Two Old Women: An Example of Gwich'in Stewardship

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This project analyzes *Two Old Women* by Velma Wallis, which provides insight into how an Indigenous writer has engaged in cultural reclamation in Alaska. Based on a traditional Gwich'in story, the novel is a cautionary tale about respect for Elders and strength in community. Through theories of survivance and stewardship, I examine how Wallis's writing preserves cultural literacies, promotes cultural survival, resists colonial pressures to fully assimilate, and mediates dominant literacies. In particular, I examine how Wallis uses stories of subsistence and survival; place-specific language about animals, landscapes, and place-based activities in interior Alaska; and translanguaging between English and Gwich'in. Together, Wallis's use of story, place-based language, and translanguaging demonstrates potential tactics of stewardship as a means of preserving and promoting Gwich'in culture. Overall, Wallis' efforts of cultural revitalization align with movements toward decolonization and survivance.

Growing up, every morning when my dad would greet me before going to school, he would say, "Siyo Otahitsu," Cherokee for "hello, how are you?" It permeated my life for many years; by reciting this to me, I've come to realize, my father was trying to teach me the importance of our heritage and culture. He would remind me that if there was anything that I could give thanks for it was that my family survived the Trail of Tears. He would pull out the old family bible from the shelf and show me pictures of my great grandfather, Mitchell Longfoot, and tell me the story of why we had to change our last name. I remember my father saying, "Mitchell changed his last name from Longfoot to Ellis because he wanted a white last name." I was and still am saddened by the fact that my great-grandfather felt like he needed to be anything but Cherokee.

Later in my life, I read *Two Old Women* by Velma Wallis. When discussing the text, the story of my great-grandfather, our name change, our family bible, and speaking our language every morning came to the forefront of my mind. My father was teaching me to be grateful for my heritage, for the language that ties us to our culture, and the stories we have about what our ancestors had to do to survive. While reading Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women*, I saw in her writing much of the same cultural wisdom my father tried to teach me.

Like my own family and people, Alaska has a difficult history of colonization. Indigenous traditions and sociocultural practices were threatened by abusive educational, religious, and economic practices. In the face of this attempted cultural genocide, many Alaska Natives have been writing their oral

narratives to try and help preserve their traditions. One novel that is a product of this reclamation work is *Two Old Women* by Velma Wallis. The book is based on a Gwich'in oral narrative passed down to Wallis by her mother. Storytelling helps to preserve history and culture and pass lessons of survival from generation to generation, making it essential to the tradition of the Gwich'in people, who are one of thirteen recognized tribes in the Yukon Flats region of Alaska. *Two Old Women* is based on a Gwich'in myth. The story details how two Elders are left to die. Their tribe sees them as burdens and leaves them alone in the brutal landscape. Ultimately, the women use cultural knowledge to survive and save their tribe. The story is a cautionary tale about respect for Elders and strength in community.

With the publication of her novel in 1993, Wallis was able to achieve something extraordinary: she negotiated between traditional and dominant practices that came from a history of growing up in an environment that was hostile to her Gwich'in culture. By pursuing her craft and producing *Two Old Women*, Wallis can be best described as a "literacy steward" because she notably engages in alternative language practices that are different from dominant institutional and economic pathways. Together, Wallis's use of story, place-specific information, and translanguaging demonstrates potential tactics of stewardship as a means of preserving and promoting Gwich'in culture and language. By tracing Wallis's avenues to stewardship through story, place-based language, and translanguaging, one can see that Wallis's efforts of cultural revitalization align with movements toward decolonization and survivance (Vizenor *Fugitive Poses*). Wallis achieves movement toward decolonization despite her own community's suspicion that her writing works against this goal.

To appreciate the work of *Two Old Women*, it's necessary to establish the context of its creation. Wallis's 2002 autobiography *Raising Ourselves: A Gwich'in Coming of Age Story from the Yukon River* covers Wallis's life before and after the publication of her novel, giving insight to its creation. Specifically, readers learn about Wallis's blended and unique experience as an Indigenous writer and the tools that were available to her as a literacy steward.

Wallis's autobiography shows how colonialism can ultimately lead to intergenerational trauma, which strips—generation by generation—a culture of literacy traditions and social practices. In response to colonialism, Wallis wrote *Two Old Women* to preserve a Gwich'in oral narrative. As Wallis notes, "piece by piece, the Gwich'in way of life was ... destroyed" (36). She knew that sometimes "the forbidden no matter how dangerous is more powerful than your sense of preservation" (74). Wallis' autobiography shows the devastation of intergenerational trauma by highlighting how her personal history connects to her tribe's experience with colonization. As a third-generational Gwich'in Indian (since direct colonization), unlike her ancestors who lived a nomadic lifestyle to survive, living a sedentary lifestyle due to white influence has led to even more cultural wreckage. No longer did the Gwich'in follow the Caribou from the mid-belly of the Fort-Yukon river to the northern slopes of the arctic circle; instead, their fish camp—only suitable for summer—became a place for year-round living where liquor (a substance never encountered pre-colonization by her ancestors) became a salve for their grief and loss of life.

This sad tale is emphasized by Wallis' account of how the Gwich'in way of life became sedentary—her own family entrapped by the influenza in the early 1900s, brought to the small village by American missionaries. In addition to their loss of nomadic life, it was this new presence of the missionaries and teachers that caused most of the trauma. The biggest crime was colonizer's policy of English-only that forced Wallis' tribe to give up their language and traditions for Christian ways of communication and belief. With them the missionaries brought the belief of white superiority, a claim over the Indigenous' ancestral land, and patriarchy. Over time, the trauma of their loss as a people was transmitted from mother to daughter through multiple generations. Each relationship became new and difficult, and they struggled to hold on to their traditions during a time of cultural genocide. Indeed, Wallis felt she had to write down Two Old Women because she had to keep her culture alive. Wallis's autobiography shows the challenges that Indigenous writers face as they try to produce their craft in an environment inflicted with colonizer attitudes (from teachers, missionaries, doctors, military officials, and even sometimes from Native individuals who chose to assimilate). These negative attitudes permeated everyday life for Wallis in Fort Yukon.

Not much has been written on Velma Wallis's contribution to the wider field of Indigenous studies. Broadly, there is consensus that her literature should be discussed; however, very little about her work has been critically examined. Her contemporary contribution and her isolated location in relation to the rest of the United States may be to blame for the lack of scholarship. Even so, it is important to highlight that two scholars have reviewed *Two Old Women* and its importance to the wider Indigenous community. The authors take different theoretical tactics to tease out Wallis's work, but they both raise imperative questions about the uniqueness and significance of her novel.

Wallis's novel was written during a proclaimed time of Indigenous reclamation, a period where indigenous authors start to reclaim their narratives against the tide of colonialism which threatens to silence them. This exigence caused Indigenous authors to become ethnographers / authors for their cultures (Ramsey 22). In "The Salvage Ethnography and Gender Politics in *Two Old Women*: Velma Wallis's Retelling of a Gwich'in Oral Story," Ramsey analyzes the significance of gender, rhetoric, and politics in the novel. Ramsey starts the article by briefly giving a history of the Gwich'in people. She then notes how Wallis personifies the Gwich'in conflict and details her unique struggle to publish her novel in a male-led tribe. It is here that Ramsey highlights the many obstacles to publishing for Indigenous women, such as racism, lack of community support, lack of financial support, and lack of ties to the publishing world. Ramsey argues that the burden of survivance (survival + resistance) for Indigenous authors comes out of necessity for perseverance. In Ramsey's article, Wallis's journey to get published is detailed as the struggle of Indigenous authors to be published as well. Ramsey uses Wallis's experience in illustrating her community's stories to characterize a lack of understanding around Indigenous publishing and the struggle to become heard.

Indigenous writers write their oral traditions down as acts of resistance to colonizing forces, as well as to help their stories survive. Ruppert's "Survivance in the

Works of Velma Wallis" explores how Wallis uses written story to preserve Gwich'in oral narrative. The article also highlights how story can be used as a tool of resistance for Indigenous writers who grow up in hostile circumstances that threaten their cultures (3490). Wallis exemplifies an Indigenous writer whose "goals are wider than mere documentation. For Wallis this purpose is the deeper value in collecting and disseminating colonial narratives. She can help revive an epistemology that colonialism has repressed and supplanted in the push toward a 'modern-style living'" (3492-96). Ruppert argues that Wallis wrote stories to contain tools of strength, identity, and survival to inspire pride and decolonize history for future generations of Gwich'in people. What's more, Ruppert also notes how Wallis wants the *non-Native* individual to be influenced by her novel. The modern style of living, or rather the fast-paced lifestyle that has become common within the villages, serves to dismantle the collective understanding traditionally communicated via storytelling in Wallis's community; by widening her audience to non-Native readers, Ruppert argues that Wallis allows many non-native people to view Gwich'in culture when they may have never been granted access.

As illustrated by Ramsey's and Rupert's analyses, there is no doubt that Wallis's *Two Old Women* is rich for critical discussion and needs to be studied in relation to Indigenous literature more broadly. Whereas Ramsey highlights Wallis as a "salvage ethnographer" of her community (25), Ruppert notes a discrepancy with this title. His argument is that, while Wallis's work is unique, her goal was not mere documentation for her community but rather an act of resistance. He argues that Wallis was able to achieve her goals through the vehicle of the Gwich'in story, while Ramsey illuminates Wallis's community presence. Both Ramsey and Ruppert make important strides in highlighting Wallis's unique history and struggle to become published as an Indigenous woman.

I want to build on this work by, turning to Deborah Brandt and Alana Frost, discussing Wallis's role as a "literacy steward" (Frost 55). To analyze Wallis's *Two Old Women*, I draw on theories of *stewardship* and *survivance*, concepts that illuminate how Wallis's book promotes her culture's traditional literacy practices. These concepts, unpacked below, help to explain how Indigenous writers subvert dominant literacy pathways in order to help their cultures survive.

In response to theories that have outlined how individual literacy development is connected to community practices, scholars have begun to rethink how texts are created, consumed, and distributed within local contexts. As Deborah Brandt's work illustrates, the education of reading and writing often occurs with the help of local agents, such as teachers and church members, who are tied to economic institutions that offer collective learning efforts from childhood for a learner (166). Specifically, within Alaska, local agents of literacy tied to economic institutions would be teachers, fishing and tourism guides, village police officers, and public radio programmers. Brandt conceptualizes this process of mentoring as sponsorship, where sponsors "are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). The concept of sponsorship demonstrates the roles of a community in the process of

passing along of literacy traditions, especially as they relate to economic systems.

However, often sponsored literacy practices, such as those described by Brandt, threatened long-standing Indigenous practices. As Alana Frost discusses in her article "Literacy Stewardship: Dakelh Women Composing Culture," the term *sponsorship*, for the Indigenous writer, becomes wholly inadequate for describing the dynamism of the writer's educational experience between dominant and alternative practices (56). This is because Indigenous writers, like Wallis, aren't represented the same way in sponsored literacy practices as are majority groups, such as Euromerican writers. Due to this disparity, Frost offers a "companion" term, "stewardship," which embodies resistance and negotiation in the wake of this phenomena (54-55). Literacy stewards, unlike literacy sponsors, are agents of literacy who often undertake their alternative practices in an environment which is hostile to their endeavor (55). Unlike sponsors, stewards undertake their language reclamation with little to no help from dominant social and/or economic systems (56). Frost denotes this distinction in her article and offers a definition for a new theoretical approach. She states,

> This term, literacy steward, can be applied to any individual who demonstrates persistent dedication to the practice or promotion of a literacy considered traditionally important to his or her community. The traditional literacy that a steward engages is notably alternative to those that are institutionally and economically dominant. Thus, the literacy steward's dedication entails complex negotiations between traditional and dominant literacies and is most often undertaken with limited resources. (56)

In short, unlike sponsors, stewards protect and promote traditional cultural literacy practices while also mediating dominant literacies. Stewardship reflects a sharpened theoretical framework to encompass how Indigenous writers produce texts that are reflective of their culture as a conduit for activist work required for Indigenous stories to be heard in privileged spaces (55). In the case of writers like Velma Wallis, the products of stewardship can be seen through their texts: a survival of Indigenous ideals and culture.

The concept of literacy stewardship allows us to see Indigenous writing in a new light. It shows that Indigenous writing is shaped through complex negotiations between dominant institutions and traditional cultural values. It also illustrates how resulting texts can be useful both for passing on traditional knowledge as well as informing the broader community about their Indigenous neighbors.

Whereas stewardship illuminates how Indigenous writers cultivate traditional literacy practices, *survivance* emphasizes the goals of these writers. Gerald Vizenor, Anishinabe author, was the first to coin the term survivance as a combination of survival and resistance. Survivance highlights and defines how Indigenous writers use stories to dually help their cultures survive and resist Western narratives. Vizenor defines survivance as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name" (*Survivance* 1). The implications of survivance are profound. Vizenor illuminates the voices of Indigenous

people so they cannot be washed out by the dominant tides of literature.

A key mechanism for survivance is language. Leslie Wyman uses the term *linguistic survivance* to theorize how languages are shifting in the face of colonialism while also resisting pressures to assimilate. In her book *Youth Culture, Language Endangerment and Linguistic Survivance*, Wyman argues for a term that encompasses reclamation work in communities undergoing language shift. Specifically, Wyman defines linguistic survivance as how a community uses "language and/or translanguag[ing] to creatively express, adapt and maintain identities under difficult and hostile circumstances—as they (1) grow up in rapidly changing sociolinguistic environments and (2) are educated in schools under pressure" (2-3). Linguistic survivance helps to explain how writers use language to resist colonial forces and adapt to new realities.

Together, stewardship, survivance, and linguistic survivance empower Indigenous writing as an act of resistance in colonial contexts. Stewards help to explain what motivates an Indigenous writer to take action; survivance helps us to see how writers use story in general to resist and survive colonial pressures; and linguistic survivance illuminates the role that language choices can play in that process. All of these concepts show us that Indigenous writers use creative expression to survive the harm of colonial narratives. Purely colonial perspectives threaten to silence their identities as Indigenous people. These terms also emphasize a theme of resistance which is active in Indigenous writing as a means of absolute survival.

Indigenous writers use different tactics (Powell 399) to ensure their cultures' versions of history are able to survive. Without these tactics, literacy stewards would not be able to transmit their cultural knowledge through dominant pathways. In her article "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing," Malea Powell notes that often scholars ignore the tactics used by Indigenous writers in narrative creation. As a result, Powell asserts, scholars have done a poor job of engaging critically with these texts because of the "the tactics" currently in use to discuss and imagine indigenous writers' work (397). One such tactic is the use of stories as conduits that transmit to the broadest audience traditional cultural knowledge for future generations (399). Additionally, stories may hold cultural memories that include the use of specific place-based terminology, a second tactic; these may highlight the many uses of landscape items for a community's survival. Further, the text may have a combination of dominant and Indigenous languages, yet a third tactic of stewardship. By using their Indigenous language, place-based language, and stories, Indigenous writers set the terms for access for a wider community.

Powell argues that stories are important for Indigenous survivance and identification; from them, a cultural conscience can create a historical revision that leads to further exploration (428). In her article, Powell explores how the study of rhetorics up until this point has engaged poorly with Native texts (397). In part, this is because scholars of Indigenous rhetorics have not viewed the rhetorics of Indigenous writing alongside Euromerican oral traditions. Instead, the long tradition of Indigenous story is described in primitive terms. Powell argues for a new definition of Indigenous storytelling that reimagines it as a tool for complicating histories by revising identity paradigms. Stories for Indigenous

writers can be seen as the primary tool to "reconceive history, to imagine Indian-ness in [their] own varying and multiplicitous images, to create and re-create our presence on this continent" (428). In this way, stories can create space for voices to be heard where originally absence had suffocated them.

Indigenous writers' use of story allows scholars to see anticolonial work in process. Indigenous writers purposefully use the tools of Euromerican imperialism to dismantle narratives created by it. Powell argues that not only is the writer "not helpless in the face of civilization," but that by "purposefully using its tools" they can begin to subvert Euromerican narratives (425). This allows Indigenous writers to use story to show "Indian people as people not victims" (426). Understanding story as a tactic allows scholars to look at the rhetoric that Indigenous writers use to communicate their narratives. It allows for the scholar to see the tellers of stories as rhetorically enabled, to not only to translate stories but also to translate cultures and subvert white narratives.

Within story, Indigenous writers often use place-based language as a tool for sharing cultural knowledge. Keith H. Basso's book *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape Language Among the Western Apache* takes a critical look at the importance of analyzing place-based language. In the book, Basso illuminates how the nuances of place and language are often connected for Indigenous people. The wisdom of a people can exist in the language used to describe a specific landscape. Basso notes that place-based language is an area of scholarship that is often overlooked by many academics (ix), therefore identifying a need for an analytic tactic that describes the particularities of how place and language relate to one another (ix-x). Every place has a story to tell about its past; each landscape has a unique collection of realities, some of which may no longer exist. This memory is relative to the beholder of the landscape and can be told through local testimonies.

With focused analysis, a language of place may come to define a landscape for a community. These words, or set of identifying features, create memories of spaces that may no longer be fully accessible to a people (ii-x). Basso asks his readers to observe how language can evoke memory of a place, how it creates mental filters for concentrating on a world beyond the physical view, and how it can be a lens to see an environment pre-colonization (x-xii). He specifically explores place-based language through the example of the Western Apache, whose language gives view to ancestral knowledge of place and landscape. By doing so, Basso creates a framework that allows scholars to analyze their own cultural memory through the practice of analyzing place-based language (12).

Locating place-based language in texts allows scholars to unpack Indigenous writing. For example, nature is so important to Indigenous writers because it centers the connection that the tribe feels to the land. In Indigenous writing, the balance of life and death, culture and tradition, or colonialism and Indigenous affairs can perhaps be seen in how the text describes nature. Place-based language also allows the audience to see how Indigenous people used the materials of their environment traditionally to survive.

Place-based language is an important tactic for survivance, but it is not on its own sufficient to keep colonizing narrative forces at bay. Destructive colonial practices that value western linguistic ideologies, like

monolingualism, put Indigenous language practices at danger. Another language-based tactic to counterpoise these practices is known as translanguaging, a complex cognitive negotiation of switching between multiple languages to communicate across the boundaries of culture. Ofelia García and Li Wei state in *Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language* that translanguaging illuminates the effects of colonialism while also resisting them (23-24). The theory of translanguaging highlights that speaking, reading, and writing multiple languages is a complex cognitive and cultural negotiation. To recognize translanguaging in Indigenous texts, one must first recognize language as a negotiation of complex processes.

García and Wei argue that multilingual students, writers, and practitioners learn and pull from extensive knowledge of their many languages. This in turn shapes their identities and realities. In Wei's words,

> I have argued that Translanguaging offers a practical theory of language that sees the latter as a multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource that human beings use for thinking and for communicating thought. The Translanguaging perspective challenges the received and uncritical view in some quarters of the applied and socio-linguistics communities that bilingualism and multilingualism are about the protection of individual languages and, since language and sociocultural identity are postulated to be intrinsically linked, maintaining one's language means maintaining one's identity. (26)

Here, translanguaging is highlighted as a practical theory of language that is postulated to be intrinsically linked to identity. Multilingual thinkers complete complex negotiations of space and language in almost every situation. Their thinking is as complex as their knowledge-making of negotiation in space. Therefore, translanguaging challenges monolingual notions of superiority. It also shows how translanguaging can be hypothesized as a key mechanism for survivance.

Translanguaging can be seen as a tactic for use by Indigenous writers to complete complex negotiations between their language use and many imaginings of cultural identity. By negating a text's space with multiple language practices, Indigenous writers can use translanguaging to translate their cultural identity. Viewing translanguaging as a tactic highlights how Indigenous writers resist colonial ideologies in their narratives and engage in survivance and stewardship.

Indigenous scholars have pointed out the inadequacy of literary terms used to describe the rhetoric of indigenous writers. By reimagining the discourse of how we talk about writing produced by Indigenous people, we can better view their work as being inherently political and resistant to colonial narratives. These writers use tactics within their narratives to express their cultural traditions and therefore transmit these ideals to a broader non-native audience.

With *Two Old Women*, Wallis exemplifies the actions of a literacy steward. Through her story, audiences are able to engage with defining features of the Gwich'in way of life; in the process, Wallis achieves her goal as a Gwich'in literacy steward: to help her cultural tradition survive against a wave of Western influence and to resist colonial narratives of superiority.

Stories allow for cultural participation

and resistance against policies and beliefs about what it means to be "Indigenous." Indigenous writers, like Wallis, use this tactic to reconceive a history that affirms survivance and reclamation (Powell 428). Wallis notes the use of story in her culture in the introduction of her novel, stating that the stories her mother would tell her were like gifts to her siblings and her. They spun reality in a way that gave her strength to continue towards a higher goal in one of the darkest periods of her life. Wallis notes that this darkness was due to Western language policies that caused the destruction of the Gwich'in way of life (x). Through the use of story in *Two Old Women*, Wallis is able to share important practices which show audiences the strength and cunning of the Gwich'in people. This, in part, helped to counter the Eurocentric narrative of what it meant to be Gwich'in that was instilled by white missionaries.

To survive, the Gwich'in developed sophisticated methods of living within their place/landscape. Wallis uses the vehicle of story to transmit these methods to future generations. For example, in the novel the two women had to fashion snares out of birch to catch rabbits and then used the bark of birch to make containers to help keep their food (19). The narrative thus shares with the audience that the Alaskan landscape had birch trees and rabbits; it also relays that to catch a rabbit one can use the birch tree to make a snare. Another example of this transmission of lifeways can be seen when the two old women use their knowledge to survive. "In blind determination they stumbled about gathering spruce boughs used for beds and shelter" (45). This story tells us that the Gwich'in people (and other Alaska Native groups) used spruce boughs to create beds to stay warm at night. This may have not been out of comfort, but it tells the audience what was available for shelter on the landscape.

Yet another example of how story-telling transmits knowledge is when the two women are abandoned by the rest of their band. In two instances, the women use snow to build shelter. In the first instance, the two women were "deciding to camp" and they "dug deep pits in the snow and filled them with spruce boughs" (37). In the morning, the women "had to slowly and painfully come out of the snow shelter" (37). This is the first story of how the two old women are able to survive a cold night. They had to dig deep pits out of the snow and this kept them warm for the night. Later in the second example, we can see them doing something similar for their permanent winter shelter. "They knew they would have to hurry to make the final preparations for the worst of the winter, for even colder weather lay ahead. So, they spent the day piling snow high around the shelter to insulate it" (55). Here, we can see one way the Gwich'in people were able to keep themselves warm in the dead of winter. In an environment where there is an abundance of snow, the Gwich'in used that snow to insulate themselves from the cold.

The use of story within *Two Old Women* translates a strength that parallels Gwich'in identity. Wallis subverts the western notion that she learned while growing up in Fort Yukon during the 1960s—that to be Gwich'in meant ridicule and pain. Gwich'in identity is redefined through a guide sent by the band, named Daagoo. When Daagoo saw the women and how they survived, "he felt admiration grow stronger because the two women were ready

to fight whatever they had to face" (112). Later, when he spoke after the two women fed the men their supplies and sat them by the fire, he realized "that in these two women, whom he once thought of as helpless and weak, he had rediscovered the inner strength that had deserted him before. Now, somehow, he knew that he never would believe himself to be old and weak again" (116). This story is a reclamation of courage, strength, and survival. The two old women did not have to share their supplies with the guides. Yet, we get the image that to be Gwich'in is to be forgiving, to be kind, and to be loyal despite previous hurt; in this case the hurt being more broadly attuned to cultural abandonment.

Through the women's kindness, Daagoo reimagines his identity. He notes feeling reconnected with an inner strength that had previously deserted him. The men, Daagoo's companions, also feel as if they have been abandoned by their cultural traditions and values. There is a disconnect between past-and-present values that is present throughout the story of *Two Old Women*; in this scene there is a connection to a broader political statement of what it means to be Gwich'in. Wallis uses this story to reimagine identity for her people. Additionally, she makes a political statement about the rhetoric of the perceived old ways of living as being less than the new ways of living.

Overall, there are many transmitted cultural practices that are specific to the Gwich'in in the text. More broadly, the story is a tale of survivance through the focus on the old ways of living. This is a political statement about Gwich'in identity. Wallis's *Two Old Women* is a novel that models reconnection and reclamation of cultural knowledge as a way to regain strength in troubling times for Indigenous people. In this way, the novel is an example of literacy stewardship and survivance, because not only does it share cultural knowledge through the tool of story, but the rhetoric of the narrative reimagines Gwich'in identity.

Wallis uses place-based language to denote Gwich'in survival. Place-based language in the novel cues cultural memory of her tribe's knowledge of the landscape. This survival of cultural traditions shows the power of the literacy steward's ability to share and subvert narratives of the past. It also shows what knowledge can be transmitted through story. Table 1 provides an overview of place-based language in the book. As the overview shows, Wallis uses place-based language to show how the Gwich'in people used their landscape to thrive.

Table 1.
Place-based language in *Two Old Women*

Code	Category	Page Number
Snowshoes	Transportation	31
Sleds	Transportation	35
Toboggans	Transportation	37
Walking Stick	Transportation	4

Hatchet	Tool/Weapon	11
Spear	Tool/Weapon	84
Bow	Tool/Weapon	84
Arrow	Tool/Weapon	84
Birch Wood Container	Storage	18
Hardened Mooseskin Sacks	Storage	18
Fishracks	Storage	52
Fishbag	Storage	112
Babiche	Many Purposes	8
Birch	Type of Tree	18
Cottonwood	Type of Tree	18
Cranberries	Type of Berry	85
Fungus	Plant	18
Spruce	Type of Tree	13
Spruce Boroughs	Branches from a tree	13
Willow	Type of Tree	19
Willow Boroughs	Branches from a tree	19
Bear	Animal	66
Beaver	Animal	70
Caribou	Animal	21
Duck	Bird	95
Fish	Animal	34
Fox	Animal	73
Moose	Animal	18
Mosquitoes	Bug/Pest	80
Rabbit	Animal	18
Salmon	Fish	80
Squirrel	Animal	20
Willow Grouse	Bird	71
Wolf	Animal	62
Awls	Sewing Tool	32
Fur Blankets	Bedding/Clothing	22
Parka	Clothing	4
Snow Water	Drink	21
Broth	Drink	21

Place-based language is an essential tool for the literacy steward, for it not only defines their connection to the broader world but bonds them to their tribe. The Gwich'in were a nomadic Alaskan Native tribe; they played by the rules of the landscape for thousands of years before western contact. Everyone had a role to play in the tribe, and every part of Gwich'in life—from spiritual to physical—was rooted in being at one with nature. Wallis notes this connection in the narrative: "The women stood on the bank for a few moments [and] marveled at the power of the land held over people like [themselves], over the animals, and even over the trees. They all depended on the land, and if its rules were not obeyed, quick and unjudgmental death could fall upon the careless and unworthy" (43). By incorporating the language of place, Wallis tells the story of her culture and the survival of her people.

Wallis's use of place-based language allowed her to share protected cultural knowledge with a broad audience. For example, by noting that the two old women had to use snowshoes (31), sleds (35), and toboggans (37), the audience can tell that the Gwich'in were adept at moving through the winter. Near where Wallis's tribe roamed above the Arctic Circle, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the record low winter temperature is 75 below zero (F), with average snowfall of 41 inches per year. Wallis highlights cultural knowledge of surviving in this extreme cold by illuminating features that are specific to the interior of Alaska. These details tell the audience that Gwich'in were developing technologies to mobilize the landscape for many generations.

Besides mobilization, Wallis uses place-based language to describe Gwich'in subsistence practices. For example, the two old women used hardened mooseskin sacks and birch bark containers to gather pieces of fungus, sodden branches, and dry cottonwood tree sticks (18), which they use to build a fire. They used the same containers to salvage hot coals while migrating between camp locations (18). By stating the materials of the landscape, Wallis shares what types of materials the Gwich'in traditionally used to survive. Further by sharing this information, an Indigenous writer can rewrite the narrative of their people, seeing themselves as resourceful, skilled, capable, and another counter to white characterizations of Indigenous people as less-than. As a tool, place-based language not only helps the literacy steward share cultural knowledge but also reshapes identity ideologies.

Wallis also incorporates animals and their different uses in the text. For example, as mentioned above, the women use hardened moose skin sacks. This image communicates that moose lived on the landscape with the Gwich'in and provided many resources for survival. Other animals identified by their uses include bear, muskrat, beaver, willow grouse, fish, salmon, fox, rabbit, squirrel, caribou, and wolf. This shows the many animals that lived on the landscape with the Gwich'in people. The book also shows the many uses of the animals that the Gwich'in used to survive. The two old women note that animals "served many purposes" (37). Animals could be used to make grease, clothing, bags, sacks, blankets, shelter, medicine, eating or cooking utensils, weapons, sewing needles, shoes, binding, rope, and straps for their snowshoes. The two old women even describe drying and creating long strips from rawhide called "babiche"

(71), which they used to create baskets, traps, snares, nooses to catch grouse, and straps for their snowshoes. Place-based language can be used by the literacy steward to transmit how their people used animals for survival.

Another tool of the literacy steward is the use of translanguaging in a text. This happens when the author meshes dominant language practices with their Indigenous language practices. Translanguaging preserves the literacy steward's cultural identity while also promoting survivance and access to the largest audience possible for their work. García and Wei note the need for continued use and examination of translanguaging in various contexts. One such context is the literacy stewards' use of language to shape a narrative. In the text, Wallis uses Gwich'in words only to describe important landscape features and people. Although the mix of Gwich'in and English is limited, Wallis shows mastery of both her languages by using them together to enhance the narrative.

Though Willis's use of translanguaging is minimal, as evidenced in Table 2 below, it is nevertheless significant in its contribution to literacy stewardship. The relatively limited use of translanguaging in the text may be first a function of Wallis's first language actually being English, not Gwich'in. This occurred because her father did not want to teach her or her siblings Gwich'in growing up because to him it meant "pain and ridicule" (Wallis *Raising Ourselves* 24). The second factor that could have contributed to the small presence of Gwich'in is that Wallis, as literacy steward, wanted to ensure the broadest audience possible for her novel, including a generation of children who had minimal access to their heritage language. The literacy steward's main goal is to ensure their cultural knowledge is passed along no matter what they have to do to make sure their narratives survive. It is about identity and resistance, and sometimes English is the most effective language for reaching that goal. It stands to reason that the combination of intergenerational trauma and the need for a wide audience for her text may be the explanation for minimal translanguaging. However, it should be noted that when Wallis does transverse between Gwich'in in English, it is significant.

Table 2
Translanguaging in *Two Old Women*

Code	Meaning
Ch'idzigyaak	chickadee bird (3), 80 years old (14)
Sa'	guiding star (3), 75 years old (14)
Daagoo	a guide (96)
Ozhii Nelii	Ch'idzigyaak daughter (7)
Shurh Zhuu	Ch'idzigyaak grandson (7)
Han Gwachoh	Yukon River (75)

Wallis translanguages to denote cultural significance. For example, when referring to the Yukon River, she uses "Han Gwanchoh" (74). By using Gwich'in rather than English to describe the landmark, Wallis denotes the cultural worth of the river to her tribal community. The river guided the band from summer to fall and from winter to spring. The two old women in the novel also navigate this river, and so does the guide to find them. By using the Gwich'in name, Wallis is conveying the spiritual importance of the river to her tribe. It is one of the only times she uses Gwich'in in the novel.

The other site of translanguaging is observed in her inclusion of Gwich'in

names. The two old women have Gwich'in names, and so do most of the main characters. The names themselves can be seen as miniature narratives that hold powerful nuance, and each Gwich'in name holds a story. For example, the two main characters "Ch'idzigyaak" and "Sa" both are words that hold linguistic importance in Gwich'in (Peter 30; Wallis *Raising Ourselves* 126). Similarly, both names are explained through the vehicle of story. The first old woman's "name was Ch'idzigyaak, for she reminded her parents of a chickadee bird when she was born." There are moments throughout the narrative that illustrate the importance of her name. Ch'idizigyaak is the navigator and is a source of wisdom. She takes on the characteristics of her Gwich'in name. The other main character, Sa', means "guiding star." The story connected to her name is that at the time of her birth, "her mother had been looking up at the fall night sky, concentrating on the distant stars to take her mind away from the painful labor contractions" (3). This name narrative for Sa' alludes to her guiding nature throughout the text. Sa' has no children, but often acts as the more mature one between the two old women. She often looks to the sky, to nature, to the river, and other natural planes for guidance and strength. Both main characters have Gwich'in names, which highlight their positionality in the text; their names also allude to their powerful position in the text and character assets, which help them survive.

There are also examples of less important characters having Gwich'in names. These characters include "Ozhii Nelii" (8), "Shruh Zhuu" (9) and "Daagoo" (96), none of which are translated or explained in the text. The two main characters are given specific narratives that align with their names, which signify power. Yet, the one man given a name, Ch'idzigyaak's grandson, is "an unusual boy" whose "behavior seem[s] to be outside of the structure of the band's structure" (9). Perhaps, Wallis decided to give Ch'idzigyaak's grandson a specific Gwich'in name without translating it because of the sacredness of the male character's behavior towards women. Wallis's tribe was a male-dominated band. Her people listened cautiously to male rule, yet there is a sense of resistance in this text to the male perspective. In particular, there is something to be noted about "Daagoo" who, though he seems to be the ideal healthy male of the tribe, doesn't get a name, but rather a general Gwich'in title of "guide" (96). One possible interpretation would be that because he is the typical male he would be the type to abandon the elderly women. However, Daagoo instead is the one to subvert his male archetype and realize the need to keep the elderly around. Their cultural knowledge is imperative for the tribe's survival. Nevertheless, the use of Gwich'in names signifies these characters' overall importance in the frame of the narrative.

Overall, Wallis uses translanguaging to her benefit as a literacy steward. By writing primarily in English, Wallis negotiates between her "communities' traditions and resources and dominant literacy" as a way to access the largest audience possible (Frost 70). This allows for the story to be rich with Gwich'in linguistic power and further allows it to survive in the face of oblivion due to colonial presence. Although limited, when Wallis does use this tool, it is a powerful vision of survivance.

Through the use of story, place-based language, and translanguaging, Wallis can be seen as a literacy steward with the goal of survivance for her culture's unique identity. *Two Old Women* is important because it maintains access to an ancestral language and knowledge system. By writing down her Elders' oral narratives, Wallis fought for her Gwich'in traditions to survive. She met many roadblocks that could have deterred her, but they did not. She pushed on, exemplifying the actions that all literacy stewards take to make sure their traditions survive in the face of cultural genocide. By preserving one of her community's oral traditions, Wallis hoped to communicate the importance of protecting Alaska Native literacy practices. Wallis's novel adds to the movement of language reclamation in a time of linguistic survivance (Wyman 2). It acts as a model for other Indigenous writers to preserve their own culture through writing down their community's history.

This is why, when I first picked up Wallis's novel, it reminded me how my father greeted me every morning. At the time, I didn't know that my father was trying to pass down our cultural knowledge. He knew that my Cherokee ancestors' knowledge, which was passed down from generation to generation, was just as important as what I was learning in the western school system. He wanted me to know there was more than one image of the world to be held at any time.

Reading *Two Old Women*, I didn't know at the time, reawakened a great truth for me; it awakened a deep-seated need as a Cherokee woman to learn more about what other Indigenous women are doing to help their own traditions survive. Velma Wallis is a great example of what an Indigenous woman is able to do when put to the task of writing down her truth. By doing so, she has encouraged women like me to know the importance of my own writing.

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