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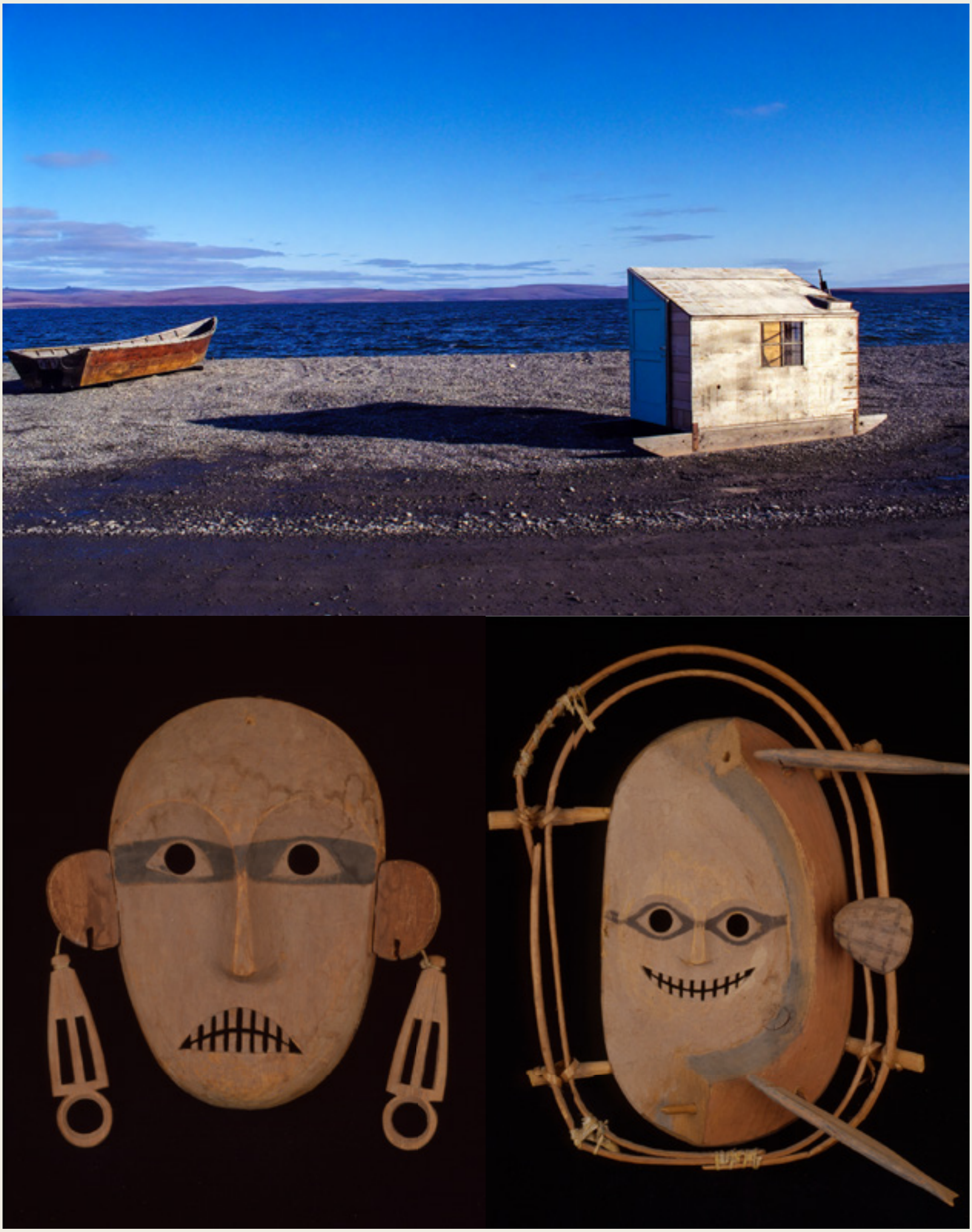

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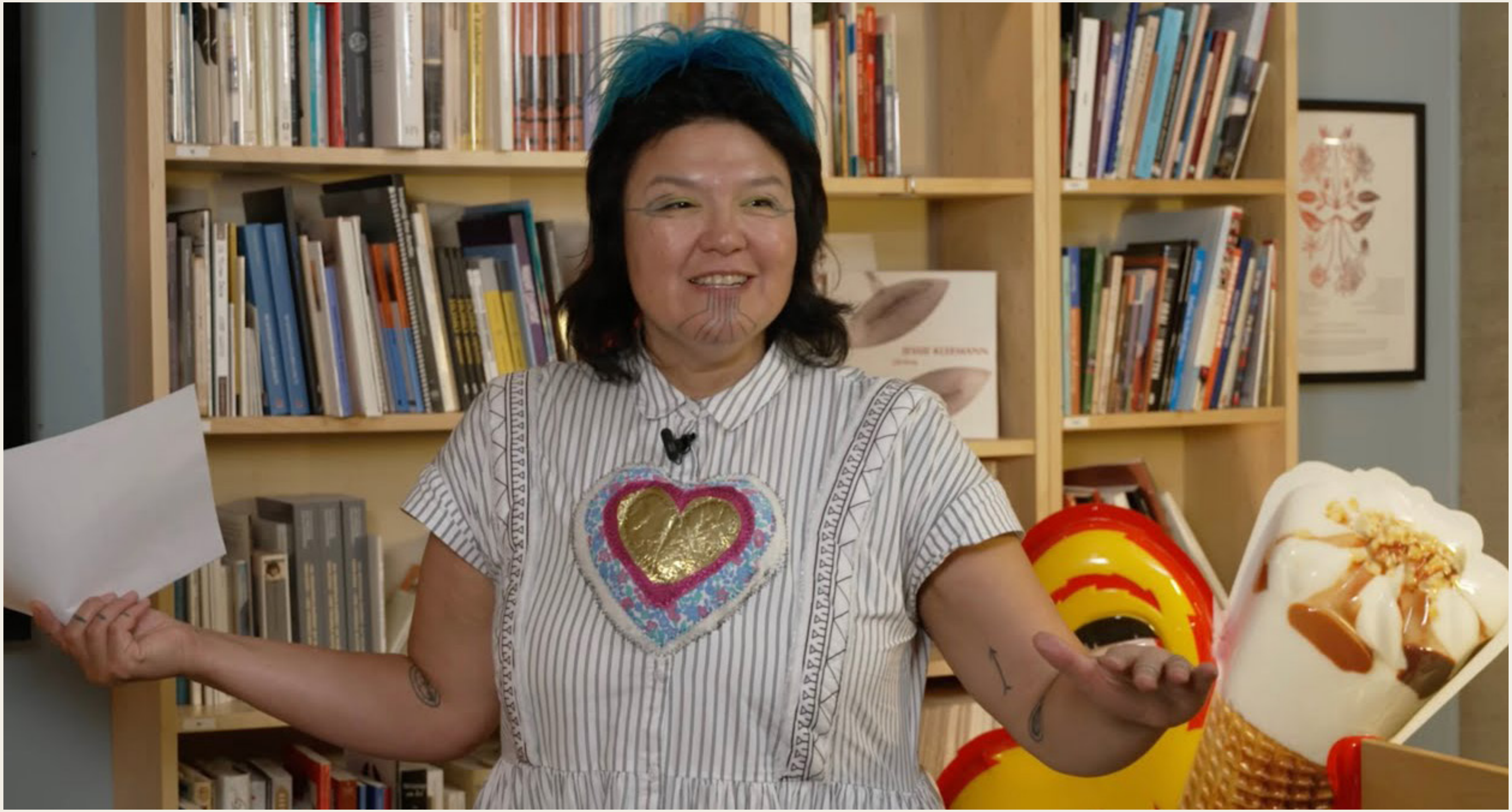

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INTERVIEW WITH IÑUPIAQ CONTEMPORARY ARTIST AISA WARDEN

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Interdisciplinary Art as Cultural Continuity and Resistance in Alaska

Aisa Warden[1], an Iñupiaq interdisciplinary artist[2] born in 1972 in Fairbanks, Alaska, is a prominent figure in contemporary Indigenous art, known for her work as a poet, musician, performer, and visual artist. A tribal member of the Native Village of Kaktovik, with ancestral roots in Utqiaġvik (Barrow), she has spent decades developing a practice that challenges conventional representations of Alaska Native identity, language, and environmental concerns. Her work engages deeply with questions of cultural survival, decolonization, and the revitalization of Iñupiaq traditions, making her a key voice in contemporary Arctic artistic expression.

Throughout her career, Warden has resisted static or nostalgic portrayals of Inuit and Iñupiaq life, emphasizing instead continuity, adaptation, and innovation. Her engagement with hip-hop, performance art, and poetry reflects this commitment to artistic hybridity, integrating Western and Indigenous artistic traditions in ways that speak to both historical and present realities. She first emerged as a rap artist in the 1990s under the stage name AKU-MATU, incorporating Iñupiaq language and themes into hip-hop as a means of engaging younger generations with their linguistic and cultural heritage. Her use of rap as a tool for language revitalization reflects a broader trend among circumpolar Indigenous artists, who reclaim contemporary musical forms to assert their presence and agency.

Beyond music, Warden's work in performance art and installation further interrogates the ways in which Indigenous bodies and knowledge systems are represented in institutional and academic settings. Her 2016 solo exhibition *Unipkaaġusiksuġuvik* (The Place of the Future/Ancient) at the Anchorage Museum exemplifies her approach to creating spaces that blend past, present, and future Iñupiaq perspectives. The installation recreated the "qargi", a traditional Iñupiaq gathering space, reimagining it as a site of cultural endurance and transformation. Similarly, her performance *siku/siku* (2017) explores the trauma of colonization through the metaphor of ice—"siku" meaning both "ice" in Iñupiaq and, colloquially, methamphetamine—juxtaposing themes of addiction and cultural loss with linguistic and spiritual reclamation.

Warden's work is also deeply political, even though she resists defining it as such. Her performances challenge the historical and institutional erasure of Indigenous voices while simultaneously asserting the ongoing presence of Iñupiaq people. She has been outspoken about the role of the artist in confronting environmental issues, particularly the impact of climate change on Arctic Indigenous communities. Her participation in projects such as "Insidious Rising" (2018), reflects her commitment to using art as a medium for ecological and social critique.

While Warden initially gained recognition through rap and performance, her recent shift toward poetry has marked a new phase in her artistic itinerary.

In 2013, she began a poem-writing project based on Twitter's 140-character message format. In 2017, the Anchorage Museum collected the best of these poems in the form of a book, which it published as part of its creative project "The Lab project". Entitled *Taimanisaaq/Akkupak = (Long Long Time Ago/Right Now): Twitter Poems*[3], this collection is an exchange between the poet and her 87,000 followers, in which she asserts her contemporary identity, steeped in ancestral knowledge:

she holds up the sky
remembers how families are related
the old old stories run through her veins her heart
beats steady
for our village[4]

She also bears witness to the individual and collective struggles of her people, which she experiences on a daily basis, as in this poem:

holding a root
so deep
bracing our souls
for the unadulterated truth our great great grandparents envelop us
"hold tight, hold strong[5]*"*

Finally, she also offers a positive vision of the relationship between the Iñupiaq and the rest of the world, inviting her followers to imagine the best for their future:

when your decolonized mind sees the madness
the disease
take a moment to transform it
visualize the most healed version
hold that space[6]

Her work has also been featured in various literary journals, including *Poetry* and *Anomaly*, where she explores themes of knowledge transmission, territorial acknowledgment, and the embodied experience of language. Her 2022 poem "we acknowledge ourselves[7]", published in *Poetry*[8], offers a reflection on Indigenous self-recognition in the context of colonial geographies, while "let's try it this way for the last ones[9]", published in *Anomaly*[10] (2023), interrogates the possibilities of resistance through linguistic and artistic practice.

Aisa Warden's contributions to Alaska's cultural landscape extend beyond her artistic production; she has also been active as a teacher and mentor, working with young artists and students across the Arctic to foster new approaches to Indigenous storytelling. Her recognition includes the Rasmuson Foundation Award for Performance (2012) and the Alaska Governor's Award for the Arts and Humanities (2015), cementing her status as one of the most significant contemporary artists to emerge from Alaska.

Her practice embodies the dynamic and evolving nature of Iñupiaq identity, resisting the idea that Indigenous culture belongs solely to the past. Instead, Warden asserts a vision of Alaska Native art that is fluid, experimental, and deeply engaged with the pressing social, political, and environmental realities of the Arctic. As Alaska continues to be a site of contested narratives— about the climate crisis, resource extraction, and Indigenous sovereignty—Aisa Warden's work stands as a testament to the role of art in shaping new futures while honoring ancestral knowledge.

Context of the interview with Aisa Warden

The following interview with Aisa Warden was conducted at the Université du Québec à Montréal in November 2024, during her visit to Quebec, invited by the UArctic Chair on Images, Perceptions

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[1] Also previously known as Allison Akootchook Warden, or sometimes, Allison Warden.

[2] https://www.aisawarden.com

[3] Allison Akootchook Warden, *Taimanisaaq/Akkupak = (Long Long Time Ago/Right Now): Twitter Poems* (internal limited edition), Anchorage, Anchorage Museum, 2017, 135 p.

[4] 2017, p. 37.

[5] 2017, p. 87.

[6] 2017, p. 123.

[7] During her visit to Montreal, Aisa Warden recorded a reading of this poem, which can be consulted at : https://youtu.be/MrTR1XVi3-A?si=hbZs0EVTq-uocdcp

[8] Allison Akootchook Warden, "we acknowledge ourselves", *Poetry*, July-August 2022, online, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/158110/we-acknowledge-ourselves>, accessed March 6, 2025.

[9] She also recorded a lecture of this poem, which can be found at : https://youtu.be/Z_ExW9uDnVs?si=n4_BZ_YwVk4uU3uS

[10] Allison Akootchook Warden, "let's try it this way for the last ones", *Anomaly* 36, 2023, online, <https://anmly.org/ap36/allison-akootchook-waden/>, accessed March 6, 2025.

and Mediations of the Arctic. A video version of the interview we conducted is available[11], and the following transcript has been authorized by the artist.

In this interview, Warden offers an exploration of the intersections between language, identity, performance, and cultural continuity in contemporary Indigenous artistic expression. As a multifaceted creator—poet, visual artist, musician, and performance artist—Warden challenges conventional representations of Inuit people, particularly within spaces that often frame Indigenous cultures. Her work seeks to disrupt these narratives by asserting the enduring and evolving nature of Iñupiaq identity in the present.

A central theme of the discussion is Warden's deep engagement with the Iñupiaq language, which she describes as an untranslatable and an irreplaceable vessel of cultural knowledge. While not a fluent speaker herself, she integrates the language into her artistic practice, emphasizing its emotional and historical weight. For Warden, language is not only a means of communication but also a marker of a worldview that cannot be fully rendered in English. In this sense, her work functions as an act of cultural preservation and transmission, ensuring that Iñupiaq remains at the forefront of artistic production for future generations.

Beyond language, Warden addresses the exoticization and romanticization of Inuit people, particularly in academic settings where Arctic researchers may engage with Inuit culture from a distance, often without direct interaction with Inuit individuals. She recounts a performance in Montreal[12], at the end of which she invited Arctic scholars to physically touch her, later remarking on the irony that many of them had dedicated their careers to studying the Arctic without ever having interacted with an Inuit person in a tangible way. This performative gesture underscores a broader theme in her work: the importance of embodied presence in reshaping narratives about Inuit life and identity.

Adaptation and innovation emerge as additional concepts in Warden's reflections. Drawing on both historical and contemporary examples, she illustrates how Iñupiaq culture has always been dynamic and responsive to change. From her early engagement with rap—an art form she adapted into an Iñupiaq context—to the ways in which her ancestors embraced new technologies while maintaining cultural integrity, Warden positions her artistic practice as a continuation of this tradition of resilience and reinvention. In her view, there is no rupture between past and present Inuit existence; rather, there is an ongoing continuity, wherein new artistic and technological forms are integrated into a distinctly Iñupiaq framework.

While Warden does not explicitly define her work as political, she acknowledges that her mere presence in certain spaces—whether as a performer, an artist, or simply an Inuit woman existing in a globalized world—becomes a political act. The rarity of Inuit representation in many cultural and academic spaces results in encounters where her identity forces a re-evaluation of assumptions about the North and its people. Yet, rather than approaching these moments through confrontation, she embraces them with humour, generosity, and engagement, creating opportunities for dialogue and rethinking the psychological and cultural boundaries that often define Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

This interview offers a perspective on the lived realities of contemporary Inuit artists, challenging conceptions of Arctic life while emphasizing the agency of Indigenous artists in shaping their own narratives. Warden's insights contribute to broader discussions in Inuit studies, Arctic research, and performance studies, providing a compelling case for the role of art in asserting cultural presence, resisting erasure, and fostering new understandings of contemporary Inuit identity.

Interview with Aisa Warden

DC: Aisa Warden, your music and performances often include Iñupiaq words. Which importance do you give to language, and which effect does the use of Iñupiaq have on your public?

AW: I am not a fluent speaker of Iñupiaq, though, sometimes in my dreams, I make very beautiful, eloquent Iñupiaq speeches. I grew up around the language and around elders who spoke only Iñupiaq—elders who grew up in sod houses, completely on the land. I was very fortunate to be immersed in this environment as a very young person; I remember how they were in their spirit. That is where my performance comes from: embodying who they are.

[11] https://youtu.be/wxtSo1RgwHk?si=hr8Bu4mBBzg6a_on

[12] On November 4th, 2024, at the Université du Québec à Montréal during an event called "Journée de la recherche nordique".

Language is our unique fingerprint on the Earth. It is unique to who we are, setting us apart from all others, whether in Uganda or in Montreal. It's a unique worldview that is only Iñupiaq, specifically Kaktovikamiut, an island in the Arctic Ocean. We have our own dialect, but we are related to all Inuit. As circumpolar people, we are one.

Language is important in my work because I think of the future. I think of young people, fifty years from now, who will engage with my work. I want them to hear the language and know that it was at the forefront of my thoughts and my practice. It expresses our worldview in a way that cannot be translated to English. We don't translate into English. While we can negotiate meanings, many aspects of our identity have no direct translation. I place the language at the forefront so that it can be experienced. The feeling is there—you don't have to understand what I am saying to feel who we are, deep in your bones.

DC: Today, you did a performance at the university in front of Arctic researchers and professors. At the end of the performance, you asked them to touch you. After that you told me: "All those people know about the Arctic, but they never touched an Inuit woman." What do you want to express thanks to this gesture?

AW: Iñupiaq people live on the very edge of the world. I consider us to exist on the very edge of the psychological mind frame of people. We are often romanticized— viewed through a "fantalogical" lens, as human beings living in the cold, in snow houses, inside the ground, in ice houses, and surviving on the very edges of everything, in the very coldest places. I find that, in academia especially, our people are often subject to romanticization. There is a tendency to view us as a people of the past, largely because there has been limited direct engagement with us. This creates a dissociation between our present selves and the idea of who we are, which is often rooted in the past. But for me, there is no separation between the past and the present. There was no break in our identity—only continuity. Even though it seems like there should have been a break in who we are, there wasn't. I am the 2024 version of my great-great-great-grandmother. If my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother were alive in 2024, she would be a performance artist, a poet, a visual artist, creating regalia that reflects the time. Our culture is one of adaptation.

Let me share one more story about our elders. When the first photocopying machine was introduced, my great-uncle bought a huge one and had it shipped to our village. It was a huge object —imagine this in the 1970s, one of the first prototypes. He bought it because he didn't want to wear glasses, so he used the copy machine himself to enlarge the text. He was in his 80s when he did this. My other great-uncle, who had difficulties in hearing, rigged up a light to his phone so it would blink when it rang. He attached an emergency light, like those on ambulances, to his phone. Every time the phone rang, it would flash around his house. He had two lights, blinking rapidly to alert him when the phone was ringing. We would take whatever the Western world had to offer in terms of technology, adapt it, and make it Iñupiaq. So, when I engage in performance art, visual art, or poetry, I do the same.

DC: You first decided to perform rap, which was also a kind of adaptation into the Iñupiaq context. Why did you decide to choose this musical genre?

AW: I don't rap as much anymore, but I started about 32 years ago. It was a way to connect with young people. Rap has a strong link to poetry. Now, I've transitioned explicitly into a poet, because I like the power of the words on paper, quietly awaiting to be digested by people at their own pace. Yesterday, I gave a student a piece of my work to read at her own pace, to see if the tone would be appropriate for the group. I appreciated how it was done with her own permission—she could engage with the work in her own way. It wasn't barrelled at her like a machine gun of words that she had to absorb in one sitting. She had her own agency to engage with it, take a break, go for a walk, come back to it, read a little more. She could choose to read it or not; it wasn't a challenge I was imposing on her to help me understand the audience. She could've said: "I can't handle it now, but I will read it this weekend".

There is more flexibility in how poetry engages with the audience, compared to live performance where you're either present with me or not. When you are in the audience, you take what is given to you, with no opportunity for dialogue on how you take it in—unless it's a video, where you can pause and reflect.

In the 90's, my cousins were listening to rap, and I thought: "Why are you listening to this? It has nothing to do with who we are". Then I saw a performance, and once again, it had nothing to do with our experience. Yet, I like hip hop and rap because it's a universal language with an *ethos* that transcends culture. There's an understanding that it's a medium anyone can use as a way to express their identity, issues, or politics. The framework of hip hop and rap is adaptable to any culture. I’ve created my own version that’s deeply Iñupiaq. For instance, I rap as the animals, as an ancestor, as an elder that came from the future. I’ve used rap in many ways, but it hasn’t followed a linear arc. It’s a wonderful medium. With poetry, I love the quietness of taking words. It’s like sewing, quietly stitching the words onto a page, imagining someone, like this student, quietly taking it in, wearing it in that moment. It’s such a private, intimate experience. Instead of: “POW! POW POW! OUUUAAAARRR!” and “AHHHHHHHH!”, it’s more like: “Oh! a book, ohhh.” You can have the same effect, but in a quiet way that gives the reader permission to get engaged at their own pace.

DC: But you also like to read aloud your poetry?

AW: Yes! That becomes a performance. I didn’t expect that initially. I recall that, a long time ago, an article was published about me, and it referred to me as: “Spoken word poet Allison Akootchook Warden.” I thought: “I don’t do spoken word. I’ve never done spoken word. Where does this come from?” So, I decided to embrace that label because I found it amusing.

I have written poetry throughout my life, but recently, I have been publishing more. I was reading poetry about a year ago in Stuttgart, Germany, and I didn’t realize, when I started to read it aloud, that it would transform into such a performance. I didn’t expect that when I read it, that it would just come to life and become its own thing. I expected it would simply be reading, but instead, it transformed into its own form of art, and I enjoy that.

There is a certain power to it, but I don’t write with that in mind. I write for the person who wants to be at a café or at home on their couch with a blanket. They can engage with it how they want. And if it translates to performance, then… well, it will, because I am inherently a performer. I have been performing since I was 8, so everything I do will naturally have a performance element. Even this right now!

DC: Do you consider yourself an Iñupiaq artist, or an artist?

AW: I am Iñupiaq. I am also half Missourian, but I was raised as an Iñupiaq. I grew up in the ways of the Iñupiaq. My mother was almost scientific in her approach to raising me, ensuring that I was truly Iñupiaq. She made sure I knew how to sew, that I understood our values, and she was very strategic in how she raised me to ensure that I was carrying forward the family tree, especially. I don’t know everything. Some of my cousins hold different aspects of our culture, and we each carry what we can as best as we can.

I am Iñupiaq. I am Iñupiaq, and I also am an artist. When I think of my village, which I didn’t grow up in, but to which I belong as a tribal member, most people are artistic. Many of my family members are very artistic. Did they choose to pursue it professionally, in the same big and somewhat crazy way that I did, travelling all over the world? No. But they do create at home, using various materials. I’ve heard it say: “Our art is not separate from our culture”. It’s simply part of who we are as a people. Our art is embedded in our clothing, in everything that we are. There is no separation. So, I would say that most Iñupiaq people are artists, though they may not pursue it relentlessly as a profession, which is a very specific path. But I am pursuing it, and others are as well.

DC: Most of your work has a political content. How do you incorporate values or points of view in a contemporary art form?

AW: I don’t think in terms of politics, but it just happens to be that my body is political. Me being in a space where I’m less than 0.0 something percent of the global population is political. Me being an Indigenous woman is political. When I come into a space, I am simply myself; I am Iñupiaq. That act of being Iñupiaq is perceived in a political way, because I am seen as an exotic creature, almost like an anomaly, within the broader global world. It’s like: “Oh! Eskimo! Eskimo! Oh! I’ve never met one of you.” Unless I am in an Inuit community, I am often the only Inuit, or the first one ever to enter that space. That alone becomes a political gesture—just by entering a space. People are compelled to respond to my presence. I’m not forcing anything on them; I am just entering the room, I am hungry, I want to do what humans do. I have ten fingers and ten toes, I am getting a coffee. I don’t know what I am doing. I am simply there. But when they find out where I’m from, it puts them in a position which suddenly creates a relationship. Often, it’s like: “I never thought about people from there, but now you’re here, you’re real, you have blood, and you want a coffee, just like me. You’re alive.” It triggers all these thoughts in them. I can see it every time— “Oh! You’re real,” and I’m just like: “Yes, I’m real, and I’m hungry. Is there a place for me here?”

It creates a reaction within people that forces them to reconsider the very psychological boundaries of what they thought humanity was. I’m from the furthest edge of a place they never imagined people could be from, but here I am. I exist in the abstract, I am far away, romanticized, and positioned in the past. But suddenly, I’m wearing funky clothes, I’m in the space and I want cheese! Just being myself in any space is a political act. So, I approach it with love and kindness, again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again. That’s part of being a member of an Indigenous people in this larger global world, and I am at peace with that. I think it’s fun; I make it fun. When I was 13, it wasn’t so much fun, no. Now, at my age, it’s fun, it’s beautiful, it’s a wonderful thing. The kind of excitement that people have sometimes from meeting an Inuit is so sweet.

I might be the only Iñupiaq some people will ever meet. When I return to my village, I find it funny to say: “I went to Stuttgart and I told everyone we are all the same, all like me”. And they respond: “You did that again!” Then they laugh. I think it's fun to engage with people and let them have a little taste of who we are.