

# Coney Island Baby

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**A Cut-Up Text by Jeneen Frei Njootli,  
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Subsistence economies, practiced in various ways in different parts of the world, offer an alternative perspective and critique to the self-destructive growth logic of capitalism. It has been argued that the marginalized subsistence and survival activities both in developed economies and in the new frontiers of capitalist penetration have become a central arena for the development of consciousness and action based on the right to live in the present crisis of capitalism.  
—Rauna Kuokkanen <sup>1</sup>

We are working and the rabbits are working. But working is just living, waking up early, when the sky is still black, walking together out to the snares, breath blooming in the headlamps, snow compressing under our feet, and snow pants swishing loud in the silence.

I am thinking about the phrase ‘people eater,’ a *tscé/emc...* from *tsí* for meat and *emc* for people, as in Secwepémc people—the suffix the *emc* meaning people. I just learned this in my *secwepemcstín* language class the other day with elder Monda Jules and linguist Marianne Ignace. When

<sup>1</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, “Indigenous Economies, Theories of Subsistence, and Women: Exploring the Social Economy Model for Indigenous Governance,” *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Spring 2011): 231.

Skeetchsten elders retranslated a number of Secwepémc stories they used this word, ‘people eater,’ that was from my great-grandfather’s telling of *ststeptekwéll*, our creation stories. I used to read this story, told by my great-grandfather Isaac Willard and translated and transcribed by anthropologists Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy in the publication *Shuswap Stories*.<sup>2</sup> I read over one of these stories as we gathered for BUSH gallery and I wondered what word was translated from *secwepemcstín* to english for this story as I have read it in this reiterated way, not from my great-grandfather in person but through this simulacrum, this translation, this copy from this book.

When I was a kid we each got a rabbit: Pinky, Thunder, and Storm. I remember Pinky’s twitchy pink nose, and the yellow brown pine of the hutch with the sunlight coming through and everything warm inside. When my mom fed us rabbit stew she told us it was chicken, but we knew and it didn’t bother us. We didn’t mind eating the rabbits, it seemed ok to us.

Women walk across an island. Skirts and hands extended. A line formed. Rabbits drawn to one shore. Flushed. Fleshed.

My uncle showed me how to set up a rabbit run in his living room with coffee mugs, beer bottles, remote control, a pen: set them up like this, and they will run this way, right into the snare.

<sup>2</sup> Randall Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy, *Shuswap Stories*, Vancouver: CommCept Publishers, 1979.



All images courtesy of Aaron Leon unless otherwise noted.



Rabbits reproduce—up to fifteen babies at a time—always pregnant, always making more rabbits. In early *Bugs Bunny* cartoons, the hunter is often overrun with baby bunnies by the end of the episode, driven crazy by all the bunnies he can't catch. But in the middle of winter, it is that abundance that can save the hungry people. I've been drinking rabbit broth all winter as I try to get pregnant, hoping for a little of that magic.

Uncle said that rabbits saved lots of people. When that woman was abandoned, she made clothes out of ravens, then rabbits. Her home was made of rabbit skin.

When I was 14-16, I wore a pink angora fedora with a matching velour jumpsuit.

One time my cousin brought a rabbit to me at the cabin. My hot friend was staying with us and I think he wanted to impress her. He had never dropped off a rabbit to me before. Maybe he wanted to impress our cousin too, who had recently hit on him over Instagram... I foolishly brought the rabbit inside and dripped blood across the floor. We fried it up on the woodstove.

Playboy bunnies, ski bunnies, beach bunnies, snow bunnies, hunny bunnies, bunny slope, dumb bunny, breeding like rabbits, Jessica Rabbit, piece of tail, rabbit feet, the turtle and the hare.

Lil paws as washcloths.  
Birthing without sound.  
Luck.

Hands in the warm water washing the dishes, washing the blood from the hide, feeling the soft fatty layer beneath the fur under the running tap. The kids are running around and playing, there is the cooking and the washing up and the wood-chopping. But the whole time also talking and laughing, owning our time. When working is just living, you are free.

The rabbits are working too, all day running through the brush, making tunnels, feeding themselves, making babies. The rabbits at home are building the warren and raising the young, birthing them in an effort of blood and pushing.

I was thinking about rabbits while swimming in the lake. Wondering how to honour them. If we will have dreams of them. What about the rabbit spirits and what can they teach us? Sharp claws in my leg under the water. A dog had swum over to make sure I wasn't drowning.

What do the rabbits teach us? To be quiet, to be patient, to be still. Quiet magic, camouflage magic, love magic.



Meat that's never seen a fridge or freezer. Meat that has never once been cold. A rabbit was in our snare that morning. You came over to visit. You sat at the kitchen table and told stories with my dad while I cut up the rabbit as best I could. Fried it to the warmth of laughter while heating up risotto from the night before. We all ate and felt proud.

**coney, *n.***

**I. Senses relating to the rabbit.**

**1.**

**a.** The skin or fur of the rabbit; a rabbit skin. Repopularized as a term of the fur trade in the late 19th cent.; *rare* (*hist.* or *regional*) in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

**b. orig.** *U.S.* An item of clothing made of rabbit fur or skin.

**2.** A rabbit. Now chiefly *regional*.

**a.** As hunted, bred, sold, or prepared for food. Also as a mass noun.

1785 *South Cave Inclos. Act.* 33 No person shall turn out or stock with conies or rabbits any part of the lands.

1867 *Wigan Observer* 23 Feb. Two young men were charged with trespassing in search of coney.

[...]

**4.** Chiefly *Heraldry*. A representation of a rabbit.<sup>3</sup>

It was important because in the story of Tillesa and Hare, Hare was at one time a 'people eater.' She/He/They were transformed for the people to club on the head and use—transformed for our ancestor artists. The rabbits we ate last year, raised by Don Arnouse on Cstalen (Adams Lake Reserve), were clubbed on the head. This ancient Hare—the 'people eater'—is the power of the common rabbit today, with the power of their legs. Their fastness, their kinetic force of their elastic muscles. What of the meat we ate, the lives they were, the meat we are.

At Don's house, sometimes the rabbits in the backyard escape to the woods just beyond. They hang around the fence though, so there's rabbits inside and rabbits outside and little difference except some are easier to catch.

Ko'ehdahn was so fast, his rabbits would hang sideways while he ran. People used to tie rabbits to their waists on one side. Rabbits can have lots of gee, lots of lice. Depending on the time of year, people singe them to get rid of the rabbit lice.

Last winter, my dad and I made a little sculpture in the slough for the rabbits, out of willow, which they like to eat. We agreed that if other people knew we were doing this they'd think we were strange. I only told BUSH gallery.

<sup>3</sup> "Coney." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. June 2018. Oxford University Press.



**cunny, n.**

**Forms:**

α. 15–16 **cony**, 16 **conney**, 16 (19– hist.) **coney**.

β. 15– **cunny**, 16 **cunnie**.

**Frequency (in current use):**

**Etymology:** Originally a specific sense of CONEY *n.*<sup>1</sup> (compare forms and note on pronunciation at that entry), reinforced in this sense (and in the β. forms, in spelling) by association with CUNT *n.* and -Y *suffix*<sup>6</sup>.

A number of quotes. below (as e.g. 1599 at β. , 1631 at α. , 1720 at β.) occur in passages which pun on use of CONEY *n.*<sup>1</sup> denoting a rabbit. Compare earlier use of CONEY *n.*<sup>1</sup> as a pet name for a woman (see CONEY *n.*<sup>1</sup> 9) and, with a similar range of senses, PUSSY *n.*

*coarse slang.*

The female genitals; the vulva or vagina; = CUNT *n.*

1. Hence: a woman, or women collectively, as a source of sexual gratification; sexual intercourse with a woman; cf. CUNT *n.* 2.<sup>4</sup>

Also our stories here are about Hares—the Rabbit is different and is a domesticated animal from Europe. We ate this colonization, we eat a lot of colonization: do my enzymes decolonize it or am I still eating colonization while colonization is eating me?

This reminds me of how the mink became small. He exploited the goodwill of bear, rabbit, and mouse women until bear squeezed him and squeezed him and he became a skinny little weasel. Which reminds me of the rationale for stealing the land: the Indian isn't doing anything with the land and so he is not entitled to it, and so they took it. We maintain that a farm is not necessarily an improvement on the land, while European law maintains it is an improvement. We maintain that we do not have to do anything to our stories to make them ours. Europeans maintain that we must write them down, transform them into metaphor. This notion of writing things down contains a kind of incarceration of story. A sentence is captured, rendered permanent, unchangeable, static, still, dead. —Lee Maracle <sup>5</sup>

Two Old Women<sup>6</sup> and many others know it's bad luck to not check your snares often. So are we gunna come up with a neat metaphor about checking our snares regularly or are we just gunna do it? —Tendency to graft ndn knowledge in academia for the sake of a decolonial argument.

I remember cutting meat as a child and hauling in maybe a hindquarter of a deer and realizing this meat was like our own. It was shocking as a child in some ways to be confronted with the material reality of the world, the flesh of it. I think it is important that the earth, the plants, the

<sup>5</sup> Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, Toronto: Book\*hug Press, 2017: 121.

<sup>6</sup> Velma Wallis, *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival*, Seattle: Epicenter Press, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> "Cunny." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. June 2018. Oxford University Press.





Images courtesy of Tania Willard.

winged, those that swim and the four-legged were at one time ‘people eaters.’ We are animals and we are meat. We need to give thanks for the transformation of our world to make it safe for the people we are today. Of course we have new people eaters: Capitalism, Trump, Facism, War, Refugee crises. These are the people eaters today that we must collectively vanquish. To make the world safe and good for the people to come, for our future ancestors.

How often rabbit snaring is mentioned in stories of survival and resilience.

Reclaiming and upholding subsistence economies and values are often led by women around the world. For them, subsistence represents not only personal autonomy and agency and economic self-sufficiency but also a means of resisting the global capitalist economy and its patriarchal, colonial control over women, means of production, and the land.

—Rauna Kuokkanen <sup>7</sup>

Sometimes to break the monotony, one would present a woven rabbit fur hat or mittens to the other. This always brought wide smiles. As the days slowly passed, the weather lost its cold edge, and the women savored moments of glee - they had survived the winter!

—Velma Wallis <sup>8</sup> ■

<sup>7</sup> Kuokkanen, 228.

<sup>8</sup> Wallis, 70.

### NAPOLEON AND RABBITS.

Thiebault, like most of Napoleon's fighting Generals had a hearty contempt for Berthier, whom he regarded as a toady and a carpet-knight. The Marshal, in the early days of the Empire, invited his master to a rabbit-shoot on his estate, and bought a thousand of these animals to furnish sport. 'But how can I tell it or be believed?' says Baron Thiebault in his 'Memoirs,' which have just been published. 'All those rabbits, which should have tried in vain, even by scattering themselves, to escape the shots which the august hand destined for them, suddenly collected, first in knots, then in a body; instead of having recourse to a useless flight, they all faced about, and in an instant the whole phalanx flung itself upon Napoleon. The surprise was unbounded, as was Berthier's wrath. At once he assembled a force of coachmen, with long whips, and darted forward at their head. The rabbits put to flight, Napoleon was delivered, and they were looking on the incident as a delay—comical, no doubt, but well over—when, by a wheel in three bodies to right and left, the intrepid rabbits turned the Emperor's flank, attacked him frantically in the rear, refused to quit their hold, piled themselves up between his legs till they made him stagger, and forced the conqueror of conquerors, fairly exhausted, to retreat and leave them in possession of the field. It only remains to explain the phenomenon; and all was revealed as soon as it was known that Berthier's emissary, not aware that there could be any difference between one rabbit and another, had bought rabbits from the hutch instead of from the warren. The consequence was that the poor rabbits had taken the sportsman, including the Emperor, for the purveyors of their daily cabbage, and had flung themselves on them with all the more eagerness that they had not been fed that day.'

### PIOUS PREJUDICES AGAINST PIGS.

Millions of men loathe the pig, and dread its touch. Jews, Mohammedans

history time.

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Works Sited



**Jeneen Frei Njootli** is a Vuntut Gwich'in artist and a founding member of the ReMatriate Collective. In her interdisciplinary practice she uses media such as performance, sound and textiles. Much of her work deconstructs the history of the materials she uses. She investigates their relationship to trade, ceremonial regalia, and the politics of First Nations art. Her work as a contemporary Indigenous artist has been recognized throughout Canada. In 2017, Njootli was longlisted as a nominee for the national Sobey Art Award and shortlisted for the Contemporary Art Society Vancouver Artist Prize. In 2016 she won the William and Meredith Saunderson Prize for Emerging Artists. In 2017, Jeneen Frei Njootli earned her MFA from University of British Columbia as an uninvited guest on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, Sto:lo and Tsleil-Waututh territories.

**Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill** is a Metis artist and writer from Vancouver, BC, located on unceded Musqueam, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and Tsleil-Waututh territory. Hill's sculptures and installations perform as both a material exploration of colour and form and an enquiry into concepts of land, property, and economy. Her work has been exhibited at the Polygon Gallery, the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, Sunset Terrace, and Gallery Gachet in Vancouver; SBC galerie d'art contemporain in Montreal; STRIDE gallery in Calgary; SOMArts in San Francisco; and Get This! Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Tania Willard** (Secwepemc Nation) works within the shifting ideas of contemporary and traditional as it relates to cultural arts and production, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard's curatorial work includes *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture*, a national touring exhibition first presented at Vancouver Art Gallery in 2011. Alongside Karen Duffek, she co-curated *Unceded Territories: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* at the Museum of Anthropology. As a practicing artist, Willard's recent project BUSH gallery collapses the boundary between artist and curator while creating space for experimental contemporary art practice in a land-based, outdoor environment outside of institutional spaces. BUSH gallery hosts an annual rez-idency on Willard's family land on Neskonlith Indian reserve, near Chase, BC, part of Secwepemculecw.

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