

From “the Last Frontier” to *The Island Within*: Two Versions of Alaska in Contemporary Nonfiction Narrative

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For one hundred years the dominant image of the North in the American imagination has been “the last frontier.” Alaskans have cherished this description, characterizing themselves as “pioneers” and rugged individualists living the rough, free life of bygone days. This trope of “the last frontier” evokes nostalgia for the nineteenth-century Western frontier, and generally implies that Alaska is in constant danger of losing its special status and becoming more like the rest of the United States. As Alaska enters the twenty-first century, many Alaskans (not all in the tourism industry) still vigorously promote images of the nineteenth century.

But there is another way of imagining Alaska as well, one in which the relatively brief “frontier” period was an aberration, though it altered northern life radically. For Native cultures in Alaska the last century or more of denigration and oppression has been a period of special hardship, like a small ice age or a dip in the caribou cycle. In the last thirty years, however, traditional practices have been increasingly reaffirmed, traditional arts recovered, old languages revitalized, and remembered stories retold. In those ancient stories Alaska is not a distant frontier, but a familiar homeland.¹

These two views of Alaska are powerfully evoked in a flood of excellent literary nonfiction published in Alaska over the last twelve years. John Haines’ *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, John Hildebrand’s *Reading the River*, and Sheila Nickerson’s *Disappearance* represent Alaska primarily as a borderland or outpost of America, a version of “the last frontier.” These books tend to look backward, and their tone is predominantly nostalgic or elegiac. Nick Jans’ *The Last Light Breaking*, Carolyn Kremers’ *Place of the Pretend People*, and Richard Nelson’s *The Island Within* represent Alaska mainly as an ancient homeland, described in a cautiously optimistic and forward-looking tone. Not surprisingly, these latter works tend to be heavily influenced by and reflective of Alaska Native beliefs.

All six of these works are by white writers who are reaching out to a broad, mixed audience of both Alaskans and “Outsiders.” In my choice of texts I do not mean to

imply that Native writers are not themselves producing powerful literature these days. The phenomenal success of Velma Wallis' *Two Old Women* is one testimonial to the eloquence of Native voices, which are increasingly finding more outlets for publication and a wider audience for their work. But the fact that six such talented non-Native authors should choose to describe two such different versions of Alaska—both of them true, as I will try to show—is for me fascinating evidence of the single most important aspect of life in the North at the turn of the millennium: the ongoing negotiations among contrasting cultures.²

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Alaska's best-known poet, John Haines, is also a wonderful prose stylist; in 1989 he published *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire: Twenty-five Years in the Alaska Wilderness*, a memoir of his years homesteading and trapping near Fairbanks beginning shortly after World War II. Like Haines' poetry, these often dream-like stories are rooted firmly in the details of daily life and of landscape. Trained as a painter and sculptor, apprenticed as a fur trapper, Haines matured into a writer, but his writing reflects the depth of his commitment to his two earlier callings. In spare, precise language Haines describes the country he lived in and reflects on what it meant to live there. Early in the book, he explains the choice of a profession that many people nowadays find barbaric:

So much can be said about [trapping] from one conviction or another, the attitudes easily become partisan and intractable. There is the coarseness too often found in those who follow the trade, especially where mere cash is the end in mind. And yet to some fortunate individuals there have been few things more deeply attractive than this seasonal pursuit of the wild. It is life at its fullest, uncertain and demanding, but rich with expectation. The wilderness is open, and whoever enters it knows the satisfaction of being at ease in a country he calls his own. The land belongs to him and to no one else. He can go where he likes, following his own trail through the spruce bogs and across the dry birch hills, a pathway tramped in the snow, to stop at nightfall in his own snug camp. (8)

Haines came to Alaska as a rank tenderfoot, and *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* is a tribute to the trappers from whom he learned. They were the last few survivors of the old gold rush days, Scandinavian bachelors many of them, living a way of life that was disappearing in the blown-snow wakes of semi trucks heading up the highway towards Fairbanks:

They are useful ghosts, these old inhabitants with their handworn implements, their settled lives. They tell us something of what we have been, and if we live long enough and well enough, what each of us may become: one more sign of our residence on earth, alive by reason of remembered love.

I was lucky to have known them when I did, for they are no longer standing in their patched wool and mended cotton. In some way I have always accepted, they were my people, if the phrase now means anything, and the best of them I have loved with a deep appreciation that has never left me. They were friends and teachers, and I do not expect to see their kind again. (164)

The book's last vignette is of a man knocking on the door of the abandoned Richardson roadhouse, then walking off into the cold and quiet from whence he came. The message is clear: death has taken an entire generation, and with it a way of life.³

This sort of elegy to the stalwart men of the past always threatens to become maudlin, but Haines never succumbs to sentimentality. As he warns us in *Living Off the Country*, " clichés about the 'last frontier' will not do," lest "what Alaska produces as literature may go on being notable for its hymns to Mount McKinley [and] dead odes to dead salmon" (19, 20). *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* is a kind of elegy, even perhaps a sort of elegiac ode, but one that avoids clichés even when talking about salmon, as in this description of gaffing fall chum:

There was something grand and barbaric in that essential, repeated act. To stand there in the snow and cold air toward the end of the year, with a long hook poised above the ice-filled river, was to feel oneself part of something so old that its origin was lost in the sundown of many winters: a feeling intensified, made rich by the smell of ice and cold fish-slime, by the steely color of the winter sky, and the white snow stained with the redness of the salmon: the color of death and the color of winter. (142)

This is one place in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* where Haines refers obliquely to Alaska's indigenous peoples. As he notes in his preface, "I think I have always been aware of certain events as existing in a kind of *dreamtime* in the ancient tribal sense of this." But the attitudes Haines expresses of humility toward the land, respect for wild creatures, and a sense of participating in ancient rites come from white teachers (who may have learned them from Natives) and through direct experience of subsistence living. He says in an interview that

When you live a long time alone in the woods, with mostly animals for companions, some strange things happen inside your head. It is as if an older consciousness of nature, overgrown by education, slowly begins to reassert itself—the barriers come down, and the lines between human and animal, between yourself and the forest world, become indistinct. Something like the ancient religious dread comes back to claim its territory. (*Living Off the Land* 140)

Haines honors the "barbaric," recognizing its power over us, and occasionally associating it with what he calls in one of his most famous poems "a man walking alone / on the frozen road from Asia."⁴ But when asked, "Have the Native cultures of Alaska played an influence in your writing?" Haines responded, "None at all, so far as I know" (*Living Off the Land* 149). The hardy tribe of white men he knew passed away before his eyes, and Haines implies that their way of life died with them.

Though *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* is memoir, it includes few details of Haines' personal life. We are given enough just to guess at the break-up of one or more relationships across the span of years included in the book. That they pass with so little mention contributes to the sadness of the book, as if marriage was abandoned like an empty cabin in the wilderness. In contrast, John Hildebrand is explicit about his own

failed relationship in *Reading the River: A Voyage Down the Yukon*. The death of a child, the end of a marriage, an abandoned homestead, and the history of life along the river all contribute to a powerful feeling of loss. Hildebrand has a keen sense of irony about the “back-to-the-land movement” (8) that originally took him to Alaska, but at the same time he is curious about what might have happened to him if he had stayed on his homestead:

A voyage down the Yukon would be a journey through time as well as geography, back to the world as it used to be. Along the way, I could rub elbows with the survivors of many winters, the pioneers and the veterans of my own generation. Hitching a ride on the river, I could drift into other lives, people I might have become. (10)

Hildebrand’s canoe trip is informally divided into three parts by the three maps he inserts, of the upper, middle, and lower rivers. Those divisions are more than simply geographical, as Hildebrand has three very different kinds of experiences. The upper Yukon River, within Canada, is steeped in its gold rush past, dominated by the days of paddlewheel steamers, Klondike Kings, and Jack London. Though Hildebrand claims that he “couldn’t work up much enthusiasm for Dawson’s wax-museum version of its past,” because “The gold rush had been so quirky and ephemeral a movement anyway, over nearly as soon as it began” (63), he seems very interested in the subsequent history of the river, such things as he can learn from a retired Mountie in his eighties, and from a Native man who stayed alone in Fort Selkirk after it was abandoned and is now assisting in its reincarnation as a historical park. Apparently, like Haines, Hildebrand is fascinated by the remnants of that “quirky and ephemeral” period, the people who stayed on or came late into the country, inhabiting the interregnum between the boom times of the 1890s and those of the 1980s.

Once north of Dawson, Hildebrand encounters the summer salmon run, and also a couple of people his own age with whom he crossed paths many years ago in Fairbanks. These are the first of his alter-egos, revealing another life he might have led. Subsistence living in the North means taking sufficient resources during the summer months of plenty, and along the Yukon River that means salmon. Hildebrand discusses a Native-run packing plant and introduces us to a team of biologists as well as several subsistence fishermen. When, later in the book, Hildebrand notes that in traveling down the river he has been bucking “the upriver migration of salmon,” who “fought the inevitable, downward sweep of current” (183), I am willing to grant him this clichéd moment of “dead odes to dead salmon,” in return for the many pages he has already given us of accurate salmon biology and economics.

The middle section of river is strongly reminiscent of John McPhee’s *Coming Into the Country*, not only because Hildebrand is traveling through some of the same country McPhee wrote about, but because the people and issues in that part of Alaska didn’t change much in the dozen or so years between their books. Whites and Natives are suspicious of each other, government regulation intrudes on the rights of bush

inhabitants even while they intrude on the wilderness, and boomers ironically work for the salvation of their way of life by methods that can only lead to its destruction. After listening to a sermon in Eagle from a preacher with the “practiced folksiness of a radio evangelist” (87), Hildebrand sums up what he sees as the major conflict in white Bush Alaska:

Living in a small town surrounded by a vast wilderness presented a paradox. On the one hand, people were drawn to Eagle by its unfettered setting; yet wilderness also suggested temptations to be guarded against. This was the classic frontier dilemma: to choose absolute freedom, and with it the potential for anarchy and lawlessness, or accept the nullifying restraints of civilization. It is the problem Huck Finn faces at the end of his tale, deciding whether to stay on the raft or move to town and let Aunt Sally “civilize” him. In Eagle there were a lot of Aunt Sallys. (88)

This description of “the classic frontier dilemma” highlights Hildebrand’s “last frontier” approach to Alaska. Two hundred and more years ago some writers, including Ebenezer Cook, William Byrd, and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, were already deploring the tendency toward “anarchy and lawlessness” among settlers on the frontier. One of Mark Twain’s attempted sequels to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck did indeed “light out for the territory,” trailed off in bloody massacres after only a few chapters. Later on, trying to envision Huck as grown, Twain could only see him as Pap, the hillbilly stereotype, whose avatar, Willis, Hildebrand meets a few miles below Eagle:

Barefoot and shirtless, he wore a bearskin vest and had tied his long greasy hair back with a sash of marten skin. He had the long-distance eyes of a flower child gone to seed. . . .

He’d spent the Fourth at a gold Mine up Coal Creek and was still nursing a tequila hangover. The miners had sent him home with a bag of gray meat scraps for his dogs. But the dogs were going to see none of it.

“Look at this stuff,” he said, hefting the rancid meat bag as if it were a sack of gold. “They were going to throw it away. Can you believe that?” (97, 98)

The “sack of gold” that is actually a “rancid meat bag” is a symbol for the contrast between the gold rush miners and their descendant Willis. Not all late-twentieth-century immigrants are like Willis, of course, and Hildebrand describes several homesteaders his own age whom he admires. However, even his own generation is passing:

There was a restlessness among the whites who had come north in high spirits a decade ago. . . . a wistfulness for bygone days. . . .

“Check this out,” said Joe. “When I first came here, everyone was in their twenties. All the old miners had died. Now we’re all in our thirties and I keep looking over my shoulder to see if another group is coming. But they’re not.” (144-45)

With tighter government control and the end of homesteading, fewer newcomers will be able to live out the romantic “frontier” life in Alaska. This sense of a last generation of pioneers is reminiscent of Haines’ memorial to the last survivors of the gold rush.

Hildebrand's guide from the evenly balanced white and Native communities of the middle Yukon into the Native-dominated lower river is "Russian-Athabaskan" Claude Demientieff, owner and operator of a tug that hauls freight from the railhead in Nenana to villages along a small section of the middle river. Although this stretch of river is as long as the other two (each approximately 500 miles in length), this section of the book is easily the shortest of the three, and Hildebrand eventually ends his trip well short of the ocean, not only because of poor weather and difficult water, but also because he feels decidedly less welcome. There is a suicide during the night he spends in Kaltag, and the next morning as he is leaving he is confronted by "a small throng of high school boys" who ask, "What the fuck are you doing here, white guy?" (187). That question resonates far beyond the edges of one small Bush village. What are the likes of Hildebrand, many teachers like he was (and for one of whom he is mistaken in one village), doing in rural Native Alaska? There is no answer for this question, just a further intensification of the book's mood of loss and displacement.⁵

The last place Hildebrand visits on the Yukon is Steamboat Slough near St. Mary's, a graveyard of old riverboats:

The ships were lined up in a row at the end of the slough, mothballed against better days that never came. The wooden ribs had been cut off at the water line and the superstructures cannibalized over the years, so that all that remained of the great stern-wheelers were the boilers, winches, and cogwheel sprockets, rusted and gull splattered.

In place of the sea, this would have to do for a final destination. (234-35)

When we return to Hildebrand's homestead in the last chapter of the book, we cannot help suspecting that the bear-vandalized cabin he straightens will end up like the steamboats, "mothballed against better days that never came." The eager expectations that first drew Hildebrand and other hippie homesteaders like him to Alaska have finally been disappointed:

Rain drummed on the roof. It was the same coastal storm, moved inland, that had dogged me on the river. The rain kept me stuck here just as it had kept me from reaching the sea. In the steady drumming, I heard the sad echo of my ex-wife's voice.

"But there's nothing to do here."

I had never come up with an answer for that. On the Yukon what had amazed me most was how people faced a landscape that was so utterly indifferent to them without bitterness and even with a lightness and gaiety about them, realizing that there was, finally, nothing to be done. (241)

One person who found more than enough to do during her twenty-plus years in Alaska was the poet Sheila Nickerson, but at the end of her book, she too leaves. *Disappearance: A Map*, sub-titled "A Meditation on Death and Loss in the High Latitudes," is a blend of history, journalistic miscellany, and memoir. The dozens of deaths and disappearances Nickerson chronicles—some famous and mysterious like the Franklin expedition and the Hale Boggs/Nick Begich flight, others less well known but

personally closer to Nickerson, and still others simply noted in passing from newspaper stories—are interwoven with autobiographical details of Nickerson’s two decades in Juneau. They have been, by her account, good years, including a stint as Alaskan poet laureate, but juxtaposed as they are with one depressing story after another, they take on something of the feeling of a prison sentence. The second half of the book is actually in diary form, giving us the sense of a countdown, toward disaster or toward freedom, we are never quite sure. Of course, that is the nature of impending retirement for many people—threatening as well as promising—but Nickerson feels herself “surrounded by change and loss. . . . standing on the brink of disappearance” (9-10), afraid she will be swallowed up by the darkness like so many of the people whose stories she tells.

Disappearance is made up of many short sections, some only half a page. It begins, “I live in a place where people disappear. Alaska. Too large to comprehend” (3). It ends, “There is no hope, there is no searching. The compass has ceased to spin. There is only the falling of the snow, the stillness in the sanctuary of true north” (283). In between there are perhaps hundreds of disappearances and disasters, recorded with the meticulous care of an archivist (which Nickerson has been). The journalistic parts are a kind of anatomy or compendium of disappearance, a litany of loss. The least journalistic parts, those that are most personal, are reminiscent of May Sarton or Annie Dillard, the story of a woman in late mid-life searching for the holy in the interstices of ordinary life. Nickerson is a New Age gnostic who believes in the power of silence and the ineffable, but delights in books and maps. Her dilemma provokes sympathy in all of us who carry a novel when we go backpacking. And the pattern of disappearance she chronicles cannot be denied—though it is somehow ignored, every day, by all sorts of northerners (including me) who hardly notice how many of our fellow citizens vanish, so inured to it we have become.

The first loss recorded, and one to which Nickerson returns often in the book, is that of a co-worker, Kent Roth, whose plane disappeared in the vicinity of Yakutat, along the treacherous, exposed coast that separates Southeast Alaska from the rest of the state, an area “sometimes referred to as Alaska’s Bermuda triangle” (5). From the details of the search for Roth, Nickerson segues into a history of deaths and disappearances in the Gulf of Alaska, especially the spooky Lituya Bay:

Native carvers sometimes depict the Tlingit legend of the Lady of Lituya Bay: A band of Tlingits once raided the bay in an overland attack, killing many victims. They took a woman hostage to guide them safely out of the dangerous waters of the bay. The woman, grieving for her slain husband and family, directed the raiding party onto shoals, killing them all—and herself in the process.

My place—my life—was Lituya Bay: beautiful, breaking open, scarred; criss-crossed with echoes and ghosts; a place dangerous to enter and leave. (41-42)

This passage neatly illustrates Nickerson’s methods, both its drawbacks and its strengths. The Tlingit legend is interesting, though covered rather quickly. The

comparison to Nickerson's own life is startling and compelling. But one wonders what disasters on the scale of such a massacre make Nickerson's life so "dangerous to enter and leave," not to mention what exactly that phrase refers to. Birth and death? The coming and going of other people in her life? From all the evidence in *Disappearance* Nickerson has had a good life, financially comfortable, professionally successful, with her children well launched and she and her husband preparing for early retirement. Whence all the scars? Of course, everyone feels at one time or another that life is battering, "criss-crossed with echoes and ghosts." As the book goes on and one gets to know Nickerson better, one may be more willing to grant comparisons that seemed a little melodramatic at first. But the fate that looms over her throughout *Disappearance* remains, after all, only leaving Alaska for a winter (or more) in the Carribean. Compared to the deaths and close calls she chronicles, her own leaving seems like a lucky escape.

Though her "discussion of polar exploration" has been criticized as "thin and misguided,"⁶ complete or balanced history is not the point of *Disappearance*. The background Nickerson provides—on the Franklin expedition and Alaska Native history, for instance—is interesting to the lay reader.⁷ But it mainly serves to provide atmosphere for the autobiography and the chronicle of contemporary disappearances. What the historical details meant to Nickerson herself, how they lodged in her memory and imagination, is what counts. This book is, after all, a "meditation," an intensely personal exploration of recorded events. In the progress from Haines to Hildebrand to Nickerson, it makes a kind of sense to say that we have moved increasingly from impersonal to personal. But Haines' accounts of wolves and bears and old-timers are in another sense just as intimate as details of Nickerson's children and pets. All three books describe individual dreams and ambitions coming smack up against the tough realities of Alaskan life; all three share a search for what has been lost, a tone of mourning, and a view of Alaska as a beautiful, daunting place to which one comes in high hopes in one's young adulthood, to be tested, but which one must finally give up.

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There is another way of thinking about Alaska, however: as a place to be *from*, the center, the home-land.⁸ This "borealcentric" view is natural to the indigenous peoples of the North, and for some white writers becoming an Alaskan means adopting elements of the world-view of Alaska Natives. Nick Jans' *The Last Light Breaking: Living Among Alaska's Inupiat Eskimos* is dedicated "To the elders, who remember," and one might think at first that this dedication is offered in the same spirit as Haines' memorial for the last survivors of the gold rush days. However, it turns out that Jans' elders are thriving, and passing on their learning to younger people (including Jans) in a tradition that not only is not disappearing, but is making a comeback.

Jans' book is made up of twenty-three fairly short chapters, some only a couple of pages. Though not in strict chronological order, they begin with Jans' arrival in Ambler,

in northwest Alaska, and his first year there, working in the general store, before he became a teacher. He kids himself about making the adjustment, and refuses to play the role of the local expert even after more than a decade in the North: "All these years later, I still recall that first simple failure to understand; it reminds me of all my failures since then, and of the distance that remains" (25). This respect for local culture and willingness to take on the role of continuing student make for a very humble and appealing authorial persona. By the third chapter he is helping two elderly Inupiat women with their annual whitefish harvest; they grow increasingly "like schoolgirls" in their eagerness to "Work hard until the season is over," while he is exhausted (38, 39). Despite his immersion in the work, he has a moment of feeling "ashamed" of his own "squeamishness," and it is impossible not to admire him both for throwing himself into the subsistence ritual and for acknowledging the distance that remains between him and those who have always led this life.

Any number of particular episodes from this book would be worth recounting, but it is the cumulative effect that is, finally, what makes *The Last Light Breaking* so valuable. Jans gives white readers a sense of what it means to learn over time from a living Native culture. This is what Alaska has that few other places in the United States can claim: wide areas in which the Native culture is dominant and the white, mainstream American culture is still a minority latecomer.⁹ Jans has lived for years in the middle of one of those areas, Northwestern Alaska, the Kobuk and Noatak, and the whole time he has lived there he has been a student. One book cannot duplicate years of hard-won experience, of course, but it can do a marvelous job of re-creating some of the best moments of that experience for readers who may never come anywhere within a thousand miles of Alaska.

One of the best things about Jans' portrayal of contemporary Inupiat life is his honesty about how Inupiat culture has changed over the last century. No healthy culture will remain static, or fail to borrow from its neighbors. Thus, the traditional life that Jans discovers is not identical with life on the Kobuk centuries ago, but a descendant of that life. For instance, Jans has positive things to say about the huge Red Dog zinc and lead mine, which offers much needed jobs for locals in exchange for development that will necessarily destroy fish and game in the area of the mine. He gives equal time to both sides of the issue, discussing the environmental dangers of the mine as well as explaining why it was backed by the NANA Native Corporation. The lesson seems to be that maintaining a traditional and independent way of life requires compromise between resource development, which will help locals thrive in a cash economy, and environmental conservation, which will preserve the needed expanse of wild land for subsistence hunting and fishing.

Jans handles such seeming contradictions with tremendous grace, describing both the freedom and the intrusion associated with snow machines, the ancient power and necessary suffering of hunting, the loneliness of isolation and the warmth of community

in that distant corner of the continent. Because each essay is so cohesive, building to a powerful conclusion, it is difficult to give in excerpts an adequate sense of Jans' writing. But let a paragraph from his last chapter suffice:

When I first saw Ambler in 1979, it was a different place. Two hundred and fifty people lived there then, a hundred fewer than today. Most of the buildings that stand now didn't exist back then—the freezer plant, the Kobuk River Lodge (once Erik's Ambler Trading), the city office, the fuel project, the clinic, the Traditional Council building, two small stores, the new Friends church, and more than twenty cookie-cutter modules that the Eskimos call "housings"—prefabricated dwellings with tile floors, paneling, and indoor plumbing, much superior to the sort that Nelson Griest and others received. (Those units were so shoddy that they were eventually given away.) The gravel runway up the hill, once lit by hand-placed kerosene flare pots, now boasts an automated electrical system, and there are high-tech navigational beacons to guide pilots in. The Alaska Department of Transportation laid a grid of gravel roads through town, complete with stop signs. Of all the changes that have come, those half-dozen red metal octagons bemuse me most; they stand scattered about the village, propped against a huge backdrop of sky and land, insisting on human order and limitation. I look at them and wonder if I should laugh or weep. (210)

That choice of responses is appropriate to so much of the life Jans describes, including the schools in which he has taught, where students are now able to learn Inupiaq but are still plagued by all the problems—poverty, inappropriate teaching materials, high turnover among unprepared teachers, alcohol and drug abuse, to name just a few—that haunt Native American students all over the United States. Tradition does not provide easy answers to modern problems, Jans suggests, but it does make a solid place to stand, from which to begin trying to address those problems.

The challenges facing teachers in rural Alaska turn out to be remarkably similar to those facing inner city teachers, according to Carolyn Kremers. Kremers began teaching in rural Alaska mainly as an adventure and ended up finding her calling (though today she teaches university students rather than K-12). In *Place of the Pretend People: Gifts From a Yup'ik Eskimo Village* Kremers, like Jans, describes her years of teaching as a simultaneous process of learning. The "Pretend People," stone cairns above the village where Kremers lived on Nelson Island, like the "Real People" she lived among, teach her important lessons about "how things change and don't" (102).

The Yup'ik Eskimo village of her title is Tununak, in southwestern Alaska, and she taught there for only two years (plus another year in Bethel at the Kuskokwim Campus of the University of Alaska). As she says in her Preface, her book "visits, also, Colorado, Chicago, and Siberia" (9), ranging in flashback to her experiences hiking in the Rockies, teaching on the South Side, and traveling by train across the U.S.S.R. But mostly it is about Alaska: about following a trapline and hiking a wilderness race with her lover; teaching music and English to Black and Yup'ik children; and struggling to learn dancing, language, carving, and a traditional respect for animals and the land. In the course of the book Kremers parts ways with her lover; though the loss is profoundly

felt, the dominant tone of *Place of the Pretend People* is not that of mourning, as it is in *Reading the River*, but rather of gratitude, and of willingness to accept pain as a part of fully living. The most important gift Kremers is given is Alaska itself, both its people and its natural beauty:

When things change, the Eskimos are ready. It has often seemed so to me, anyway. My Eskimo friends have seemed better than I at dealing with unexpected events.

I know that such conclusions border on stereotypes, but cultural differences do exist. I have seen such differences, have lived in the middle of them. To live inside a different culture is a striking way to learn. (99)

At times her spiritual journey almost becomes too personal, the web of symbols and stories too specific to her own life. But in the end Kremers manages to maintain a kind of grave reserve coupled with careful observation, a counterbalance that keeps *Place of the Pretend People* from spiraling into self-absorption.¹⁰ The hard lessons she has learned by paying attention are applicable far beyond her own life.

When, near the end of the book, Kremers returns to Tununak (like Hildebrand returning to his homestead), the situation in her former school seems to be improving:

The teachers in Tununak will have an awards ceremony in the gym for all of the students on the last day of school, and I will notice how cheerful and cooperative the staff is, how young and new to teaching. There will be no mention of low standardized test scores Sally, the woman who sold me salmon each winter, will tell me why she has not made many knitted gloves or grass baskets this year. She has been teaching students at the school to make them. (232)

Kremers has a moment of envy, wishing things had been this good when she taught there. But not everything is improving. There are fewer dances, replaced by bingo every night instead of just two nights a week. And some changes are still in the balance, as a new political militancy, reflected in a unilateral declaration of the sovereignty of Indian Country in Tununak, makes headlines all over Alaska, but also divides the community. Overall, however, the picture of rural Alaska we get from Kremers reflects renewed interest by Yup'ik in their own traditions and greater respect among whites for the value of those traditions. As we travel with Kremers in her search for the right way to live, we discover also that it is perhaps becoming easier for rural Yup'ik children to feel at home in the intersection of two very different cultures.

Richard Nelson's *The Island Within* is about Nelson's own quest to feel at home in one particular corner of the world: a wilderness island in Southeast Alaska.¹¹ Structured as a year-long series of visits to the island from his home in Sitka, Nelson's book is nature writing at its most religious. Visits to the island are for Nelson a devotional practice, and the annual cycle of nature is like the Catholic monk's daily cycle of prayer.

Nelson is a professional anthropologist, and has published on the Inupiat culture of Northwest coastal Alaska and the Athabascan culture of the Interior Koyukuk. In the

process of studying these people he has himself been converted, to belief in a world full of spirit and in respectful humility toward that spirit as the highest human virtue. Rather than as his “subjects,” Nelson refers to the elders of Wainwright and Huslia as his “teachers,” and *The Island Within* is his attempt to live their lessons. Many anthropologists have extolled the virtues of the foreign cultures they have studied, but Nelson goes a step further, adopting many of the beliefs of the people he lived with and attempting to put them into practice on his own, in a predominantly white, relatively large town (for Alaska), a thousand miles away from the Inupiat and Athabascan communities where he learned those beliefs.

The book begins and ends with early-winter deer hunts. On most of his visits to the island, including those when he hunts, Nelson is accompanied only by his dog Shugnak. Hunting is partly an excuse to be on the island, observing, but it is also important for the year’s food supply. Though they do not live a subsistence lifestyle, Nelson and his family consume a great deal of fish, berries, deer, and other traditional fare. Like Thoreau, Nelson is occasionally troubled by the act of killing, even for food, but unlike Thoreau, Nelson does not plan on giving it up:

It is a very large buck. He comes so quickly that I have no chance to shoot, and then he is so close I haven’t the heart to do it. Fifty feet away, the deer lowers his head almost to the ground and lifts a slender branch that blocks his path. Snow shakes onto his neck and clings onto the fur of his shoulders as he slips underneath. . . . In the middle of a step he raises his head all the way up, and he sees me standing there—a stain against the pure white of the forest, a deadly interloper, the one utterly incongruous thing he has met here in all his life Here is a perfect buck deer. In the Koyukon way, he has come to me; but in my own he has come too close. I am as congealed and transfixed as he is, as devoid of conscious thought. It’s as if my mind has ceased to function and only my senses remain. (262)

When the buck flees, however, Nelson obeys “the predator’s impulse to pursue,” and soon does shoot it:

Incompatible emotions clash inside me—elation and remorse, excitement and sorrow, gratitude and shame. It’s always this way: the sudden encounter with death, the shock that overrides the cushioning of the intellect. I force away the sadness and remember that death is the spark that keeps life itself aflame: these deer we eat from, and the fish, and the plants that die to feed us. (263)

Such killing, not to mention the detailed account of skinning out the buck that follows, may be a shock to some fans of contemporary nature writing. But the “nature” that Nelson writes about is different from that defined in western culture for the last two hundred years as “everything which is not us.” What he has learned from his Inupiat and Koyukon teachers is a way of life by which humans are once again at home in nature, part of the eternal cycle, relieved of the burden of “dominion over all.” Instead of Nelson taking the deer, the deer gives itself, as later another deer gives another kind of gift, allowing Nelson actually to touch her during an astounding and luminous

encounter in the forest.

There are hundreds of animal encounters in *The Island Within*, with bears, whales, eagles, sea lions, and dozens of other less glamorous species. About all of them Nelson gives us fascinating information, displaying, as reviewer Glen A. Love noted, a “sense of intimacy with all aspects of the natural world, especially with animals” (60). While we are along on these trips to the island, we manage to pick up a lot of natural history. But almost every biological lesson is accompanied by a spiritual message:

The shiny lure slips into the depths, and I jig it up and down for about ten minutes without feeling a bite. Finally, there is a sharp tug on the line and slow, powerful jerks that indicate a good-sized lingcod The lingcod is about two feet long, mottled gray, slender-bodied except for a very large head and a huge mouth rimmed with fanglike teeth. Many times I’ve reminded Ethan [his son] not to insult lingcod by commenting on their looks, and to remember instead the delicious food they provide for us. (65)

This reminder is no mere gesture, but the expression of genuine belief in a world in which the spirit of the lingcod would hear the insult and withhold itself from the fisherman. That is the profound challenge of reading *The Island Within*: Nelson is not merely offering lip service to such beliefs, but actually seeking to practice them, and to convince us of their validity and viability—or rather, their beauty and their truth. Nelson is no fan of the clear-cutting once practiced on the island, and his politics could only be characterized as liberal, especially for Alaska. But his is not exactly a stereotypical preservationist ethic either. Rather, it is a traditional Native ethic, based on give-and-take with the natural world, through subsistence hunting and fishing with the proper attitude of respect. Living in Sitka with his small tribe of wife, child, and dog, Nelson is a kind of shaman, translating belief into action and action into words.

* * *

Haines and Nelson both learned about hunting from their teachers, and when they talk about their ambivalence toward killing animals or their sense of belonging in the wilderness, there is a powerful sense in which they are brothers. All six of the authors I have discussed are deeply respectful toward the northern land, its animals and plants, the people who call it home. All six books are spiritual journeys. I don’t wish to suggest that either view of Alaska is truer than the other, or that either group of books is better written. All six of these writers are authoritative and insightful; all are giving us the truth.

But it seems to me that deep truths require a mythological underpinning, a foundation of interwoven stories and beliefs upon which to draw. Each of these two groupings I have identified draws on a different mythological schema, a different dream-setting upon which to map the realities of Alaskan life. Haines, Hildebrand, and Nickerson describe Alaska as a “frontier,” with all the freighted connotations of that word for Americans. It is the nature of the frontier to be simultaneously harsh and evanescent, to be an eternal testing ground that cannot be overcome, and at the same

time a fading remnant of the past, a kind of Brigadoon that slips through one's grasp. This is not to say that the Alaska of *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire, Reading the River,* and *Disappearance* is not real, merely that it is not *just* real, or not real in the same way as other places. The frontier has long been America's most sacred liminal space, the edge where white men (and women) go to be tested, but where they cannot remain. As "the last frontier," Alaska is a particularly poignant site for the American imagination, especially when skilled memoirists can accurately evoke the aspects of Alaskan life that inspired and continue to inspire the myth.

The Native American has long had a starring role in the American frontier drama, of course. At least since Cooper's homages to the vanishing red man, the Native American has been the embodiment of the frontier, both in his fierceness and in his quiet disappearance. In the Alaska described by Jans, Kremers, and Nelson, however, Alaska Natives aren't going anywhere. The mythos upon which their books are built includes old stories of Raven the creator, and new ones of hunting with snow machines and fighting for sovereignty. Contemporary traditional Native life as described in *The Last Light Breaking, Place of the Pretend People,* and *The Island Within* rarely matches sentimental stereotypes of the noble savage living the ancient ways. Alaska's Native cultures are not museum tableaux, but changing societies, constantly borrowing from and compromising with mainstream American culture. Learning Native beliefs is more like jumping aboard a moving kayak than it is like reverting to a simpler past.

The notion that modern whites can individually adopt traditional Native beliefs is in some ways just as romantic as the idea that Alaska remains a living remnant of the frontier. But both of these conflicting views are no less true for being romantic. Alaska is simultaneously both the edge and the center of the world. John Haines and Richard Nelson hunt the same wild country, though it sometimes feels as though one hunts in the evening and one in the morning. The best nature writing and the best autobiography are about spirit, about the glimpses one is given behind the pasteboard mask of the world. But the choice of a mythos by which to look deeper into the world sends these six books in two different directions, as is most evident in their different tones: elegiac or nostalgic on the one hand, and auspicious or hopeful on the other.

Anyone, white or Native, may come to see Alaska as home rather than as frontier. Third-generation white Alaskans may still be as rare as third-generation white Californians were not long ago, but where one is born is not really the point anyway. What matters is whether the North is seen as margin or center. Neither view is likely to triumph completely over the other. Sherrill E. Grace, a very perceptive critic of Northern writing, said, in 1991, that "The North was, and remains, largely inaccessible, uninhabitable, silent, mysterious, and deadly" (250)—despite Alaska having been continuously inhabited for longer than anyplace else in the hemisphere.¹² Obviously the North has successfully resisted being reduced in the Southern imagination to the plane of the actual. Truths are many, and sometimes contradictory. America's northern

borderland is likely to remain a powerful setting both for those writers searching for the everlasting frontier and those who have found an ancient homeland.¹³

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Notes

1. My thanks to a reviewer of this essay for calling to my attention Thomas R. Berger's 1977 *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*, one of the first important documents to make this distinction.
2. I realize that one of the biggest generalizations I am making is lumping together several very different cultures under the one politically expedient label of "Native." ("Native" or "Alaska Native" is generally used in Alaska in preference to the broader "Native American" or the Canadian "First Nations.") I can defend this only by pleading that Tlingit and Yup'ik and Inupiat and Aleut and Athabaskan cultures have much more in common with each other, in fundamentally important ways, than they do with mainstream Euro-American culture. The biggest thing they share, in fact, is precisely their conflict with white society.
I should hasten to add that Jans, Kremers, and Nelson do not themselves employ this generalization as hastily or loosely as I do; a respect for particular beliefs of particular people—Inupiat, Yup'ik, or Koyukon Athabaskan—is part of what they value in the cultures from which they have learned.
3. Several critics have noted that Haines' writing is full, as he himself puts it in the Preface to his collected poems, "of a prevailing somberness, of a tone that might be called elegiac" (*The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer* 3). One recent essay by an editor of the first collection of critical works on Haines is titled "An Elegist's Dream" (*The Wilderness of Vision*).
4. "The Traveler," *Winter News*, p. 45.
5. Nick Jans and Carolyn Kremers *do* answer that question, as I will argue below. As teachers in rural Alaska what they are mostly doing is learning.
6. Marjorie K. Cole, p. 2.
7. Though a key event in northern Canadian history and a common reference in much of Canadian literature, the story of the Franklin expedition is relatively unknown among Americans. One beneficial effect of Nickerson's book might be to educate a few Americans about an important piece of Canadian history.
8. Rudy Wiebe and Aron Senkpiel, among others, have discussed as critics (and attempted as creative writers) such writing from a Northern Canadian perspective. It is from Senkpiel that I first learned this distinction between North as edge and North as center.
9. Large reservations in the Southwest and the Northern Plains, the homelands of Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich, perhaps come closest to the situation in vast areas of Alaska, and of course Indian Country exists all over the United States in smaller parcels, but

the scale is so different in Alaska as to suggest at least the possibility of a qualitatively different situation. In the case of Canada, of course, the creation of Nunavut may go considerably farther in the direction of sovereignty than any situation in the United States.

10. As, for instance, Canadian writer Aritha van Herk's nonfiction book *Places Far From Ellesmere* occasionally does, and as William T. Vollman's *The Rifles* frequently, deliberately, self-parodically does.

Kremers' inclusion of some of her own poetry also counterbalances the many personal references, paradoxically, because the poems include translations of Yup'ik sentences and descriptions through the eyes of her students.

11. In keeping with Nelson's intentions and the practice of other reviewers, I will not identify the island by name—though it is not difficult to do so from the descriptions Nelson supplies.
12. I learned a lot from Grace's observations on the differences between the American West and the Canadian North, but I have to say that I do not think she does full justice to the mythos of the West, as, for instance, in comments like the following: "Compared with the face of the American West, that of the Canadian North is complex, multiple, and above all, elusive" (255). I think the similarities, at least in Alaska, are profound. And the West remains pretty darn "complex, multiple, and . . . elusive."
13. I have chosen not to discuss in this article any number of "pioneer memoirs" and other nonfiction books, mostly in the "frontier" mode. But there have been several important nonfiction books published in the last half-dozen years in addition to those discussed in this essay. I think my model holds up pretty well for "frontier" books like Grant Sims' *Leaving Alaska* and Jennifer Brice's *The Last Settlers*, and "homeland" books like Jans' *A Place Beyond* (subtitled "Finding Home in Arctic Alaska") and Nancy Lord's *Fishcamp and Green Alaska*. But Sherry Simpson's *The Way Winter Comes* is an interesting exception: it treats Alaska with a range of tones, mostly optimistic, and as a homeland rather than a frontier, but is not in any obvious way influenced by Native beliefs. I hope the discussion I've begun in this article will be engaged by other critics, and I think Simpson's book would be a good place to start the next round of that discussion.

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