

KEEP TALKING — *Niugaa Yugaa*

Language is Life

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE

Program Synopsis

KEEP TALKING follows four Alaska Native women fighting to save Kodiak Alutiiq, an endangered language now spoken by less than 40 remaining fluent Native Elders.

Their small community travels to remote Afognak Island to start teaching kids Alutiiq. Sadie, 13, is inspired to begin learning the language and dances of her ancestors. Instead of getting swept up in the wake of historical trauma, these women overcome personal demons and build toward a brighter future. *KEEP TALKING* reveals the ultimate impact of language and culture revitalization, joy and hope.



From L to R: Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers Samantha Heglin, Margaret Roberts and Sadie Coyle dancing in snow falling parka regalia. Photo by Sarah Harrington.



The Kodiak Archipelago's location in Southcentral Alaska, in the Gulf of Alaska. Map source: <https://www.travelalaska.com/Destinations/Regions/Southwest.aspx>

In Their Words

"I want to see first language speakers of Alutiiq. It needs to be used in the community and the home and the school and not just taught in one classroom. I also have a strong feeling that we can't just settle with a preschool because there are people who speak the language until they're five. And then speak English and never speak that language again. It's great to get language in a person young but you've got to keep it in them all through, and give them relevant language, so they're going to want to use it at seven and they're going to want to use it at twelve and fifteen and twenty, otherwise you're wasting your time. So, I want to get people fluent all the way up, from kids and adults and old people and young people, and use this language."

– Candace Branson, Alutiiq Teacher and Learner

Director / Producer's Notes

Karen Weinberg

In February of 2012, I went to Kodiak, Alaska as a film instructor to teach a week-long film editing class. This particular class was made up entirely of young Alutiiq people working to preserve their endangered Alaska Native language and culture; Kodiak Alutiiq. At the time there were only 41 fluent Elder speakers remaining. Their mission to save their critically endangered language seemed completely overwhelming. As an outsider, I was compelled to understand the challenges, motivations and rewards of their revitalization work and do what I could to help share their story.

When I sent a proposal to the Native Village of Afognak to make a documentary about their language movement, they met with Elders to discuss my request. To my surprise, the tribe granted me permission and seed funding to start filming at their first attempt at immersion at Dig Afognak camp on Afognak Island. With minimal previous exposure to Native culture, I began reading Alaska Native history and Kodiak Alutiiq History. Once I arrived with a small crew we started listening to everyone about their experiences in the movement. I had become the student and the tribe was now my teacher.

As a white person and an outsider helping to tell a Native story, it was imperative that the film participants be treated as collaborators. To achieve a truthful and respectful picture, the community was involved and offered feedback and ideas throughout the process. I also worked with Kari Sherod as a co-producer. A language advocate and a member of the Kodiak Alutiiq community. Kari helped me understand an insider perspective throughout the process.

We became a co-production with Kartemquin Films (a collective of documentary filmmakers in Chicago). After several years of filming, editing and writing grants, we secured finishing funds. With dozens of feedback sessions with advisors and film subjects alike, the storyline began to take shape. We incorporated ideas, changes, tweaks, clarifications, translation corrections and got final approval from the Elders. The film enjoyed a successful festival run before its nationwide broadcast on PBS in the summer of 2018.

It was uncanny that, as we were filming this project, studies began to emerge supporting what we suspected: 1) intergenerational historical trauma is a real condition, similar to PTSD, which occurs in the progeny of groups of people who have experienced atrocities. The impact of this kind of historical trauma can now be tracked by DNA markers that appear in the progeny of survivors. People with these epigenetic markers in their DNA are at a higher risk for some health disparities, as a direct result of the impact from the trauma their parent or grandparent faced. However, exposure to a positive environment can reverse these health disparities. 2) Studies have now shown that Native communities with language revitalization programs have lower suicide rates than communities that do not have these programs. With this emerging understanding of how language revitalization is increasingly linked to healing the effects of historical trauma, *KEEP TALKING* asserts that language and culture revitalization is such a powerful force that can literally save lives.

Quyanaa (thank you) to the Alutiiq teachers, learners and Elders for their openness, trust and patience; in this film you teach us all to live in a way that is more fully connected to our past, our present and ourselves.

– Karen Weinberg, Director



L to R: Director Karen Weinberg, Cinematographer Nara Garber, Sound Recordist Matt Sutton and Additional Cinematographer Hanna Craig. Photo Credit: Tyler Townsend.

Sources:

1) *Traces of Genetic Trauma Can Be Tweaked*

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/traces-of-genetic-trauma-can-be-tweaked/>

2) *Aboriginal Language Knowledge & Suicide*

<http://web.uvic.ca/~lalonde/manu-scripts/2007CogDev.pdf>

By the Numbers

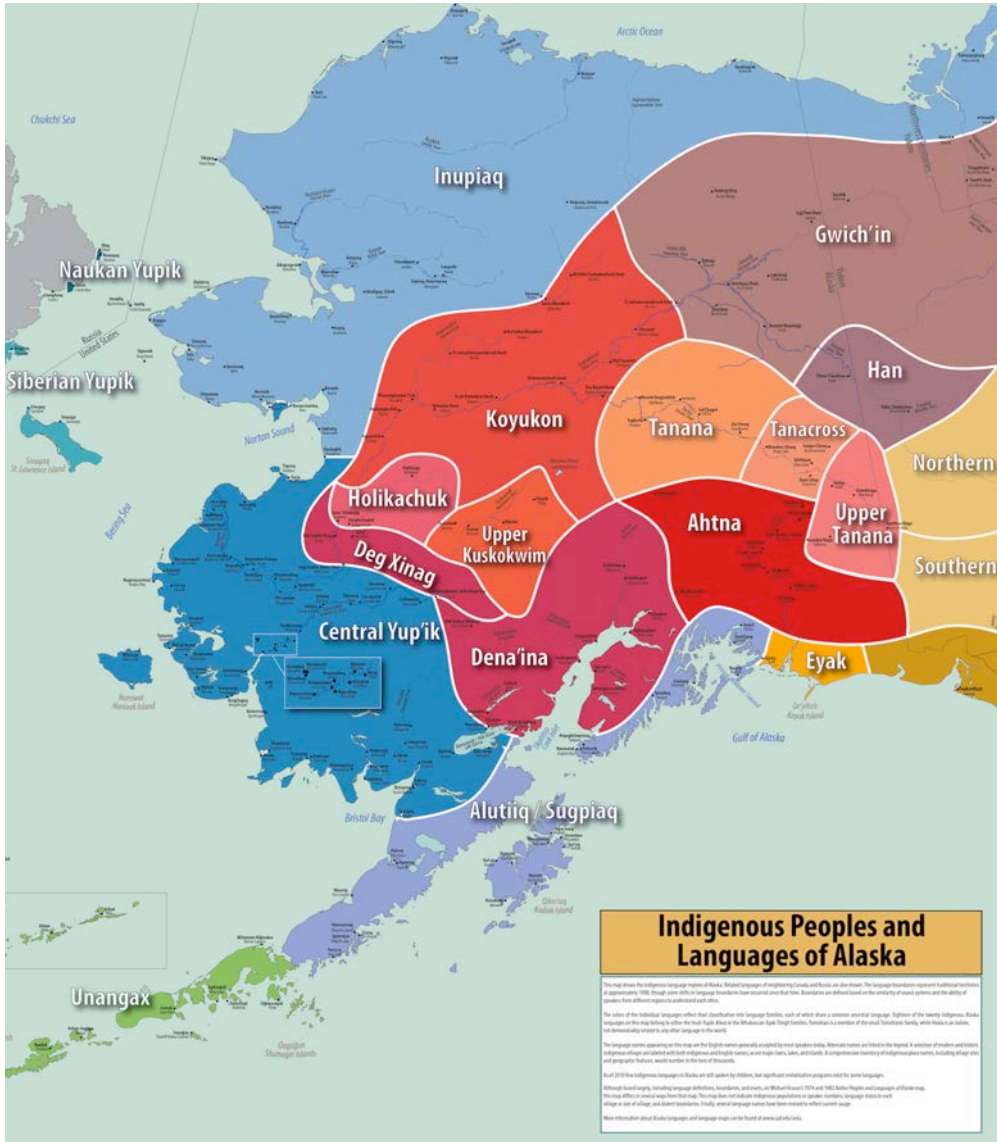
1. There are **21 Alaska Native languages**, including *Sugt'stun* (aka Alutii'tstun or the Alutiiq language) as the language of the Alutiiq Nation. The Alutiiq language is comprised of two dialects: 1) **Koniag Alutiiq**, which include both the *Qik'rtarmiut*—people in the Kodiak Archipelago and the *Talliurmiut* or *Aganimiut*—people of the Alaska Peninsula and 2) **Chugach Alutiiq**, which includes the *Suacirmiut*—people of the Chugach Kenai Peninsula. Within each of these two dialects there are several village or sub region styles or accents, such as the Northern and Southern Kodiak Alutiiq styles explored in the film.

2. Kodiak Archipelago is **177 miles long** and encompasses nearly **5,000 square miles**, roughly the size of the state of Connecticut.

3. Russian fur traders first reached the Kodiak Archipelago in the mid-1700s trading with Alutiiq hunters for sea otter pelts, until the Russians attacked the Alutiiq at **Awa'uq (To be Numb) or Refuge Rock in 1784**, massacring many Alutiiq men, women and children, taking all the survivors hostage. The first school in Alaska was built the same year at Three Saints Bay near Old Harbor village.

4. There are **three tribal groups that comprise the Sugpiaq/Alutiiq Nation**, each with its own sub-group of federally recognized Tribes, including **ten Tribes in the Kodiak Alutiiq Region**, **six Tribes in the Alaska Peninsula Region** and **seven Tribes in the Chugach Region** on the Kenai Peninsula and in Prince William Sound.

5. The City of Kodiak is the hub community for the Kodiak Region where **three Tribal Councils** are headquartered: Native Village of Afognak, Tangirnaq (Woody Island) Tribal Council and the Sun'aq Tribe of Kodiak. The Sun'aq Tribe of Kodiak's homeland is the City of Kodiak, whereas the Native Village of Afognak is located in Kodiak because the **1964 Great Alaska Earthquake and Tsunami** destroyed the Old Afognak Village on nearby Afognak Island and the Tangirnaq (Woody Island) Tribal Council relocated to nearby Kodiak as Woody Island depopulated when the Mission school moved to Kodiak.



Alaska Native Language Center map showing the regions for all 21 Alaska Native languages. Map source: University of Alaska Fairbanks, <http://www.uaf.edu/anla/collections/map/>

6. The Kodiak Alutiiq people have made the Kodiak Archipelago their **homeland for approximately 7,500 years**. The name "Afognak" comes from the Sugpiaq/Alutiiq name "Ag'waneq" or "that which is split apart" and is used to distinguish Afognak Island and the Old Afognak village. Its Alutiiq name likely refers to how Afognak Island is split apart to the north of Kodiak Island.

7. The Kodiak Archipelago and Alaska Peninsula are home to the Kodiak Brown Bear or Taquka'aq in the Alutiiq language. For every **three people living in the Kodiak Archipelago there is one Kodiak Brown Bear**.

Discussion Questions



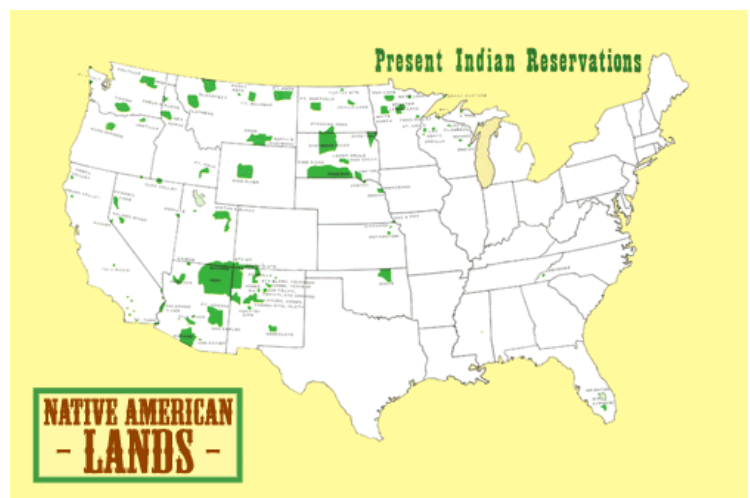
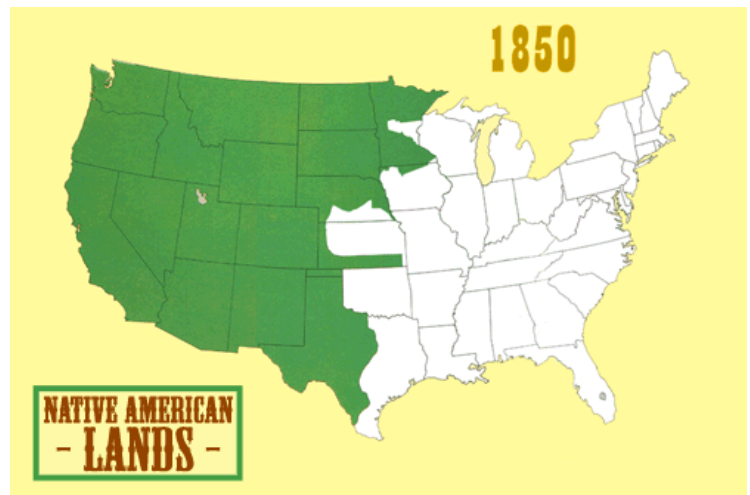
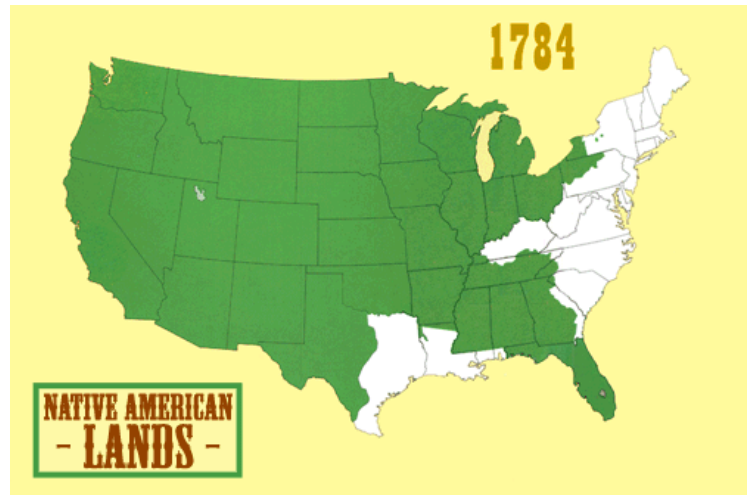
Alutiiq Language Club practicing Christmas songs in 2006. Photo courtesy of Alutiiq Museum.

1. In what ways can the *KEEP TALKING* film be used as a tool for community awareness about supporting Indigenous language revitalization and as motivation for others to learn an Indigenous language?
2. Marya Salirniq Halvorsen explains that when someone says, "You don't look Native," it is really hurtful. As a group, explore and discuss how personal identity and connection to community can be life-saving, as well as challenging.
3. Consider the impact that learning a few words, celebrating language growth rather than language loss, and offering patience with learners who practice their language in public. What are some specific ways you personally and your wider community can be supportive of Indigenous language revitalization?
4. All of the main people featured in the *KEEP TALKING* film talk about how their language learning is connected to their sense of wellbeing. Why and how can an Indigenous or ancestral language be important to personal and community wellness?
5. In the film, first and second language speakers of varying ages interact regularly in the film in important ways. As a group, discuss examples of intergenerational communication and the roles and goals for each age group.
6. Films and books about modern Indigenous peoples often integrate traditional ancestral stories to teach a lesson. In *KEEP TALKING*, how was a traditional story used in the film and what might it represent for the community?

Suggested Activities

1. In 1999, UNESCO proclaimed February 21st International Mother Language Day—a worldwide annual celebration to promote linguistic and cultural diversity awareness. There are over 3,000 endangered languages across the planet. As a class or group, visit the www.endangeredlanguages.com website to learn more about an endangered language group nearby your community or somewhere you have visited. Then identify some of the historical impacts that have led to its endangerment and what efforts the language community may be taking to protect or revitalize their language.
2. The *KEEP TALKING* film touched upon some major points along the Alutiiq / Sugpiaq people's historical timeline. As a group, conduct research and map a timeline of major events along the Alutiiq timeline related to other major events along the US or World timelines. Similarly, the group can select your own local Indigenous community to map a timeline for and reference the comparative map that shows American Indian cultural groups from pre-contact times until today.
3. The Alutiiq language community is using Where Are Your Keys Techniques and Total Physical Response (TPR) as two of several systems for language learning and teaching that they have tried. Visit the WAYK website (<https://whereareyourkeys.org/>) to identify some of the WAYK Techniques demonstrated in the film or others shown in the Deleted Scenes. As a group, what are some of the specific language learning or teaching strategies shown in the film? Why might these techniques be more effective than individual book learning?
4. The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) is held every October either in Anchorage or Fairbanks, Alaska. AFN is attended by 3,000-4,000 people each year, including 1,000 voting delegates from across the state of Alaska. In the *KEEP TALKING* film, the Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers are shown performing at the convention. The Alaska Native Language Advisory Council gave a presentation at AFN about the impacts of Indigenous language revitalization. As a group either choose to read and discuss an Annual Report from the Alaska Native Language Advisory Council or watch a video excerpt of the AFN convention and discuss the issues covered in that conference session.

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United States maps shows the decline of Native American tribal territory through time, <http://atlasextinctnations.blogspot.com/2012/01/holy-grail-of-north-american-maps.html>
Image credit: Sam B. Hillard/Sunisup

Suggested Activities (continued)

5. The Alutiiq people have 14 core values that shape their worldview, which can be grouped into five categories:
- **Place** (homeland, subsistence lifeways and stewardship of natural resources);
 - **People** (Elders, family and people);
 - **Process** (ingenious arts & crafts, language and learning by doing, observing and listening);
 - **Spirit** (humor and spirituality); and
 - **Ethics** (sharing, trust and respect).

View the following helpful online resources to learn more: <http://alutiieducation.org/> and <https://alutiigmuseum.org/learn/the-alutiiq-sugpiag-people/values/>. As a group, explore the deeper meaning of Alutiiq cultural values and identify examples of how these core values are shown in the *KEEP TALKING* film. Identify some of the overlaps and distinctions between Alutiiq values and other cultures represented in the class or discussion group.

6. "Language is central to culture, identity and heritage. The right to use your own language is an internationally recognized human right," declared the Human Rights Commission of New Zealand. In *KEEP TALKING*, the concept of "Historical Trauma" is discussed along with the factors that impact community healing and wellness. Individually, consider your own heritage and the events in your family or community's history that have established your perceptions. As a group, form a "talking circle" and share your thoughts about your own journey or that of the people who shared their journeys in the *KEEP TALKING* film.
7. In the film, there were several Elders gatherings shown that demonstrate how the Afognak and Kodiak Alutiiq communities work effectively with their Elders as they share language and storytelling. Invite Indigenous Elders to share their own experiences or lessons they learned from their Elders with your class or group. Remember to discuss what respect looks like before the Elders join your group and practice what you learned about. After sharing

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Alutiiq language instruction using Where Are Your Keys techniques. Still from the KEEP TALKING film.

Suggested Activities (continued)

- refreshments and thanking the Elders for their visit, discuss what topics or lessons the group learned. For example, did the Elders share specific historical, cultural or social traditions; environmental science or traditional ecological knowledge; or did you learn some traditional words that were new to you?
8. The Director/Producer Karen Weinberg and several of the *KEEP TALKING* film subjects have provided interviews or panel discussions surrounding film screenings. Listen to an interview about *KEEP TALKING* on [NPR Worldview with Jerome McDonnell recorded on January 5, 2018](#), (fast forward to the last 20 minutes of segment). Then, discuss as a class or group the themes they touched upon that deepened your understanding of the film and the Kodiak Alutiiq community's journey.
 9. The *KEEP TALKING* DVD has 18 extra scenes, not included in the film. Divide the extra scenes among the group and assign a few extras to each person. Then have the group discuss what concept is being highlighted in that extra scene and how it ties into the power of language revitalization.
 10. At the Dig Afognak camp in the film, the campers are taken on a language walk, where they have to interact and discuss what they are seeing and doing. Have the group build a language walk in your Native language and discuss what students would learn at each stage of the walk.



Dig Afognak Culture Camp participants learning with Alutiiq instructor Candace Branson. Still from the KEEP TALKING film.

Resources

About the Film

[KEEP TALKING Film – Official Website](#)
[Vision Maker Media – KEEP TALKING Film](#)
[Kartemquin Films – KEEP TALKING Film](#)
[PBS KEEP TALKING Website](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA –

[@KeepTalkingFilm](#)
[Facebook.com/keepthetalkingfilm](#)

About the Tribes

[The Native Village of Afognak](#)
[The Native Village of Port Lions](#)
[Afognak Native Corporation](#)
[Sun'aq Tribe of Kodiak](#)

History & Education

[The Alutiiq Museum & The Naken-Natmen Project](#)
[The Alutiiq Language Website](#)
[The Alutiiq Education Website](#)
[The Alutiiq Language Preschool / Language Nest](#)
[The Chugach Language Project](#)
[The Alaska Native Language Advisory Council](#)
[Alaska Federation of Natives](#)
[Where Are Your Keys](#)
[Native Languages Resource Website](#)
[Cultural Survival Website](#)
[Univ. of Alaska Fairbanks – Alaska Native Language Center](#)
[UAF - Project Jukebox](#)
[Traces of Genetic Trauma Can Be Tweaked](#)
[Aboriginal Language Knowledge & Suicide](#)



Petroglyphs at the Old Afognak Village, Afognak Island, Alaska. Photo courtesy of the Native Village of Afognak.

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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Dr. Alisha Drabek, an author, Alutiiq language educator and former assistant professor at Kodiak College where she taught for three years. Alisha has a PhD in Indigenous Studies, an MFA in Creative Writing and a BA in English – American Literature and became an Alutiiq language apprentice 13 years ago. She serves on the Alutiiq Museum's Qik'rtarmiut Alutiit Language Revitalization Program Committee and develops Alutiiq language education resources. She is a major contributor to the [www.alutiiqlanguage.org](#) and [www.alutiiqeducation.org](#). She published a children's book, titled the Red Cedar of Afognak: A Driftwood's Journey, which won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation and the Honoring Alaska Native Literature (HAIL) Award. She created the Alutiiq Picture Dictionary, published by the Alutiiq Museum in 2007 with a second edition in 2013 produced by the Native Village of Afognak. Her articles have appeared in the Kodiak Daily Mirror, the Sharing Our Pathways newsletter and on the Center for Humans and Nature Blog. She also appears as a learner, teacher and ethnographer in the KEEP TALKING film.

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Educational resources for this film are available at [www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/keep-talking](#).

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