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Valued Volatility
Inhabiting Uncertain Flux in the Mackenzie Delta, Canada

Abstract: This article argues that Ehdiitat Gwich’in and Inuvialuit inhabitants of the Mackenzie Delta cultivate flexibility and a refusal of settler habits by actively avoiding stability and predictability. It discusses ethnographic insights into articulations of dependence, work, schooling, alcohol consumption, gambling and hunting, highlighting the virtues Mackenzie Delta inhabitants see in certain forms of volatility. While some volatilities are regarded as problematic, others are cultivated, rebelling against colonial control and enabling continuity in a fundamentally uncertain world. This article proposes re-evaluating ‘volatility’ as a term with ambivalent, but not only negative, connotations. It may become a useful idiom for coming to terms with a social and ecological world, in which control is neither possible nor desirable.

Keywords: Gwich’in, Inuvialuit, refusal, uncertainty, volatility

If volatility refers to uncertain and potentially rapid transformations that cannot be controlled by conventional means (see Krause and Eriksen, this issue), it sounds like something to be avoided. Wouldn’t we all prefer, instead, stability, certainty, slow and controlled transformations? In the current era of profound social and ecological upheaval around the world, upholding the ideal of a plannable, complacent earth, with human populations following predictable paths and ecologies characterised by equilibria, is evidently misplaced. But what may come in its stead? This article suggests that volatility – as outlook, material phenomenon and human disposition – can provide cues to a life beyond the illusion of social and ecological solidity and control. This argument is based on my fieldwork with Ehdiitat Gwich’in and Inuvialuit inhabitants of the Mackenzie Delta, who cultivate a form of volatility that allows them to seize opportunities as they arise while resisting settler colonial domination. After establishing the theoretical context for this argument, drawing from both Indigenous North American and European writers, I outline some of the ways in which Mackenzie Delta inhabitants avoid orderliness and predictability and thereby cultivate flexibility and a refusal of settler habits.

I argue that valuing volatility is more than a technical, practical, strategic or benefit-seeking adaptation to a disequilibrium environment, and rather part of a way of life based on trusting instead of attempting to control (see Scoones, this issue), and that is indeterminate and flexible instead of directed and disciplined. People following this way of life may appear undeveloped (Scoones and Stirling 2020) and meek (Ingold 2006) to Western observers and government administrators, as they do not plan, assert
and follow through in ways conventional to settler colonial observers (e.g. Bates 2007; Krause 2022). Instead, I suggest that people may actively relinquish control in a recognition of a volatile world, where partaking in rapid, uncertain and far-reaching transformations works through being oneself transformative, not specialised but open, which allows them to appreciate volatility for its unforeseen opportunities. Moreover, among Indigenous Peoples in Canada, valuing volatility may also be part of a refusal of settler colonial governance (see Simpson 2014) that renders Indigenous Peoples dependent and attempts to discipline them into foreign social and economic practices.

These considerations are based on ethnographic fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, during which I had the opportunity to learn about volatile life from Inuvialuit and Ehdiitat Gwich’in residents of Aklavik in the Mackenzie Delta. In Inuvialuktun, the delta is known as Umaq, in Dinji Zhuh Ginjik as Ehdiitat (literally, ‘among the timber stands’). I am a white anthropologist from Germany who had become interested in the delta and its inhabitants through discussions with colleagues, previous work in the European Arctic and on the role of water in social and cultural life. In correspondence with the Gwich’in Tribal Council’s Department of Culture and Heritage and the Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee, I developed a research agenda to document current, everyday life in the Mackenzie Delta, being based in Aklavik. Aklavik is a hamlet of roughly six hundred inhabitants at the border of the Inuvialuit Settlement Region and the Gwich’in Settlement Region in what is today the Canadian Northwest Territories. Most of its inhabitants would agree that while they spend much time in the hamlet, their home is what they call ‘the land’ beyond the settlement, including the Arctic Ocean Coast, the nearby Richardson Mountains and above all the huge Mackenzie Delta. Aklavik developed out of a fur trading post, established in 1911, into the administrative centre of the Western Canadian Arctic by the mid-twentieth century. When the Canadian government aimed to replace Aklavik in the 1950s with an ostensibly ‘modern’ town on dry ground at the eastern edge of the delta, some families decided to stay in Aklavik. After a period of government neglect, it was incorporated as a hamlet in 1974 and has, since then, received considerable government support in housing, income assistance and numerous other services.

In spite of all this, a common narrative among both the Inuvialuit and the Ehdiitat Gwich’in of Aklavik is that they were better off from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. They often refer to this period as the ‘good old times’ (see Wishart and Loovers 2013; Wishart 2014, for similar narratives from neighbouring Teet’it Gwich’in; for Gwichya Gwich’in, Nazon 2007; or for Vuntut Gwitchin, Demuth 2013) even though they simultaneously acknowledge that it was also a time of radical economic, social and ecological transformations. It marked an increase in reach of the market economy, the proliferation of settler institutions like church, police and school, and the growing presence of the hydrocarbon industry.

A story famous in the region serves to illustrate some of the dynamics of that era, which already foreshadowed its end. A white trapper using the name of Albert Johnson had come to Gwich’in lands in 1931 and was accused of meddling with neighbouring traplines during his first season trapping on a delta tributary. When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) visited his cabin to question him regarding these accusations, Johnson, who would later be called ‘The Mad Trapper’ resisted and even-
Figure 1. Some of the major channels of the Mackenzie Delta (*Ehdiitat* in Dinjii Zhu’ Ginjik; *Umaq* in Inuvialuktun), with Aklavik and Inuvik and part of the border between the Gwich’in Settlement Region (GSR) and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR).
tually fled across the mountains into the Yukon, where the RCMP, aided by Indigenous Special Constables, finally caught and shot him dead seven weeks later (e.g. Lydia Alexie Elias in McCartney and Gwich’in Tribal Council 2020: 320–322). In Eurocanadian accounts, this episode is a story of maintaining law and order in a formerly wild and unruly region, a proof of state control on the edges of the colonial empire that materialised Canada’s claim to the territory and its inhabitants. Not surprisingly, the stories many Gwich’in people tell about these events are less heroic, but reflect the understanding that the man-hunt signified the end of an era when the sphere of the Canadian state was limited to settler affairs (Demuth 2013; McCartney 2017). Now the colonial administration had effectively taken control of their lands that before had been regarded as wilderness by the whites.

The ensuing takeover by settler institutions and corporate activities such as hydrocarbon explorations were so profound and had so many negative impacts on the area’s inhabitants that they soon sparked a series of Indigenous movements in the Mackenzie Delta and beyond, struggling for the Canadian government’s recognition of their land rights. These movements culminated in the signing of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement in 1984 and the Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement in 1992 and lay the foundations for current self-government negotiations (e.g. Alunik et al 2003; Loovers 2019).

Ambivalent Volatility

There are evident tensions between, on the one hand, the volatilities that Inuvialuit and Gwich’in people sought to curb by taking back control of their own lands through land claim negotiations and, on the other hand, the volatilities that they appreciate and cultivate. Limiting the political and economic volatilities that characterised much of the Mackenzie Delta’s twentieth century (Krause 2021) did not lead to a wholesale rejection of a volatile world. Instead, people try to avoid certainties that render them dependent, and embrace practices that emphasise indeterminacy and flexibility.

Before illustrating this with ethnographic insights from Aklavik, I will provide an overview of ways in which Indigenous elders and scholars, as well as anthropologists with various backgrounds, have identified the refusal of being fixed and controlled as key struggles of Indigenous Peoples.

Inuvialuit elder Billy Day (2002), for example, describes the radical transformations in beluga whale hunting off the Mackenzie Delta and concludes that while it is necessary not to overhunt whales and other animals, it may not be a good idea to designate permanent protected areas considering all ‘the changes that are going on in the environment’ (Day 2002: 3). Too much solidity may inhibit people’s and animals’ agency. Also other voices from the region, including Alice Masak French (1992) and Ishmael Alunik (1998), emphasise the unpredictable dynamism of landscape and people in the delta and beyond as a dearly-held characteristic of Inuvialuit life. Human mobility, flexibility and improvisation belong to this world just as changing weather, uncertain ice conditions and migrating animal populations do. Transformations can become dangerous and overwhelming, as when blizzards hamper movement or ani-
mal populations shift their migration patterns, and people may need to devise ways of buffering their impacts or avoiding their reach; but in principle, uncertain dynamics are not problematic, but the way the world works.

North American Indigenous scholars have developed powerful approaches to articulate and forge Indigenous ways of life that are not defined by their relation – and submission – to dominant settler society (e.g. Alfred and Corntassel 2005). One central aspect of this path of resistance and resurgence is the refusal to be pinned down and fixed – in terms of identity, livelihood and territory – by colonial governance (Alfred 2009). In formulating an ‘American Indian metaphysics’, Vine Deloria states that Indigenous knowledge, with its relational ontology and stance of ‘suspended judgement’, is much better placed to enable inhabiting a changing world than the tradition of dehumanised and mechanical scientific knowledge with its ‘misplaced concreteness – the desire to absolutize what are but tenuous conclusions’ (2001: 6). Zoe Todd (2018) uses the metaphor of a moving water surface, refracting and dispersing the light as it travels through it, to think through Indigenous ways of navigating and re-defining colonial and Indigenous relations to fish. Todd relates her contribution to research on ‘dynamic-but-rooted’ Indigenous legal orders and to the concept of ‘survivance’ (Vizenor 2008) that frames Indigenous histories as not just surviving and adapting to colonial rule, but as thriving and developing on their own terms in spite of often daunting challenges. This implies that Indigenous resistance and refusal pivot on the ability to avoid control, standardisation and stability, while emphasising indeterminacy and capacities to relate to an evolving, uncertain world.

Anthropologists working with Indigenous Peoples across the circumpolar North have similarly reflected on the ambivalence of volatility. Allice Legat’s (2012) long-term research with Tłı̨chǫ narratives emphasises the way stories from the past serve to direct Tłı̨chǫ people in the present and towards an unknowable future. Rather than denying or attempting to contain uncertainty and volatility, telling and reflecting on old narratives allows them to embrace a transforming world without losing their sense of continuity and grounding. Peter Loovers’s (2019) ethnography of teaching and learning with the Teetł’it Gwich’in makes similar observations about inhabiting ‘a growing world’ by active ‘conversation’ with new influences, rather than a wholesale ‘conversion’ to foreign religion, economy and lifestyle. This ambivalence, of managing radical transformations by following ‘dynamic but rooted’ trajectories, indicates that their very strategy to deal with certain threatening volatilities is to embrace uncertainty, improvisation and transformation. This resonates with Peter Collings’s (2014) analyses of the predicaments of young Inuvialuit men in Ulukhaktok, and Barbara Bodenhorn (2000) sums up her research on transforming whaling practices with Inupiat in Barrow through the formula ‘it’s traditional to change’.

Juxtaposing examples from human–animal relations across the circumpolar North, David Anderson (2014) identifies an ‘architecture of relationships’ that is geared towards effective reindeer herding but not reducible to either ‘control’ or ‘reciprocity’. He identifies a tendency among circumpolar Indigenous Peoples – instead of attempting to control, but without simply surrendering – to negotiate their changing world by creatively working along with its uncertain emergence. Correspondingly, Mark Nuttall (2009) explains that many Greenlandic Inuit do not experience the uncertain trans-
formations that come under the label of climate change primarily as a set of threats, but rather as a string of opportunities in a world that has never been fixed and certain, and that continually requires people's attention and informed judgements. Peter Bates (2007), in turn, argues that this openness to a transforming world characterised by uncertainty implies that Inuit are often reluctant to devise and commit to fixed plans, as they would close down possibilities and flexibility. This does not mean that all transformations come easy to them – melting ice and permafrost, industrial pollution, declining caribou herds and settler governance can all have debilitating effects. Nevertheless, the attitude towards a volatile world does not map easily onto settler-derived ideas of control and planning.

Embracing volatility is not limited to Indigenous Peoples of the circumpolar North. A long tradition of research around the world has pointed out that neither ecologies nor social relations are constituted by equilibria, and that uncertainty is a key dimension of social and ecological life (Scoones 1999). For example, Saverio Krätli and Nikolaus Schareika (2010) point out that the Wodaabe pastoralists inhabiting the arid savannahs of Niger, Nigeria and Chad herd and train their cattle in a way that benefits from variability and uncertainty. Thereby, the authors argue against a so-called ‘deficit view’ of dryland environments, which reduces them to the lack of stability and uniformity, and reduces their inhabitants’ agency to coping with perpetual crises. Instead, they suggest that without uncertain spatiotemporal precipitation variability, the pastoralists would be worse off. While this argument is couched in terms of benefit maximisation and productivity optimisation, which perhaps draws it back more than necessary into a modernist frame of ‘optimal’ land use, it does open up, together with the insights from Indigenous theorists and circumpolar anthropology, a useful avenue to consider the logic of a way of life that confronts volatility by embracing it. This awareness and embracing of volatility, as I will argue, is not necessarily geared at maximising the benefits from an uncertain environment, but can be understood as an active letting go of all illusions of control and pretensions of planning (see Day et al 1999), turning oneself into a volatile actor who is able to correspond with a volatile world. The ambivalence of volatility, then, lies in the extent to which inhabiting volatility is possible by being aware and embracing it, or to which embracing volatility engenders a radical erosion of people's world.

Independence and Transformation

Ehdiitat Gwich’in elder Freddie Greenland served as Aklavik Indian Band council member and chief for many years from the 1970s to the 1990s. When I asked him about his view on the government welfare programmes that support many livelihoods in the region, he responded firmly:

Well, in the long run, it's not a good idea. People are not independent anymore. They're depending on the government. And as soon as something happens or if the government pulls out . . . There's going to come a time when they are going to pull out, you know? They can't be there all the time. Everything is changing. (Freddie Greenland 12 April 2018)
Figure 2. Freddie Greenland on a wood-hauling trip in the Mackenzie Delta, April 2018.
Freddie Greenland emphasised that he has ‘always been independent’, which has helped him to take advantage of ever new opportunities and enabled him to leave behind commitments that were no longer viable. Born in 1937, he began working as a teenager on the boat and barge that provisioned one of the main private traders in Aklavik at the time, transporting fur to the upstream markets and bringing materials, foods and fuel to the delta. The off-season for the barge, when Freddie Greenland was laid off, coincided with the main hunting and trapping season. So he ran a trapline and sold the fur during the winters, while the rivers were frozen and inaccessible for the barge.

But it wasn’t the navigability of the Mackenzie River that ended the barge’s journeys to and from Aklavik in the late 1950s. It was, instead, the Canadian government’s decision to re-locate Aklavik, which had become the central commercial and administrative hub in the Western Canadian Arctic, to dry ground at the edge of the delta. While Aklavik’s location in the middle of the delta had been very suitable for water-based transport, accessible for both Inuvialuit and Gwich’in hunters and trappers and with large populations of fur-bearing animals in its vicinity, flooding and erosion in the delta were antagonistic to the urban infrastructures such as streets and large buildings that had been spreading in Aklavik in recent decades. The government determined a new site for a model town of Arctic modernity, which eventually became known as Inuvik. Most white settlers moved to the ostensibly modern town, while many Ehdii-tat Gwich’in and Inuvialuit remained in Aklavik, among other reasons because their relations with land and people were oriented more towards the western than the eastern side of the delta and adjacent places.

Freddie Greenland did not move to the modern Inuvik, but instead to the booming oil town Norman Wells, where he especially remembers the seemingly never-ending loading of countless fuel barrels into planes bound for the military infrastructure that was emerging along the Arctic Coast. With the onset of the Cold War, US and Canadian forces developed a system of radar stations, known as the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, across the Arctic (Fritz 2010). Having had enough of loading fuel barrels, Freddie Greenland moved back to Aklavik, where many inhabitants had stayed, instead of moving to Inuvik. Soon after, he took on work in construction for one of the DEW Line stations not far from the delta. Once construction work was finished, he returned to Aklavik, in order to work for the local store for five years.

The Aklavik Fur Garment Co-operative was established in 1963 as part of an economic development programme initiated by the government of Canada. The programme offered Freddie Greenland a position as manager, which he kept for ten years. The Co-op employed between ten and twenty mostly female seamstresses, and sold its products throughout North America and Europe. However, Freddie Greenland also learned that a project controlled by the government was systematically unable to cater to the delta inhabitants’ needs. Soon after Freddie Greenland left to work full-time as Chief of the Aklavik Indian Band, the Co-op project was declared a failure and closed. Around the same time, Fur Garment Co-ops in many other places in the region closed down.

Looking back at his work in Gwich’in politics, Freddie Greenland emphasised his conviction that, in order to improve life for the people of Aklavik, he had to work
against the Canadian government rather than with it. This included his involvement in the negotiations for the Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement, but also other episodes in which he vehemently argued for supporting locally meaningful practices and livelihoods rather than embracing externally derived models of prosperity, such as improved automobile access to land around Aklavik. Even today, in his early eighties, Freddie Greenland is a strong advocate of independence, breaking his own trails on snowshoes and snowmobile, cutting and hauling firewood to keep his house warm and speaking out at public meetings in Aklavik.

In short, Freddie Greenland’s experience has taught him that it is necessary to remain self-reliant and independent in order to seize opportunities as they come up, since no projects or enterprises are likely to last forever. Whenever he took a job, he did not know what would come of it, and he always kept his eyes and ears open to other options. In particular, Freddie Greenland is critical of government commitments, since he has seen time and again how unreliable they can be: he has experienced the government divesting from Aklavik when it planned re-location to Inuvik; mismanaging and discontinuing the Fur Garment Co-op; and building up and abandoning the DEW Line infrastructure. It is not surprising that he finds it likely that the government will ‘pull out’ from supporting income, housing and other social services in Aklavik, too. And Freddie Greenland is not alone in this assessment – many Gwich’in elders in the region predict that ‘hard times are coming’ (Loovers 2018), which makes it necessary to remain flexible and independent from settler institutions and technologies.

Does his flexibility, opportunism, distrust of the state and focus on individual choices imply that Freddie Greenland would make a model for the precarious and highly mobile employee and entrepreneur of late liberal economies (Sennett 1998)? This would be a severely misguided interpretation as his strive to remain independent is based in a specific context of settler colonial politics and extractive economies coupled with a long tradition that values volatility and the ability to live with it. This volatility is much more than the relative deviance from an expected development, as the term is defined in the finance industry. It is rather the certainty that the world is liable to rapid and unpredictable transformations, which requires care, openness and, perhaps, a similar internal volatility to get by.

**School and Careers**

For example, the fact that Aklavik people with insufficient paid employment are eligible for income assistance does not mean that they rely wholeheartedly on this government programme. Sandra Arey, who administers the programme in Aklavik, stated in an interview on 10 November 2017 that the number of income assistance cases had quadrupled since the mid-1990s, when she began this job. Back then, it was just a half position as only few people in the region did not find work in the booming oil and gas industry. Today, with much less employment, the job is full-time. Sandra Arey reported that most people apply for income assistance around Christmas, when they have higher expenses and lower income opportunities. But cases fall again in spring and summer, as soon as people find other sources of income. Sandra Arey observed
that not nearly as many people as would be eligible for income assistance also apply for it and believed that many people consciously abstain from government assistance; in her words, their ‘pride’ keeps them from relying on external help. They prefer remaining independent and open to seizing opportunities, and they take pride in making do.

In Aklavik, not many people are overly enthusiastic regarding full-time, permanent employment. On the one hand, they know how few jobs of the kind exist. On the other hand, people realise the importance of being able to hunt, fish, collect berries and run traplines at the right time, and then with sustained effort. Not many full-time positions allow for this flexibility. As formal employment-based careers are therefore unlikely, formal schooling enjoys mixed successes in Aklavik, too. Most people agree that other kinds of education, gained through spending time in the delta, on the coast and in the mountains, and listening to elders’ stories, are as necessary for preparing children for life. This has long been realised by those responsible for developing the curricula in the regional school board, and elders’ visits and delta excursions are part of the students’ schedule. Furthermore, when students do not attend class because they accompany their parents or others during an activity on the land, such as fishing, gathering, hunting, maintaining a camp or trapping, this is not counted as an absence from school.

Nevertheless, even the formally counted absences pose a continual challenge for the school in Aklavik. Attendance averages around 80 percent, and the Beaufort Delta Divisional Education Council, the regional school board, campaigns intensely to raise this figure. One of the board’s main arguments is that 80 percent attendance means missing, on average, one day of school per week, which adds up to having missed two years by the end of high school. When the board’s then superintendent of schools, Denise McDonald, visited Aklavik in October 2017 to assess the current situation at Aklavik’s Moose Kerr School, she also made an announcement on the community radio. In convincing, calm and compassionate words, she encouraged all guardians regularly to wake up their school-aged children in the morning, feed them breakfast and send them to school. She was aware that this requires a lot of commitment from parents who do not work regular working hours but may stay up late into the night when particular tasks need to get done, or when friends are visiting, and may rest in the morning when they have the opportunity, in order to be refreshed when they need their strength and concentration again. The school schedule, modelled on an industrial rhythm of work shifts, fits awkwardly into this life.

This friction of state-sponsored school with Indigenous lifeworlds and regional career opportunities influences many people’s biographies across the region (e.g. Collings 2014). But it is a much wider problem of ongoing colonial relations (Deloria and Wildcat 2001) that has been discussed for decades, and Indigenous educators continue to experiment with alternative forms of education, such as ‘land based pedagogy’ (Wildcat et al 2014), that afford more appropriate methods, contents and settings (see Loovers 2019), such as Moose Kerr School’s annual muskrat camp in spring, to which students accompany teachers and elders in order to experience and learn more about muskrats and their uses. In Aklavik, as in many other places throughout the region, current schools are careful to avoid policies and manners that would remind students and parents of the Indian Residential School system, under which Indigenous chil-
Children across Canada suff ered into the late twentieth century (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015; for an autobiographical account from the Mackenzie Delta, see French 1976). This school system had been explicitly set up to turn children from Indigenous families into members of White, settler society, but in practice it resulted in exploitation, abuse, murder and trauma, a system the Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified as ‘cultural genocide’ (2015: 1).

Separated from their families for months, and often years on end, Gwich’in and Inuvialuit children, who are today parents, elders and ancestors, were disciplined into settler colonial routines, forbidden to speak their languages and practice their rituals, and subsequently returned to their families as strangers who spoke English and had been trained to dislike and fail at Indigenous livelihoods. Schooled in ways that made them unfit for both their home communities and settler society, residential school leavers had to struggle on multiple fronts to re-gain a sense of independence, purpose and self-esteem (Di Mascio and Hortop-Di Mascio 2011). Likewise, parents who hardly saw their children for half of their childhood had to re-connect with teenagers who had been taught to disrespect their elders’ ways of life and whom they hardly recognised when they returned. As devastating for the children was the systematic emotional, physical and sexual abuse many of them suffered in residential schools. Many families struggle with the consequences to this day. It is therefore not surprising that current school policies are careful not to reproduce the focus on discipline and the wholesale adoption of settler-state school principles. And it would not be surprising either if some families neglect their children’s school attendance precisely as an act of refusal of settler colonial subjugation (cf. Simpson 2014).

One day in December 2017, Jordan McLeod invited me to join him on a trip to a camp close to the coast to pick up a snowmobile that had broken down last season. His nine-year-old son Zack also joined us on the trip, without his father appearing concerned about him missing school. During the trip, which followed a freshly ploughed ice road through the delta, Zack not only witnessed the route, noticed the location of various camps, talked with us about ice conditions and listened to his father’s comments on animal tracks, but also got to help with loading the snowmobile, investigated with his father another vehicle at the camp and shot at a fox that we met on the way.

On another trip, Jordan McLeod told me that when he was sixteen years old, his oldest son was born and he moved out from his parents’ home to live with his partner and child. He also quit school to be able to work and support his young family. This did not keep him from making a successful career, and his work – as so often in the delta – consisted of combining different jobs, working for his uncle’s contracting company and for the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans during different seasons. He was also active in various organisations in Aklavik and beyond, for example as chairman of the Aklavik Community Corporation, the local body of the Inuvialuit land claim administration.

Of course, not all stories turn out as fortunately as Jordan McLeod’s, and not all the times that children miss school are they treated to experiences that may be easily recognisable as educational. Nevertheless, rather than measuring success in life and children’s education in the specific terms of settler industrial society, it may be more appropriate to approach them in terms of what they do for enabling a way of life that
feels at home in a volatile world. Jean Briggs (1991) has famously called traditional Inuit education the ‘training for an experimental lifestyle’, where children are systematically challenged, teased and unsettled, which teaches them to confront an inherently volatile world in which they cannot be certain of anything. In Briggs’s experience, grown-ups do not explain rules and facts to children, but rather ask them questions and put them into tricky situations, which they have to figure out for themselves, knowing that they might be wrong and that what works in one situation might not work in another. Not disciplining children to go to school can be understood as a continuation of this pedagogical tradition, where children are expected to learn for themselves what is good and appropriate, instead of being taught rules and facts. In sum, irregular school attendance in Aklavik is not only a problem for the school board, but also – and more importantly – an important element in embracing volatility and resisting dependency and settler institutions.

**Drinking, Gambling and Hunting**

Alongside schooling and unemployment, the concern about substance abuse is widespread in Aklavik and throughout the region. Many times have people complained to me that they cannot pursue the activities they had hoped to, because the person who had promised that they would join or help them had been drinking and is not fit. One
elder shared her concern with me that she goes through a lot of trouble preparing and financing trips to her camp in the delta, to which she invites many people who have told her that they would like to be ‘out on the land’ more, but do not have the means to get there. Once she is about to set out, however, it often turns out that none of them is ready to go, and she assumes that this is usually related to drinking. While some consider drinking a waste of money and opportunity with many negative effects, including domestic violence, others insist on their right to have a good time.

Alcohol and substance abuse are closely related to colonial history in Aklavik and throughout North America, and so are governmental attempts to control alcohol consumption among Indigenous Peoples (Clairmont 1963) as well as a number of well-rehearsed and long-debunked stereotypes (May 1994). Police officers assured me that alcohol-related offences make up the single highest number of violations in the hamlet. One of the detachment’s five cells is locally known as the ‘drunk tank’, a place where people are put to ‘sober out’ and usually released the next morning. According to the Aklavik RCMP detachment’s public reports to the mayor from 2009 to 2018, four out of five drunken offenders are male. With the regular drinking bouts and hangover periods, Aklavik social life and the relations between its inhabitants itself take on a volatile, unpredictable and at times violent character. I would argue that this, too, can be understood in the context of an overall valuing of volatility.

Hugh Brody (1988, 2001) identifies two important dimensions of drinking among the First Nations and Inuit with whom he has worked since the 1960s. On the one hand, he contrasts European and Indigenous North American attitudes towards the bodily effects of alcohol consumption: whereas European drinkers tend to pride themselves for being able to ‘hold their liquor’, attempting to suppress any signs of losing control over their mind and body, Indigenous drinkers make no such pretensions and, on the contrary, excel in letting go. In a world where uncertain transformation is key, Brody reasons, ‘people who welcome transformation [. . . also] welcome loss of self’ (2001: 253; see also Goulet 2000). Consuming alcohol and other drugs facilitates people to become someone or something else, which happens also in many Gwich’in and Inuvialuit stories.

However, Brody is careful not to romanticise drinking, and he identifies colonialism as a second dimension structuring Indigenous alcohol consumption. As an Innu man told him in 1988, the Canadian government had imposed so many rules and prohibitions on his people and lands that ‘[t]he only right we have is to get drunk’ (Sebastien Pastichi, cited in Brody 2001: 235). And while occasional intoxication works well in a world of volatile transformations, the more systemic kind of intoxication that has come with the tightening of external governance is highly problematic. In a situation of increased control, drinking is perhaps the ultimate expression of refusal and resistance, by letting go so much that colonial governance has nothing left to govern. But it is also an indication of an erosion of viable livelihoods and self-esteem – both, as Brody argues, are reasons that tend to compel people to limit their alcohol consumption. In Brody’s words, ‘colonial processes give ever more reasons to colonists to control their drinking, and ever fewer to those whose lands, languages and religions the colonists destroy’ (2001: 251). Where lifeworlds and livelihoods are being systematically undone through language loss, displacement and disenfranchisement, the losing of
self that had its place in a generally volatile universe is amplified into losing an entire world and has disastrous consequences (2001: 254).

Gambling is, in many ways, similar to drinking: it, too, is widespread in Aklavik and often regarded as a social problem that absorbs too much money, enthusiasm, time and morals (see Williams et al 2016), and it, too, chimes with an attitude of letting go, of trying things out without being in control. Various card games, lotteries and bingos are very popular in Aklavik. Alongside private gambling parties, gambling is also the most important fundraiser, not only for many hamlet activities like sports and festivals, but also for individual concerns like travelling somewhere or financing a funeral. Moreover, gambling acts as a way of redistributing income, as those with more money to spend tend to buy more lots or bingo cards. The principle is usually the same: for a relatively small input, generally between five and twenty Canadian dollars, people have an opportunity to make a potentially large gain, often several hundred if not several thousand dollars. While some lotteries and games have fixed prizes, perhaps the most popular games are so-called ‘fifty-fifty’, where half of the collected money goes to the fundraiser and the other half to the lucky winner. As well as games limited to Aklavik, people also enjoy participating in larger games, including gambling on the internet and occasional games with particularly high stakes, for example in Inuvik or Yellowknife, the territorial capital. For such larger games, a group of people may pool their resources and send one of them to play and, if successful, redistribute the win. Gambling, especially in lotteries and bingos, is not so much competitive as it is convivial.

Figure 4. Inuvialuk elder Barbara Archie playing ‘merchandise bingo’ during Aklavik’s ‘Dizzy Daze’ festival, September 2017.
Investing into a fundamentally uncertain but potentially beneficial outcome, as in gambling, is a perfectly logical way of making ends meet in a volatile world. Such a risk-taking approach may be, on closer inspection, not particularly ‘risky’ – as a calculated investment given particular odds – but really a part of a practice of navigating radical volatility. This has significant parallels with the hunting, fishing and trapping livelihoods that continue to bring food, money and prestige to the Inuvialuit and Ehdiitat Gwich’in. These activities, too, depend on making considerable investments for a fundamentally uncertain return, investments which are not limited to the substantial financial expenses for buying and maintaining boats, engines, snowmobiles, sleds, all-terrain vehicles, fuel, nets, traps, rifles and ammunition. They also include the time and energy spent preparing, breaking trail, setting up and maintaining nets and traplines, and looking for or pursuing game, much of which does not yield any catch. During some years, there are lots of caribou, the most popular source of meat for Aklavik people in the area, and hunters bring and share plentiful meat. In other years, and sometimes many in a row, the herd follows a different migration route and remains too far from the delta to hunt it from Aklavik.

The populations of other animals, such as rabbits, lynx, muskrat and various fish species, are also notorious for fluctuating. In late 2017, the Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) department of the Government of the Northwest Territories organised a beaver trapping course for Inuvialuit people in Aklavik. Ian McLeod, the ENR officer in Aklavik responsible for holding the course, explained to me that there was a dire need to teach trappers how to catch beavers and work with their pelts, since these skills had been mostly displaced from the delta. He recounted that, up to the 1950s, people hunted and trapped beavers all over the delta for its well-priced fur, at which point the government wanted to regulate the beaver harvest through a quota system. Ian McLeod told me that the quota was based on a simplistic survey sometime in the 1950s, conducted from an airplane flying over the delta, which counted beaver lodges from above, and on the assumption that each lodge contained a family of five beavers on average. The government’s estimate of beaver numbers was grossly exaggerated and the ensuing quota of thirty beavers for each registered trapper made sure that the entire delta beaver population was all but wiped out the next season.

As no one therefore caught any beavers for the years and decades that followed, people began to forget how to work with this animal, and younger trappers did not have the opportunity to learn how. Since the 1990s, after the fur economy had collapsed, the beaver population began to steadily increase in the delta, spreading even further north than people remember from previous times. By 2017, the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC) had become worried about the extensive beaver population, whose dams were clogging up boating routes and inhibiting fish movement. Some Aklavik inhabitants told me they were worried about contracting giardiasis, which they called ‘beaver fever’, by drinking water from a channel occupied by beavers. Many people had begun to haul drinking water from Aklavik to their distant camps in the delta and on the coast. At around thirty dollars, the price for beaver pelts was still low relative to the work and inputs necessary to hunt and skin them and prepare their pelts. Only when the IRC offered a hundred dollars for parts of each beaver carcass to be used in a
The story of the beaver population in the delta makes clear not only that the world and its specific affordances are volatile, but also that this volatility is tightly interwoven with attempts at controlling and normalising it, which can have disastrous consequences and hugely amplify the volatilities (see Strang, this issue). It also speaks of the wide-ranging effects that changes in prices, markets and skills have in the shaping of volatile dynamics. For Aklavik hunters, this only corroborates their experience that they cannot predict trends in animal numbers. It implies that, in any one year, they might harvest a lot or nothing with the same effort, depending on a myriad of factors that are impossible to control or foresee. Therefore, they have to proceed cautiously through each season, always gauging, trying out and experimenting. This is part of a wider contrast between hunter-gatherer and farming lifeways, with current state institutions representing the latter (Brody 2001), or perhaps more precisely, between an industrial world geared at factory shifts and clock-time (Thompson 1967) and a dynamic world emerging through attention.

Conclusion

The delta world is volatile, and Gwich’in and Inuvialuit are actively refusing government attempts to control the landscape and its inhabitants. Their valuation of volatility goes beyond the functionalist adaptation to a highly dynamic environment and the constant hunt for opportunities of the neoliberal subject. It includes the appreciation of movement, transformation and foregoing control also of people themselves, a way of being that is easily mistaken for laziness or listlessness by settler-colonial observers. To an important degree, current Indigenous projects and logics of resurgence (Coulthard 2014) centre exactly on re-establishing the freedoms and options to cultivate and develop volatile ways of life that do not sit well with settler colonial institutions and economics. This also includes re-centring the positive valence of being able to attune to an uncertain world by inhabiting volatility: rather than misreading these abilities and values as listlessness or weakness, they must be credited as a most suitable, time-tested way of being at home in an emergent universe. At the same time, we must recognise that a volatile way of life may be particularly vulnerable to settler colonial violence, and we must support communities in negotiating colonial volatilities without losing themselves.

I have not heard Aklavik people use the term ‘volatility’ for addressing these dynamics. They would rather say things like ‘don’t make plans, things always change’. But as an analytical concept, I believe that volatility can be useful for developing an understanding of, appreciation for and politics towards a world, in which control is neither possible nor desirable. Just as volatility tends to have negative connotations in a settler worldview geared at certainty, control and stability, engaging with it requires tackling phenomena that, in this same worldview, have negative connotations, including under-employment, school absences, intoxication and gambling. In this article, I have argued for reframing these phenomena not as pathologies but as important elements of successfully inhabiting a volatile world. I therefore hope that thinking
through volatility may contribute to formulating and practising Indigenous resurgence in Aklavik and beyond.

Volatility in the Mackenzie Delta is a fierce obstacle to state governance and economic development, and can also be problematic for Aklavik residents when its rubs against their recent dependencies. Nevertheless, Ehdiiitat Gwich’in and Inuvialuit seem to know volatile dynamics in job markets, gambling, drinking and hunting mostly in terms of opportunities, albeit uncertain ones, and as a way of life worth defending. This way of life is not predicated on discipline, control and attempts to change the world, but on knowledge, respect, care and trust. As Hugh Brody has observed regarding drinking, shamanic shapeshifting and other uncertain journeys: ‘This ever-present possibility of transformation is both the opposite of, and an equivalent to, control’ (2001: 254). Only in relation to the fixed and disciplined aspirations of the colonial government does a volatile world become problematic, where wildlife management rules cannot keep up with ecological dynamics, or where losing oneself in drinking bouts serves to strengthen the colonial grip. Social services, housing programmes and income support can be welcome inputs to volatile households, but when people grow dependent on these inputs, their healthy relation to volatility is threatened, as Freddie Greenland warns. This unease is reflected in Aklavik residents’ pronounced desire for ‘the land’, which does not only provide for livelihoods, but also for ‘healing’ from the ills of settlement life, where things are literally more settled, often to the disadvantage of Indigenous Peoples (see Loovers 2019; Wildcat et al 2014). They often represent the vagaries and discomfort of ‘the land’ as meaningful dealing with the elements, plants and animals, opposing it to being ‘stuck’, pampered and secure in the hamlet. Valuing volatility in the Mackenzie Delta means avoiding control and discipline to be able to appreciate an emerging and uncertain world.

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Notes

1. *Ehdiitat Gwich’in* refers to the participants in the Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement who live in and around Aklavik. *Gwich’in* translates as ‘those who dwell’ and *Ehdiitat* means ‘among the timber stands’ (i.e. the delta). When I refer to the wider group beyond Aklavik and the Agreement, which inhabits a vast area in what is today Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories, I refer to them as *Gwich’in* along with general usage. Linguistically, the group’s correct name is *Dinjii Zhuh*, but this term is rarely used in Aklavik.

2. NWT Scientific Research Licences Nos. 16098 and 16219.

3. At this point and until 2016, it was known as the Gwich’in Social and Cultural Institute or GSCI.

4. Many Indigenous people from the region soon noticed that the promise of Inuvik, to embody prosperity and progress in the Western Canadian Arctic, did not hold for its Indigenous population. Well-paid jobs, modern housing and infrastructure materialised only for settler Canadians from the south, producing an ever-more marked two-class society in town.

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**Volatilité valorisée : flux incertain dans le delta du Mackenzie, Canada**

**Résumé:** Cet article affirme que les Ehdiitat Gwich’in et Inuvialuit du delta du Mackenzie cultivent la flexibilité et le refus des habitudes des colonisateurs en évitant activement la stabilité et la prévisibilité. Il aborde les aperçus ethnographiques des articulations de la dépendance, du travail, de la scolarité, de la consommation d’alcool, du jeu et de la chasse, en soulignant les vertus que les habitants du delta du Mackenzie voient dans certaines formes de volatilité. Si certaines volatilités sont considérées comme problématiques, d’autres sont cultivées, se rebellant contre le contrôle colonial et permettant la continuité dans un monde fondamentalement incertain. Cet article propose de réévaluer la volatilité comme un terme aux connotations ambivalentes, mais pas seulement négatives. Il peut devenir un idiom utile pour s’accommoder d’un monde social et écologique dans lequel le contrôle n’est ni possible ni souhaitable.

**Mots clés :** volatilité, Gwich’in, Inuvialuit, refus, incertitude