In the poem “Uncle Good Intentions” (1999) Siberian Yupik artist and writer Susie Silook encounters her uncle Doug for the first time, a man with whom Susie’s mom and aunt share one parent. Silook was born and raised in Gambell Village on St. Lawrence Island, a community centered between the North American and Eurasian continents. The poem recounts how after decades of the kin’s estrangement Silook accompanies her mom and aunt to meet with Doug at a bar in Nome, on the Alaska mainland across from St. Lawrence Island. Doug’s visit with the three women offers insights into the way race as a technology comes to shape indigenous family histories throughout twentieth-century Alaska, when the region was being developed as part of the United States.

In the telling of the reunion, the poem “Uncle Good Intentions” also recounts how the US government removed Silook’s Inupiaq grandmother, also named Susie, from the village of Kotzebue, Alaska, so as to enroll her as a student in the Chemawa Indian School located in the city of Salem, Oregon, a thousand miles away from her home. In the nineteenth century the

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1 Susie Silook, interview by Thomas Michael Swensen conducted via email, March 26, 2014.
2 Susie Silook, interview by Thomas Michael Swensen conducted via email, July 24, 2014.
3 Susie Silook, email correspondence, March 26, 2014.
United States began forcing Native children and young adults into boarding schools far from their communities to keep them from adopting indigenous ways of knowing themselves during the most formative time of their lives. Native boarding schools continued throughout the twentieth century and many are still operating today, though without the level of coercion that they used in the past. Over time, the young Susie escaped the school with the assistance of a non-Native man, a Mr. Faegins, with whom she cohabitated and raised children until she fled back to Alaska, never to see her husband again. Doug was one of Mr. Faegins’s sons, born before Susie joined the household and bore her own children, a girl and a boy, whom she took back to Alaska with her while pregnant with their second daughter.4

The poem “Uncle Good Intentions” opens with Silook, her mother, and aunt meeting Doug upon his arrival at the airport in Nome, Alaska. The narrative introduces Uncle “Good Intentions,” aka Doug, as a quivering alcoholic. The first line of the poem describes how “[h]e stepped off the plane shaking / and went to the nearest bar for a quick / one or two shots of medicine” (1–3).5 Once properly medicated, Uncle Doug proceeds to express offensive opinions about this branch of the family, with whom he has barely been in touch for years. Silook details her uncle’s racist and misogynistic attitude in his descriptions of their family:

My family predicament
according to half uncle Doug
read like this:
Carol was a shameful unwed mother
Johnny a no good womanizer
spreading his precious seed and
Rose was nothing but a nigger lover. (31–37)

In discussing the other siblings Doug rebukes them, with gendered, sexist, and racist statements, including his full biological brother, Johnny. In doing so, his judgments come to form a pattern that allows him to think he is better than his family members. As the narrative unfolds, Uncle Doug deploys a dependency upon both incendiary comments and alcohol in order to realize a racial, gendered self in opposition to his indigenous half sisters. For during his visit gender also serves as a strong division, if not stronger, between him and them as does race and indigeneity. For example, Doug attests that “[h]e liked his half brother Walter, though, / cause Walter could drink like a man, / you know” (50–52). By linking masculinity to alcoholic consumption, Doug jockeys for a position of power over the female indigenous family members. In the bargaining between race and gender, he perceives that a greater social standing is shared with Walter, whom—despite his indigenous status—was “like a man.” If Walter is “like” a man due to his ability to drink alcohol, then Doug (whose body jittered as he stepped off the plane) must be an epitome of manliness. Doug believes that the gendered racial identity he shapes for himself allows him to assert who qualifies as a valid racial and gendered subject.

Estranged Uncle Doug has previously met only one of his sisters—Silook’s mother—because Grandmother Susie gave birth to her second daughter after leaving Doug’s father.

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4 Ibid.
and returning to Alaska. Once settled in at the bar, Uncle Doug expresses relief in finally getting to see “his long lost sisters,” Silook’s mother and aunt (4–6). Though pleased to reunite with them, Silook points out that Doug was “even more relieved to find / they were not bow-legged / and pidgeon toed little / Native women / as he had feared” (7–11). Silook’s mother and aunt were of course only, as Doug attests, “[h]is half sisters” (12). By reiterating their incomplete status as siblings—they are only “half”—Doug indicates his unwillingness to acknowledge them as complete individuals. According to his irrational diatribe, full-blooded family members, whether from his family line or in his racial narration, would ostensibly have an equal status with him.

His desire to diminish these women’s standing as both women and indigenous individuals is further exemplified in the way he notes their lack of genu varum, or what he refers to as being “bow-legged” (8), and metatarsus varus, or “pidgeon toed” (9). Through this chronicling he declares the physicality of “pidgeon toe” as an inherent, less-than-human trait. Furthermore, the “lack” for Doug surely implies their incomplete embodiment as true indigenous subjects. The claim also suggests that their shared father contributed to the sisters’ physicality, ultimately easing Doug’s trepidation that Silook’s mother and aunt would personify the bodily inferior, gendered subjects that he believes are “little / Native women” (9–10). Doug’s invasive apprehension toward indigenous females, Silook explains later, proves directly linked to his traumatic childhood memory of her grandmother Susie.

Throughout their meeting, Doug grows increasingly concerned with how their family history intersects with issues of race. In fact, his narrations work for him as a technological operation to build a racial position against the perceived feminized indigeneity of his Native kin, which Doug finds personally threatening. With the architecture of his words, he seeks to delegitimize the women as impure subjects, denying their indigeneity as he simultaneously diminishes their gender. This structure of racial narration intertwined with gender continues to guide Doug’s interactions with his sisters and niece Susie at the reunion. Yet these invasive tirades have less to do with race as a set of genetic truths than as a way for him to manifest himself amid the historical and present-day social realities of Alaska, a place to which he is foreign. In other words, these irate commentaries permit him to form a white maleness within the unfamiliar surroundings of Native Alaska.

Anthropologist Thomas J. Biolsi observes how the use of racial narration, such as Doug’s, composes a technology of the self, that is, a method for one to configure the self as a racial subject. Drawing from Foucault, Biolsi characterizes race technology as a form of “race-making in terms of the micro practices used by situated actors in concrete, historical situations,” which shift “attention to the practices by which ‘a human being turns him or herself into a subject.’”6 In the implementation, Uncle Doug’s surveillance and policing of his sisters’ physical characteristics develop as a scheme for him to fashion a racial and gendered self, thereby asserting a white hierarchy in a predominantly indigenous Alaskan community.

With the employment of race technologies, Uncle Doug pinpoints this whiteness through what Biolsi calls the micropractice of “stating.” Doug’s pejorative declarations serve not just as “expressions of an underlying white racist ideology” but as a “strategic project of subject-formation that is tied up in the making of the statement, as well as upon the unintended effects

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of the statement in its subsequent relationships with other statements.”

Signifying and unraveling them as “[h]is half sisters,” he can position himself as pure and racially legitimate, and the “good intentions” that such a move allows will enable him to wield power in the social atmosphere. In other words, Doug narrates a self in which he constitutes a flourishing whiteness as he claims that his sisters fail to embody fully formed racial subjects.

Doug’s strategy to constitute the women as impure has its roots in the historical project to rightfully establish the United States on the continent. Transforming portions of North America into the territory of the United States required a social program in which newcomers promoted the land as a terra nullius, a place free from another’s ownership. This project necessarily conceived of the indigenous people encountered during the expansion across the continent as people unable to properly steward the North American estate or to cope with industrial modernity. These allegedly unorganized individuals would rightfully disappear from the land as newcomers secured governance over the entirety of North America in the creation of the United States. Notions of Native impurity, leveled as proof of their gradual and total disappearance, helps the nation justify ownership of places in the United States, like Alaska. Due to the vast region’s distance from the rest of the nation, Alaska’s development by the government took place slowly over a period of ninety-two years. Upon the government’s conferral of statehood in 1959, Alaska, with 663,300 square miles of land, constituted approximately 20 percent of the nation’s landmass.

Similar to the contiguous part of the nation, Alaska is home to multiple indigenous communities whose rights the nation overlooked when claiming the region as property. Unlike the contiguous part of the United States, however, Alaska would remain largely an extractive colony, an imagined portion of the nation where few people would ever come to live or visit, even after statehood. This lack of mass immigration from the “Lower 48” into Alaska required the nation to incorporate Natives into the developing polity and workforce. However, in the time leading up to statehood, many newcomers arrived in the then Alaska Territory to help cultivate federally recognized municipalities in long-established Native villages and towns, like Nome. At the time, Natives still made up a significant portion of the social geography, and they were required to learn other customs for the benefit of the newcomers through government-sponsored institutions, such as day schools, mission schools, and boarding schools. Alaska is an enormous place, and before US territorialization, each region had a distinct history of contact with its Russian overseers, which made the Americanization of Alaska a geographically uneven project. Areas like the Aleutians and the Alaska Panhandle felt strong Russian colonial presence, as opposed to the North Slope, a region that Russia largely bypassed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Russia’s patchy colonialism required US functionaries to redevelop each region and their relations with Native communities in distinct ways.

Nordic sailor Vitus Bering, exploring on behalf of Russia, found the island of Sivuqaq, where author Susie Silook is from, on St. Lawrence’s Day, August 10, 1728, proclaiming it St. Lawrence Island. The Siberian Yupik call the island Sivuqaq, meaning “squeezed,” because, looking down from a mountaintop, the island appears to have been formed by a hand squeezing it. Anthropological theory about the origin of the indigenous peoples in the Americas speculates

7 Ibid., 401–2.
8 The United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. The geographic boundaries between Russian America, Canada, and the United Kingdom came into question in 1821, but the United States formalized a border with Canada in 1898 that continues to be in dispute from time to time.
that the island may be the last remaining part of a land bridge once theorized by Spanish priest José De Acosta in the sixteenth century. In contrast to this theory, the Siberian Yupik believe the origins of the island lie with a giant who stood with one foot on the tip of Eurasia and another on North America and then bent over to thrust his hand into the sea to pull out a wad of mud, which he then threw down to form the island. Though Russian functionaries renamed the island, their colonial project steered clear of many northern villages, like those on Sivuqaq, gravitating toward the southern parts of the region due to the relative warmth and the abundance of natural resources, such as sea otter pelts, they could export to wealthy buyers in Eurasia.

The Siberian Yupik culture, from which writer Susie Silook originates, extends through the northern Bering region from North America to Eurasia, but the culture was divided in half by the creation of the international date line in 1867. St. Lawrence Island, which is situated closer to Eurasia than to North America, fell under US national authority. Then for the purposes of US law and culture, the Siberian Yupik residing in North America and on St. Lawrence Island are deemed “Native American,” though their culture extends into Eurasia. In producing the Siberian Yupik people as Native American, those who coveted their territory could think of them as a vanishing race of people, as they thought of American Indians in the contiguous part of the nation.

The theme of indigenous territory, history, and race proves vital to reading the poem “Uncle Good Intentions,” since Doug comes to meet the women in the town of Nome, established from the Native village of Sitnasuak, North America’s most geographically western town. Thus, Silook’s tale allows the reader to observe how Doug requires the employment of race-making techniques to construct a self in an unfamiliar and predominantly indigenous social geography, located within a traditionally Inupiat cultural region. In fact, through Doug’s rhetorical aspirations to diminish his sisters, in the assertion of a racial-impurity narrative, he wants to mark their bodies as proof that Native people are vanishing, as though their physical beings are half-filled containers of rapidly evaporating water. Moreover, race as a technology of white selfhood in “Uncle Good Intentions” requires indigenous people to seem extinct or, at the very least, endangered and therefore mutually exclusive to the flourishing whiteness he endeavors to formulate at the reunion. Doug’s contentions about being with his sisters arise from the fact that indigenous people are a significant part of the Alaska’s inhabitants; for example, Nome’s population is 51 percent indigenous. Thus, perhaps surprising to Doug, many of the social spaces of Alaska contradict the rhetoric of indigenous people as a vanishing race.

In fact, this mythology about Native people proves tied to the problems Doug faces at the reunion. For instance, in the tavern at the edge of the continent, Doug’s desire to establish a white male self is a way to cope with being in an unfamiliar and indigenous community, one that is tacitly thought to be nonexistent. For if entire cities in the United States possessed predominantly Native residents, like Nome, then surely the nation’s agenda to inherit the continent from a fabled disappearing people would come into question. Because of this, he turns to race technology so as to undermine his family and thereby try to delegitimize the reality before him. Silook illustrates her uncle’s motivations by noting his urge to disparage his sisters when he “[a]sked my mother who she felt she / belonged to / her white / or Eskimo / side” (42–46). For Doug, whiteness excludes Susie’s indigeneity, which he refers to as “Eskimo,” a term of dubious origins used by non-Arctic people to make generalized statements about the Arctic’s diverse communities. Derived from a Cree word meaning “raw-flesh eater,” “Eskimo” has been used by Alaskan Yupik, Cupik, and Inupiat in the twentieth century as a way to emphasize themselves
as a distinct political and cultural group in relation to the political and cultural groups defined as Alaskan “Indians” and Alaskan “Aleuts.” Divergently, non-Native people have employed the term as an offensive racial epithet. Doug’s use of the word aspires to destabilize both his sisters and the indigenous “placeness” of Nome.

After Silook’s mother tells Doug that she identifies with her indigeneity, he responds that she believes so only because “that’s who raised her” (49), thus attempting to rewrite her subjectivity for her. Furthermore, his desires to undermine her become clearer as his relationship to her mother, Susie, who had also helped raise him, unfolds in the poem. For he presents himself as a victim of her abuse, thereby eliding the oppressive colonial situations that created the conditions by which Susie became his stepmother. Silook writes of her namesake,

She was running from an Indian boarding school
when she begged my grandfather to help her escape
and he helped her and
herself to a mother for his sons. (27–30)

During the adverse conditions in which she was forced to beg him to save her, the young Susie formed an asymmetric union with Doug’s father, Mr. Faegins. Trapped in an unfamiliar region of the world, she lived as his wife, raising his sons and bearing his children—Silook’s aunt and uncle. The relationship between Susie and Mr. Faegins ultimately proved perilous for the young mother, such that she was forced to leave Oregon and flee the contiguous United States entirely while pregnant with their third child, who was born on Susie’s return voyage. Silook writes: “My mother was born at sea / heading back to Alaska with a mother / who was a runner” (24–26). Susie gave birth to the younger of Mr. Faegins’s two daughters on a boat as she sailed back to Alaska to live in Nome. This great escape from the marriage arose after she physically disciplined Doug without the permission of her husband. Silook writes:

all these years he [Doug] hadn’t seen them
since their mother took to the sea
that day his, their, father caught her
beating him with his hip waders

Said he was the reason they’d fought
Dad gave him permission to go fishing
but no one told that
mean little Eskimo woman
Susie
that
So she whipped him good. (13–23)

This moment from his childhood memories centers the racial narrative Doug uses to fasten his experience with his kin at the bar. In placing himself as the definitive victim in the family, wrongfully beaten by “that mean little Eskimo woman,” Doug actually inverts both his familial and twentieth-century Alaskan history. His victim narrative assembles race and gender whereby he frames Susie as an uncivilized, aggressive “Eskimo woman” who dared to subvert the male power
of her husband. Through this story, Doug attains a more righteous (white male) selfhood than his Native stepmother.

Nevertheless, this narrative runs incongruently with young Susie’s circumstances when she is taken from her home in Alaska and sent to the boarding school in Oregon. Once in the school she may have been disciplined very harshly by her teachers as so many thousands of other children were in similar North American boarding schools. The depravity of the situation motivated her to escape the school by seeking out Mr. Faegins’s help. Then once in the lopsided power dynamics of their household, she was left out of the chain of command, as Mr. Faegins felt no need to tell her that the boy Doug could go fishing. Doug attempts to transform her from a victim of the boarding school system into “that mean little Eskimo woman” for disciplining a boy whom she felt had disobeyed his parents’ wishes (63). In finding out that she held no authority in the governance of their son Doug, she came to understand the uneven dynamics of the household’s white patriarchy—an abusive, hierarchical system that mirrored the boarding school experience she sought to escape when entering into the marriage.

Recognizing her lack of power within the situation, the young Susie decided to flee from these circumstances and return to Alaska. That is, she refused to participate further in the violence of the household, and in doing so she rejected the structure of colonial patriarchy represented by both the boarding school and her marriage to Doug’s father. Unable to discipline Doug—a child whom she was raising—only reinforced the powerlessness of her situation. Susie’s decision to flee for Alaska suggests her ability to separate herself from the cultural spaces of US empire. This can be seen in the way she rejected the boarding school’s attempted expurgation of her community and culture. The return to her home illustrates how she regarded Alaska as a safe haven outside the boundaries of the nation’s project to fully subject indigenous people, such as herself, as racial subjects without sovereign communities or indigenous ways of knowing. In this sense, western Alaska serves as an indigenous place where non-Native people, like Doug, must assert a racial self in attempts to downplay indigenous experiences in the history of US expansion.

In contrast to Doug’s racialized “stating,” young Susie’s escape allows the reader to more fully appreciate the limits of race technologies as practices that produce indigeneity as subservient to a racial order. The young woman’s drive to return to the sanctuary offered by Alaska plays against Doug’s need to avow whiteness as a male in the region. Furthermore, as Susie’s descendants’ lack of pigeon-toes and bowlegs also illustrates, the narrations of race cannot undo the bodies and lives that continue to inhabit these indigenous cultures. Doug’s tirades seek to abridge the complexity of the indigenous placeness of Nome as part of the United States, but not solely of it. Adding to his anxiety, his relatives also reflect the intricacy of indigenous placeness in that they are part of the town’s Native majority. The imposition of a purity narrative on to the lives of his sisters seeks to undo Native people as indigenously placed-based communities in the hopes of securing what he wishes to be a racial selfhood, standing at the top of the nation’s hierarchical organization.

Doug’s inept efforts in projecting this white self against his sibling’s indigeneity provides an illustration of the limits of race technologies in indigenous contexts. The reality lived by Alaska Natives imbues these techniques with less meaning than Doug imagines their power to embody. For at the end of their reunion, Silook writes, her “mother was happy to see / him coming / and happier to / see him going” (64–67). In the view of his siblings, Uncle Doug’s struggle to construct and affirm race has little bearing on the formation of indigeneity in Alaska. Doug tells his sisters that after Susie left with her children, his father “searched high and low / for them after / Susie
ran” (60–62). Yet as Doug’s micropractice of stating illustrates, with his narrow optics of nation-bounded race technologies, Mr. Faegins lacked the ability to see her as an individual in the first place. Uncle Doug’s “good intentions” to visit the women, as with his father’s actions in helping Susie escape the boarding school, sought to eclipse both indigenous history and ways of knowing through the race technology of stating, a practice he must have assumed carried national, if not, global meanings and power. Through the example of Doug’s failure to threaten the women’s indigeneity and gender, the poem proposes that the geographically bounded nature of narration limits the success of race technology as a universal form of domination. Grandmother Susie’s return home to find sanctuary from racial patriarchy advocates Alaska as a place where indigenous knowledge challenges the imposed social practices brought about by national expansion. Native people, as exemplified in the poem “Uncle Good Intentions,” possess their own indigenous technologies based of placeness and history that have endured compulsory enrollment in boarding schools, removal from their communities, and racial projects.