

Native whites: contesting local identities on Russia's resource frontier

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In social investigations of the post-Soviet Russian North, whites haunt the ethnographic stage from the wings.¹ Social scientists bypass the northern industrial town on the way to the native village, producing over the past decade a remarkable profusion of research on the indigenous experience. The assumed transience of white figures, in contrast to the rootedness of native people, raises the question of their long-term importance to life in northern communities. The terms in currency – *priehzii* or “incomer” for whites and *mestnyi* or “local” for natives – reproduce the idea that there are two kinds of people in the North, the recently arrived, and by implication the soon to leave, and the eternal native, who will always remain. Aware of the diverse and diasporic origins of the white population, we also assume that, whereas native settlements are the site of fairly bounded cultures, with detectable senses of collectivity and community, for whites, community and close cultural affinity are part of a mythic village past on the Russian “mainland” (*materik*). Community kinship networks bind natives across settlement and region. Most whites, in contrast, came north in ones and twos, leaving family networks behind.

Native cultural identity emerges in many ethnographic accounts from a close, practical relationship not just with others in the settlement, but with the land itself. Accounts of northern native peoples in Canada, Greenland and Russia have predominantly fixed landscape, and in particular land-use activities such as hunting and travelling, as a primary constituent of personal and collective identity in a manner consistent with writing on belonging and landscape in other regions (Nuttal, 1991; Brody, 1981 & 2000; Vitebsky, 1992). Practical interaction with local environments decisively constitutes the concepts of “northern belonging” and “indigenous homeland”, which find their articulation in descriptions of “ecological senses of belonging” based on practices of “dwelling on the land” or “skills of dwelling” (Ingold, 2000; Anderson, 2000). When native peoples’ interests are threatened, they often invoke political claims of “indigeneity”, which derive their power from traditions of local interaction with a specific territory, practices of harvesting local resources, and the threat of cultural failure if that bond is severed.

Nothing therefore arouses our scepticism of northern whites as a viable object of study as forcefully as their lack of connection to the land. The *priehzii* figure is “de-territorialised”, a product of “conditions of displacement that seem increasingly prevalent in the world” (Geertz, in Feld & Basso, 1996). Whites in the North have emerged from the deracinating Soviet experiences of urbanisation, dislocation, persecution and hardship, all of which progressively eroded the old connections to a *place* of community. The Russian – or Ukrainian, or Armenian – village, with its extended family network, belongs to an unrecoverable past. Whites carried with them to the North a suitcase version of imagined homeland, their *rodina*, which, it is assumed, precluded the possibility of adopting the real northern landscapes surrounding them. In most accounts, the *rodina* is a birthplace, not a living place. The anthropologist Anna Kertulla, who lived in a settlement on the Bering Strait in the late 1980s, remarked that whites were “a

group devoid of cultural and spiritual connection to the village and its surrounding environment. They were the perpetual outsiders.” (Kertulla, 2000) Just as social scientists want to investigate the Russian North through its own people – its traditional inhabitants - bypassing the flowing population of transient whites, the native bias might also arise from our hostility toward the destructive behaviour that a transient frame of mind permits.

In Chukotka, the conditions that created the Soviet white population and provided a sense of shared community were dramatically cancelled after 1991. Although it was the most remote region of the Soviet Union, with the poorest infrastructure, Chukotka was a zone of relative abundance and its residents were cosmopolitan, able to fly to any part of the country on less than a week’s wage. Urban in-migrant whites also enjoyed a sense of colonial agency, partaking in a project of cultural and technological mastery (*osvoenie*). Soviet state collapse devastated the North, and these three props – abundance, cosmopolitanism and colonial agency – were ripped away as the idea and the material promise of communism failed at once. Although whites abandoned the North, and in particular Chukotka, in large numbers, one effect of the crisis was a large remaining white population, effectively trapped by distance and poverty in northern communities. It seemed central Russia had cast the North adrift, leaving whites and natives alike to adopt strategies of survival that hinged on *local* resources.

In December, 2000, Russia’s second richest “oligarch” Roman Abramovich became Chukotka’s governor and initiated an administrative revolution and an ambitious programme of modernisation. The movement of a young, rich businessman from Moscow into high political office in the Russian periphery follows a remarkable pattern of landslide victories for resource magnates, also witnessed since 2000 in Taimyr and Evenkia. In all three cases, the character of reforms has, as David Anderson has observed in Evenkia, “merged legislative with executive power and blurred the face of public administration with that of corporate governance.” (Anderson, 2002, p. 106) Abramovich has spent over \$200m a year since 2001 paying wages and arrears, building new infrastructure and funding a raft of social initiatives, including the restoration of the Soviet-era system of reindeer-herding and sea-mammal hunting state farms (*sovkhozy*). Chukotka is wholly reliant on state subsidies and, despite the small population, is a serious drain on the federal treasury. The programme of economic modernisation is therefore oriented to achieving cost savings, by closing a series of “unpromising settlements” and resettling thousands of white residents in central regions of Russia, or, in the candid words of one administration official, ridding Chukotka of its “human ballast”. Current levels of state subsidy in the region can support a population of roughly 30,000, or half of Chukotka’s current total. Administration planners anticipate that the cost of resettling a resident to central Russia will be recouped within five years, by saving on the considerable subsidy cost of supporting him in the North. These calculations assume that the region itself will produce virtually no revenues from internal economic activity, which was indeed the case when Abramovich took office.

To the extent that Abramovich’s Modernisation affects natives in Chukotka, his style seems to confirm a broader tendency of benevolent “oligarchic liberalism”, which David

Anderson detected in Taimyr (Anderson, 2002). His administration recognises natives as the territory's original peoples, living in their traditional homeland, and so community closures and resettlement are conceived to affect only the white population. Large investments are flowing into the traditional native economy, funding the resurrection of Soviet state farms² and the rebuilding of most or all of every native settlement in the region. Subsidies for the native economy are effectively becoming a much larger cost to the state, while the majority white population (over 75 percent) is bearing the brunt of cost-saving measures. No white resident is any longer "trapped" in Chukotka – the administration, uniquely for the Russian North, has created a high-capacity conveyor belt to shift large numbers out of the region.

Quite unexpectedly, the white population in Chukotka is proving less amenable to restructuring than the administration's economic planners had anticipated. Abramovich's resettlement programme was seriously under-subscribed in the first two years of operation, contrary to predictions of massive "delayed demand" for out-migration (Heleniak, 1999; Kontorovich, 2000). My ethnographic research revealed widespread hostility to the modernisation programme among established whites in Chukotka's largest community, Anadyr, and a series of smaller Soviet-era industrial (white) towns. Many expressed a tenacious attachment to their local communities and landscapes, and in fact passionately contested the idea that "local" or *mestnyi* should be a term reserved for natives alone. "Homeland" or *rodina*, in my conversations, was rarely a long-lost birthplace in central Russia – like for natives themselves, many whites professed their attachment to Chukotka using exactly this term.

This chapter addresses the disagreement between conventional assumptions of white transience, shared by social scientists and Moscow modernizers alike, and the evidence of local belonging in Russia's most far-flung northern outpost. The effect of the modernising challenge is a galvanisation of local identity in the remaining white settler population. Whites, who formerly embodied the innovative technologies and cultural forms of the centre, are now repositioned as the subjects of a renewed colonial project, this time representing distant resource and finance capital instead of the Soviet state. Former white settlers, who once constituted their "newcomer" (*priezhii*) identity partly out of their transient lifestyles, are now occupying the moral position of the "local". Indeed, faced with Abramovich's modernizers, the idea of belonging locally and of having roots in the community is the only position available. But here whites come into conflict with natives, for they are contesting the very meaning of local belonging and appropriating a very powerful element of native identity and distinction. There are serious implications in this challenge for the claims of indigeneity made by Chukotka's native peoples, because whites are questioning the native monopoly on local belonging. These ties to landscape constitute the primary arsenal of legal and moral defence in native resistance to the intrusions of incoming business and state interests.

Migrant settlers and indigenous rights

In attempting to locate some sympathy for the predicament of Chukotka's established white population within current anthropology, two very different and not entirely helpful

bandwagons immediately come into view. The first might be called the “indigeneity debate”, generated by ethnographers, policy-makers and native-rights advocates, who argue about the *basis* for indigenous entitlements but who broadly agree that a set of special entitlements are due, if only to ensure the cultural survival of native peoples. Lately, the most conflicted point in this debate is “what makes a person indigenous to a piece of land – ethnically exclusive descent from a ‘first people’ or practical interaction arising from a tradition of rooted dwelling or land-use?” The second theoretical bandwagon, to which I have already referred, focuses on the experience of migrancy in the world, which its proponents now claim is a more relevant condition than rootedness in the old anthropological village fieldsite. While maintaining the traditional of anthropological felicity to the marginalised, powerless and colonised, this school maintains that it is now people in movement and out of community who increasingly experience these conditions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Appadurai, 1996; Cohen, 1997). So there is both richness in the ethnographic descriptions of native peoples, lately augmented by accounts from the now open Russian North, and in the anthropology of diasporas, the multicultural and culturally hybrid urban space, and the cultural refugee. But these two positions are in conflict. Indigeneity hinges on primordial belonging to a place. Migrants, on the other hand, are in search of a place, and would almost always prefer something concrete on which to build their lives to a remembered but absent homeland.

“Diaspora” and “indigenous” are both identities of the marginalised, in competition for the same leftovers from the dinner table of expansive state and industrial interests, and both are a politically valuable identity in mounting a defence and staking a claim. This explains why both labels are commonly appropriated by groups with widely divergent histories. William Safran attempted to provide a defining model of diaspora rather narrowly as a “an expatriate minority community” displaying the features of historical dispersal, memories and myths of a homeland, and a collective identity defined by these conditions of life (Safran, 1991). In reality, many groups that might be considered diasporic do not fit all these criteria, and in his critique of Safran, James Clifford (Clifford, 1997) presents two classic diasporas, the Jewish nation and the “black Atlantic” (after Paul Gilroy, 1993), neither of which have a historically discrete homeland nor have harboured a universal desire of return. Zionism is a relatively young movement in the Judaic world, and if there is a myth of return for Jews, it is eschatological or utopian-escapist. For blacks in the Atlantic region, the complex history of their displacement has destroyed any sense of African homeland. Yet the two groups possess a multi-located collective identity and a history of migration. They are both communities set apart from their host societies, and historically at least, both have been disadvantaged and persecuted. Diaspora has also entered the intellectual field of post-Soviet studies, in reference to Russians marooned in the former Soviet republics. But what to make of settlers in Russia’s North, who found there a haven from the deracinating Soviet experiences of dislocation, persecution, and hardship that surely severed the link with pre-existing communities and kinship networks? The northern settler was simultaneously diasporic, carrying histories of loss, exile and marginality, and a colonial state agent, bringing Soviet culture and technologies to the indigenous frontier in the project of *osvoenie*.

Indigenous identity is likewise a term with political power in the contemporary world, and aided by international intellectual debate and advocacy movements, it has become quite widely travelled. In political terms, indigeneity is couched in the assumption of an “original people”, and a clear historical distinction between the colonised and the colonisers. Sometimes, as in the case of aboriginal Australia, this is an easy case to make. But as Andre Béteille observes in his critique “The Idea of Indigenous Peoples”, in North America, where native peoples both resisted colonisation and were commonly displaced from their pre-contact homelands, the idea of indigenous claims to territory is altogether messier. Native peoples colonised and displaced each other, until they were fixed in their putative “homelands” by white colonial regimes. In India also, a long history of warfare and usurpation between tribal and non-tribal populations has produced victories and defeats, territorial expansion and retraction, but any attempt to ascribe a territory to an original people fails as it travels back through history and myth (Béteille, 1998).

The contemporary language of indigenous rights, which is voiced by both advocates and the bodies of international legal and moral arbitration, nevertheless maintains the idea of first peoples and the indigenous right to homeland. The United Nations, in a 1989 ILO convention, recognises that “indigenous or aboriginal peoples are so-called because they were living on their lands before settlers came from elsewhere.” (ILO, 1989, Art 1.b) Peoples “are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographic region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization.” (Ibid.) This language is echoed in the language of the Indigenous Peoples Movement, which calls for rights of both entitlement and self-determination for native peoples on the basis of original inhabitation and the suffering they have endured on the losing side of colonial histories (Niezen, 2000). In the language natives use to stake their claims for survival, indigenous people belong primordially to their homelands, and out of this belonging comes an arsenal for resisting state and corporate intrusions. In this formulation, indigenous identity is *ethnically* defined and is passed down as an inheritance by descent. An indigenous person can, once this logic is accepted, lose neither the legal connection to his specific homeland nor the entitlements that arise from it.

Ethnographers of the indigenous experience have raised an eloquent critique of this “political definition of indigeneity”, by seeking to define how natives “belong” on the landscapes in which they live while rejecting the notion that any people can ever be historically original inhabitants of a land. This argument threatens the legal basis of contemporary indigenous movements and their claims, but it opens up the possibility, I believe, of reconciling migrant and native interests in a single geographic space.

Rejecting the “genealogical model” of indigeneity (Ingold, 2000), which posits the idea of land passed by descent through generations of natives, this anthropologically-informed interpretation of nativeness emphasises the practical interaction natives have with the land they inhabit as the origin of their indigeneity. This re-interpretation questions neither the colonial threat to native cultural survival, nor the entitlements that would

ensure survival. But while traditions of being on the land may be passed by descent, indigenous identity itself emerges from an intimate knowledge and interaction with a specific landscape. This is Ingold's "relational model", in which "cultural knowledge and bodily substance are seen to undergo continuous generation in the context of an ongoing engagement with the land and with the beings – human and non-human – that dwell therein" (Ingold, 2000, p. 133). Anthropologists working in the circumpolar North have often encountered a native attachment to landscape that can only be described in these terms, where identity and community seem to organically interpenetrate human and natural features of the land equally.

Mark Nuttal, in his research on hunting practices and community in northwest Greenland, showed that individual and community experiences are written on the local landscape – the "hunting place" that locals use intensively – so that the land becomes a script of collective memory. "The locality is a memoryscape, a cultural landscape revealed through its place names, which are not merely descriptive but tell of subsistence activity and inform us of a multitude of other close human associations with the natural environment" (Nuttal, 1991, p. 39). Alexander King, writing about reindeer herders in northern Kamchatka, develops a remarkably similar idea – "culturescape" – "a physical landscape, which is enacted and expressed in terms of social relations and activities" (King, 2002, p. 65). The relationships humans have with features of their environment and other animals constitute, in many accounts, culture and landscape in a seamless whole. David Anderson, from his research with reindeer herders in the Tiamyr, termed this neo-social entanglement of natives and their environment a "sentient ecology", showing that personhood extends beyond the human realm (Anderson, 2000). Indeed, the personhood of rocks, hills, trees and reindeer in particular native worldviews emerges quite widely, for example in accounts of the Eveny (Vitebsky, 1992), Dene (Sharp, 2001) and Cree (Brightman, 1993).

Understanding indigeneity not as passed-down traditions and land inheritance, but as practical intimacy with a landscape, liberates native identity from the museum display-case to which it is too often banished. It is entirely natural that a lifestyle of practical interaction with the land should produce innovations and departures from cultural "tradition", that for example native communities might embrace snowmobiles and sealed windows without losing their native identity. But on the other hand, the "relational model" of indigeneity removes the ethnically exclusive barriers to this identity, for anyone can develop skills of dwelling on a landscape. And natives moving to the city, or moreover born in the city, are unlikely to have the practical interactions with a natural environment, which, according to this model, are required to substantiate their indigenous identity.

Returning to the problem of migrants and the de-territorialised identity, there is a definite possibility that, with land-use the primary precondition of indigenous land rights, the migrant newcomer might practically and morally replace the native on his landscape. Maintaining a clear distinction between the colonising settler and the original inhabitant is difficult first because the colonisation of a given territory is rarely a single event – the colonisers over time become the colonised. Second, with the passage of time, the

dichotomy of local and newcomer, settler and indigenous, becomes blurry. Might not the children of settlers become the practical indigenous dwellers on a landscape, while the children of herders and hunters lose those skills and relationships, and thus their claim to the indigenous title? Evidently, indigeneity is a ductile identity, and for native peoples, there is always the danger of its dilution or appropriation.

Tim Ingold eloquently spots the contradiction:

We are left with the question of why people should feel the need to articulate claims to indigenous status in terms that, by their own accounts, are incompatible with their experience and understanding of the world. The answer, I believe, is that these people are compelled to operate in a modern-day political context in which they are also citizens of nation states. The genealogical model is deeply implicated in the discourse of the state: indeed it is the principal source of legitimisation for the state's sovereign entitlement to defend and administer its territory in the name of the nation (Ingold, 2000, p. 151).

Contact with colonial regimes generated the idea of indigenous first peoples, and the concept only has meaning as a label of difference. The presence of settlers on native land necessitates terms that maintain distance and cultural integrity for colonised peoples, in particular because they are often up against brutally deracinating and de-territorialising threats to their survival. Being on the land first is a simple but powerful claim, and in modern legal frameworks, it is a claim framed in the language that states and businesses understand. But simply being on the land, a kind of “squatters’ rights”, also has its power, as Ingold and other ethnographers have demonstrated. In the Modernisation that Chukotka’s Soviet-era settlers find themselves, skills of dwelling on the land and claims to local, native identity are now quite plausibly a part of the white experience. As I will show in the case of Chukotka, senses of belonging migrate just as people do, and the political value of indigenous identity is certainly contestable.

Oligarchs colonise the North

In December, 2000, Roman Abramovich, a 35-year old resource “oligarch” and erstwhile “cashier” to the Yeltsin family became governor of Chukotka in a landslide victory. Officially, he won 92 percent of the vote, but rumours persist that, while his predecessor Alexander Nazarov manufactured election results to stay in power, Abramovich deflated his own polling numbers to create the illusion of a good democratic contest. The euphoria with which Chukotkans greeted him contrasts strikingly with the cynicism Russians typically direct toward the oligarchs and departs from traditions of Russian anti-Semitism.³

Chukotka had reached such a perilous state by 2000 that descriptions seem to descend into hyperbole. After war-torn Chechnya, it was rated as the most socio-economically depressed of Russia’s 89 regions (*RFE News*, Jan. 2001). Reindeer herders’ wages had been unpaid for six years, the regional debt was three times the annual budget, several mid-sized industrial towns and settlements had been without heat, water and electricity

for years, and starvation threatened much of the rural population. Trauma and suicide were the principal causes of death (*Goskomstat*, 1999). Governor Nazarov and members of his administration clique were accused of embezzling budget funds and the federal “gold credits” provided to restart the region’s gold-mining industry, while ordinary native and whites alike survived on a combination of subsistence hunting and humanitarian aid provided by foreign donors.

Abramovich spent an estimated \$80m on his campaign, providing summer holidays on the Black Sea for 4000 children and chartering ship-loads of food and fuel for Chukotka’s settlements. It might be argued he simply bought the vote. But I detected more sophisticated justifications among voters, who tempered their ambivalence toward an outsider from the tainted world of Russian business with the hope that he alone could radically repair the crisis of administrative integrity. Ultimately they perceived Abramovich as a completely new political entity, offering a break with neo-Soviet governance in its devalued “transitional-era” forms and heralding the arrival of corporate efficiency as a model of administration. Sibneft, Abramovich’s oil company and the flagship enterprise in his corporate fleet, emerged since the 1998 ruble default as defiantly new type of organisation, distant from the opaque world of 1990s Russian capitalism, modelled on western management techniques and felicitous to the idea of shareholder relations. Abramovich openly promised to import his business model to Chukotka, as though his election to governor were another in a series of corporate takeovers and the regional administration another division of his business empire. The claim that Sibneft represented a new culture of administration and that all previous models were merely derivative and neo-Soviet, charged Abramovich’s election victory with a sense of revolution. Voters, enraged by the brazen indifference of Nazarov’s clique to the human disaster in the region, elected Abramovich because of his outsider status and because his wealth insulated him from the influence of local patronage networks. They hoped he would properly clean Chukotka’s Aegean stables of the former Party elite.

“A revolution sweeps clean, but a reformation points forward and backward at the same time,” wrote Adam Gopnick, referring to French history, but making a point on social change just as relevant to Russia (Gopnick, 2000). Political persecution and economic crisis generated such broadly felt anger in the Nazarov period that his administration and all those associated with it were morally discredited, leaving the edifice highly vulnerable to revolutionary change. Abramovich’s election might be understood as the neo-Leninist arrival of an outsider, embodying an ideology of western innovation, promising relief to a suffering population and offering a mystical formula for providing it (Abramovich’s Swiss-piloted personal jet is the modern equivalent to the train in Finland Station). In Lenin’s case, it was a mystical teleology of salvation, whereas Abramovich offered the Sibneft formula: the achievement of wealth through modern management and major capital investment. But the logic of revolutions is never predicated on the rehabilitation of the former ruling classes – those implicated in the crimes of the former regime – but rather on their extinction. This broom typically sweeps wider than expected, as the purge-like terror following many revolutions clearly shows. It is in this context that many whites in Chukotka, having voted for Abramovich to effect the removal of

Nazarov's elite clique, are surprised to find they themselves are stigmatised as the embodiment of "old Chukotka" – targets of, rather than participants in, the Modernisation.

In July 2001, six months after the regime change but still in the earliest stages of the modernisation programme, a young journalist from Nizhni Novgorod in central Russia recruited by the administration to become chief editor of Chukotka's weekly newspaper wrote an article on her first impressions of Anadyr. For publication by her former paper, this piece described the city as a petrified forest, a cultural relic preserved since the Soviet period, a grey, oppressive town bearing none of the marks of capitalist dynamism familiar in cities like Nizhni. Most significantly, she described people in Anadyr, a mostly white population, as "frozen" (*zamorozhennye*). Unfortunately for her, and for the entire modernising programme, this article soon turned up in Chukotka and began to circulate, along with the term itself, through local networks. The term itself has evolved into one of the most enduring discourses framing the character of local reform and resistance.

The Modernisation is driven by specialists imported from central Russia, most originating from within Abramovich's companies or connected corporate structures. As this episode illustrates, there is a schism of sympathy, as well as in values and experience, separating them from the local white community. Abramovich's "team" (*komanda*) is intentionally comprised of people too young to have a personal experience of Soviet life, consistently recruited from outside Russia's biggest and wealthiest cities. The current regional administration is much like a branch office of Sibneft headquarters in Moscow. Employees shuttle between Moscow and Anadyr on chartered jets, spending two or three weeks in the North at a time, and a large proportion of administration business is in fact conducted from a suite of offices on Kursovoi pereulok in central Moscow. Administration staff themselves are employees not of the regional government, but of Sibneft. Most have Sibneft email addresses and, for a time, their visiting cards bore the Sibneft logo rather than that of the regional administration. The injection of overtly corporate management into regional administration follows the pattern of a revolution by vanguard. The intention is to subordinate pre-existing power structures, particularly at the level of regional administration, to specialists embodying the values and habits of Abramovich's new-model business culture.

The modernizers scattered throughout Chukotka's administrative institutions tend to maintain a strict separation from the larger, local community. They are outsiders, and their shuttling lifestyle, in combination with a sense of coming to the North on short-term assignment, creates within their own community of colleagues the sense that Chukotka is a place for work, while their lives remain strictly on the materik. For those with families in Moscow, this is literally true. The administration effectively works on Moscow time – phones go unanswered until early afternoon and business shifts into gear at 5pm, when the mother office in Moscow opens. Most imported specialists in Anadyr live together in custom-built residences. Chauffeured luxury Landcruisers and Volkswagen mini-buses move them along prescribed corridors between the administration, the town's principal

restaurant, their prefabricated homes and the heliport, linking Anadyr to its airport and Moscow in turn.

Physical separation naturally generates a distance of understanding between local residents and Abramovich's *komanda*, but this alone does not explain the mutual resentment which I found to pervade conversations in both communities. The young modernizer not only embodies the lifestyle and values of the new capitalist Russia, he expresses a rejection bordering on hatred for the "Soviet", which in practical terms plays out as disdain for older people, for the backward Russian hinterland, and for the emerging lower classes. Outsider specialists confided to me many times their conviction that locals, especially the "Soviet generations", were frozen in time and of little use to the present. One young recruit expressed this problem in pedagogical terms:

*We often find, as psychologists, that when we have children with special needs who we want to remove from special classes and integrate into mainstream learning, we just can't pull it off. Once they've spent time outside the mainstream system, they can't re-integrate – they will always be behind.*⁴

Another senior figure remarked that the administration should in principle be recruiting locals wherever possible, but he had found that there were simply no skills and work habits in the local workforce to meet his standards. This was the usual justification for outside recruitment – a 22-year old Moscow university graduate was preferable to a 40 year old local with two decades of work experience. Administration figures described an ingrained "Soviet mindset" in locals, who combined a mistaken sense of pride in their abilities with complete ignorance of the tempo and technologies of the modern, post-Soviet workplace. In the words of a young reporter from Nizhni Novgorod:

Reporters here think they have the right to leave for home at 5pm, even with unfinished stories. At home in my old newspaper office we worked until late at night as a matter of course. People don't understand how to work here – they're spoiled and lazy. People really are frozen (zamorozhennie).

The pride and independence of local figures particularly mystifies and frustrates modernizers imported into management positions in Anadyr and other communities. The Modernisation hinges on the cooperation and obedience of local rank-and-file teachers, accountants, tax collectors and state farm directors, and the material generosity attending the programme of change should be met, they expect, with gratitude.

Local resentment in the white community has a complex psychological basis, largely connected with the loss of status resulting from Abramovich's modernisation by corporate takeover. But across kitchen tables in Chukotka's towns, complaints focus on a range of concrete indignities. Locals often feel excluded from the Chukotka taking shape today, partly because power now rests in the hands of people brought in from outside who, despite being decades younger than their local subordinates, command a great deal of authority. Abramovich's networks are insular – the administration recruits from within its own networks in Moscow and other cities, but not from Anadyr. The physical

separation of modernizers living in Chukotka, the conspicuous privileges of their lifestyle, and their much larger incomes create a visible class boundary between outsiders and locals. But the modernising programme is also producing deep administrative changes that impact on local lives directly, and there is a sense that un-tested 25-year old mandarins with no understanding of northern life are experimenting on the local population in deeply damaging ways. This is nowhere more strongly felt than in school education, which is exclusively administered by a team of specialists from Syktyvkar, Abramovich's childhood city.

Local whites, concentrated in Anadyr and a small number of other towns, are also recognising that one pillar of the Modernisation is a very expensive programme of native development. Funding for the agriculture ministry has risen from 5m rubles in the form of material gifts in 2000, under Nazarov's administration, to almost 250m rubles in budget funds in 2002. The greatest improvements in standards of living have been in the native villages, which formerly suffered the greatest deprivation under Nazarov. Abramovich is rebuilding entire native communities, with Canadian-built schools and comfortable detached houses (*kottedzhy*). Meanwhile, as "unpromising" industrial settlements close and their white residents are resettled, mostly to central Russia, the huge volume of construction work in the region is undertaken by Turkish, Canadian, Ukrainian and Russian labourers flown in on short-term contracts. The position of the white permanent resident in Chukotka seems increasingly tenuous in the evolving shift-labour and native economy. The tenor of media advertising for the administration's resettlement programmes, which saturated the local TV, radio and press, seemed to many locals like a redundancy notice, a signal that their era in the North has ended.

Contesting local identities

My parents came to Chukotka about 25 years ago. My sister and I were born here. My friends Rustam and Zhenya were born here too. So it's funny to talk about the Chukchi as the mestnoe naselenie [local/native population] – we grew up here and we know everything there is to know about this place. And we've done a fair bit for this place, we've represented Chukotka in competitions, and when we're outside the region, they call us "Chukotskye". We like it, we live here.

– Denis, a 23-year old Russian living in Anadyr.

The Soviet-era settler population in Chukotka derived its sense of collective identity largely from its place in the colonial order. Whites selected for jobs in the North considered themselves a unique tribe, a Soviet labour elite, but in Chukotka, they also defined themselves in opposition to the local indigenous population, and an important feature in their plans and self-image was transience. The term *priezhi* – "incomer" or "newcomer" – aptly described the archetypical white in Chukotka, a member of a "flowing population", as recently arrived as he was soon to leave (Leksin & Andreeva, 1994, p. 307). Soviet air transport was excellent and cheap, and the ability to fly out to central Russia on one's ample annual holiday was a key compensation for the rigours of life in the Far North. Good transport effectively collapsed the Soviet Union's huge distances, and both the ability to regularly imbibe at the cultural spout in Leningrad and

Moscow and the relative ease of transporting metropolitan cultural life to the North were perceived as vitally important to the northern settler lifestyle. Cultural power was also projected onto local natives, and mastery of the North was in part a project of acculturating primitive peoples – the penetration of “great Russian” *kulturnost*. Like Soviet research colonies (Akademgorodok, Tomsk-7) and nomenklatura networks, Chukotka was one type of “closed distribution system” – a zone of superior consumer goods and food supply relative to the wider Soviet deficit economy (Osokina, 2001; Ledeneva, 1998). So abundant supply, the Soviet version of prosperity, was another key prop to settler identity.⁵

Abundance, cosmopolitanism, and colonial agency – these attributes of the old Soviet white idyll are largely lost, although residual northern benefits still accrue, including longer holidays and early retirement, and the *kulturnost* project is not entirely dead in the minds of many white locals. Now Abramovich’s Modernisation is completing the emasculation of the old colonial identity, by excluding locals from the community of core modernizers and, critically, positioning whites as targets, rather than agents, of this most recent *osvoenie*. This section explores an unexpected outcome of the Modernisation, one that may run contrary to the administration’s desires – the emergence of a strong *local* sense of identity in whites. Localist claims to authority are emerging, and they offer a means of resisting modernisation, which many view as a project to disrupt the white community and its forms. This localism has largely abandoned its former colonial features, not for altruistic reasons, but because the layering of a new neo-colonial modernising population on top of the established white population leaves only a local moral claim available. White senses of group identity are thus reconstituting themselves in reference to land-use, local kin and friendship and long tenure in the North. What follows is an exploration of the discourses and behaviours that define group boundaries and set locals off from incoming modernizers, while valorising northern life.

The extreme character of Chukotka’s climate and the adaptive strategies it demands of northerners are two strong, recurrent themes in accounts of local life. Chukotka is arguably the harshest inhabited environment on the planet (this is certainly local opinion), and the extreme climate, the isolation, the vast distances, and the myriad peculiarities of working and living there are cast as a kind of exclusive code, locally referred to as *severnaya spesifika* (“the special circumstances of the North”). A member of the regional Duma (legislative assembly) who spent three decades working as a construction engineer in Provideniya and Anadyr, warned that replacing local builders with flown-in construction workers was a recipe for disaster in northern conditions. A Turkish company contracted to pave Anadyr’s streets with concrete was still pouring as the Arctic winter began in October, and not only the member of the Duma was convinced that the new streets would crack apart in the next spring thaw. Building on permafrost is considered rather a black art, on which long-time locals often claim a monopoly. When a team of summer camp volunteers from Moscow chose a patch of tundra outside Anadyr as their new “ecological” camp territory, they levelled the area by stripping the turf with a tank (*vezdekhod*). This peeled the insulative layer from the permafrost below and created a vast melt-water pond, an episode wryly remarked upon across local kitchen tables the following winter. A cameraman in the local television studio described the frequent

visits of documentary film crews from Moscow and abroad, who invariably arrived without special polarising filters for filming in the harsh Arctic light – he keeps a private collection of camera equipment, and makes a tidy profit equipping the naïve and uninitiated. There is a sea of other such stories in circulation, to do with building to withstand winds roaring off the Bering Sea, wearing the proper type of fur hat while ice-fishing, protecting the eyes while travelling over snow in the spring, and the best cure for nausea during the massive barometric pressure shifts that effect the coastal areas.

Jack London and Robert Service articulated the “code of the North” for western and Russian readers. The idea that life in extreme circumstances produces a better breed of person, more generous, more forgiving and most trustworthy, is another enduring northern self-perception. A typical statement runs “Northerners are better people, they always help each other, they never refuse a friend in need.” For long-time white residents, framing this sentiment as part of their personal arrival narrative is an important, recurrent device for explaining the uniqueness of a northern community. A geodesist and 30-year veteran of Chukotka recalled:

When I came to Anadyr, it was February, it was a sunny bright day, we got in a little van and the second I got in, I immediately noticed a different atmosphere. People talked to each other, asked each other questions. Someone strait-away explained to me where to get off, so it would be most convenient for me.

A sub-genre of the “forge of the North” discourse relates to the close, intimate friendships people form, as they draw together to resist the hostile environment. Social boundaries imported from mainstream Soviet life dissolve by necessity in northern conditions. A former geologist and Communist Party member described surviving an autumn blizzard on the tundra with only a former convict for company:

A terrible blizzard hit and they couldn't get a vezdekhod out to us. We had gone out to visit a drill site for a twelve-hour shift, but it turned into five days. We were in a canvas and wood shelter with no roof, since the drill tower was too high to accommodate – our tower just rattled in the wind and I'm amazed it wasn't just carried away. The two of us were stuck there, slowly burning the wood walls for heat, burning our sample trays, the peat insulation between the walls...in the end, we had to cling to each other for warmth. Before this incident, he'd said about me, “I'll kill red shitbag” – I was in the Party since I'd been recommended during Army service. And in the end, he and I worked together for two years and I wouldn't have anyone else for a partner.

Settlers came from all corners of the Soviet Union, leaving kin behind. But close friends came to replace siblings and cousins, to form a surrogate northern kinship network. A group of men resettled from a now-closed settlement in Chukotka to Voronezh in south-central Russia nostalgically recalled:

We northerners are a good people [narod]. We came from all over Russia, from all paths and destinies and even ethnicities. But in the North, we became one people. The North forged us. We forgot differences that we might have noticed on the materik

[mainland]. Take Ivan – I never wrote him off because he was a Georgian. To me, he was just a damn good underwater welder. To this day, we're still a northern people, even living here in Voronezh.

One common old-timer narrative focuses on the moment, having returned to old homes on the *materik*, when whites realise how much nobler human relationships are in the North. This is an important threshold, past which settlers begin to understand themselves as true northerners. Another former geologist in Anadyr recalls his first trip back to Ukraine, after three years working on the tundra:

When I first returned to the materik, I witnessed the beginnings of the tendencies that eventually led to the collapse of our society and the anarchy that reigns on the materik today. I understood even then, on my first trip back that I would never be able to return to life there...my discomfort was not physical, it was psychological – I was permanently annoyed and bothered. Everyday life irritated me. I noticed that my old friends couldn't even believe my stories from the North, about my life there. They couldn't conceive of the kind of simple, honest relationships we had in our geological parties.

The valorisation of northern life is paired with a disdainful disregard for the lifestyle and values of the *materik*, the other half of a superiority discourse. Moscow, significantly for the Moscow-led modernisation project, epitomises the worst: people there are venal, grasping, insincere, self-important, and lacking in community spirit. Relationships are transactional, in contrast with the unconditional generosity that northerners call the code of the North. As one gold-miner who came to Chukotka in 1972 put it, “In Chukotka, relationships are built on friendship rather than on money (*bolee družestvennye chem finansovye*)”. An engineer from Minsk, who married a northern white and moved to Chukotka in 1982 recalled:

*I got here in that period when you would just leave your flat and lean a stick against the door to let people know that no one was in. Nobody would intrude – just friends (*svoi liudi*), if they needed something. No one ever stole. There was this incredible mutual reliance (*ogromnoe vzaimnopolosch'*) – people relied on one another.*

Muscovites are an entirely different matter, however. After a visit from his Moscow superiors, the local representative of a major environmental movement remarked – “after you shake a Muscovite's hands, check you've got five fingers!” A white photographer in a small industrial town north of Anadyr remarked:

The further you get from the centre, the less selfish people are. Even in Anadyr, a more mercantile frame of mind has taken hold, but in Moscow, it's all about power. Why do you think no one likes Muscovites? It's their arrogance, their snobbism – they come from the capital and tell us we live in the middle of nowhere, that it's all provincial and second-class here. In reality, the people who came here to settle were the most dynamic, the most energetic.

The demonisation of the *materik*, beset by the myopic mass psychology of the late-Soviet stagnation era coupled with materialism – a phenomenon the Russian social historian Sheila Fitzpatrick termed the “embourgeoisement of Soviet society” (Fitzpatrick, 2000) – reaches back to the early days of Soviet settlement in Chukotka. These discourses are rooted in the possibilities of escape that the prosperous North offered to a deracinated and exhausted post-war people. Many older whites in Chukotka remember very difficult childhoods, growing up in areas decimated by the German invasion in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For many younger whites, Chukotka, with its strictly enforced restrictions on access and movement, was quite literally an escape from abusive husbands and failed marriages. A drama teacher fled to the settlement of Bilibino, the site of the world’s northernmost atomic power station, to protect herself and her daughter from a violent husband – the border-zone restrictions in Chukotka made this was one region to which he could never follow her. Another culture-worker, a photographer, remarked:

People from all the corners of the country came here – it was a United States of Russia. Chukotka was a new beginning. A man would divorce his wife, he’d have nowhere to go, he’d come to the North to work in a gold-mining enterprise, to earn money, to get away from his wife, to earn enough to pay the alimony and still have a little left over.

While the valorisation of the North at the *materik*’s expense is not new in the North, discourses of “northern patriotism” were powerfully galvanised by the state’s collapse in 1991, when the irritations of mainstream Soviet life were overtaken, for northern settlers, by tangible dangers. Although many whites left the North as the economy collapsed, many in fact later returned to its safe and tightly knit communities. The Darwinist brutality of post-Soviet life, and in particular violence and mistrust, repelled many northerners, and although Chukotka could provide no insulation against poverty, its isolation and strong community traditions were an effective bulwark against the intrusion crime and the mafia. At least in the minds of locals, who claim Chukotka’s border-zone controls are the only effective measure to prevent a flood of illegal Chinese traders and Chechen *mafiosy*, there is a sense that despite the socio-economic disaster of the Nazarov period, Chukotka has so far escaped the worst of the “transition”. The “collapse of society” that locals witnessed from a distance powerfully renewed the negative narratives on life on the *materik*. Here are sample descriptions of social collapse that settlers escaped by coming north:

From my class, 90 percent of my mates were involved in crime – I lived in a bad part of town, and there was a kind of subculture there. Looking at my contemporaries now, many of them are dead – I can count 15 from my old neighbourhood who are dead. They killed themselves, they were murdered, or they died from drug overdoses or alcohol poisoning. – pastor of a small Pentecostal church in Anadyr, early 30s.

In Moscow, you could only survive [in perestroika] if you had a head on your shoulders. When perestroika began, enterprises started closing down and young people were left on the streets – people my age, aged 25 to 30 at that time. They just started to drink. From my class of 18, five are still alive. Of the rest, they were either murdered or they drank

themselves to death. They're all in the ground. – singer-songwriter and actor in Anadyr, aged 41.

I have no real rodina on the materik any more. The community I was born and grew up in has been closed down – it was reliant on a timber mill. All my friends left for different parts. – director of Chukotka's forest-fire fighting service, 43.

One constituent of white “localism” is evidently a highly-valued sense of Chukotka as a place apart. But ironically, while Abramovich's modernizers agree that locals have been outside developments in Russian society, their view is less sanguine on this point. Far from preserving a precious social balance, modernizers contend that isolation has made of local communities a petrified remnant culture un-suited to the new Russian reality.

I have already referred to the vague anthropological consensus that practical and intimate relationships with a landscape underpin indigenous senses of belonging, but it is troubling that some of these ethnographic formulations are so ethnically exclusivist. Alexander King, drawing from research in northern Kamchatka, posits a dichotomy of native Koryak and white Russian perceptions of nature: for the white, nature is wild, an emptiness, an alternative to civilisation, whereas for Koryaks, nature itself is a civilisation, a “figure as people are figures”, marked and named through practical engagement. (King, 2002, p. 77) In “othering” nature, whites can never properly use it as a source of identity and belonging in a fully native way, according to King. Tim Ingold expresses a similar idea, describing typically *indigenous* spiritual relationships with a landscape, whereby aboriginals project ideas of personhood onto natural features and animals, and thereby construct a kind of supra-human culture of landscape, instrumentalised through reciprocal exchange. There are two ways of using land, in his view – occupation and inhabitation. The first is colonial in mindset, and commodifies, parcels out, measures, and exploits. The second is a rooted practice, whereby personal attachments to a landscape translate into aspirations of sustainable use. But Ingold, unlike King, does not hold with ethnic exclusion and concedes that the descendents of colonial settlers can *inhabit* a land just as easily as ethnic aboriginals can become the most short-termist proponents of practices of *occupation* (Ingold, 2002, p. 248).

Many whites in Chukotka are intimately attached to the landscapes they live in, drawing not only food but also emotional sustenance from their natural environment. Unlike in wealthier territories of the circumpolar North – Canada, Greenland, Alaska – harvesting local food resources is a central part of the white lifestyle in Chukotka, reaching back into the Soviet period. Living off the land became a matter of survival in the 1990s, as northern supply collapsed. While a small minority of whites based in the larger towns were able to entrepreneurially exploit connections with Moscow and Vladivostok, the typical pattern as wages failed and transport to the *materik* became exorbitant, was to turn to harvesting activities – hunting, fishing, berry gathering – in a more-or-less full-time manner. Formal jobs, if maintained, were often a shell. For example, a middle-aged marine parasitologist at the Anadyr branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences went unpaid for much of the 90s and did not manage to present her research at a single conference over an eight-year period, but she remained on staff. She spent most of her

time fishing for wild salmon and smelt on the Gulf of Anadyr, and her colleagues describe her preternatural talent for reading the waters “like a native”:

She really is an old-timer (starozhilyi) – she’s given 35 years to the North. A very good parasitologist...but an amazing fisherwoman (rybak). Better than a man – she always comes back from the ice with a huge rucksack of smelt. Not right in the head anymore though...

The parasitologist was established in her field and secure in her (formal) job when the crisis began – many less fortunate whites were compelled to abandon their careers entirely in order to turn to the tundra. A 39-year old concert accordionist, who abandoned studies at the Vladivostok Academy during perestroika, recalls his efforts to support his family in the 1990s:

I fished for smelt in the winter months, I went out on the tundra, and it wasn’t rare that we went hungry – famine, not to mince words. Our family was on very limited rations. I counted every kopek, we had practically no money. My wife worked cleaning floors, but she made almost nothing - \$30 a month. We got by, but we ate what I caught or gathered, and there were lean months in every year – early winter and late spring. For ten years, twice a year we went on bread and sugarless tea.

Members of the local bureaucratic elite rarely faced these hardships, but even these figures spent much of their available time on the land, gathering berries, fishing, and hunting. In part, this is because fresh and nutritious foods have been difficult to obtain in Chukotka’s shops for any price – everything, from cabbage to yoghurt, must be flown across nine time zones from Moscow or shipped 4500 kilometres from Vladivostok. More significantly, however, the fact that harvesting the land transcended social classes in Chukotka suggests that land-use was not purely a utilitarian pursuit. In local accounts, going out on the land is “good for the soul” (dusha), it “ennobles and renews” and for many, it is a movement to the *natural*, as opposed to the *artificial*, environment. I encountered a Ukrainian builder supervising the rebuilding of Amguema, a remote Chukchi settlement in the interior, who had lived in the area since the 1960s:

They sent me to Moscow to learn about building these kottedzhy, and I had to live in a flat for three months – it was utter hell. How can people live like that? Russians have returned to their troglodyte origins, living in those concrete caves. I couldn’t cope anywhere but here, this is my home. When I fish these rivers I feel like a whole person.

A former high Party official, who remains in Chukotka when his wife visits the *materik*, described the existential bliss he experiences when travelling on the tundra. His own account echoes remarkably Tim Ingold’s ideas of “skills of dwelling” in a landscape:

When I’m walking, I always stop to listen. I lie down in the gorse and listen to the silence until my ears ring. You realise you are alone – if you never got up, no one would come to your aid. You realise your human powers, but also your true weakness. You’re relying completely on your own skills and familiarity with the land. I live for that sensation.

One of the dominant discourses framing white land-use in Chukotka, and one evidently alien to native perceptions of the environment, is the “romance of the North”. Settlers almost universally carried with them to Chukotka an imagined North, constructed from stories of heroic exploration and exotic tribal peoples in popular literature, songs, and film.⁶ In the context of the “bourgeois North” – a zone of superior pay, supply and working conditions – the romance discourse provided a distinctly anti-materialist justification for settling in Chukotka, one grounded in self-realisation, self-testing, curiosity, and the rejection of mainstream Soviet values. Borrowing from a ballad valorising the geologist in the 1960s, many whites say they came north “for the smell of the taiga”, not the cash. Nature plays a leading role in romantic images of northern life, its “ecological purity” and “extreme” character a foil to the degraded human landscapes of central Russia. It is this essentialised view of nature as “out there” on which Alexander King bases his rejection of local white belonging in Kamchatka (King, 2002).

But essentialised views of nature collapse as intimacy with nature grows. The rooted white in Chukotka often maintains the romance narrative in his own accounts, perhaps due to its power to retroactively erase materialist motives for at first migrating north. But in practice his close and pragmatic relationship with the land has long since destroyed the two-dimensional romantic image of nature he might have once held. To illustrate, conservationism, in contrast with sustainable practices of being on the land, originates and is most fiercely worshipped in urban populations, which are accustomed to putting their most valued objects under protective glass, beyond touch. Conservationism, in its more extreme variations, saves whales but ignores traditional whalers – it is essentially a misanthropic philosophy, and it is very romantic. Like in any other part of the North – a predominantly rural zone – love of nature combines with harvesting practices without falling into moral contradictions. The conflation of utilitarian and emotional interactions with the land in whites might be viewed in parallel with the practical and spiritual interactions with land that anthropologists typically describe.

A Kuban Cossack, settled in one of Chukotka’s most remote native settlements and married to a local Koryak, exemplified this wholism, in his pragmatic approach to natural resources. Consider these two statements:

I had a Chukchi friend who was attacked by a polar bear downriver – totally unexpected in the taiga! This bear was a long way from its home territory and really desperate. Anyway, my friend was a tough guy, he managed to kill the bear with his fishing knife...but he got properly mauled and had his ears ripped off. So he’s lying in the clinic here and these two bureaucrat parasites fly in from Anadyr and arrest him for killing a protected animal! That’s the kind of shit we put up with from those “nature protectors”.

Question: Isn’t the hardest thing about living so far from Anadyr the lack of fuel?

- *It’s hard, but I tell you, if there was more fuel around, all the Chukchi men back here in the village would have taken boats and snowmobiles and hunted down every living thing in the area. They’re useless, the ones not out with the [reindeer] herds – they don’t know how to hunt with respect.*

Here, our Cossack rejects the abstract conservationist extremism of the urban inspectors, but then condemns practices that unbalance the local environment, one he knows intimately. Local knowledge, not ethnicity, informs his view of authority.

Among former settlers, I encountered expressions of local belonging arising from close engagement with the land more often from men than women: localism seems to be a gendered identity. Within marriages, men and women were often, though not consistently, on opposite ends of this scale. In three cases, wives yearned to return to old homelands on the *materik*, while their husbands insisted there was no homeland better than Chukotka. This discord arises from a situation in which men tend to make more intensive use of the landscape, as hunters, than women, as berry and mushroom gatherers. I travelled on the tundra south of Anadyr with one of the most experienced white hunters I met in my research. His wife had never, in 25 years in the North, been out of sight of the city, although she travelled to see relatives in Kaliningrad once every year or two.

In contrast with Chukotka's long-time residents, the new generation of modernizers has a very limited relationship with the natural environment. This cohort imports their entertainment from their distant urban lives. There is now a karaoke bar, fitness gym, luxury sauna, cinema complex, internet café and ice hockey rink in Anadyr built at least partly for their benefit – many new facilities are closed to locals. Meanwhile, locals speak rapturously about the fun to be had fishing in the Gulf of Anadyr during the salmon runs, a form of recreation that involves wading far out into the frigid waters in Soviet chemical warfare suits to set shore-fast nets (people drown every season when water enters through puncture holes and anchors them out from shore in a rising tide). When the modernising elite venture into nature, they are not – like the existentialist hunter – in modest solitude. The Vice-Governor celebrated his birthday by flying with 100 colleagues in a fleet of helicopters up-river for a day of fishing.

I have described how whites stake their moral claims in localist terms using both discourses and behaviours that mark the boundaries of a distinct northern identity. They claim they are a special breed, and through their intimate relationship with the landscape, many of them indeed substantiate this. But in Chukotka, white identity is not confederate; there is little sense of regional, Chukotkan identity. Attachments are in fact strictly local, based on solidarity within a single community. “Community” is perceived in literal rather than imagined terms, just as relationships with the landscape are practical, and therefore local, rather than mediated by romantic images of nature.

This finding became apparent in interviews with white migrants who have “cascaded” from smaller settlements to larger ones, usually ending in Anadyr. In the Nazarov era, skilled workers in rural Chukotka or the second-tier towns were drawn to Anadyr, the only remaining centre with some prospect of paid work in the region. Cultural workers, teachers, heating systems engineers, telecoms experts and reindeer veterinarians were all drawn to the capital's small but still functioning labour market. These people complain that Anadyr's “nature” is a pale version of the natural environment of their “home”

regions or that Anadyr has no sense of community spirit in comparison to what they left behind. One migrant from Mys Shmidt, on the Arctic Coast complained:

Here it's not the same. Here the berries aren't great and the mushrooms – I don't know. The bushes are skimpy – it's not worth going around here. But there in Shmidt you leave town and the jeep (Ural) is just hidden in the bushes in summer. There you have mountain streams with carp... Anadyr is nothing much to look at. You know what they don't have here? Sunsets. In Shmidt you have the most amazing colours...

For people still in rural areas, a common manner of professing attachments to local areas includes some sort of slight on the regional centre. The Cossack's view of Anadyr as a parasitic city of bureaucrats is in fact widely felt, and this view deepened in the 1990s when Nazarov cut services and wage payments in the settlements and concentrated state resources in Anadyr, his true patronage base. Residents of Beringovsky, whose coal mine supplied Anadyr with fuel for heating and power, were themselves without utilities for several years. A Beringovsky police officer explained that Anadyr “eats the fat off our backs, those parasites just eat the settlements away.” On one journey up the Anadyr River to visit remote settlements, I travelled with the head of small vessel inspections, who regularly tours the region extracting license fees and fining boat-owners for “safety infractions”. As far as I could discern, he returned no training or material good to boaters – there was no public service, only public rent collection, a situation which somewhat confirms the justifications for rural attitudes to the centre. Echoing the enmity Chukotkans reserve for the mega-centre, Moscow, rural Chukotkans view Anadyr as both morally and ecologically tainted. A geographer and hydrologist in Egvekinot reported that he never visits Anadyr because the polluted water gives him rashes and indigestion. But the water of Egvekinot, in his words, extends the human lifespan.

Settlers typically came to Chukotka without family networks, but since the Soviet period, many of the most rooted whites have developed extensive kinship ties to local communities. Piers Vitebsky has described the marriage of white labourers to native women in rural Siberia as a corrosive force, denaturing native communities by marooning native men, often migrant herders, in a purgatory of bachelorhood (Vitebsky, 2002). In the settlement of Vaegi (pop. 300), 700 kilometres travel up the Anadyr River from Anadyr, the roughly 30 white men were almost all married to native women. Yet these are whites with strong attachments to the village, remaining there after a decade of white out-migration. Most have children in the community. Few planned to leave in the future. Like the Cossack mentioned earlier, these figures are often deeply proprietorial of local resources, even at the expense of natives. Intermarriage roots whites in communities, but it also shifts their cultural centre of gravity, as a Chukchi broadcaster in Anadyr explained:

There is this man, Misha Zelensky...he's head of the Chukotsky Raion. He was brought to Chukotka very young, just after birth. When he gives interviews in our native language, he doesn't identify himself as a priezhii [newcomer]. He says, 'we Chukchi...' and so on. In other words, this is a man who has learned our language like a native speaker, he is located within our culture, and he judge judges Russians as a Chukchi – he

doesn't mince his words! Absolutely not! When he is explaining how things are, he speaks about priezhie as something separate from himself.

Kinship, as so often in Russia, is also felt with the deceased – Russians visit the graves of their friends and relatives to commune and remember. The need to identify a *rodina* (homeland) partly arises from the practical concern that one should be buried in one's true community, where the living can visit and care for your grave. Anxiety about burial thus continually haunts Russians in a state of migrancy, and burial choices are a clear indication of primordial attachments. When whites died in Soviet Chukotka they were almost always flown back to the *materik* for burial. But in the 1990s, this practice virtually ceased, as the cost of a single ticket to Moscow surpassed the value of a typical flat in Anadyr. The small local cemetery suddenly reached its capacity, and within a decade, a new field of graves sprouted in the tundra beyond the town. Now whites in many parts of Chukotka observe a ritual which, according to my informants, was never before part of Soviet life in the North: on "Parents' Day", Russians visit the graves of their loved ones to drink, eat and care for the spirits. The former Party official related to me that after a week of hunting he was walking back to Anadyr through the new cemetery. He stopped for a drink and looking about the tombstones, each bearing a face, he was struck by the fact that almost everyone was known to him. His gaze then fell on the face of a good friend, exactly his age but dead now for five years, and he noticed how well the grave was cared for. He was struck by the thought, almost unthinkable in the Soviet past, that he himself would be better buried here, in his community, than anywhere else in Russia:

Morally, I'd be better off lying out there in the cemetery (Mne moral'no budet normal'no esli by ya lezhal tam). What do I have on the materik? I grew up there, but then I came straight to the North after service. As they say, I spent my best years here.

Staking claims

Identities are political. Presentations of the self in the social field are indexes of power and authority within it. For this reason, identities are fought over, contested and defended, a struggle in which the essentialist rhetoric of fixed and unassailable identities plays a vital role. Essentialised portrayals of identity underwrite many ethnic movements, indigenous claims for land rights and self-determination among them. The matter of indigeneity, in contrast with the status of colonial populations, has in the circumpolar North been easier to delineate than in regions of the world with overlapping claims to territory stretching back through long spans of recorded history. In the North, with the exception of Scandinavia, recorded history (at least in the forms recognised by the courts to which land claims are appealed) began with colonial conquest, and indigenous peoples are recognised as those in place when the colonising process, and concomitantly the historical record, began. The notion of "First Peoples", a highly spurious idea for the ghosts of nations exterminated and expelled by the predecessors of native peoples on their "homelands" today, is often more valid as a political-legal claim than a historically accurate one.

But across the circumpolar North, descendent populations of former colonial peoples are joining with aboriginal populations in claiming a degree of nativeness. The métis of Canada, an organised population with an emerging claim to nationhood and a history of resistance to colonial invasion itself, is one example. In the former Soviet Union, the abandoned colonial diaspora of the Far North is, I have argued, another population with legitimate claims to local, native identity. The aboriginal self-determination movement and the democratic legal space in contemporary Russia has not yet matured to the point when historical claims to territory might be transferred into property rights, material compensation and ultimately self-determination arrangements, as witnessed for example in Greenland and Nunavut. But this is the inevitable trajectory, as precedents and native rights movements cross international boundaries. The assertions of belonging raised by whites in Russia's North could seriously threaten these claims.

As Andre Béteille has remarked, the very idea of indigeneity is a response to external threats, and the indigenous identity firms up and marks its boundaries when it becomes necessary to stake a claim to what is "ours" – territory, for example, or hunting rights. In the Russian North, a new pattern of colonial development is beginning to emerge, in which maturing forces of private capital based in the metropolitan heartland are extending their interests to the "resource frontier".⁷ Chukotka is among the first regions to experience a modernising project of this type, but since its natural resource wealth is not unique in the Russian North, it cannot be the last. But Roman Abramovich has found in Chukotka a white population which, perhaps contrary to his expectations, cannot be manipulated and allocated as an "economic factor" to suit his aims of management expediency. Nativeness has achieved a clear material utility in the new Chukotka, where major development initiatives are securing the Chukchi and Yupik population in their own villages, while whites are encouraged to leave for Voronezh and elsewhere. "If I'm not native (*mestnyi*), who is?" ask whites. It should come as no surprise that long-term whites are appropriating the rhetorical weapons of indigeneity in reaction to Abramovich's corporate modernisation.

Leaving the domain of legal entitlements and language politics aside, can the idea of a white sense of local belonging and rootedness, of "dwelling on the land", withstand ethnographic scrutiny? Merely harvesting the tundra to survive – knowing how to shoot a moose – hardly compares with the rich engagement of a Chukchi reindeer herder or a Tungus hunter with the land, in which acts of consumption are only one side of a relationship of continual reciprocal exchange and animals, trees and rocks are imbued with animating personhood. This spiritual perception of the natural environment, or some variation of it, is surely the prerequisite for truly inhabiting a landscape and being its native person. Whites, as natives in Chukotka sometimes remark, have no sense of the spiritual complexity of the landscape surrounding them. These are the words of an urban Chukchi intellectual:

The worldview of the Chukchi considers nature a living thing, with which you can have a conversation, which you can go to for help, with which you need to cultivate a relationship. And priezhie [newcomers] don't consider nature to be alive – it's just a location, a place.

I was part of an overland expedition to visit the abandoned city of Iul'tin, once a massive tin and tungsten mining centre, located in the high Arctic mountains of the Chukotka Peninsula. Connected by an old disused gravel road to Egvekinot, a port town 300 kilometres south, the most dangerous obstacle in our path was the Amguema River, once spanned by a long trestle bridge. We knew we could cross by fording, but the currents continual rebraid the river's channels and in the summer we made our attempt, two gold-miners had already drowned in their swamped vehicles. We arrived at the river in three 5-ton military trucks – Urals – having hired as their drivers three *vezdekhodshiki*, young local white men whose job is to drive transport tanks over the local territory and provision the reindeer herders. No one knew the ford better. As we were stopped on the near shore, to seal distributor caps and change the air-intake valves for the crossing, a bottle of vodka emerged. We each threw back “100 grams”, no doubt to steel the nerves, but then the eldest driver, a Ukrainian born in the local village, offered a libation to the river, pouring a glass and tossing it into the waves. We got across.

The Russian term *perestrahovka* means “double insurance” – living in a place of such uncertainty, contending with the fickle temperament of the northern environment, it is always comforting to have the spirits on your side. The Ukrainian driver probably learned this from his Chukchi friends. The ford over the Amguema is a dangerous, invisible path, constantly changing in the current, and locals know it is futile to read its mind. In some part, it is a creature who appreciates a drink.

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¹ Borrowing a convention from the North American context, I use the term “white” to denote a Russophone non-indigenous resident of the North. English-language accounts set in the Russian North has avoided this word, preferring to translate the “native” term *priezzhii* literally as “newcomer” or “incomer”. Since the premise of this article is to question the outsider status of the *priezzhii* population, I have chosen to import a more neutral term.

² Formerly *sovkhov* (state farm), the new terminology is *unitarnoe gosudarstvennoe predpriyatie* (consolidated state enterprise).

³ Roman Abramovich was listed by *Forbes Magazine* in its 2003 survey as Russia's second richest citizen, with an estimated net worth of \$5.7 billion. His Millhouse Capital holding controls oil major Sibneft and half of metals giant Russian Aluminium (www.rusnet.nl)

⁴ Quotes in this article were selected from transcripts based in interviews held with the author in 2002 and 2003 in the Chukchi Autonomous Okrug.

⁵ Elena Osokina, a Russian cultural historian, argues that class and privilege in the Soviet economy of shortage depended not on income, but on access to goods, or rather access to superior zones of state distribution. In the hierarchy of privilege, closed distribution systems (for example the Soviet North) were structural props of class difference (Osokina, 2001).

⁶ See, for example: McCannon, John, *Red Arctic: polar exploration and the myth of the north in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998) and Diment, Galya & Slezkine, Yuri (eds.), *Between Heaven and Hell: the Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture*, New York: St. Martin's Press (1993).

⁷ Chukotka was the first region of three autonomous okrugs in the Russian North to elect an oligarch as governor and thereby sanction the replacement of a locally-based administration with corporate government. Similar elections took place in Taimyr and Evenkia in the following months. Commenting on the situation in Taimyr, David Anderson claims that "with the election of the oligarchs we can identify a political context that is no longer ambiguously 'post-socialist' and 'transitional'...but suggests very strongly the type of corporatist politics, which now predominates in resource frontiers the world over" (Anderson, 2002, p. 119).

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