

“Such Humble Awareness”: The Emergence of a Northern Vision in the Fiction and Non-Fiction of Nancy Lord

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For several decades these two views of the North [as frontier and as homeland] have been colliding violently. They have collided in virtually every arena: politics, history, economics, and even religion. Out of this collision a new literature of the North is beginning to emerge. (Senkpiel, “From the Wild West to the Far North” 140)

In 1986 I came to the University of Alaska Fairbanks fresh out of graduate school and almost immediately was handed the privilege of teaching English 350: Literature of Alaska and the Yukon, based solely on my youthful enthusiasm and a student essay on Jack London.¹ The syllabus for the class consisted entirely of photocopied out-of-print novels by London, Rex Beach, and Barrett Willoughby, plus some Robert Service poems. Nothing was more recent than the 1930s. I brought the syllabus more up-to-date with recommendations from my colleagues, incorporating the non-fiction of John McPhee and Joe McGinniss (Alaska “coming” and “going”), as well as poems by John Haines and John Morgan. Over the years those old novels were further winnowed down in favour of newer work, including fiction by Nancy Lord and Jean Anderson, non-fiction by Haines, Richard Nelson, Sherry Simpson, Nick Jans, and John Hildebrand, and stories and poems by Yukon authors such as those in the 1992 anthology *Writing North*. I found myself, with help and encouragement from colleagues such as Aron Senkpiel, Jack Bernet, Jim Ruppert, and Maureen Long, increasingly drawn to the study of contemporary Alaskan and northern Canadian literature. It helped that the books were getting better. At least in Alaska, what used to be primarily a tourist literature² has now become fully home-grown. Alaskan writing can compete with the best, in many different genres. The literature of “collision” that Senkpiel said was “beginning to emerge” in 1992 has already, just that quickly, found its way into the light. The purpose of this essay is to show how the career of one

particular writer, Nancy Lord, is an especially illuminating illustration of how the tremendous potential for a literature of the North is being fulfilled.

Like so many whites in the North, Lord immigrated as a starry-eyed young adult, arriving in Alaska in 1973 and settling in Homer. Her first book was a small collection of short stories, *The Compass Inside Ourselves* (1984), published as the winner of a statewide fiction contest. The seven stories in *Compass* are all short, and employ limited omniscience from the perspectives of female protagonists in Alaska, most of them on the beach. The stories are clearly, as Lord herself has described them, her “juvenilia,” but they demonstrate the skills of close observation, psychological insight, and narrative restraint that are present in all of Lord’s more mature work, both fiction and non-fiction. They also employ motifs that will appear often in later work, including the joys of natural history, relationships with dogs, the risks of opening your door to strangers, and the distinction between loneliness and solitude. Alaska itself is important in all the stories, and as the title of the collection indicates, Lord never considers place as existing only “out there,” a neutral setting or backdrop for the characters. But neither does she employ her setting sensationalistically, as so many tourist writers have. Already in this first book it is clear that Lord has internalized her new home, and is exploring it from the inside out, albeit modestly, from within a relatively narrow range of experience.

Her second book, *Survival* (1991), contains fifteen stories with a wide range of protagonists, a mix of first-person and third-person limited narration, and a greater variety of tones than in the first collection.³ “A Guy Like Me,” for instance, is a first-person account of a young murderer who’s just barely smart enough to realize how bleak his future is going to be. There’s nothing stereotypically Alaskan about the setting. Lord’s challenge to herself and her readers is to empathize with the thoroughly unlikable protagonist through attention to the operations of conscience in what may be his last few days of relative innocence. Another unlikable male protagonist (in “The Winner”), this one clearly an Alaskan character, is sometimes scary and sometimes pitiable as he thinks about the effect that winning a lottery will have on his extremely frugal lifestyle. Not much at all, it turns out, as he plans to squirrel away his winnings with the same miserly approach he takes to everything in his life. The most moving story for me, purely for reasons of identification with the protagonist, is “Nature Lessons,” about the mix of emotions in a father during the brief visit of his young daughter, who lives thousands of miles away with her mother. Another heartbreaking story, “Waiting for the Thaw,” is told from the vantage point of a four-year-old boy living in the wilderness with his father and his deeply depressed mother. This is a new and powerful twist on the cabin-fever theme that has appeared in Northern literature from Scandinavian sagas to Jack London.

The collection chronicles many kinds of suffering, several of them linked to life in the North, including a man who has to choose between fishing and his family, another man who makes the trip to Alaska for the start of the Iditarod sled dog race in a desperate attempt to find happiness, a homesteading wife whose loneliness has built up over decades until it is ready to explode, and another lonely woman who falls for the lies of a pseudo-frontiersman. Only one story, the last in the collection, is lighthearted. But even “Why I Live at the Natural History Museum,” an homage to the famous Eudora Welty story “Why I Live at the P.O.,” has a powerful undercurrent of estrangement from the world.

The title story “Survival” might be the best of the bunch, and it certainly lays bare a number of issues about life in the North. The narrator is someone very like Lord herself, a woman who came to Homer, Alaska, in the search for a place that would give meaning to her life. And at first she found it: “Alaska, the summer I discovered it, was all I wanted it to be: a land of light and flowers and adventure. I was going to climb every mountain, pick berries beside every bear, raft every river, drink whiskey with every old sourdough. It was like being in love; everything was possible” (4). But as time passed, life in Alaska became less magical, more like ordinary life, and the ambitious plans turned into a daily routine. The story is about our middle-aged narrator meeting Bonnie, a younger version of herself, except that Bonnie is less willing to make compromises in her embrace of what she sees as the real Alaskan life. Bonnie is a fictional female predecessor of Christopher McCandless, the subject of Jon Krakauer’s 1996 non-fiction book *Into the Wild*. Her story ends tragically just as his does, and the narrator’s musings on Bonnie’s fate concisely anticipate Krakauer’s lengthier exploration of similar questions. The narrator concludes that Bonnie “wasn’t crazy, and she didn’t want to die. ...But not to die—not to die in this place—takes other skills, adjustments, compromises” (22). The question is, what price do we pay for making those compromises in the name of “survival”? What difference does it make that we’re living in the exotic and beautiful North if we’re going through the same routine we would be anywhere else, except that the mountains out the car window are a little higher, or there’s an occasional moose in the backyard rather than a deer?

Sandra Boatwright has observed that the stories in *Survival* are about “a place that people come to rather than come from,” and that “too often they resemble character sketches or essays rather than short stories,” telling us “What Alaskans Are Like rather than showing us how characters come to be who they are” (207). While many of the stories are indeed slices of Alaskan life, they nevertheless provide us with piercing insight into very particular and fully realized lives. And at least one of the stories does tell us a great deal about how its protagonist “came to be” who she is. The title story “Survival”

could only have been written by someone who had been in Alaska long enough to know its full range of temptations, from death-defying wilderness adventures to the life-threatening insular urban existence of Anchorage. The narrators of that story and another in the collection, "A True Story," could be taken for thinly-veiled versions of Lord herself. Combined with the fact that several stories in *Survival* fictionalize real people and events, it's perhaps not surprising that her next book was a work of non-fiction.

Fishcamp: Life on an Alaskan Shore (1997), an account of summers spent set-net fishing at a remote cabin on the west side of Cook Inlet, is one of the best descriptions of life in the North ever written. It's not a *complete* account of living on the beach in South-Central Alaska, because it only describes the summers, the season of salmon and whales and bears and fireweed. But it more than makes up for the strobe effect of its vision by careful attention to all levels of experience, from natural and human history to the daily activities of beachcombing, bear-watching, and berry-picking. We learn about all the varieties of edible plants on her homestead, about patterns of salmon migration and harvest, about traditional Dena'ina stories and practices, and about the changes wrought by human and non-human forces along a small stretch of coastline backed by a very big, very empty land. All of this is delivered in a confident, modest voice, a style that is clear, direct, and self-effacing without erasing our sense of a real human speaker.

Lord's working summer home is, except perhaps for the view, not an especially beautiful or exotic place; there are relatively few species of plants and animals, with only occasional visits from charismatic megafauna like brown bears and beluga whales. Part II of the book is titled "More History of a Hard Place." The fishing is "poor, for complex reasons having to do not with depleted fisheries but with nuances of fisheries management, competition from the offshore fishing fleet, even the changing coastline itself" (xii). As this description suggests, Lord is careful and honest, reluctant to simplify complicated issues, always interested in a wider web of connections. She chronicles the loss of Native place names, a bad blueberry year, days with no fish in the nets. Exploring the pits that are all that remain of a Dena'ina winter house, she says, "All my life I've been fascinated by abandoned living places" (65, 67). Picturing the early-twentieth-century days of fish traps and canneries on Alaskan rivers, she has a momentary "semiromantic vision of a hardworking past and a nightmare of exploitation and destruction" (82). The "human culture of this place" is full of "heartbreak stories" (90, 91). But those stories are not exploited for melodrama. This is neither a romanticized nor a demonized Alaska, but rather a spiritually enriching place, the same kind of accurate and inspiring Alaska that is described in Haines's *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* and Nelson's *The Island Within*. The apparent ease with which Lord

writes about her home is rooted in the fact that it *is* her home, a place that she has made and that has made her.

One aspect of Lord's writing that appears for the first time in *Fishcamp*, and that will subsequently become a very important focus of her writing, is the attempt to understand and represent Native cultures.⁴ The chapter "A Crying Country" discusses local Dena'ina history, stories, place names, and language. Lord sees the effort to understand Dena'ina culture as a responsibility incumbent upon her, part of choosing to live where she does. But she also understands her position as an outsider and latecomer: "I'm well aware of the awkwardness of my situation. If the continuum had *not* been broken—if Dena'ina lived on this point still—there probably would not be room here for me" (68). Here one can see lingering evidence of the "collision" that Senkpiel refers to, as well as the new synergy that is "emerging." From the first chapter of *Fishcamp*, an exploration of "sacred time" (14) as Lord experiences it in camp, to the Epilogue's discussion of the lessons she has learned on her beach, the vocabulary and worldview of this book are both informed by the long history of western culture (as in her reference to the distinction between *kairos* and *chronos*, and the Old English roots of the word "tide") and sympathetic to Native ways of knowing. Lord never claims special knowledge of Dena'ina culture, much less that she somehow belongs to that culture, but she is a respectful student, always willing to learn from those who lived in her home before her, white or Native, human or nonhuman: "We know these sacred truths, east and west, in our bones: *everything has a life of its own, but nothing lives by itself*" (256).

In her fourth book, *Green Alaska: Dreams from the Far Coast* (1999), Lord takes a look back at a particular group of people who preceded her in Alaska, the members of the 1899 Harriman Alaska Expedition. As I said in an earlier review of the book, *Green Alaska* "gives us a fascinating dual perspective on Alaska, a kind of stereopticon or 3-D view" (361), juxtaposing contemporary Alaska with the place as it was one hundred years ago. The resulting picture is surprisingly positive. It turns out that a lot of things are at least as good in 1999 as they were in 1899, if not better: more salmon, more bears, more whales, Native children no longer being shipped to boarding schools in the Lower 48, Native gravesites no longer being looted for artifacts. The way things were going when millionaire Edward H. Harriman had difficulty finding a grizzly bear anywhere in southern Alaska, and when nets across entire streams wiped out salmon stocks in just a few years, it looked as though the abundance of Alaska was remarkably fragile. But somehow we caught ourselves in time, before the gray whale, bald eagle, or brown bear went the way of the Steller's sea cow, wiped out only twenty-seven years after its discovery by Europeans. *Green Alaska* manages the acrobatic feat of being both a warning and a celebration.

The Harriman expedition was a pivotal event in Alaskan history. The president of the Union Pacific Railroad, ordered by his doctors to take a vacation, “leases a large steamship and completely reoutfits it for luxury travel through the waters of Alaska” (xv), inviting, along with his family, thirty more guests: “the nation’s top natural scientists, mainly; but also a few practical engineering types, some cultural enthusiasts, select writers and artists and photographers” (xvi). The official historian of the trip is John Burroughs, naturalist and extremely popular author. He will be the primary lens through which Lord recreates the trip, and she develops a profound sympathy for him. Other famous names along for the ride include John Muir, William Dall, Edward Curtis, and George Bird Grinnell. Lord does an amazing job of distilling a huge amount of material—all the words and photographs and specimens, including Burroughs’s own account of the trip (called *In Green Alaska*)—into a small book, and without any obvious plot framework she manages to provide us with a suspenseful page-turner.

The present-day perspective comes from Lord’s own experience of Alaska, and in particular from a trip she makes aboard a salmon tender along part of the route of the Harriman expedition, from Homer to False Pass (at the tip of the Alaska Peninsula, where it fragments into the Aleutian chain). We do get a few side-by-side comparisons, then and now, but for the most part Lord’s trip only loosely parallels Burroughs’s. She discusses the parts of the expedition that are hundreds or thousands of miles away from her segment, in Sitka, Glacier Bay, Prince William Sound, as far north as the Seward Peninsula and west to Siberia, and those passages are seamlessly linked to the book as a whole. Her own experiences on the trip include seasickness, double rainbows and Dall porpoises, a close encounter with a bear, and a beautiful afternoon with four other girls and women in a hot tub on the edge of the continent.

Green Alaska takes an almost photographic approach, telling its double story in sixty-one tiny chapters that are well served by Lord’s clear, spare prose. This is the kind of book that looks easy, is in fact wonderfully easy to read, but is tremendously hard to write. I would argue that *Green Alaska* is a more ambitious achievement than *Fishcamp* because it blends the personal experience and descriptive skills of the earlier book with impressive research and the effort to witness past events through someone else’s eyes, namely Burroughs’s.⁵ As Lord points out, she had lived in Alaska for one-quarter of the century that had passed since the Harriman expedition. Knowing Alaska at the turn of the twenty-first century as well as she does helps her compare it more vividly and accurately with the same place one hundred years earlier.

At the end of the book, after her research has taken us all the way from Cold Bay to Washington, D.C., she concludes that the Harriman expedition was “a story of our nation, of its westering impulse and obsession, its search

for a home place, a chase after the myth that wherever we go we will make what we find our own" (169). She admits to her own participation in this obsession, to being caught up upon her return to Alaska by "the hope and beauty of it all" (170)—meaning, I take it, the rare joy of living out one's life in full awareness of and appreciation for having found some version of the "myth" of America.

Lord's next book, *The Man Who Swam with Beavers* (2001), plays with mythology in a much more explicit and complex way. This collection of seventeen short stories "was largely inspired by the titles and themes of stories belonging to Native Americans, particularly Alaska's Athabaskans" (11). From history and a span of one hundred years, Lord has moved on to myth, legend, and spans of time that cannot be precisely measured. She has also returned to fiction after two books of non-fiction, but this time the stories, separately and collectively, are more original, more experimental, and more unified.

Elsewhere I have argued that this book represents an interesting variation on the short-story cycle or linked collection.⁶ What unifies these stories is not, I claim, recurring characters, a single plot thread, a single setting, tone, or point of view, but rather an alternative perspective, a thematic concern with difference and tolerance explored through intercultural connections between Native American ways of knowing and mainstream American culture. If I am right, what looks like an extremely diverse collection of stories is actually a coherent narrative experiment, an epistemological gamble in which the traditional story pleasure of epiphanic moments of "defamiliarization" is sacrificed to some degree for the sake of building up connections, bridges of tolerance and shared perspective, a truly multicultural vision.⁷

My thesis about the experimental nature of the collection as a whole notwithstanding, there remain in these stories plenty of the traditional pleasures we associate with contemporary short fiction, even as the author expands the range of her technique. The variety of tones and perspectives varies even more widely than in *Survival*—for instance, in one story the point of view character is a dog, and in another it's God. Sometimes the connections to the Native American source or inspiration are fairly clear, as in "The Woman Who Would Marry a Bear," a widely told myth among Northwest Native peoples upon which Lord superimposes all the contemporary American challenges of putting together a big wedding. The title story is perhaps the most ambitious in the whole book, straightforwardly updating the Dena'ina myth of a man who preferred to live as a beaver, and was rewarded by being turned into one. (If this story works for you, you're never going to be able to think about beavers the same way again.) In other cases the link to Native materials is more opaque—in "The Attainable Border of the Birds," a quiet little story about aging, it may be no more than the powerfully evocative title, taken from a Chukchi story.

My case for this book representing progress in Lord's career—and by extension a step forward in Northern literature—is based on three things: its coherence as a collection, its radically multicultural perspective, and its expansion beyond the borders of Alaska (both in settings and in source materials) while still maintaining a close connection to place. The collective thematic vision of the more recent stories is of a world different from the one most Americans know but alongside it, the way the imaginative truths of mythology exist alongside the mundane truths of science and journalism. *The Man Who Swam with Beavers* reflects what Lord has learned from Native American culture, translated into a language we outsiders can understand: the modern short story form. The lessons are subtle, ironic, psychologically profound, and completely unsentimental. There are no noble savages in the book, and perhaps only one or two cheap shots, taken at irresistibly inviting targets such as "The Man Who Went Through Everything." There is more humour than in the earlier collections, and although the same penetrating investigation of loneliness is conducted, it is limited to only a few stories, and even these have happier endings. It seems as though Lord is trying in this book to go beyond the conflicts she has dramatized in her earlier fiction, in a search for resolution. Like *Green Alaska*, *The Man Who Swam with Beavers* is a hopeful book, grounded in the confidence that some important things endure, and that there is a place for those who don't fit into mainstream society. The world that she posits is based on tolerance, both of individuals and of cultures, enacted through the blend of Native and western epistemologies and narrative techniques.

Lord's ability to listen carefully to Native voices is also apparent in her most recent book, *Beluga Days: Tracking a White Whale's Truths* (2004). Returning to non-fiction in what is now clearly a rhythm with which she is comfortable,⁸ Lord gives us a remarkably thorough portrait of one population of one species of whale, including biology, history, and—most importantly—politics. This is a more journalistic book than the earlier non-fiction, less personal, but for that very reason a more impressive accomplishment.⁹ The challenges of writing *Beluga Days* were clearly enormous, beginning with the fact that so much remains unknown about Cook Inlet belugas, and continuing with the slippery phenomenon of their relative political and cultural importance for different people. The population seems to be declining, perhaps precipitously, but no one is absolutely sure of the numbers, much less the causes. Many of the Natives who hunt Cook Inlet belugas for subsistence, both for the food value and for the cultural value (always inseparable anyway), are migrants to the area, rather than long-time traditional hunters in those waters. In fact, some of the locals have had to re-learn the skills necessary to hunt beluga. It looks as though the Cook Inlet beluga population might be placed on the endangered

species list, and at the time that Lord was writing one of the stated causes for such protection was possible overharvesting by Natives—a public relations nightmare for indigenous peoples, who maintain a tricky *détente* with liberal white environmentalists over the issue of killing wild animals for food and fur. In addressing the problem of Cook Inlet belugas, Lord was taking on a biological mystery and a political hot potato.

Each of the book's relatively long chapters (compared to those in her other non-fiction books) centres on a particular aspect of the beluga issue. "The Scientific Method" chronicles the exceedingly frustrating efforts to tag whales, and in general to obtain hard data about their numbers, range, and habits. One is tempted to laugh occasionally at the various methods resorted to by scientists and volunteers (including Lord) who sometimes can't find any whales, sometimes can't find the right ones, and always have to struggle to make a successful tag. It reads a little like a greased-pig chase on water. There is also humour in "The Green Machine," the chapter about Alaskan environmental politics and its on-again, off-again efforts on behalf of the belugas. But it's a painful kind of humour. It turns out that environmental politics is a messy, bureaucratic, personality- and money-determined business, just like other kinds of politics. This chapter should be required reading for anyone who thinks that "Save the Whales" translates in any direct way from bumper sticker to effective action.

The overall movement of the book is from city to village, from whites to Natives, and from scientific studies to "traditional ecological knowledge, or TEK" (172). The research process takes her from the St. Lawrence River (home to the other isolated "remnant population" of belugas) and the Vancouver Aquarium to the villages of Tyonek (on the west side of Cook Inlet) and Point Lay (on the northwest corner of Alaska). She reports the words of dozens of sources, but she also gives us her own thoughts all along the way, including philosophical speculations about the morality of hunting, traditional rights, environmental politics, and the practice of science. She travels to Point Lay in order to "visit a village where beluga hunting was not only a significant subsistence activity but one significantly engaged in—that is, in more than an occasional or a symbolic way [as in Tyonek]" (187). As the whales approach in their seasonal migration, people are worried about the progress of the melting ice:

In the constant daylight, we all waited. The community was focused on belugas—the coming belugas, the hunt, the food—in a way that was pervasive. I tried to think of an analogy and could only think of how a community of farmers might watch the sky, waiting for a rain they needed for their crops, a rain they knew would almost certainly come and which would feel so good, falling on them and their world, making everything else possible. (192–93)

The search for this analogy, for a way to make this experience clearer to us, is emblematic of Lord's method throughout *Beluga Days*. In our struggle as readers to comprehend the whole of the problem, we have the benefit of her intelligence, her Alaskan experience, and her cultural sensitivity, as well as her language. Like that other investigator from a century and a half ago, Melville's Ishmael, Lord feels duty-bound to help us understand all aspects of the white whale—natural, cultural, and metaphysical.

Like *Fishcamp* and *Green Alaska*, *Beluga Days* is a very personal book, written out of first-hand experience and following Thoreau's reminder on the first page of *Walden* "that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking." However, *Beluga Days* is also more ambitious than those earlier works, in that it is willing to take on a very complex issue in depth, and therein assume responsibility for truthfully representing that issue. While no one would think of taking Lord to task for not fully representing all important aspects of the Harriman expedition in *Green Alaska*, one could certainly hold her responsible for some degree of thoroughness in *Beluga Days*. Not that this will be the last word on belugas by any means; part of what Lord shows us is how our understanding can shift over time, sometimes very quickly and in surprising directions. Thus the modest title, echoing Whitman's *Specimen Days*, suggesting that this is merely one woman's highly subjective and time-bound meditation on whales. Don't be fooled. Just as *Specimen Days* was intended by Whitman, despite its highly personal nature, to be a kind of representative American memoir, so *Beluga Days* is a model for what Northern writing can be when it chooses to engage its most intractable problems with energy, grace, and precision.

Of course, Lord is not the only writer successfully representing Alaska from within by attempting to reconcile its cultural complexities. In an earlier essay in the *Northern Review*, I argued that the wealth of excellent Alaskan non-fiction published in the last twenty years can be divided into two categories, which I take from Senkpiel's model: North as frontier and North as homeland. I claimed that the work of Nelson, Jans, and Carolyn Kremers belonged in the latter category, among books whose underlying "mythological schema" demanded that the North be characterized by tropes of the "centre" rather than the "margin" ("From 'the Last Frontier'" 52, 53). Susan Kollin has recently questioned whether such tropes of the margin are indeed unavoidable in writing about Alaska, claiming that "although Nelson tries to avoid scripting Alaska as an exceptional terrain set off from the rest of the country, a new world that can redeem a corrupted America, at times he is unable to get outside those narrative conventions. His writing thus becomes a testament to how strong those understandings remain in the dominant national imagination" (173).¹⁰ I believe that Lord, like Nelson, wants to do justice to those aspects of

the North that are unusual and spectacular, while at the same time making connections with more southerly places. For both Lord and Nelson the North is not a uniquely sacred place, but a complex ecosystem where the sacraments may be daily enacted (as they are in many other places). When Lord talks about her identification with John Burroughs, a man living a century ago in a much more domesticated natural setting, she links Alaska to New York not in a relation of margin to centre or sacred to profane, but as two versions of home. When she talks about the complex role of belugas in national environmental politics and oil economics, she does not represent Alaskan nature as something untouched and untouchable, but rather as a place that is and will likely always be inhabited by people, harvested for game, exploited for natural resources, and shared with whales.¹¹ If Kollin's exposure of pervasive exceptionalism in writing about Alaska is to remain useful, it must acknowledge the potential for writing that appreciates what is particular to the North, and even respects its spiritual potency, without obscuring the truth that human life is much the same everywhere.¹²

The perceptive reader will notice that I have been using "Alaska" and "the North" somewhat promiscuously in this essay. There are various kinds of Alaska exceptionalism, of course, and one of those routinely considers Alaska in isolation from everywhere else, including northern Canada and Siberia. Unfortunately, most Alaskans don't feel they have to pay much attention to what's going on to the east or west, unless it interferes with their ability to carry guns in their pick-ups across the border and up the Alaska Highway (which no longer seems to be referred to much as "the Alcan," a name at least tacitly acknowledging the fact that most of the highway is in Canada). Although Fairbanks may have more in common with Whitehorse than it does with Anchorage or Juneau, that connection is only rarely apparent, perhaps during the Yukon Quest sled dog race, or when an Alaskan flies Air North for a weekend of gambling in Dawson. It sometimes seems as if the tremendous variety of climate, topography, wildlife, and human habitat within Alaska contributes to a sense of self-sufficiency, as if Alaska were world enough in itself. (This attitude is suggested by the common use of the term "Outside" to refer to everywhere not Alaska.¹³) In her discussion of visits to the Vancouver Aquarium and the St. Lawrence River in *Beluga Days* Lord expands the scope of her inquiry into Canada, but by and large she (and most other Alaskan writers) are seemingly content to treat Alaska as a sort of giant island isolated from everywhere else and forced to acknowledge other northerners only when there is a dispute over fishing rights or a debate over the best route for a pipeline. If Lord is indeed representative of a circumpolar trend, it is because her observations about Alaska *can be* extended to other northern locales, not because she in fact does so explicitly.

A second objection that might be raised against the version of Lord's career that I have been describing as representative of the North is whether she is qualified or entitled to represent a Native perspective (particularly on spirituality), as I have argued she does increasingly in recent books, and as I have claimed is common among white writers representing the North as homeland. This opens up the entire fascinating question of syncretic beliefs in the North, which has been discussed not only in terms of white appropriations of Native spirituality, but also in terms of indigenous people incorporating European views into their belief systems, as in Dominique Legros's article "The Crow Reincarnated as Jesus." Legros argues that the Northern Tutchone have integrated Christian stories into their own because "it makes Christianity and Athapaskan sacred traditions coeval," thereby validating their own beliefs while simultaneously explaining certain white "advantages."¹⁴ Legros also raises the question of religious reciprocity: "In contrast, Euro-Canadian Christians still present themselves as extremely parochial in as much as they are unable to recognize and make sense of the sacred when expressed in a different tradition" (75). Although Lord is not explicitly Christian, her writing does attempt to redress the "parochial" practice of white immigrants to the North ignoring the lessons of people who have lived here for a very long time. Unless one believes in a kind of cultural purity analogous to racial purity (itself a spurious biological concept), then surely it is unavoidable for cultures to influence each other, and in fact admirable for a thinking person to seek out the wisdom available through radically different perspectives.¹⁵ The question of whether Lord has succeeded in adapting Native ways of knowing judiciously and accurately, rather than choosing only what suits her taste or fits her preconceptions, will probably remain a vital question for critics.¹⁶

In Senkpiel's history of higher education in the Canadian North, he concluded that the model finally adopted for Yukon College—that of the "comprehensive community college" rather than a full-blown "university of the north"—was a "sound" decision, because it reflected the proper balance of inclusiveness and opportunity, taking people where they were, giving them skills they could use, and still pointing them in the direction of further growth ("Post-Secondary Education" 102). In a way, this is similar to how I see Lord's writing: modest in scope but growing over time, giving us an accurate sense of ourselves, but holding out the prospect of expanded possibilities.¹⁷ While there are other books by Alaskans that are as good as hers, I would argue that no one else has yet produced a body of literary prose with the range and power of her books. In her Preface to *Fishcamp* Lord quotes Aldo Leopold's definition of a conservationist as "'one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of the land,'" and then goes on to observe that "such humble awareness is, of course, easier to come by when

cutting a tree by hand, not bulldozing forests, and when catching fish one at a time, not hauling them by the ton onto factory boats" (xv). Lord's observations about the North are hand-picked, one insight at a time plucked carefully from the intricate net of natural and cultural relations, in pursuit both stylistically and thematically of Leopold's "humble awareness." Senkpiel has observed that although "the North continues to be, like Hamlet, more acted upon than acting," there are signs of "a new confidence and a quiet insistence to act independently" ("North to North" 13). Lord's career seems to me to exemplify such growing confidence and independence, in her twenty-year effort "to do what [she] can to bring together history and heaven" (*Fishcamp* 258). If I am right about the arc of her literary journey describing our cultural coming-of-age, an "emergence" from the "collision" Senkpiel described, then the outlook for Northern literature in the days ahead is very exciting.¹⁸

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Notes

1. Higher education administrators in the North, including Aron Senkpiel, have often found themselves in the position of having to make the best of a relatively small pool of expertise. This can be good or bad. Judith Kleinfeld has documented how the "frontier" aspects of Alaska have meant genuine opportunity and accomplishment for some people who would otherwise never have ventured into new fields.
2. I use the term "tourist writer" in preference to even more pejorative options, such as "carpetbagger" or "colonizer," to refer to writers who spend some weeks or months in the state before producing a book conspicuously set there. My own list of just the most famous novelists from among tourist writers of the last few decades includes James Michener, Norman Mailer, John Hawkes, Ken Kesey, Martin Cruz Smith, Robert Olen Butler, and T. C. Boyle. I'm sure there are others—for instance, I only recently discovered *Williwaw*, Gore Vidal's first novel, which is set in the Aleutians.
3. Lord acknowledges that the title of this collection is a nod to Margaret Atwood's discussion of Canadian literature by the same title.
4. The term "Alaska Native" or simply "Native" is preferred in Alaska over the Lower 48 "Native-American" and the Canadian "First Nations" or "Indigenous."
5. For a more in-depth look at the coherence and thematic unity of *Green Alaska*, see Michael Stubbs's recent MA thesis "Shades of Green: Perspectives on Nature in Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska*."
6. In "Borrowed Mythology: Counter/Cross-Cultural Narrative in Nancy Lord's *The Man Who Swam with Beavers*," forthcoming in a collection of essays on short story theory and practice.

7. For an explanation of this way of theorizing the modern short's story characteristic effect, see Charles May's "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction" and Michael Trussler's "Suspended Narratives: The Short Story and Temporality."
8. In a panel at the 2005 Associated Writers and Writing Programs meeting in Vancouver Lord and four other Alaskan non-fiction writers talked about their reasons for choosing to write non-fiction. Several of them agreed that they sensed a special opportunity, even, in Lord's words, "a sense of urgency," about representing the facts of Alaska: "There's a lot that needs to be said, and done, and not many people to say and do it" (Lord, "Where It's All Too Real"). It would be interesting for someone to explore the larger issue of non-fiction in the North, or even, as an early reader of this essay suggested, whether mixing fiction and non-fiction is a common northern tendency, and if so, why.
9. For an example of Lord writing about science in a purely technical mode, just by way of comparison to her "literary" non-fiction, see *Darkened Waters*, her 1992 book written to accompany a museum exhibit about the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.
10. Frank Norris addressed this question of exceptionalism in regard to films, concluding that "most if not all movies about the North will continue to emphasize the qualities of Northern life that are unavailable elsewhere," but also claiming that "a well-executed production can provide a realistic glimpse into different times and places" (68).
11. In fact, one way to think about Lord's writing is as a kind of literary version of "sustainable development," defined by Oran R. Young as "a condition in which activities that enhance human welfare do so without destroying or degrading existing biophysical systems or cultural systems" (38). There is necessarily an imaginative component to any such "condition," and Lord's fiction and non-fiction serves that imaginative function.
12. I am aware that my use of the word "truth" in this sentence already indicates problems with my argument from Kollin's cultural-studies perspective. But I don't think we have to abandon the use of a perfectly good word like "truth" just because we have to be careful about using it. I tried to make my point about the dangers of seeing exceptionalism everywhere in a review of Kollin's book in *Western American Literature*, although with the opportunity to offer more instances of Lord's writing as a counter-example, I hope that this time I have made my case more effectively. *Nature's State* is unquestionably a groundbreaking study of the impact of Alaska on the U.S. mind and heart. There is, of course, a comparative wealth of writing about how the North has functioned in the Canadian imagination. See, for instance, Margaret Atwood's *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Rudy Wiebe's *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*, and Shelagh D. Grant's "Myths of the North in the Canadian Ethos."
13. However, I should note that the same term is frequently used in the Yukon to mean everything to the south, and some Alaskans don't consider the Yukon to be Outside, perhaps because one can drive there fairly easily.
14. For a couple of other interesting perspectives on the complexities of cultural syncretism operating in two directions, as it were, see Miranda Wright's "The

Joys and Conflicts of Being a Native Anthropologist” and Victoria Churikova’s “Becoming Aboriginal: Experiences of a European Woman in Kamchatka’s Wilderness.”

15. One way that this question has been addressed by literary theorists is through Mikhail Bahktin’s notion of “dialogism,” the multiple cultural voices speaking within any text, and speaking most loudly and variously in the most interesting narratives. For a specific application of this concept to white and Native voices, see James Ruppert’s *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*.
16. There are plenty of illustrations of the dangers of misunderstanding and misrepresenting Natives in the North. For a literary example of such misrepresentation see Robert Campbell’s “Facing North: Jack London’s Imagined Indians on the Klondike Frontier.” This is a very important and complex issue among anthropologists, but for one northern example see Elsie Netro’s critique of Asen Balikci’s 1961 anthropological study of Old Crow Gwich’in.
17. It is tempting to extend this analogy by comparing the achievement of graduate education at Yukon College to the promise of a novel by Lord, but that comparison would be unfair both to Yukon students and to Lord. Though we were given a glimpse of a novel-in-progress by Lord some years ago in the pages of the *Northern Review* (“Excerpt: The Mechanical Hawk”), the mainstream novel (that is, as opposed to genre fiction) remains the one area in which Alaskan literature has not yet matured. But perhaps the first sign of such maturity is the recent publication of Seth Kantner’s *Ordinary Wolves*. Lord’s books have not made any bestseller lists yet, but her reputation is spreading among scholars and critics—that is, those who most strongly influence the next generation of readers—and I predict her works will have a very long shelf life.
18. In case it isn’t entirely obvious by now, I owe a great deal to Aron Senkpiel’s vision of life and literature in the North. Neither this essay nor my previous study of Alaskan literature published in the *Northern Review* (even the title of which echoes Aron’s earlier essay) would have been possible without his contributions to my understanding. For his generosity, modesty, intelligence, and good humour I think of him as perhaps the ideal reader of Nancy Lord’s work, and potentially its most perceptive critic. And as I hope the range of works cited in this essay suggests, not least among his contributions was his stewardship of the *Northern Review*.

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