

# 2020 Schwartz Nomination

## Continuous Conversations

The Alaska Humanities Forum is proud to nominate its Kindling Conversation Program, Continuous Conversations for the 2020 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Public Humanities Programs.



*An excerpt from the Kindling Conversation guide Continuous Conversations, featuring Anthony Capo (Sugpiaq/Taino) from Egegik, Alaska, photographed by Inupiaq artist, Jenny Irene Miller.*

**Kindling Conversation.** Remoteness and isolation are common words used by outsiders to describe the Arctic. There is all too often an image of a barren landscape painted that fails to acknowledge the vast diversity of thought, culture, and identity that exists. With limited and expensive transportation across the state Alaskans have found inventive ways of connecting across these differences. Kindling Conversation is one of many ways that the Alaska Humanities Forum encourages communities to explore and discuss the rich diversity that exists within them. Through this program individuals and organizations across the state are provided

toolkits, training, and \$200 stipends to host conversations on any number of topics ranging from homelessness to women in the military. Communities are then empowered with everything they need to create a warm welcoming environment for a small group to explore some tough subjects that implicate all of us. The Alaska Humanities Forum Kindling Conversation program bridges distance and difference through the power of conversation.

**How does culture shape our understanding of gender?** This is the leading question of the Kindling Conversation guide *Continuous Conversations* which is based on Jenny Irene Miller's ongoing portrait series *Continuous*. When Miller envisioned her portrait series, she was answering this very question. She wanted to consider how colonization interacted with gender and sexuality to discriminate against Indigenous LGBTQ2+ individuals.

She says in her project statement, "*Continuous* is my small answer to the large question: how do we as Indigenous Peoples decolonize our sexualities, genders, and the way we treat individuals who identify outside of the standard binary of male or female?" Miller herself identifies as queer and indigiqueer and is featured in the portrait series. This project aimed to transform negative attitudes towards Indigenous LGBTQ2+ peoples, break down stereotypes, and support the healing of Indigenous communities. She identifies that many LGBTQ2+ peoples are unable to live openly and safely as their authentic selves. She states that this portrait series is for them and is to be used as a building block from which those who are silenced can be themselves.



Q:

*In your culture(s), are people more encouraged to stand out from society, or encouraged to fit in?*

*Jenny Irene Miller, Inupiaq photographer, featured in the Kindling Conversation guide Continuous Conversations.*

Miller's portrait series was funded by the Alaska Humanities Forum in 2016 and lives on in the Forum's programming through the Kindling Conversation guide *Continuous Conversations*. In an effort to preserve the impact of her work and in recognition that an understanding of gender impacts us all, the Alaska Humanities

Forum partnered with Miller and the Pride Foundation to develop a conversation toolkit that could be used to continue the conversation that her work started. The guide directly implicates the viewer of the portraits by invoking a conversation about their own gender identity and the

culture that raised them. Each of Miller's portraits is paired with a short story from the individual featured in her work and a powerful prompting question. The conversation centers on the guiding question, *how does culture shape our understanding of gender?*

Moving from a large group discussion to pairs, the guide builds a sense of connection in the room. Participants answer various prompts including a reflection on who in your life has influenced how you view gender roles. The group then goes into a deep dive of the portrait of Will Bean (Iñupiaq/Aleut/Athabaskan). In Will's interview, they describe how it felt growing up not seeing Alaska Native representation in LGBTQ2 media. They describe how participating in the *Continuous* portrait series has helped them to be able to proudly say they are both Alaska Native and queer. The group is asked, "What do you notice first about this portrait?" Participants reflect on Will's portrait and story and are then challenged to consider their own community and identity.

**Impact.** This project is particularly unique because Bean has been the primary facilitator of *Continuous Conversations*. Bean is an Anchorage Community Organizer for Native Movement, an Indigenous led nonprofit based in Fairbanks, AK. Bean has been partnering with the Alaska Humanities Forum to host *Continuous Conversations* for the past year.



JENNY IRENE MILLER, 2016

Bean says,

Co-facilitating has had such a great impact on me, personally and professionally. It's been a wonderful space to facilitate deep dialogue, make connections, and I've learned quite a bit from our diverse participants. Although the pandemic hit back in March, we never stopped and I'm so grateful to be working with the Alaska Humanities Forum because we've continued *Continuous* via Zoom with great success and participants across the nation!

So far, there have been 6 Continuous Conversations that have been attended by 77 participants, with more events planned.

These small group discussions have provided an affirming space for Alaskans to explore the intersections of culture and sexuality in a way that so many participants have reported is necessary for healing and connection. Post-event surveys ask, “What is one thing that made this conversation worthwhile?” One participant reports,

I feel like I have been slowly reconnecting with my Alaskan community, and gradually reconnecting to my Inupiaq heritage. I have missed this so much living across the country, and it can often feel lonely not connecting to this part of me, and it did feel lonely to be queer and Alaska Native and everything else I am as I was growing up.

Other participants have reported how Continuous Conversations has reinvigorated their belief in the power of conversation to make meaningful connections and change. Another participant stated, “Conversations are easier than you think! It's such a safe space!” Simple statements such as this are revolutionary considering the vulnerability requested of participants.

**COVID Response.** As Bean mentioned, true to its name Continuous Conversations, did not stop with the start of the pandemic and was instead translated into an online format. The Alaska Humanities Forum held a strong belief that through isolation, Alaskans needed connection more than ever. Through the pandemic so far, two conversations have been hosted online with participants from across the state and country, including Massachusetts and Montana. Hosting an affirming space that encourages vulnerability on an online platform is not an easy task. However, participants have reported that Continuous Conversation provided them hope for connection across distance. To the survey prompt, if you were to share one thing you learned at this gathering with a friend, what would it be, one participant responded, “That it is possible to hold an enriching dialog with people you don't know over an online video platform.” Knowing that virtual gatherings are likely the Alaskan reality for some time, the Alaska Humanities Forum is looking forward to continuing to host enriching dialogues that inspire connection despite the platform or circumstance.

**Financial Structure.**

The Continuous Conversations project was made possible by a grant of \$5,000 from the Pride Foundation.

The entirety of the Pride Foundation grant was passed through to Jenny Irene Miller and the graphic designer she chose to design the toolkit (who also identifies as queer). It was important

to us, given the nature of the project, the funding the Forum received be directed to queer and Indiqueer contributors to the project. The rest of the project's budget has been covered by the Alaska Humanities Forum's general funds.