indigenous person in general in present day to be 'full-blooded' Indigenous. As Ren suggests, "Nobody's pureblood [anymore]" (Interview, December 5, 2020) This situation is further complicated due to the fact that some Ainu today are not even 'genetically' Ainu.

In Japan, ties to Ainu ancestry are relatively unique in that an individual can be of Ainu ancestry through blood, adoption into an Ainu family, or marriage to an individual of Ainu ancestry (of blood or adoption) (Watson 2014: 4; lewallen 2016). Historically, a large portion of Ainu families actually adopted children of both Ainu and Wajin Japanese ancestry, with Japanese children being adopting much more frequently (Geiser 1971). Though it is not quite clear to scholars why so many Wajin Japanese children in particular were adopted by Ainu families, some texts do mention the death of many Ainu children at an early age and in one recognized case, adopting as a means of escape for a Japanese child from his abusive father, as possible leading reasons why (Geiser 1971; lewallen 2016). Regardless, once adopted, these children were bestowed Ainu status and typically fostered a 'new' Ainu identity relative to their new Ainu family's matrilineal ancestry (Siddle 1996). Ainu status could then be given to these children's partners, regardless of both persons being genetically of Wajin Japanese origin (Geiser 1971: 34).[30] Though this practice dates back a few decades or so, in present day, Ainu communities still seem to follow these practices. As one participant, Jude, who is lives in Japan, recalled in our interview,

> In fact, there is, like, one hundred percent Wajin Japanese people who are called Ainu by the community and call themselves Ainu because they were brought up in the community because they were orphaned and Ainu adopted them.
>
> (Interview, December 19, 2020)

With the inclusion of adoption and marriage as legitimate Ainu ancestry, having Ainu DNA or 'Ainu blood,' therefore, is only one of the arguably multiple ways in which one can have Ainu

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[30] It has been difficult to identify scholarship and other resources that extensively discuss the topic of adoption within Ainu communities. What is referenced here comes from brief mentions in scholarship of Ainu of other topics.

ancestry. Likely, a relatively significant number of self-identified Ainu today, including some in this research, could be of Ainu ancestry through various relations. With this in mind, perhaps this is in part why Tessa also criticized Maya for trying to prove their Ainu lineage through genetic testing. However, regardless of these histories, DNA testing is as shown still prevalent among participants. We then have to wonder, why do many Indigenous folk in particular still turn to DNA tests and in turn, blood quantum as a tool of ancestry legitimatization?

4.2.2 Oral Histories and the 'Erased' Ainu

While there may be several reasons for using blood quantum (see Kim Tallbear 2013), I suggest that many folks like Alex and Dustin lean towards blood quantum mainly because family whisperings alone are seen by many as *unreliable* proof and as a result, are easily disputable. That is not to say they solely rely on such methods, but rather that blood quantum is one of many avenues used to explore their (Ainu) ancestry. For example, in North America, there have already been several cases in which prominent individuals have been publicly determined to have falsely claimed an Indigenous ancestry.[31] In all these cases, the main culprit was found to be 'misleading' family histories passed down from generation to generation. For Ainu, issues of falsified claims to Indigenous identity seem to rarely occur, but of course we know that they do in fact exist because of the situation between Tessa and Maya. Though this false claim seems to stem out of an issue of sketchy DNA tracing (i.e. claiming an Ainu haplotype), it does help highlight other issues within Ainu ancestry tracing: hesitancy towards trusting family whispers, or as I suggest them as, oral histories.

As discussed earlier, family oral histories are the main way in which young American Ainu can trace their Ainu lineage. However, with the rise of public identity disputes online, including that of Tessa's post, I suggest that concerns of mistaken or even misinterpreted histories dominate these young folks' confidence in pursuing and eventually adopting an Ainu identity. This was most evident to me in the many times participants, and even those who declined to participate, made sure to carefully disclose the *uncertainty* and *mystery* surrounding even just the knowledge

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[31] Most notably, these include Canadian filmmaker Michelle Latimer, producer of CBC's television series *Trickster* (2020), novelist Joseph CM, author of *Three Day Road*, American scholar-activist Dr. Andrea Smith, co-founder of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and academic Dr. Amie Wolf, previously employed by the University of British Columbia.

of their Ainu ancestry. I was repeatedly told things like, "…[I'm] not 100 percent sure that I am Ainu" (Maria, Interview, November 15, 2020). I assured them that this was not an issue as the intent of my thesis is to highlight *self-identified* Ainu *identity-making* processes, not to decide who is and is not 'legitimately' Ainu. On a more personal note, from one mixed native to another, I couldn't help but remind them of the many Indigenous peoples in North America who, due to colonial histories and violence, are also unable to 'prove' their Indigenous ancestry[32] and how formal Indigenous registrations is often a by-product of colonial governments (i.e. Indian Status in Canada). Though I arguably did ease some of their concerns—specifically, they agreed that they did in fact meet the 'qualifications' to be a part of this research—their uneasiness still presided. For the majority of my participants, the fact remained that regardless of how the comfort afforded by DNA testing, they would still likely never get definitive proof and thus, formal validation of their Ainu ancestry; their families would never tell them.

> I can't even ask her…
> because she always shuts down.
>   Always shuts down.
> She doesn't even want to talk about the past.

-    Emi (Interview, May 22, 2021)

For many young Ainu today, like Emi, the legacies of Japanese *colonialism* have fostered an environment in which Ainuness is predominantly seen as, in a way, undesirable in Japan. As introduced in Chapter 2, Ainu were historically considered to be outcastes of society and were in turn often excluded from Wajin Japanese society. As such, Ainu were often considered to be "not fully Japanese", and in some cases "not fully human" (Siddle 1996: 73-4). For many Wajin Japanese, Ainu are still regarded as second-class citizens and to many they are seen as not truly Japanese due to their seemingly Northern and White (ancestral) physical features (Siddle 1996). This discrimination of Ainu in Japan, along with long-lasting stigma and shame, led to many of those with Ainu ancestry to *assimilate* into Wajin Japanese culture and identities, *erasing* their

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[32] For example, in Canada, because of the Indian Act (1867), many Indigenous women have lost "Indian Status" (tribal membership) due to marrying a non-Indigenous man. Their children also did not have "Indian Status". As a result, many Indigenous folks today what band/tribe they are from and cannot register for Indian Status. Similarly, even when an individual knows what tribe they are from, they often still cannot register to the tribe because their mother needs to register to the tribe first. However, most of these women are deceased or do not have access to sufficient documentation to prove they are a member of the tribe. Therefore, many Indigenous peoples are left with unsure histories and unknown ties to Indigenous tribes. More information can be found here.

Ainuness. As a result, the mothers, fathers, grandparents and great-grandparents of many young Ainu folk today have all but ceased to exist as Ainu and are 'completely' (Wajin) Japanese. In other words, the very family members who brought awareness to such ancestry are often the same ones who *erased* the Ainu from their histories.

Young Ainu like Emi and Alex, for example, have thus not only been denied access to their Ainu ancestries and further oral histories, but due to this discrimination have also been forced to reckon such lineages on their own. That is not say they cannot and have not reached out to fellow young Ainu folk along their journey. Nor am I saying that their family members are intentionally ignoring their inquiries into their Ainu ancestries. For instance, Dustin gained much of their knowledge of Ainu culture and lineage directly through their grandmother. Similarly, for Jude and Hana, Ainu cultural practices have been instilled in them since childhood through various food recipes and rituals, albeit unknown to them as Ainu at the time. On the other side, for some, the histories are so far erased and removed that it is likely no one in their family has any knowledge to offer these young Ainu folks. As Maria recalled,

> I just think my grandma probably didn't know the most about it or I don't know how or if her parents talked about it.
>
> (Interview, December 5, 2020)

I am suggesting that the participants explorations into Ainuness and Ainu identity-making are for the most part entirely their own; the majority of them are the only ones in their immediate and close families who are interested in pursuing an Ainu identity, or even just learning more about their Ainu ancestry. As touched on in Chapter 2, family members are reported as feeling too Wajin (Japanese) and too old to reimagine themselves as Ainu. Again, that is not to say older generations have not done fostered an Ainu identity in their later years—I am positive many have. It is just that for these particular young Ainu and their families, that is not often the case. Though I have my ideas as to why this is—for example, perhaps their experiences and racialization as Japanese American in North America have greatly shaped their relationship to and pride in their Japanese identity and thus, further distanced them from their potential Ainu identity—the reasons for this are not something I am exploring in this section nor this thesis.

Simply put, there is just not enough space to cover such avenues. However, it is worth mentioning, albeit very briefly, as it lends to the overarching themes in this research: how being in North America greatly shapes their experiences as Ainu descendants.

Though these journeys are primarily being conducted alone, this has not deterred these young Ainu from embarking on these paths of self-discover. In fact, it has arguably inspired and motivated them more to reconcile this, as they suggest, *internalized colonialism* within their families, and instead foster new paths for themselves and future generations of American Ainu. Before this however, they must first learn who the Ainu are and what it even means to be Ainu in North America.

4.3 Learning Ainu

> My mom's parents gave me a collection of National Geographic from 1973 and one of the books (*Vanishing Peoples of the World*) had a chapter on Ainu...

> - Cole (Interview, January 6, 2021)
> -

For young American Ainu today, the *learning* stages of their journeys begin with first figuring out how and where to find material on Ainu histories and culture. Given that they are, as Tessa would say *diasporic*, accessing such materials, especially in English, as well as other Ainu folks in person, is more difficult than that of an Ainu person in Hokkaido, Japan. Though some of my participants do live roughly a couple days drive from each other, as my participants are still in the earlier stages of their journeys, most have yet to even virtually meet each other nor are they aware of each others existence. Similarly, some have anxieties over meeting essentially strangers in person and/or do not have access to the time and funds needed for such travel. Also, at the time of this research, the ongoing global pandemic made most travel impossible. Without the helping hand of each other, they instead had to turn to other avenues of Ainu exploration, such as museums, books and digital spaces.

In North America, due to the limited knowledge of even the existence of Ainu, rarely is there any physical or 'real world' spaces in which Ainuness is permanently situated and on display. For example, even at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, the couple times I visited in 2019, the few Ainu artifacts (see Figure 8) in possession were not on display.[33]

Figure 8: An example of Ainu Russian Dolls, similar to ones at the MOA. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

Due to these limited 'real world' exposures, for many of my participants they instead turned to one of the most easily accessible world databases: *Google*. All they had to do was open their cellphone, open the internet, and input the word "Ainu", then press "search." From there, they delved deep into the seemingly endless digital spaces of blogs, forums, photographs, articles, etc. relating to all things Ainu.

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[33] Touched on in Chapter 2, if as an academic researcher, I still find it difficult to locate Ainu representation in places like the MOA, how can those who are brand new to such endeavors, find any physical representation themselves? To be clear, in no way am I suggesting I am more skilled than other Ainu folk in identifying and locating Ainu information and physical materials. Rather, this is just to show how despite myself actively looking for such things and given my privileged proximity as a researcher to Ainu materials, it is still challenging to find anything Ainu in North America.

For digital spaces and resources, many first relied on open-access and popular sources such as *Wikipedia* or Ainu Museum websites, like *Upopoy*. These spaces were vital in that they were English-based or at least professionally English-translated (i.e. not *Google translate*) sites that were thus written for an English-speaking audience. Many of my participants have either little knowledge of the Japanese language or "speak and listen better than I [they] read", therefore such sites provided some of the only access they had to their ancestral histories, beyond books and travel.

In terms of books, many opted to purchase physical copies of the most popular books on Ainu, as suggested by sites like Google. Much like when I began my own research of Ainu, participants like Alex for example were eager to get their hands on ann-elise lewallen's (2016) *The Fabric of Indigeneity* and Mark Watson's (2014) *Japan's Ainu Minority in Tokyo.* At the time of our interview, they were still waiting for lewallen's book to arrive in the mail, but their excitement was barely containable:

> I'm still waiting on that book in the mail. I can't wait to get it…[I'm] super, super excited to learn more, like, read that book about Ainu [and learn] what the motifs actually mean—specifics and stuff like that. That'll be really special and cool.
>
> <div align="right">(Interview, December 3, 2020)</div>

Whether it be physical books or e-books, having access to these particular knowledges helped many to learn more about their Ainu heritage. As Hana shared, the narratives in books for example acted as a more "tangible way of interacting with my Ainu culture," as opposed to just reading Wikipedia. Another reason for most owning at least one physical book of Ainu, is likely because of the limited access to book contents online, especially since most are no longer students. Without student access to library catalogues and thus, free access to most English-published physical books and e-books on Ainu, many young Ainu are forced to either purchase their books or solely rely on online open-access spaces to learn. In arguably another form of continued colonial violence, these young Ainu must use their own monies to *purchase access* to their own families' histories and culture. Regardless, as folks living in North America, many were just happy to have even found any materials for learning.

In terms of travel, while venturing to Hokkaido, Japan post-Ainu ancestry discovery is seen as a future option for most, in terms of *starting* their Ainu journeys, traveling to and learning from Japan Ainu in-person is seen by most as something to be done "eventually." As such, many have limited connections to any Ainu in Japan, meaning they would likely have to rely on visiting an Ainu tourist village—they would need to become a *tourist* to see and learn from other Ainu. Though of interest to some, Jude highlighted the awkwardness and uneasiness of potentially being a tourist among their own peoples and within their own ancestral homeland:

> I think the way that it's commodified [Ainu culture in Japan]—the way that it is packaged and dispersed, you know, as a tourist thing—feels like it was [is] accessible for me. I also feel like I felt [it was] not appropriate, but [instead] like predatory learning culture through that space and going there to… I don't know. It's not like I don't want to support my [Ainu] community. I will buy handcraft things from the [Ainu] artist…and I love their work and I want to support them, but I don't really want to be in that space along with a bunch of other non-Ainu people who don't understand or necessarily always respect our culture. And so for me, like, it's really weird because while I do have access to the space. I don't feel like going into that space [of Ainu tourist sites in Hokkaido].

> *It almost seems like you want to go as like an Ainu person wanting to learn as opposed to a tourist.*

> Yeah. Exactly.
>
> <div align="right">(Interview, December 19, 2020)</div>

Thus, as an alternative to tourism and books, participants privileged more newer avenues of learning: digital spaces like *Instagram, TikTok*, *Facebook,* and even *Tumblr*. These spaces are not only *free* to join and access, but most accounts, profiles, posts, etc. are publicly accessible. That is not to say all Ainu peoples accounts are made public. In fact, many of the personal Instagram accounts I suspected to be of Ainu people, especially in Japan, were not publicly accessible. Similarly, the *Ainu in Diaspora* Facebook group is also a private group. One would need to have a registered Facebook account and then formally request to join the group. From

there, someone like Tessa, who is an administrator—one of the people who controls who can and cannot be a member—would then either grant or deny access to the group. Once inside, members can post to the group (following certain guidelines), private message each other, and access old and new posts and thus, information about Ainu histories and culture.

While the *Ainu in Diaspora* group is somewhat easily accessible, as in most members who ask to join with good intent are seemingly accepted, it does not necessarily mean that is *comfortably accessible* to everyone. Two participants, who have membership, said of the group,

> …the page itself has been [of] mixed [feelings to me] because I think there's like some really amazing connections going on between people. And then there's like a few people who are definitely there to, like, sightsee and ask random anthropological questions about the Ainu. And that always makes me really, really uncomfortable…Like, it's a dead giveaway who is writing.

- Jude (Interview, December 19, 2020)

And,

> I kind of told her [a Facebook member] a little bit about my story and then she's like, you should join the group. And so I did. But I wasn't very active in it. I wasn't very involved in it. Like, one of the few times I read comments was that one time that where Maya commented. They all got very frustrated with her for doing so. So, yeah.

- Hana (Interview, December 19, 2020)

Of my eight participants, only three were members of the *Ainu in Diaspora* group, whereas the rest had either a) never heard of it; b) didn't have an account or aren't active on Facebook; or c) were not yet feel comfortable enough to join the group. Though I do not explore in this chapter how and why some participants felt uneasy about joining this group, or other online communities (see Chapter 5), these particular narratives are included in this section, as I feel they directly speak to the (in)accessible nature of these various learning sources—the main goal of this section. In this way, I suggest that *open-access* and *free* does not always equal *accessible.*

That being said, despite these issues of *comfortable accessibility,* digital spaces are arguably one of the easiest ways in which young Ainu in North America can find information on their heritage.[34] As shown through this section, without much access to other Ainu people, family histories, and even Hokkaido, Japan, many felt that these were good places to start their learning; because of the somewhat extensive information on Ainu within these digital spaces, they could finally learn the 'basics' of *who* the Ainu are and thus, where their ancestors came from.

4.3.2 The 'Basics'

For many of my participants, based on their own research online and elsewhere, their understanding of 'basic' Ainu history and culture is quite similar to the many texts this thesis is built on., As I have already introduced and discussed this scholarship in Chapter 2 and thus, already provided an overview of what these *basics* are, I have chosen to instead use this space to illustrate *how* these knowledges came to be. Informed by exact material from the exact digital spaces where participants conducted their own research, such as images on *Instagram* and quotes or screenshots from videos on *TikTok*, I will present a collage of sorts (see Figure 9). While much of this thesis does use text to illustrate the experiences of my participants, I want to provide a space that better allows readers to *experience* how these young American Ainu must each learn their Ainu heritage. As outlined throughout this thesis, digital spaces are vital in their ancestry reckoning and identity-making processes. As such, the Ainu discourse and representation in such spaces are often composed of a particular narrative. Though this identified narrative is analyzed and discussed in-depth in the next chapter, the following collage will serve as an introduction to how these select online representations inform American Ainu experience and identity.

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[34] In terms of Indigenous peoples and access to digital technologies, it is important that I do not ignore the fact that many communities do not own such technologies nor do they have access to basic internet. For example, even in my own nation in Northern BC, Canada, it is only within the last few years that internet access has somewhat stabilized and telephone lines were erected in the community. However, as my thesis draws mainly on my participants experience, internet access for the greater American Ainu community is seemingly not as much an issue as it is for other Indigenous communities in North America.

Figure 9: Ainu representation online. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

Of course, Ainu and Ainuness cannot and should not be reduced to only a few select images and text—it is a gross over simplification of the expansiveness and diversity of Ainu culture and history. However, for many 'new' American Ainu, as well as other non-Ainu folks newly learning of Ainu, I suggest that this collage thoughtfully represents their beginning understandings of Ainu. For them, and based on their online learning through various media, Ainu and thus, Ainuness is predominantly seen as:

a) worshipping bears and other sacred animals, such as owls;
b) wearing traditional clothing with Ainu motifs;

c) having a distinct (endangered) Indigenous language;

d) playing traditional music, doing traditional dance, and embroidering traditional motifs;

e) adorning mouth tattoos if (self-identified as) female;

f) rooted to Hokkaido, Japan and more broadly, to land and to *nature*; and

g) having been colonized by the (Wajin) Japanese, resulting in their culture mostly *dying out.*[35]

Again, all particpants are actuely aware that Ainuness is both of and beyond these understandings. That being said, these six particular narratives are the most common representations of Ainu history and culture in digital spaces—when searching through the sea of Ainu tagged content, these particular images and ideas were heavily repeated and reposted by various users. For any individual looking for answers—for example, those on a quest to discover more about their Ainu *roots*—these are the types of knowledge that they will first come across and thus, inform their beginning understandings of Ainu.

It is important to note however, that while these narratives are arguably reflective of the dominant narratives put forth by academic texts *and* Japan discourses—as these basics are the same narratives found in most scholarship of Japan Ainu—all of this content was found through the hashtag "Ainu." Though some posts were created by Japanese-speaking users with Japanese language caption—including Japanese Hokkaido museum and Japan history accounts—most had an English-translation already input below the Japanese caption. Similarly, their posts were tagged with both Japanese and English words. For example, for English-speaking audiences, the post would have a "#Ainu" and for Japanese-speaking audiences, "#アイヌ" (Ainu). In some ways, it seems that the users who put forth this content and narratives were cognizant of their English-speaking audiences and thus, their North American audiences, which happens to include American Ainu. This is most evident in that nearly all the posts tagged with "アイヌ" and not

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[35] As an Indigenous scholar, I do not like using this phrasing for the colonization and erasure of Indigenous peoples and culture, as it (re)produces a narrative of Indigenous peoples as a *dying* people despite us being very alive and present today. Yes, our cultures were systematically largely erased and continue to be discriminated against, but we are not on our way to *extinction.* That being said, this is the narrative that is told and repeated by many in digital spaces and so, I have chosen to include the narrative as is in this particular section.

"Ainu", captions were solely in Japanese.[36] Furthermore, of the many posts in English or with English captions, many of the post comments came from North American audiences[37] who frquently exclaimed how they, for example, "…did not know Japan had Indigenous people." Simiarly, many equated Ainu to North American Indigenous peoples, with one individual even asking, "…are they [Ainu] to Japan what natives are to America?" This could also be one of the reasons why many North American audiences, including American Ainu, focus on how the Japanese colonized Ainu. Whereas in Japan, for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks, what happened to the Ainu is not popularly discussed as colonization. As Jude, who grew up and now lives back in Japan said,

> … I think that it's talked about [in Japan] in almost a joking manner a lot that Hokkaido is a colonized place. Almost too lightly when I think about it. It's normalized in a way that, there is awareness of it, but not of what it means, I think.
>
> (Interview, December 19, 2020).

In this way, although these Japanese users and instituions online are primarily catering to North American audiences, it does not nescarily mean that they are also catering to North American conceptions of indigeneity and Indigenous histories. Rather, much like most introductory discouse of Indigenous peoples, I suggest that the intent for these types of users is to educate people on *who* the Ainu were and are (i.e. beliefs, culture, language, etc.), not *what* happened to the Ainu and *how* it happened (i.e. colonization), as well as continues to happen through systemic racism.This is most obvious in that many Japan-based Instagram accounts, like Upopoy, post about traditional Ainu culture, such as dancing, whereas other North American-based accounts post about raising awareness for the continued mistreatment of Ainu in Japan and elsewhere.

,As I discuss in the next chapter, I argue that Japanese users and instituions are centered on increasing awareness of Ainu for tourism purposes. Whereas for North American users and

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[36] A relatively large portion of these posts also had "#ainuembroidery", which is an English hashtag. However, the captions in these posts were mostly Japanese or even Russian (i.e. Russian Ainu) and did not often include an "Ainu" hashtag. I concluded that using English in this particular hashtag was not about catering to a North American audience, but instead about identifying Ainu embroidery itself, which is often spelt in English in Japan tourist shops where their embroidery is often sold.

[37] I was able to identify most commentors country of residence by looking at their social media profiles, which often included their nationality and country residence in their personal biography, as well as geotags on their posts.

arguably North American informed content creators, the intent is different: it is seemingly to educate on *why* Ainu are not well known globally. Again, discussed in the next chapter, this is likely due to the overwhelming prescence of Indigenous repatriation, reclaimation, and reconciliation in most North American Indigenous discourse and thus, users and content creators main reasons for posting Ainu-based content. This is very evident in that a large portion of North American-based online content tagged with Ainu, Okinawan, or Indigenous consists of individuals discussing the historical and continuing colonization of Indigenous peoples. Though these individuals also use their platforms to educate people on Indigenous culture, I suggest there is an added poltical overtone in many of their posts; they are trying to raise awareness for the *injustices* that happened to Ainu and other Indigenous folk, and for many, to their ancestors. As a result, many North American or North American-informed audiences, including my participants, are learning the basics of Ainu and Ainuness through a colonial lens—from the perspective of Ainu being oppressed and racialized by Wajin Japanese settlers, hence the added understanding of Ainu being colonized by the Japanese. Regardles, one the basics are learned, these young new American Ainu are finally able to move on to exploring what being Ainu means to Ainu folks today and more importantly, to themselves.

4.3.3 Finding "Modern" Ainu

Figure 10: 'Modern' Ainu. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

As shown in the previous section, much of the Ainu-related content online (and in books) is seemingly largely shaped by traditional understandings of indigeneity, such as traditional land-based practices rooted in Hokkaido. In this way, I suggest that Ainu and Ainuness is widely centered on older (colonial) anthropological notions of the Indigenous person, which often focuses on traditional beliefs, crafts, body modifications, etc.[38] As a result of this and as shown in the earlier collage, finding "modern" or more globally-driven contemproary enactments of indigeneity is very difficult. For my participants, of the various other Ainu folks they come across, seemingly most, if not all:

a) express themselves traditionally, such as through clothing or crafting;
b) live in Hokkaido or elsewhere in Japan;
c) speak only Japanese;
d) confidently claim Indigenous ancestry and identity; and last, but certainly not least
e) have an identity that is centered on their Ainu roots.

In other words, the most easily accessible self-identified Ainu folks online, are often the ones that to a starnger 'live and breathe Ainu.' For these folks, being Ainu is seemingly core to their sense of self, identity expression, and so forth. Whereas for many of my particpants, all of whom are of mixed ethnicity, their Ainu roots are only one aspect of their identity—they are all Ainu *and* something else[39]. Thus, for my participants, what they were predominantly seeing online— this traditional image of a singular Ainu identity rooted in Japan—did not match their own experiences.

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[38] There are arguably many issues with this type of dominant (colonial) framework and depictions of Indigenous peoples worldwide, however, there is just not enough space or time to meaningfully interrogate these notions in this thesis. That being said, the fact that *Alone with the Hairy Ainu* was republished in 2012 and many scholars still situate Indigenous folks as urban when outside of traditional lands, as opposed to just Indigenous, says a lot about how colonial anthropological notions shape dominant understandings—Indigenous folks are still sometimes talked about as primitive and still seen as 'out of place' in urban settings (Douglas 1966).

[39] I wanted to make a joke about this, as "something else" was the exact term used for the category 'Native American' in a 2020 US election poll presented on a US news show. Subsequently, the use of this term was joked about by many Indigenous users on TikTok, most of whom jokingly declared they were no longer 'Indigenous', instead they were 'something else.' However, I am just using this phrasing because I really can't think of any other useful way of phrasing it.

As mixed American Ainu, whose livelihoods are arguably mostly North American (Indigenous) rooted, these dominant Ainu representations were hard to relate to on various levels. Not only were most living outside of Japan, but most already had different ways of expressing their sense of self. For example, more than half of my particpants described themselves as artists or makers and had well-established practices already. That is not say their Ainu roots could not later inform and shape their art practices. In fact, Alex explicitly expressed interest in and has since incorporated some of their Ainu culture into their art. Cole and Dustin explicitly expressed wanting to learn traditional art practices, such as wood carving. Rather, I suggest that due to their already established practices and identities as Asian Americans (that of course, are still chaning), their expressions of indigeneity will likely look and feel different than those who grew up in Hokkaido, Japan and foster a singular Ainu identity. Discuss more in Chapter 5, I suggest that being in North America situates them as firstly Asian American, and secondly, Indigenous. In this way, much like other American Ainu, as well as younger generations of Ainu in Japan and elsewhere, their expressions of themselves as Indigenous likely go beyond these more traditional expressions of indigeneity and are far more multifaceted than what is dominantly presented online.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the Ainu who present themselves more traditionally online are in a sense *one dimensional*. Nor am I suggesting that my particpants do not appreciate such aspects of traditional culture. For example, Cole said of traditional language and clothing,

> Yes I do [think language and clothing is important to understanding culture] because the ancestors spoke that language and wore that clothing. In my case, my Russian Ainu heritage. The Russian government had them speak Russian and wear Russian traditional clothing and wear Russian religious jewelry by force. [When I wear traditional clothing] it's feels amazing and I feel closer to my Ainu heritage like their hugging me.
>
> (Interview, January 6, 2021)

I am merely suggesting that the majority of these easily accessible online presentations, which depict more traditional indigeneity, are unintentionally (re)producing an image of Ainu and Ainuness as *only* traditional. For example, information easily and firstly accessible to American Ainu continuously suggest that Ainu are only in Japan.

Similarly, the subsequent online discussions and further media posts largely support this narrative. While some posts and individuals do mention that Ainu are also either from or in Russia, nearly all overlook the fact that there are numerous Ainu outside of these two countries, like in Canada and the United States. Though it is difficult to identify just how many people of Ainu descent are elsewhere in the world, just within four months of research, I was able to locate over a dozen Ainu folks living in Canada and across the US. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, many of my particpants have also at one point lived in other countries, such as Austraila. If they, as Ainu descendants, have resided in various places, whose to say that other Ainu folks haven't? Isn't it very likely that there are many other people who have migrated to and been born in many different countries who also are on a parth to *discover,* or better yet *uncover*, their Ainu ancestry? Similarly, isn't it very likely there are other Ainu whose expressions of indigeneity are much more multifacited and *modern?*[40] Regardless*,* one thing is clear: the many discoverable narratives online and thus *basics* of Ainu and Ainuness, have yet to widely showcase their modern, yet still Indigenous livelihoods. As a result, making an Ainu identity and more broadly, making Ainu connections in North America is arguably much much harder than in Japan; how can they connect to others if they can't even see themselves represented in their Ainu communities?

4.3.4 Making Community and Belonging

The quest to find other self-identified Ainu, or people of Ainu ancestry, is aguably one of the most exciting, yet nerve wrecking aspects of the identity-making process. Much like for Maria and Alex, it requires putting oneself out into the very public world online and hoping someone responds. As touched on in Chapter 3, many of my particpants were actually found through these exact efforts of commenting on a public Ainu-related post. Comments ranged from simple introductions and questions, like, "Hi, I just learned I have Ainu roots too. What else are you mixed with?" to more celebratory claims, like, "It's a great day to be Ainu." Similary, albeit more privately, others opted for direct (private) messaging public self-identited Ainu or Ainu

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[40] I don't often like to use this term within Indigenous discourse, as I feel it suggests that Indigenous peoples are not modern and thus, primitive. However, this is the term used by some of my participants and is used in the title of the section, so I am using the term here.

community spaces, such as *Ainu in Diaspora,* as was the case with Hana mentioned earlier. That being said, some have yet to reach out at all. They have followed and 'liked' numerous Ainu-related content online, but folks like Cole are still "thinking about" reaching out. Though for Cole in particular, this is in part due to unrelated anxiety surrounding meeting and socializing with new people, I suggest that such vulnerability—as in putting one's claims to Indigenous ancestry or identity on a public platform, for millions of strangers to see—can also result in anxiety, as it opens one up for, sometimes accidental, rejection.

Issues of identity rejection (i.e. public denial of one's claim to Indigenous ancestry and identity), discussed in depth in the next chapter, are arguably a unique aspect within Indigenous community-making for many American Ainu, as well as Indigenous folks elsewhere. Not only are many of my particpants still uncertain of the legitmacy of their Ainu ancestry, but by publicly or even privately sharing their claims of Indigenous identity, they are putting their claims into the hands of others. In this way, I suggest that other folks online, like Tessa, are unintentionally given the power to confirm or deny their Indigenous claims. That is not to say people like Tessa hold immense power over others, but rather as a prominent member of the Ainu in Diaspora and broader American Ainu community, they hold a certain level of power with regard to community (non)belonging and as result, identity legitimacy. Again, this is explored more in Chapter 6, however, I feel introducing these experiences in this section helps unfold the ancestry reckoning and identity-making process. As such, it lends to the difficulties of making connections and fostering belonging to Ainu comminities as *new* American Ainu. For them, just the fears alone of being denied access to an Ainu community, like what happened with Maya, or even just feeling like they "don't fit in" due to the lack of representation, greatly impacts their opportunities to connect to and make Ainu community.

Once connections to an Ainu community are made however the sense of belonging that often comes with it can be an amazing experience; not only do they become, to an extent, *validated* as Ainu but they also make friends with others who are sharing in their experiences as American Ainu. Thus, they finally have someone to talk to about their celebrations and concerns. Though most of my particpants either have yet to become deeply involved or connected to communities, such as Ainu in Diaspora, many discussed their longing to connect with others like them. On the

other side, instead of waiting to connect and feel like they belong, some have chosen to create their own communities—or more accurately, create more visible diverse representations to foster a stronger sense of belonging among either existing or future community members and commmunities. Driven by feelings of nonbelonging and lack of representation, folks like Dustin, as well as Tessa and a few others on TikTok who I did not have a chance to interview, are some of the very few American Ainu actively trying to reimagine Ainu and Ainuness. As Tessa said of the importance of helping foster an Ainu in Diaspora community,

> …I wanted to differentiate myself as an Ainu American… being up front about, I'm an American citizen born here, I was raised here, probably going to die here. And my experience is unique from the Ainu in the homeland. And my expression, my life, my culture is going to be distinct from that [Ainu in Japan], too.

(Interview, December 5, 2020)

Of course, as introduced in the very beginning of this thesis, sometimes community making and (non)belonging, espeically with regard to the Ainu in Diaspora Facebook group, does not always go as planned; sometimes such communities have the opposite impact—such as deter prospective Ainu folks—that Facebook members hope and intend for, as explored in the next chapter. Regardless, for many, these connections with other Ainu online, as well as the relationships formed can be extremely vital in their identity making process; they can ultimately either make or break one's claims to and making of their Ainu identity.

In this chapter, I introduced what my participants shared about their varying processes of ancestry reckoning and identity-making. In it, I discussed how these young American Ainu uniquely grapple with discovering, coming to terms with and legitimizing their own families' oral histories and thus, claims to Ainu ancestry. As such, I detail how the identity-making process begins for many of my participants, along with some of the obstacles they face. Of course, one of the key aspects of these process is digital spaces; this American Ainu identity-making would arguably not exist without it, or at the very least, such processes would be seriously disadvantaged. That being said, being mostly of a generation who grew up with such technologies, wherein social media dominates much of our everyday life, I do not believe that

this turn to digital spaces is unique or even perhaps, remarkable. New technologies, like cell phones and thus social media, have already been shown by many scholars to play leading roles in people's everyday lives (see Horst 2021 and Schwartz and Halegoua 2015). Introduced in chapter 2, the main reason this research centered on digital spaces like Instagram (aside from pandemic travel restrictions) is because of how prevalent digital devices like are. That is not to say digital spaces are not uniquely important, or majorly influential in how knowledge is shared and received, but rather I suggest that for many young Indigenous folks today, these digital spaces are part of their normal everyday identity-making and livelihoods.

For many, myself included, the *digital* is already seen and accepted as a type of (manufactured) a) *extension* of the self, as in we extend our 'real world' identities and being into digital spaces (Lumby 2010) and b) *cultural hub,* wherein digital spaces act as a sort of conduit for identity-making or *cultural renewal* (Ramirez 2007). In this way, I instead suggest that how we present ourselves and how we engage with, by chance, digital spaces greatly shape how we understand ourselves and others. Similar to 'real world' spaces and representations, I argue that such engagement, including that of "Internet drama" like Tessa's post, in turn guide how young American Ainu today foster their indigeneity and sense of (non)belonging to the greater American Ainu community. The experiences shared in this chapter offer the basis for this main argument in the next chapter, which is also the overarching theme of this thesis: broadly, that American Ainu identity-making is largely rooted in North American Indigenous experience and histories and thus, is inherently precarious.

CHAPTER 5:

THEORIZING AMERICAN AINU EXPERIENCE

5.1 "Internet Drama"

Ainu that Maya was in contact with were consistently retraumatized. It felt like they were looking down on whiteness. Why does it matter that Maya looks racially ambiguous? Doesn't everyone look racially ambiguous too? **Know anyone who could help spread this info across town?** Oh great, more internet drama. It made me really uncomfortable. **They're such a "good vibes" person...I feel physically ill from looking at their profile**. I definitely don't want to join that group if they gatekeep like this. As a mixed-race woman, the language "hafu-white" hurt me deeply. **They exploited and ignored Tessa and members for months leading up to this.** We are all on our journey trying to find our way back home. I see no use in fighting each other. I can't see Ainu in Japan posting something like that. **Maya has done emotional and spiritual damage to my members without remorse**. I only let people know I'm Ainu when I feel safe enough to and this wouldn't make me feel safe enough to tell people. Whatever your grievances are with Maya should be dealt with in a compassionate way.

The situation between Tessa and Maya is arguably one of, if not the largest public incidents involving the denial and rejection of one's claims to Ainu ancestry and identity that has occurred recently within the broader American Ainu community. From what I've been told, it started when Maya, after being vetting by Tessa and another Ainu member, joined the Facebook group and community *Ainu in Diaspora.* Though I do not have access to the original interactions, as I am not a member of the Facebook group where everything occurred, both Tessa and Maya informed me separately that the conflict between the two first arose through various interactions between the two in the group and in private messages. You see, both Tessa and Maya had very different ways of understanding and enacting Ainu culture, including what types of knowledge can and cannot be shared with the broader non-Indigenous community. Whereas Tessa believes that Indigenous knowledge should not be shared to and profited on by settlers and even perhaps by select Ainu, Maya believes that "knowledge gatekeeping" should be reimagined in present day, as they feel such gatekeeping primarily serves to reproduce (colonial and capitalist) positions of authority and gatekeeping within Indigenous communities.

Understandably, tensions seemingly escalated when Maya confronted and questioned a Facebook post by Tessa's friend and community leader. By doing so, Maya, based on Tessa's account, had broken identified Indigenous protocols of questioning an Elder in a disrespectful manner—as in not showing respect to the Elder before engaging in meaningful reciprocal dialogue. While questioning an Elder in itself is not inherently disrespectful, paired with several previous occurrences of seeming disregard for community guidelines and Indigenous knowledge protocols, Tessa and some others in the group felt that Maya was doing more harm than good within the online community. As a result, the hard decision was made to revoke Maya's group membership and in turn, kick Maya out from the online diasporic Ainu community. In a seeming effort to further protect other diasporic and Ainu from Maya—who Tessa believed was extracting traditional and sacred community Ainu knowledge solely for the purpose of profit and exploitation—Tessa chose to make several public postings of what they described as Maya's "culture vulture" ways.

Though initially posted in the Facebook group, the post gained the most popularity—and controversy—when it was posted on Instagram. This is likely because Tessa's post on Facebook was to a private group, whereas their post to Instagram was through their public account. Additionally, Tessa also tagged Maya in the post they made, which made it equally accessible to all of Maya's followers (online community). Due to Tessa being a prominent member of the *Ainu in Diaspora*, as well as LGBTQIA+ community, and Maya of a relatively large holistic, anticolonial, Japanese Reiki community, this ended up attracting many diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences. In this way, the situation was not an isolated event among an Ainu-only audience, but rather it involved a spectrum of individuals, including BIPOC and white allies. Within minutes of posting, heated debates erupted either condemning or condoning the nature of the post and for some, the seeming falsehood of Tessa's claims. Just as quickly however, the conversation shifted: many became hyper-focused on Tessa's use of the term "hafu white girl."

Maya's community, as well as a few of Tessa's community members, felt that Tessa's emphasis on Maya's *whiteness* ultimately served to undermine those who were hafu or of mixed-ancestry.

They felt Tessa was suggesting that to be mixed-white was to be seen and deemed as, in a way, second-class to, for example, 'full-blood' Indigenous individuals. Though Tessa assured me they did not mean it in this way, I feel that the dialogue that erupted from their post does speak to a really important question of: what happens when the efforts made to *protect* an Indigenous community, inadvertently ends up *harming* some of the community? Furthermore, how do instances like this help foster an experience of identity-making that is arguably inherently *precarious*?

In this chapter, I critically analyze the shared experiences of American Ainu identity-making. In it, I propose and argue that based on their experiences, outlined in Chapter 3 and 4, American Ainu experience a unique form of *precarity,* coined as *precarious indigeneity.* I suggest that this precarious indigeneity is an inherent quality of making an Ainu identity in North America and is directly a result of:

a) them internalizing historically traditional expectations of Ainu indigeneity, which comes from their primary understanding of Ainu and Ainuness coming from English-based and North American catered digital spaces;

b) their self-identification as Ainu and Indigenous putting them into direct conversation with North American notions of indigeneity, due to their intimate geographical and digital proximity;

c) the often undocumented and difficult to trace nature of their ancestral lineage to Ainu in Japan (and Russia), and thus, the inability to 'prove' their Ainu lineage by North American standards; and

d) being unable or at the very least finding it difficult to adhere to a singular traditional Ainu identity due to them having to integrate their Ainu identities into their already established multiethnic and multiracial identities and being.

I argue that together, these shared experiences and predicaments ultimately foster and reproduce Ainu identity-making processes that are precarious. This results in an inherent sense of *precarious indigeneity.* That is not to say one cannot foster an Indigenous identity that is traditionally grounded and in their own ways authentic. Much like Ainu scholar Kanako Uzawa

does in her own practices and according to many scholars, Indigenous identities can and are still ancestrally rooted when expressed through more contemporary avenues, such as contemporary dance (see [AinuToday](#)) (Warren 2001: 21). Instead, I am proposing that *because* of their experience and life rootedness in North America and thus, North American Indigenous notions of indigeneity, their sense of identities are always put into conversations with, for example, *cultural appropriation, identity gatekeeping*, and *Indigenous 'authenticity.'* As a result of these particular notions, which are largely practiced and rooted in North American society and also inspired from seeing such issues happening to North American Indigenous folks, American Ainu's identities and experiences are more likely at risk of being challenged and critically examined. Compared to Ainu who grew up and live in Japan, American Ainu experiences are much more seemingly *unstable* and *insecure* (i.e. precarious).

5.2 North American Indigenous Influence

Before discussing *how* American Ainu experiences is rooted in North American Indigenous experience, it is important that I first introduce *what* North American Indigenous experience means. Similar to my presentation of Ainu representation online (Chapter 4), I am not going to detail the long histories and experiences of North American Indigenous peoples, which is easily found in existing literature (see Simpson 2014, Ramirez 2007, Barker 2017, Lawrence 2004, and Manuel and Posluns [1974] 2018). Instead, to better understand how my participants are continuously exposed to North American Indigenous narratives, I am going to show *how* such narratives are often represented in digital spaces (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: North American Indigenous representation online. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

From this, and drawing on participants and my own understandings of indgieneity, North American Indigenous peoples and indigeneity broadly are often represented and described as the following:

a) being rooted, deeply connected to, and *protectors* of ancestral lands, water and more broadly, *nature*;

b) following a primarily animistic belief system, one that suggests every animal, belief and cultural practice is *sacred*;

c) having a distinct (endangered but now revitalized Indigenous language;

d) partaking in traditional singing and dancing (e.g. powwows), crafts (e.g. beading), and cermonies (e.g. sage smudging);

e) having been colonized by white people, resulting in the physical and cultural genocide of their peoples (e.g. residential schools and MMIW).

While some of these understandings are quite similar, if not the same as particpant understandings of Ainu, there is an added narrative that goes beyond these five depictions. I suggest there is a unique overarching attitude of *needing* to *protect* Indigenous cultures and communities, espeically from things like further colonization and exploitation. As such, following the theme of Tessa's Instagram post, as well as numerous TikTok videos, there is a need to protect Indigenous peoples from *white* people. From this, I argue comes particular situations of, as metioned before, cultural appropriation, identity gatekeeping, and Indigenous authenticity. Of course, these issues are likely to occur in Japan as well. However, as shown in Chapter 2 and 3, much of the discourse is centered on (traditional) Indigenous culture itself, cultural revitalization, and Indigenous rights (i.e. policy-making). Whereas in Japan, the focus seems to be primarily on 'making Ainu culture known and understood', the focus in North America is on 'reclaiming and protecting Indigenous culture' (for specific examples of Ainu, see Watson 2014 and North American Indigenous, see Coulthard 2014). So how does this translate to Ainu experience in North America?

5.2.1 "…Is This Cultural Appropriation?"

As suggested, this overarching North American-based narrative of needing to reclaim and protect Indigenous culture greatly shapes the experiences of Ainu identity-making in North America. One of the ways it does this is through this notion of cultural appropriation. In this particular case, it is understood as a white or Wajin Japanese (settler) person adopting (stealing) an aspect of Ainu or Indigenous culture. This is different than cultural *appreciation* in that typically the settler is disrespectfully and inappropriately using an often-sacred cultural practice for themselves, instead of honouring said cultural practice. In the case of Tessa and Maya, Tessa sees Maya's use of Ainu knowledge as a form of stealing, as Maya used this knowledge for their financial benefit (i.e. to teach decolonization to clients of their Japanese reiki practice). For Tessa, these acts always inflict some form of *harm* on the respective Indigenous individual or

group. However, if Maya is indeed Indigenous like they claim, is profiting of their ancestors' knowledge still considered cultural appropriation? Or, is it more of an issue of who can *own* and *profit* off their culture? Or better yet, is it because Maya is seen by Tessa as Asian American, and not American Ainu?

Mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, this issue of cultural appropriation is experience by many American Ainu due to how they are prominently seen and regarded as in North America: as Asian Americans. While this in part is due to Ainu being largely unknown in North America (see Chapter 2 and 4), I suggest that this is in large part due to the representation of North American Indigenous peoples shown in the previous subsection. For many, being Indigenous in North America is representative of a particular traditionally-rooted experience. So, even if participants and other American Ainu today are similar in appearance to their Ainu ancestors—such as wearing traditional Ainu clothing or sharing ancestral physical features—their experiences and identity expressions are interpreted as Asian or Japanese, rather than Ainu or Indigenous, since they do not meet expected Indigenous experience.

Drawing on Jonathan Warren's (2001) study Indigenous identity in Brazil, this expectation of Indigenous experience and expression stems from the idea that anything that deviates from assumed and 'typical' traditional indigeneity is seen by the public and even some Indigenous folks themselves as non-Indigenous (Warren 2001). In the case of my participants, they felt they grew up being racialized as Asian or Japanese Americans and not as Indigenous. Even though they have since learned they are of Indigenous ancestry and some of Indigenous identity, because of how they were racialized by others around them (as Asian or Japanese), they do not feel they experience(d) the same forms of racialization and thus, relations with others as, for example, North American Indigenous folks around them. As Asian Americans first and foremost, and thus, as settlers first and foremost—due to their Japanese and/or white heritage, and position as foreigners in North American Indigenous lands—many participants feel they have yet to be racialized and experience life as an Indigenous person.[41]

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[41] There is so much more to say about this topic, but there is not enough space in this thesis. Instead, this is something I will explore in future writings and publications.

Though this narrative of cultural appropriation is seen around the world, especially among many different Indigenous groups, I suggest this for of it is unique in comparison to Ainu raised and living in Japan, especially since these North American notions are not seemingly central to concerns in Japan. Similarly, Ainu in Japan are not racialized as Asian—there are arguably only racialized as Indigenous, much like North American Indigenous folks in North America. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Ainu in Japan live in a 'bubble' and that they don't experience various forms of discrimination. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, Ainu have a long history of transnational exploration and cultural exchange. I am instead suggesting that these particular concepts, such as cultural appropriation, along with how they are perceived and internalized among new American Ainu is different than Ainu in Japan. Whereas Ainu in Japan may be acutely aware of their Wajinness in self-expression—as in expressing themselves in a way that is outside of traditional Ainu norms—American Ainu are acutely aware of their *Asian* and *settler* ancestries and thus, relations to others as Asian and settler in North American society. American Ainu uniquely understand and internalize the harm done onto Indigenous peoples, which comes from their proximity and subsequent knowledge of the colonization of Indigenous peoples in North America. As a result, many are very hesitant and careful in how and if they choose to publicly disclose their Ainu heritage. They do not want to do further harm to other Indigenous folks, especially to their Ainu and Indigenous peers. Though this is generally the case for many Ainu, due to histories of discrimination (discussed in Chapter 2), this is definitely the case for those who have yet to 'confirm' their Ainu heritage.

5.2.2 "I'm not 100% Sure I am Ainu"
Discussed in Chapter 4, many of my participants are not entirely certain of their Ainu heritage. Though some can make educated guesses, such as Emi, who can trace family ties to both the Japanese and Russian controlled sides of Sakhalin Island, most are only left with fractured family oral histories (i.e. "family whisperings"). There is no formal and/or accessible documentation of their Ainu lineage, such as family or marriage registration forms, photographs of their Ainu relations, ancestral *kotan* or tribe identification, connections to other recognized Ainu in Japan, and so forth. As such, DNA tests can only sometimes tell the regions of what people are from, such as Hokkaido, but cannot explicitly identify their traces to an Ainu *kotan*. This is because, unlike in North America where Indigenous migration patterns and lineages are

documented enough to trace one's Indigenous ancestry, Ainu migration and lineage is not well documented in Japan. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, many folks have 'erased' their Ainu heritage, which likely meant they hid or discarded any documentation they did have. As a result, many folks today cannot claim for certain their Ainu ancestry.

As to the reason why one would even need, in a way, colonial documentation to *prove* their Ainu lineage, I suggest this idea and practice is informed by North American notions of identity authenticity—that one needs to be registered or recognized by a formally (government) legitimized tribe to be authentically Indigenous. This is most evident in that if an individual does not have such Indigenous memberships or like Michelle Latimer's' case, their claimed connections to a tribe aren't acknowledged by said tribe and community, their claims are questioned and, in many cases, denied by the greater Indigenous community.[42] Again, these situations of false identity can and do happen in Japan (see Uzawa 2021). However, I suggest that the types of documentation expected by others and to an extent, the larger emphasis on blood quantum within North America, suggests that these issues of authentic identity largely stems from North American notions. Yet, even with such documentations, sometimes Ainu folks are still denied community membership or made to feel like they don't belong due to their, in a way, Ainu 'newness.'

5.2.3 "I Don't Know Enough Yet"

For many new American Ainu, as shown in Chapter 4, their journeys always start with a quest for knowledge—in particular, knowledge of their family lineages and thus, Ainu histories. This specific emphasis on knowledge comprehension likely stems from how North American Indigenous folks are represented in digital spaces. The majority, as shown earlier, consistently post and share content on digital spaces like Instagram and TikTok that often revolves around current political issues and traditional expression. In turn, to authentically claim an Indigenous identity, an individual seems to be expected to be privy to Indigenous histories (discrimination), cultural practices, language, activism, politics, and so forth. I suggest that anyone who doesn't

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[42] This issue has recently become more complicated, as after Latimer had their Indigenous identity rejected publicly, Latimer was able to trace their DNA ancestry to an Indigenous grouping in Eastern Canada. For more information, visit CBC News.

quite fit into or deviates from these expectations is seen as *inauthentic*. Furthermore, anyone that challenges these dominant understandings of the respective Indigenous histories, cultural practices, etc.—as was the case with Tessa and Maya—is often denied access and membership to the Indigenous community. They are denied their claims and belonging to Ainu and Ainuness. Arguably, others are gatekeeping—as in controlling, limiting, and/or denying—'new' Ainu folks' fostering of and claims to an Indigenous identity. However, not everyone can even fully conform to these expectations of indigeneity even if they wanted to; many American Ainu are not fostering a singular Ainu identity. Instead, they are incorporating their new found Ainuness into their already established, for example, Japanese identity. As a result, their expressions of indigeneity is likely different from what is expected from folks who already have a particular Ainu self-expression and expectation of authentic indigeneity.

5.2.4 "I Didn't Know the Japanese Were Colonizers"

When starting this research, many of my participants already had a strong sense of their Japanese identity. Though most participants are proud of their mixed ethnicity and identities, they still feel an expectation by other Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks to erase their whiteness or Japaneseness (i.e. settler identity), especially within North American-shaped spaces that privilege Ainu. This is most evident in the online conversations around whiteness or Japaneseness, such as Tessa's "Half white, all colonizer and the lack of the Ainu representation of folks who are, for example, Ainu, Japanese and Columbian like Maria. As people rooted in North America and as Asian American first, I suggest that this comes from the prominent discourse in North America that suggests being of settler identity and ancestry is a negative and not part of authentic indigeneity. Similarly, as shown in this chapter, when paired with this North American-informed notion of needing to *protect* Indigenous heritages, often many who *celebrate* their settler identity are not seen as respecting Indigenous histories (i.e. how settlers oppressed their own Indigenous ancestors). In turn, I suggest they are limited in their 'full' belonging to Indigenous communities. They are, as some scholars suggest, existing in a limbo as neither full members of the dominant society nor full members of their Indigenous communities (Uzawa 2020; Watson 2014; Siddle 1996; Nakamura 2015). All together, these North American-informed experiences greatly impact how new American Ainu negotiate their identity-making and in turn, forces them into experiencing a precarious form of indigeneity.

5.3 Towards a Sense of Precarity

Precarious
adjective

1. dependent on circumstances beyond one's control.
   a precarious identity.
2. dependent of the will or pleasure of another; liable to be withdrawn or lost at the will of another.
   they held a precarious membership under an arbitrary administration.
3. exposed to or involving danger.
   the precarious life of an undocumented native.
4. having insufficient, little, or no foundation.
   a precarious Ainu.

synonyms: unstable; insecure; doubtful; uncertain; unsettled; unsure; baseless; unfounded; ambiguous.
antonyms: secure; reliable; undoubted; protected; stable; settled; definite; certain; grounded.

As shown throughout this thesis, in Ainu studies and Indigenous studies more broadly, notions of vulnerability and social exclusion have been used to describe the precarity of Indigenous peoples (as shown in Chapter 2). Ainu scholars like Hayashi-Simpliciano (2020), Uzawa (2019), and Ishihara (2021) especially have helped emphasize how residing in places outside of Hokkaido or being of a more Wajin Japanese livelihood has created what I call precarity among many Ainu. For example, they show how Ainu lived outside Hokkaido and who are at a cultural distance from traditional Ainu culture are unfairly excluded from Ainu policy-making and have limited access to traditional cultural resources (Cheung 2005; Nakamura 2015). In this way, precarity has seemingly only been used to describe situational insecurities and uneasiness of Indigenous peoples stemming from tradition homeland and cultural distance. To better understand American Ainu experiences, I suggest it is important we expand the use of precarity in Ainu studies so it can include experiences like Maya's and my participants where precarity is rooted in one's sense of self (i.e. identity), as opposed to just their physical environment and positionality in society. I am suggesting that instead of looking at how various, often colonial, factors have led Indigenous peoples into situations of precarity, we can look at how one's Indigenous identity as American Ainu is inherently precarious. This is because the process of identity making in North America, for reasons described previously, opens one up to unique vulnerabilities, such as community membership denial and accusations of falsifying claims to Indigenous ancestry.

For example, one is expected to be an expert in all things Ainu to be considers authentically Indigenous. As Maria articulates,

> It's really about understanding the oppression that they [Ainu in Japan] faced from the Japanese government, Japanese [Wajin] people, and really acknowledging and going through all that history before I can really, claim that as part of who I really am. Because to me, it just doesn't feel right to say that [I am Ainu] until I [have] really learned everything that my ancestors went through. I need to understand the kind of hardships that they faced and how they were able to really revive and reclaim that [Ainu] identity for themselves. I think that's something that, before anyone who has these roots can say like, "I am Ainu," [they need to learn that].
> I think it's really just about understanding on a deeper level what they [Ainu in Japan] went through, which is why this [claiming an Ainu identity] is a work in progress and probably why I'm not comfortable being like, "I am Ainu." I [first] still need to acknowledge all the hardships that they faced as a culture [and people].
>
> (Interview, December 5, 2020)

Similarly, based on how they have learned of their Ainu heritage—through books and curated digital spaces—many still feel they have yet to weed out the 'false' from the 'true' Ainu information. In other words, they still need to *decolonize* their knowledge from the colonial spaces in which it comes from. This is not to say digital spaces are inherently colonial, but as discussed in previous chapters, much of the English-language Ainu online discourse stems from Japanese tourism initiatives and users trying to educate others on *who* the Ainu are (i.e. the traditional culture of Ainu). In turn, these representations portray Ainu and Ainuness in a way that is reminiscent of historical accounts of Indigenous peoples: as traditional, not modern, and most importantly, from the perspectives of White (colonial) explorers and Wajin Japanese colonizers. As Dustin said of this decolonization process,

> … [there is] a lot of responsibility personally… it can be a lot of pressure because I want to represent [Ainu] in a way that won't be seen as inaccurate/disrespectful…the best way in my opinion is to be as educated as you can, and don't spread any false info or stereotypes [like the 'Hairy Ainu'].
>
> (Interview, November 28, 2020)

Not only do new American Ainu need to learn what it means to be Ainu, they need to also learn how to decolonize their own histories and experiences as firstly, part Japanese and/or White (i.e.

as settlers). While this process of decolonization is likely experience among many Indigenous peoples in North America and Japan, I suggest that American Ainu's experience of this process is much more unique.

Being of mixed settler and more broadly, multiethnic ancestry, means that their claims to Indigenous identity are much more precarious than those in Japan who do not always view Japaneseness and colonialism in the same ways, and who are only Wajin and Ainu. As such, those in Japan are again, not experiencing life and building relations through a largely Asian or Japanese racialized existence. Even more significant, and differing from other scholars use of the term precarity, these unique vulnerabilities, including social exclusion, are often governed by Indigenous members in positions of authority, rather than by just colonial authorities. For example, in Japan, blood quantum is rarely used as a qualifier for indigeneity, yet this method of Indigenous legitimization frequently comes into conversations within the greater American Ainu community. Most importantly, it has been brought up by Ainu themselves and has been used by some to legitimize their own claims to Ainu ancestry.

Like blood quantum, we've already seen such power executed in Japan through the Census Act (1871) and here in North America through legislation like the Indian Act (1876). Created as a way for colonial governing authorities to claim ownership over Indigenous bodies—to control how they act and behave, their ways of being, ways of life, cultural practices, and when and if they could practice cultural traditions, etc.—these acts greatly shaped Indigenous livelihoods and continues to do so in present day. In terms of Tessa and Maya's situation, Tessa, as a recognized and prominent Ainu member of the Ainu in Diaspora community, is ultimately in a position of power that affords them the ability to (socially) delegitimize people's claims to Indigenous identity, much like Maya. Though Maya still self-identifies as Indigenous, due to the power of Tessa's actions and the Ainu in Diaspora's frustrations with Maya's actions, Maya will likely forever be excluded and denied formal membership to the Ainu in Diaspora community. Unfortunately, as a by product, some new American Ainu who witnessed this situation have also had their own indigeneity forever shaped by this (very public) social exclusion and denial of Ainu ancestry. They too are left wondering if they will ever be fully accepted into the greater Ainu American community and if they will ever be externally *validated* as Ainu.

Whether or not Maya's and others claims to Indigenous ancestry and identity are authentic are not necessarily important to this thesis. Instead, it is the dialogue that comes from such situations. As well, it is the affect of these conversations that I suggest is of concern and deserves more thoughtful critical engagement; it is situations like Tessa and Maya's that can unintentionally greatly contribute to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity among new American Ainu. For them, seeing someone like Maya, who like them cannot formally verify their Ainu lineage, makes for an uneasy and uncomfortable experience of identity-making. Additionally, informed by Tessa and Maya's situation, as well as North American Indigenous experience, many 'new' American Ainu feel they must protect themselves and their communities, especially from further colonial exploitation. Even if that means waiting another five years to gather more knowledge about Ainu to publicly claim an Ainu identity, they want to ensure they are not (re)colonizing or culture appropriating their own ancestry. In conclusion, it is the combination of how their Indigenous histories are learned and fostered through digital spaces; the uncertainty surrounding their Ainu lineages; their livelihoods being rooted in North America; and their multiethnic being, as Asian Americans, settlers and Indigenous, that make for a precarious identity-making process and as a result, a precarious indigeneity.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION:

Towards a More Diverse Future

Figure 12: Contemporary American Ainu. Illustration by Cheyanne Connell.

In this thesis, I presented and discussed the unique experiences of Ainu identity-making in North America. Core to this thesis is my argument and suggestion that American Ainu identity-making is largely rooted in North American Indigenous experiences, as opposed to Ainu in Japan experience. Specifically, due to their physical geographic and social proximity to North American Indigenous discourse both online and in-person, as well as their multiracial backgrounds and as Asian American, their understanding of identity-making and indigeneity is different than Ainu who grew up and live in Japan. To better illustrate these experiences, I have used various imagery and texts throughout this thesis as they are representative of how my participants have used digital spaces to inform their own identity-making. Additionally, I have centered the situation of the false identity claim between two self-identified Ainu individuals: Tessa, a prominent member of the Ainu in Diaspora community and Maya, a Japanese reiki aiming to decolonize themselves and others through their practice.

As stated at several points in this thesis, the intent of using this situation, as a key reference point to American Ainu experience, is not to pick sides in Tessa and Maya's public situation. It is instead used to show how such types of posts invite and (re)produce particular conversations and feelings of cultural appropriation, identity gatekeeping, and Indigenous authenticity. Though not inherently problematic, I argue that because of the newness of some young American Ainu's journeys of identity-making, these instances can greatly shape and in some cases deter their negotiation of Ainu indigeneity in fear of public identity rejection, making their identity-making processes feel much more precarious. So, what can precarious indigeneity tell us?

Aside from demonstrating the unique complexities of Ainu identity-making in North America, the aim of identifying this 'precarious indigeneity' is to showcase such experiences to a wider and otherwise inaccessible audience: other young American Ainu. Much like the participants of this research, many young American Ainu, and likely young Ainu in general as shown have little access to Ainu representation that speaks to their own diverse experiences. As shown, often when we read about Ainu in Japan and North America, we see scholars emphasizing these important, yet historically dated depictions of Ainu and Ainuness, such as living in traditional villages, that do not always match how many Ainu live today. What we don't often see are the many ways in which young Ainu today are connecting to and fostering their Ainuness through different avenues and in different ways. Though these depictions are typically outside of traditional expectations, they arguably can be and still are ancestrally rooted and connected. And this is something my participants want to see—they want to see more representations that speak to the diversity of identity-making and more broadly, being Indigenous; they want to see more of them in scholarship, in public spaces, online, and most important, in their own Indigenous communities. In other words, since they too are still trying to reckon with their Ainu ancestry and learn what it means to be Indigenous, diverse representation is arguably extremely important; seeing how others from similar backgrounds negotiate their indigeneity can help these young folks negotiate their own indigeneity.

That being said, seeing this diverse and complex representation does not necessarily mean that it will and is always well perceived. As one participant, Ren, said after reviewing a previous version of this thesis,

"…it feels a bit demoralizing when you think about it—that we are alone and being Ainu is just a continuous struggle."

<div align="right">(Personal communication, July 7, 2021)</div>

Though I emphasize the insecurities and struggles of American Ainu identity-making, it does not mean that these processes are inherently negative or problematic—just that they are inherently precarious. They are difficult and in many ways unsettling yet they are also fun and exciting. For example, both Ren and Cole are extremely excited to expand their Ainu language skills; Alex and Maria can't wait to visit the Ainu homeland of Hokkaido once the pandemic ends and travel restrictions are lifted; Hana and Jude are excited to continue exploring what Ainuness means and looks like the to them; Dustin looks forward to sharing their Ainu knowledge with others and helping other 'new' Ainu with their identity-making journeys; and Emi is just excited to continue learning about traditional Ainu culture. Furthermore, while yes, many young American Ainu face unique struggles, I suggest that this thesis ultimately shows that people like Ren are in fact not actually alone; there are other young Ainu trying to figure out what being Ainu means to others and to themselves. I suggest that all my participants, while perhaps as shown physically alone in their journeys of identity-making, are instead all sharing in an exciting, albeit complex, process of identity-making. Together, they are shaping each others understandings of what it means to be Ainu and are all contributing to the fostering of a broader and more diverse representation and understanding of what it means to be Ainu in North America and what it means to be Indigenous in the twenty-first century.

As an Indigenous scholar, I strongly feel it is important we as people understand the experiences and livelihoods of the peoples around us and more broadly, in the world. This means understanding the unique experiences of the peoples whose lands we are on: Indigenous peoples. Growing up myself as an urban Indigenous person, who was very disconnected form my Indigenous family and ancestry, I often found myself struggling to fit into these dominant ideas of what being Indigenous looks like. For example, I've never gone hunting, I've never been to a Pow Wow and I am not an outspoken environmentalist or political activist. Many do not understand what it is like to have people constantly comparing your contemporary, yet still

Indigenous, life to that of your traditional peers and ancestors; judging you on how 'native' you look or act like; and in some ways, just have no concept of what it means to Indigenous as a multiethnic person growing up away from one's ancestral homeland. It is my hope that by sharing the unique struggles of my participants, that other 'new' American Ainu and other Indigenous folks who have experienced what these Ainu folks have, as well as myself, can read this thesis and think,

oh yeah,
that's what I'm going through.
I'm not alone.
My experience is normal.
I am still authentically Indigenous.

It is my hope that by detailing and meaningfully engaging with my participants stories, through text and imagery, this thesis can offer another a new narrative of Ainu outside of Japan—one that doesn't position them as inherently inauthentic or in need of desperate cultural renewal due to their residence and identity-making being outside of Japan. This thesis is one that shows just how diverse Ainu and other Indigenous folks are today.

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