

The Unreliability of Place Construction in Contemporary Alaskan Regional Writing

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Abstract



Alaska's geographic isolation results in the fact that most people experience the Far North only second-hand, commonly from the narratives of visitors. Those representations, overshadowed by myth, define Alaska as a region and reflect on the literary imagination of the 49th state. This paper analyses the reader's image of Alaska and its inhabitants by tracing how regional narratives are perceived by scholars and reviewers, paying attention to the historically different transatlantic perceptions of indigenous peoples and Arctic nature. It becomes clear that Alaska as a setting, as described by its inhabitants, relies on imposed qualities that depend on the self-perception of the outside observer and not on the narration. The contested narrations of Velma Wallis and Sheila Nickerson help to position Alaska as a stage for the struggle over the spatial meaning carried out between outsiders. Conscious of this power struggle and its importance, these contemporary regional authors engage in the discourse over Alaska's representation by narrating its unreliability. These authors produce texts that invite different readings to foster a cultural discourse about the meaning of the Alaskan place within the national identity and policies.

Keywords: Alaska, place and space theory, geographical imagination.

Resumen

El aislamiento geográfico de Alaska se debe al hecho de que la mayoría de las personas experimentan el extremo Norte sólo de segunda mano, normalmente a partir de los relatos de visitantes. Esta representación, eclipsada por una larga tradición de mitos, define a Alaska como región y se refleja en la imaginación literaria del estado 49^º. Este artículo analiza el paradigma del lector de Alaska y de sus habitantes a través del estudio de cómo los estudiosos y críticos no-académicos perciben las narrativas acerca de dicha región, prestando atención a las percepciones transatlánticas históricamente diferentes de los pueblos indígenas y la naturaleza ártica. Es evidente que Alaska, como lugar descrito por sus habitantes, se basa en cualidades impuestas que dependen de la auto-percepción del lector foráneo y no en la narración. Los escritos de Velma Wallis and Sheila Nickerson colaboran en posicionar a Alaska como un escenario para la lucha sobre el significado espacial producido por los observadores foráneos. Conscientes de esta lucha por el poder y su importancia, estas autores regionales contemporáneas participan en este discurso narrando la falta de fiabilidad de la memoria, el lenguaje y la representación. En lugar de escribir en contra de la imaginación espacial, producen textos que sugieren lecturas que fomentan un discurso cultural acerca del significado de Alaska.

Palabras clave: Alaska, teoría del espacio y lugar, imaginación geográfica.

Alaska's geographical imagination owes significantly more to associations than to its physical reality. This is due to its geographical isolation, which is often neglected within the American collective identity and memory (Kollin, *Imagining Alaska* 6–8). Power relations dictate that the Alaskan landscape is defined by those who visit the 49th state and not the people who inhabit it (David 6–7; Riffenburgh 11; McGhee 10). The result is an imposed understanding of Alaska which is reflected in the framing of regional literature by reviewers. This paper situates the unreliability of Alaskan landscape representation by observing how regional authors narrate human interaction with the Alaskan place and how outside reviewers reflect on this relationship. The essay argues that the contemporary Alaskan authors Velma Wallis (1993) and Sheila Nickerson (1996) engage in the discourse of image-making by emphasising the unreliability of place perception and representation. The locally produced texts seek a variety of different interpretations to foster a cultural exchange about the meaning of the Alaskan place: Wallis initiates a cross-cultural conversation about place representations whilst Nickerson traces failed survival attempts as coordinates outlining a map of Alaska which invites the reader to interpret the landscape as well as history. By emphasising the unreliability of interpretation, both writers urge their readers to form a view of the Alaskan place which is aware of the employed meta-perspective that constructs Alaska as Other.

The discursive construction of Alaska is the result of a desire to posit the Far North outside American cultural demarcations. Edward Said (1995) explains that by creating arbitrary geographical distinctions like “designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ours and an unfamiliar space beyond” derives identity from those boundaries; consequently the outside becomes associated with fictionalised qualities (54). The constructed distinction between insiders and outsiders is similar to the suggestion that place-attachment can be understood as concentric circles; with the familiar as a centre, the further away, the more exotic the surrounding will appear (Chawla 66). Indeed, Stephen Haycox (2001) comments on the image which outsiders have when visiting: “most Americans regard Alaska an exotic venue [...] not unlike [...] a curiosity” (146). Consequently, this collective understanding of the landscape reflects on the Alaskan self-image but also on the reader’s imagination.

The most prominent features attributed to Alaskans by outsiders are that they “cling to the conviction that the North is different” (Haycox 141). However, the first impression is that most Alaskans live in an urban setting and have access to infrastructure, education, medical facilities, entertainment and most other comforts similar to people in the lower 48 states. At first glance, the life of most Alaskans does not differ significantly from that of any other American town. However, the exaggerated tales about life in the North, mostly written by visitors, establish a discourse of frontier and civilisation, and margin and centre, which brings those dichotomies together and provides a stage on which to re-imagine the American nation. Hence, the purpose of Alaskan regional writing is, in this context, the urge to locate a naturalised version of the American nation (Kaplan 253). At the same time the framing of literature by Alaskan authors highlights environmental anxieties through the foregrounding of natural

plenitude, which may well be interpreted as frontier nostalgia by the reader. For the outside observer, frontier nostalgia reflects a space which can be economically developed—just like the American frontier. But for Alaskans it is a way to reconnect with the lower 48 states by reconnecting with its history.

This discourse over their identity defines Alaskans, who like to see themselves as rough individualists, as the archetypical American Adam on the Last Frontier. However, instead of demonstrating frontier independence, Alaskan resources are exploited by outsiders similar to a colony (Haycox 156). But the construction of Alaska's characteristics as Last Frontier fosters an image of the landscape which Anne McClintock (1995) terms anachronistic space—a space out of touch with time (41). Indeed, the perceived landscape had seemingly not changed, even for some visitors who directly experienced it. In 1879, an American expedition, led by John Muir (1988 [1915]), found “untouched” and “unnamed wilderness” (103). The Gold Rush undoubtedly shaped the physical space, as did the search for copper and oil, but left the image of Alaska untouched. The writings of Jack London and Rex Beach imagined Alaska as an anachronistic space which functioned as frontier adventure setting. In 1992 Chris McCandless noted in his diary that it was an “uncharted country [...] a blank spot on the map” (Krakauer 173). Thus, the imagined qualities of Alaska as anachronistic space infiltrate the public imagination in a way which geographies never could. These images reflect on contemporary Alaska—and also on its regional writings—and create a place which might appear out of touch with time and the world.

David Harvey (1996) realises the concept of place as an unreliable point of reference. Intrigued by the concept of a gated community he observes the need to secure place as *inside* and against “uncontrolled vectors of spatiality” by creating an *outside* (292). Harvey argues that spatial rootedness and local identity are requirements to face our contemporary and globalised world context. Understanding the Alaskan place perception as a process which shapes social interactions provides not only regional place identity to local readers but also identity to outside readers. Thus, regional placeness is achieved by exclusive or inclusive subjective acts of perception. Equivalent to real locations, this process is employed to create imaginary places in literature. The communicated *sense of place*, that is, the impression that the reader knows what a certain place is like, evokes and fosters associations (Cresswell 8). Because Alaska as real world-place and as place in the literature exist simultaneously, the unavoidable clash of the perceived places determine the relationship between locals and the outside world. The author Wallis, for instance, clearly claims her stake and shows that there was no empty space: conscious of the Euro-American vision of Alaska, she explains that “[t]his story [...] is from a time long before the arrival of the Western culture” (xiii).

A Cultural Conversation about the People's Land

Wallis's *Two Old Women. An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival* is based on a Gwich'in oral legend of two elderly women abandoned by their tribe during a winter famine. The two women miraculously survive as they attempt “to die trying,”

manage to gather enough food for the next winter, and rejoin their still desperately hungry group (16). By sharing their supplies, Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak help the group gather new strength to outlast the winter. Wallis's narration promotes a view of the world based on her indigenous upbringing whilst incorporating contemporary Euro-American elements to define the Alaskan place. However, as I argue, the latter elements are ignored in the narration's responses. Instead, the reader's remarks on the framing of the book and its contents paint the author and place as exotic and lacking connection to the contemporary world. As described earlier, humans understand the world as concentric circles around home, and with each step away from the familiar spot, the world seems increasingly different and therefore unfamiliar habits can be understood by explaining the outside world through one's own terms, creating a fantastic blend of the imagined and the observed.¹

The image of the indigenous people relies mostly on snap-shots of encounters recorded through the eyes of Euro-Americans, whose cultural paradigms define the recollections. When discussing indigenous literature, history, and culture, the focus used in the reader's interpretation is usually based on his or her already constructed cultural filters and depends on what appears important to him or her. Unfortunately, no analysis can rid itself from its own cultural lens; and it is only recently that indigenous people have started to share their history with Euro-Americans. Wallis is the first Alaskan Gwich'in to engage in a conversation with the outside world about her traditions, having written several critical essays and three books. The Gwich'in are a traditionally nomadic group who speak the Athabascan dialect. There are very few insights into Gwich'in culture, as they consider it taboo to share their customs with outsiders (Childers and Kancewick 8). *Two Old Women* is Wallis's first book and, somewhat astonishingly, is highly critical of her people, thus showing that the author is eager to engage in self-reflective discourse about her people's perspective of the contemporary world and their history. The critical voice shows the tribe not as victims in the frontier process but as confident people with a strong connection to the land which is now endangered by resource extraction.

As observed by Joy Porter (2005), indigenous writers tend to "bemoan [the] scholarly resistance to Native perspectives both in literature and criticism" (184). She states that this accounts for situations in which indigenous material was cut from publications, as it did not match the Euro-American merit and was categorised as "fish tales that grow with telling" (184). Wallis reaches out and approaches our cultural framework, as she engages in our language and place names whilst making concepts understandable. If we look closely, her narrative is a portrait of her culture and, at the same time, a cultural conversation which bridges the different knowledge-frames between Alaskans and outsiders. The fact that Wallis herself prepared and polished the story is a unique opportunity to study what she wants her reader to know about the Gwich'in and Alaska. In traditional cultures which depend on the migration of animals, information is often conveyed through stories. These stories are more than just

¹ I rely in parts on theories of oral history from contiguous America, and refer to writings about the indigenous peoples in North Canada, who share a similar knowledge-frame as Alaskans.

entertainment; they provide a sense of identity by placing the listener within a tradition that transports a knowledge system structured by interaction and dialogue (Ruppert, "Survivance"). Hence, the narration communicates and discusses tradition whilst adjusting it to the contemporary situation.

In her story Wallis chooses to refer to Euro-American place names as well as Gwich'in names. The provided maps are hand drawn, out of scale, with little caribou symbols and images of hunters scattered all over them. Interestingly, one map has a compass needle which marks out North. This is pointless in Alaska but useful for the outside reader. The conventional geographic markings make no sense in the Far North, as the Earth's magnetic field prevents a compass from showing the North accurately. Thus, the map is a hybrid and combines cultural elements; it accurately shows Wallis's current knowledge which is informed by both paradigms. For instance, on one map there is a small black cross between a lake group and a river; the cross might denote either Wallis's birthplace, Fort Yukon, or the place where her mother introduced her to the story. Either way, she imprinted something about herself onto this map, as she is part of this story just like the reader, for whom she marked North and the Arctic Circle.

Ruppert (2005) evaluates the works of Wallis as invaluable for the teaching of American literature, as her books deconstruct the boundaries between genres in the Euro-American sense. Wallis contributes to oral traditions, aiding the evolution of traditional indigenous cultural values. By recording oral history in writing, the stories themselves are altered to survive. But, the question must be asked, how does the meaning change for the Euro-American reader who is unfamiliar with the place described? One imagines the Gwich'in group gathering around a fire in the dim winter lights and listening to ancient stories. What happens to the information when a reader is curled up on the couch, sheltered from the elements and reading the same story? As the tale is removed from its context, it appears to create a window into indigenous culture framed by the cultural values of the Euro-American reader. In the original context, the people had the option to ask questions, as oral story telling is a dialogue. This process allows the indigenous culture to adjust to the timely situation and the interaction between listener and storyteller creates a self-understanding of both. Wallis remembers being intrigued by the story "because it was a story about [her] people and [her] past—something about [her] that [she] could grasp and call [hers]" (xii).

When reading the published story, readers gain access to this process, and the story becomes identity-forming for the readers whilst also establishing boundaries of self and the Other. Similar to Harvey's observers of the gated community or Said's outsiders, the reader is bound to the limited information on the pages and his or her cultural knowledge to create a mental picture of the communicated story and landscape. This transformation is an important factor in transcultural conversation. As Wallis provides a lot of additional information in her book, she answers the assumed questions of the reader. The maps tell of the location, whilst the drawings show what the protagonists looked like, what they wore, and how their shelter was built, and the book has additional information at the front and back regarding the Gwich'in and the Athabascans. This information details their territory and lifestyle, and it provides

explanations of social practices, contemporary life, photos of the author and her family, her biography, and the biography of the artist who illustrated the book. Wallis anticipates questions by the reader similar to the dialogue in the oral tradition when she provides guides and answers to the questions the reader might have. The book includes a table of contents which points out maps and details; she offers information on a golden plate; something very similar to a textbook. Assigning the story of the *Two Old Women* to common categories such as *novel* and *fiction* would fictionalise the information given in the book and deny its value as a usable past for the Gwich'in. The ongoing discourse about the fictional character of indigenous narrations suggests that written oral stories only fictionalise by bridging text and interpretation. Instead, a narration could be considered as an ethnographic collection (Ruppert, "Why We Should Teach"). In an interview with her publisher HarperCollins, Wallis explains that telling stories in written form is "a new way of getting stories out to the younger generations." By adjusting the story and the way it is told it becomes part of contemporary American culture and, thus, more than history or ancient myth. Wallis is well aware that she is able to negotiate between cultures. Understanding Wallis only in the context of an excluded static indigenous culture would imply that she should not be allowed to be part of this time, and it would enforce the reading of her as Other.

The dangers of ignoring the conversation between indigenous and Euro-American cultures sparked by the book is highlighted by underlying interpretations of reviewers and scholars, which frame the book. These readings appear anticipated by the author, when paying attention to the skilful framing of the book by the editor. The reviews illustrate how this reading leads to the misinterpretation not only of the narration but also Alaska and its population. A "responsible feminist-tribal reading" is offered by Genie Babb (1997), who argues that the use of the English language and a classic Aristotelian narrative structure consisting of conflict, crisis, and resolution transforms the story into a European tale with indigenous protagonists (306). Babb's reading illustrates the parallels of the plot and the debate surrounding the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The Gwich'in rely on the migration of the porcupine caribous who calve in ANWR, which is threatened by oil exploitation. In Babb's reading, Wallis's narration reassures the tribe that they should continue trying to resist the imposed power that threatens their subsistent life. This victimisation appears simplistic when considering that some Gwich'in representatives are in favour of drilling, as they are shareholders of the oil industry thanks to the Native Claims Settlement Act. In contrast, Babb's understanding supports a story line in which those who depend on the land will not harm it.

Since its publication, the book has sold nearly two million copies and has been translated into 17 languages. It has been reviewed by many mainstream American newspapers; the reviews are well-meaning and enthusiastic, but they make sense of the book in their own terms, mostly by emphasising the individual human experience and its apparent universal moral. In addition, the reviews emphasise the Otherness of the story, mostly in terms of its location. The blend of universality and Otherness conceals the power relation in the interaction between Alaska and the lower 48 states to make

the story accessible. For instance, the review by author Ursula Le Guin, quoted on the cover, emphasises that “this story seems to come from a place and people utterly different from modern America.” The review focuses on the “utterly different” Other that communicates universal wisdom which, despite its Otherness, is accessible. Most reviews follow this pattern and fail to look at the cultural roots of the book. Instead of mentioning the indigenous nature of the book, the reviewers place it in a canon of fictional representations of Alaska, sublime nature, and individualism. John Murray’s review (1993) talks of a “Jack-London-like tale” where the protagonists “triumph over adversity.” The reviewer Margaret Saraco (1994) admits that the story caters to her longing for “rugged country and gentle souls,” which she knows from her “weekly doses of TV’s Northern Exposure” (66). Flo Whyard’s (1994) review calls it a “real breakthrough” for American literature (135). For the Canadian writer, it is important to let the reader know that this book was “written, edited, illustrated and published by Alaskans” to install regional pride (135). The review illuminates the struggles of the publication more than the contents of the narration.

According to these reviews, the book’s appeal stems from the fulfilment of the romantic perception of the Alaskan landscape and the fight for survival in an unforgiving environment. Thus, the narration appears to satisfy Euro-American expectations of a conflict-centred plot and a universal moral. It is unsurprising that Gwich’in organisations are critical of Wallis’s publications and have tried to prevent them (Wallis 143). The afterword in the *Two Old Women* tells the reader about the struggles author and editor had to face. Both earned harsh criticism and were told “[they] would make Athabascan people look bad” (143). As a result, Wallis became “decidedly unpopular” (143). Readers also learn that the editor and University of Alaska Fairbanks instructor Lael Morgan started raising money for the book together with her students (144). This unexpected information in the afterword frames the author as innocent but also rebellious: In the introduction, Wallis confesses to be still enjoying her mother’s bedtime stories as a grown woman. The reader learns that Wallis did not know where to use commas, so that she left them out completely, and that she fell in love for the first time whilst working on the book (144–145). The mental image of Wallis “with a pepper shaker full of commas” patronises her (145). This discourse helped to construct circumstances to ease the reader’s imagination of the naïve but well-meaning women with little literary skills, who only with the help of Euro-American money was able to convey her story. It turns out that the book was supposed to be financed through student funding only, although Epicenter Press was eventually able to raise enough money. Indeed, not only do the introduction and the afterword create the image of the child-like naïve women, but the design of the book itself also aids the illusion. The page design of the Epicenter Press edition consists of very large writing, sizeably spaced with few lines on a page and an abundance of illustrations printed on thick paper. The outline underlines the framing of the author as innocent and naïve.

In contrast, the book’s content focuses on strength and on the fact that its author had been “taught from childhood that weakness was not tolerated among the inhabitants of this harsh motherland” (4). A close reading reveals that it was not tribal

politics which demanded the abandonment of the women, but rather the land. The day the decision was made to leave the two old women behind, the chief justified the decision as “the starkness of the primitive land [...] demand[ed] it” (5). The tribe was “forced to imitate some of the ways of the animals [...] Like the younger, more able wolves who shun the old leader of the pack, these people would leave the old behind so that they could move faster without the extra burden” (5). Every time the women remember the people, the wolf-people metaphor guides their memory. Animalistic features appear to suggest cruelty to a Euro-American reader but clearly underline the connection to the land. The women fear other groups and their own people who might “do desperate things to survive”; for example, they hide whilst on the move and disguise their tracks (34). Wallis reveals an understanding of humans as part of nature, exposing them as a threat similar to animals or the cold. Survival is not possible by conquering nature, but is instead achieved by respecting it. For instance, the two women interact with the land, as is illustrated by an agreement with a stalking bear. They start leaving food for it and are not harmed in return (82). Instead of the victory over isolation and the ethics of frontier individualism, the circumstances of living off the land become apparent. Detailed descriptions on the making of snowshoes, the interpretation of weather phenomena, the use of snares, or the transportation of coals in hardened moose skin sacks are included. What might have once been Gwich’in traditional trades becomes a demonstration of knowledge and entertainment for the reader.

When the two women finally reached the camp spot where they planned on spending the long winter, they were overwhelmed by the feeling of coming home (52). Inspired by the Christian notion of paradise, it is a classic American western belief that nature offers human nature self-connectedness. However, no romantic notion of nature is found: “all depended on the land, and if its rules were not obeyed, quick and unjudgemental death could fall upon the careless and unworthy” (43). What reminds the Gwich’in of survival and their connectivity to nature invites the Euro-American reader to see nature as a place to prove oneself. When the women discuss their fear of death, they emphasise the physical pain they had to endure while their mental horror is played down. In a similar fashion the narration fosters an emotional reader response rather than describing emotions in the text. Wallis’s narrative strategy makes the women appear brave, and together with the author, they turn into heroic, empowered feminine figures—but only for Euro-American readers. In the interview with her publisher HarperCollins, Wallis explains that the Gwich’in language knows no gender and that she never attempted to empower women in her story. She explains that gender is not important to her people, as long as one proves oneself skilled for a task and follows traditions—a world view which appears controversial in the gendered Euro-American understanding.

Wallis’s book addresses the tradition of senicide as a central issue. Although assisted suicide rates amongst the elderly indigenous peoples in Alaska are high, there are very few studies on this controversial topic. The only paper on this topic, Alexander Leighton’s *Notes on Eskimo Patterns of Suicide*, dates back to 1955. Leighton underlines the cultural value of suicide. His study concludes that senicide and suicide are mostly

non-ritualised, motivated by the feeling by the elderly of being no longer useful, and commonly carried out by their dutiful children (328–329). Leighton tries hard to communicate the functional aspect and the economic and social motivations behind the killing of the elderly to the Euro-American reader. According to Leighton, the task of “ridding the society of unhappy people” as well as the ‘entertainment factor’ of senicide, apparently similar to European public executions during the Middle Ages, signify a functioning society and are of bonding quality (337–338). Whilst there is no recollection of this practice in recent studies, one is bound to think that senicide is a myth, but interestingly enough, it is the topic addressed by Wallis. All reviews manage to avoid talking about this major event of the book. Another example of the denial of senicide can be found in the archives of the online open source encyclopaedia Wikipedia, where the authors of an article on Inuit culture have a heated discussion about whether senicide should be mentioned. In 2008 one unnamed author suggests including the practice, as *Two Old Women* addresses the issue. Another author writes, it “is a parable, it is not a history” and another writes, “it is fiction.” Ruppert, who participated in the discussion, refers to the book as a “primary document” which therefore proves senicide as a cultural practice. However, his assumption is said to “denigrate” indigenous culture, and as a result, the reader of the encyclopaedia article is left in the dark. Thus, for the reader of *Two Old Women* Alaska is shaped by the Otherness of the landscape as well as its inhabitants—a representation in flux where everything is possible, but nothing can be definitely pinned down.

Mapping the Landscape of the Lost

Maps are both records and symbols of the changing perceptions of the world; they express the knowledge of the cartographer as well as the perspective of the user of the map. Nickerson recognises Alaska as a uniquely mapped landscape shaped by a long tradition of unsuccessful attempts to map the North. In her memoir *Disappearance: A Map* the social construct of the Alaskan landscape is the primary marker which helps to trace the author’s own imprint onto Alaska and recovers other marks left behind. At the same time, she narrates different versions of the same place by looking at different maps. The multi-layered narration begins with her personal journey and her attempts to come to terms with her upcoming retirement, the impending move away from Alaska and the disappearance of her colleague Kent Roth. By interweaving her own path with disappearances of humans, animals, resources and cultures throughout history she establishes a connection between her own life and Alaska’s history. However, Nickerson chooses not to track the lost people, but, instead, the memories and artefacts left behind. The tracking of things and thoughts left behind relies on a subjective interpretation as these things have to be put into context to understand them. Nickerson uses these interpretations to narrate unreliable information and also to connect Alaska to the contemporary outside world.

To describe her terror about what is lost to the land and its people is an impossible task; instead of pursuing it, she warns her readers that words are unreliable

“monuments of fear” and are marked by timely emotions (118). She shows how recorded memory, such as newspapers, maps or books, is only a small part of what remains. The limitations of language and memory are central to her project; she exposes both as untrustworthy. However, they are her only means of communication. Memory and words therefore also function as her guide. “Incorrect maps led [the explorers] beyond imagination to what we might say was real” (175). This struggle over the unreliability of sources dominates *Disappearance*—and so does the dependence on the written word. The self-reflection of the limitations of the author results in a critical discourse about the reliability of documents that demonstrates the subjective nature of communicated information. As a result of Nickerson’s struggle, the novel is simultaneously marked by trust and distrust in her own narration. To counteract this unreliability, Nickerson offers a cartographic text that assigns historic events as guide points. These events are interpreted according to Nickerson’s personal reflection and invite the intended reader to connect and position him- or herself in relation the events. This gives the outsider a chance to connect to Alaska and local events while at the same time exposing place as an unreliable point of reference.

The appeal to freely interpret the narrative is further fostered by the structure of the book. Nickerson’s text conjoins and interweaves diary entries, anecdotes, poems and historical narrations. Each chapter is titled ‘records’ and is accompanied by latitude and longitude coordinates, similar to a logbook. Nickerson’s search for coordinates and spatial rootedness shows a need for stability and a *sense of place* that at a closer look falls apart as *simulacra*. She emphasises that the interpretation of place through maps relies on how others saw and see Alaska. To document the *sense of place* and counteract unreliable sources, she attempts to create a timely memory map in the second part of the book that might help to remember those memories lost during her last Alaskan summer. At the same time, she ties herself up amongst the lost as it is time for her retirement and to disappear from the Alaskan stage.

For Nickerson, the possible multitude of place interpretations is a burden, as she is insecure about the best way to narrate her story (23). She alarms the reader about the subjectivity of the text: narrated maps “can be made from any perspective, used for any bias, for any purpose, but they can never be totally objective” (24). In *Disappearance*, anecdotes and legends are used to illuminate a cultural map of Alaska in addition to a geographical space. This strategy reflects a deep map, named after the subtitle of William Least Heat-Moon’s *PrairyErth. A Deep Map* (1991). According to Lawrence Buell (1995), a deep map is a memoir genre that requires a cartographic reading of landscape, culture, and history (273). Combing empirical and formal knowledge as a deep map provides a bridge between the subjective place and the objective space (Roorda 257). The book describes and captures the temporary *sense of place*, “a thick layer of history, memory, association, and attachment” that helps outsiders to experience Alaska in the small window of time Nickerson describes (Ryden 38). Thus, deep mapping provides a chance to read self-reflective landscape that joins layers of images between outsiders and insiders.

To create her deep map Nickerson forces connections between herself, history and place by tracing coincidences. For instance, she remembers a friend, Wilkie Collins, who shared the name with the author of *The Moonstone*. Nickerson was left a moonstone necklace by her great-aunt, and she starts identifying with the protagonist of Collin's novel (192). These "translucent bands of names and connections" allow her to narrate her personal story as well as history (192). Those references attest to a wide general knowledge but they also assume that the reader is able to keep track at the same time. To back up her personal deep map, Nickerson includes a bibliography, definitions of terminology, long indented quotes and references to other literature that result in a well-researched text that is almost academic in its appearance but remains dominated by her poetic choice of words. The deep-map approach allows her to reflect on the Alaskan landscape without claiming to objectively define it. She describes her relationship with nature as fearful, admitting "[she] live[s] in fear of the cold" (14). Nickerson recognises nature mostly as threat; she tells of wildlife attacks and never mentions her admiration for nature. Instead she describes Alaska by employing adjectives that are commonly used to express pain; for instance, "tortured land" or the "assaulted terrain" (32; 40). This personification of landscape allows the author to communicate her anxiety about the powerful natural world and at the same time those phrases have a second meaning that implies environmental and cultural violations by outsiders. Consequently Nickerson makes it clear that the quest to find oneself in Alaska is fruitless as those voyages search "for what exists only in imagination" (175). Visitors search for a construct they created themselves:

those who come to Alaska, the land of promise, come to find that which is lost only to themselves—money, power, position, authority—or a wilderness they think will save them from the evils of a more crowded world. They come with hope, because the spaces within Alaska are very large. The horizon, often obscured by range after range of rock—or fog—has not quite been pinned down. Boundaries are vague. (44)

As Nickerson concentrates on waypoints left behind by those who were defeated by nature, rather than people who returned and could tell their story, she indicates that most knowledge depends on interpretations of recovered artefacts. She refers to Sir John Franklin's expedition and the marks and anecdotes it left on the landscape. The faith of Franklin and his 129 well-equipped men, leaving England in 1845 in search of the Northwest Passage for a trip that evidently came to an end in the Alaskan Prudhoe Bay is, to this day, uncertain (Riffenburgh 25). All indications of what happened to Franklin are based on recovered visual fragments such as, for instance, buttons or silverware (Robinson 55). The interpretation of those artefacts is shaped by the collective memory and hopes of the outside observer and illuminates the different modes of knowledge that manifest themselves in the geographical image of Alaska.

When the British explorer John Rae returned from his search for Franklin, he was the first to report the evidence of cannibalism amongst the desperate crew. Victorian England was outraged and, in shock, the British blamed the indigenous peoples for stealing from Franklin's crew and possibly killing them. The reason for the British disbelief was based on the military honours that expedition members had received.

Franklin and his men were decorated with the highest ranks in the Royal Navy and therefore were of “the highest character of British people” (Robinson 55). The British public questioned Rae’s sources, which relied on indigenous reports. The “testimony of savages, they argued, had to be weighed against the far more reliable attributes of British character” (Robinson 56). The famous response by Charles Dickens to Rae’s report champions Franklin and his men who “outweigh[...] by the weight of the whole universe the chatter of a gross handful of uncivilized people” (qtd. in Robinson 55–56). The perception of the found artefacts could not have been more different in America. The American explorer Captain Charles Francis Hall, who also participated in the search for Franklin, is remembered for his friendship with indigenous Arctic peoples (57). He was convinced that they must have aided the survivors of Franklin’s party, who would have probably preferred their new life amongst the indigenous peoples to the British existence. Both extreme scenarios seem unlikely, and countless other outcomes could be possible but as the example shows, the two different interpretations of the found artefacts are based on imagined qualities; they depend on character and morals. The ‘British interpretation’ relied on the connection between military honours and good character, whereas Hall believed in the noble qualities of the Arctic people. Obviously other qualities, such as political revivalism, the growing interest in the lives of indigenous peoples and the opportunity to overturn captivity narratives influenced the perception of Franklin’s faith. There is to this day no conclusive proof in this matter.

The second part of the book is a diary of the months before Nickerson’s retirement; it is a repetitive listing of disappearances. The many names result in confusion for the reader but allow Nickerson to demonstrate that all parts of society are affected, all ethnicities, gender and ages. She includes accounts of indigenous people who disappear and exemplifies the faith of Ada Blackjack, an Inuk who was recruited for an ill-planned colony on Wrangel Island (111). In contemporary times, Nickerson argues, indigenous peoples lost contact with the land and, therefore, their knowledge to survive. This is a direct result of a geographical imagination imposed by outsiders who had changed, for instance, place names. The comprehension of the disappearance of people and places translates into the loss of power over the own environment for the Alaskan society. When Nickerson remembers her lost colleague and the glacier where he disappeared she observes “a huge white area” on the map that is not blank after all (276). Alaska appears like an empty place—but it is a place with a long history, that is—like the people in Nickerson’s story—only covered by meta-narratives symbolised by snow and ice.

The interpretations of the book re-imagine Alaska as exotic Other and outside place that is understood through the lens of post-colonialism. For Susan Maher (2004), *Disappearance* describes “Alaska’s hybridizing contact zone” lacerated by permutations and cultural clashes (379). She argues that the image of Alaska stems from modern colonial history “dramatizing the dissonance of competing cultures and ideologies within a contact zone” (366). Consequently, Maher assesses Nickerson’s dispute with the male white colonizer as she reads the book in the canon of post-colonial literature and concentrates on Nickerson’s domestic life. Maher adopts the understanding of humans

as intruders and, for her, the natural space itself “adds to the devastation humans have brought to themselves and others” (372). Her knowledge of history is erroneous when she argues that “Europeans introduced [...] trappers [and] whalers” as those are traditional hunting methods that have been used before the Europeans set foot in North America (371). For Maher, seemingly all evil was introduced by Alaska’s visitors “aiding the colonizer’s desire,” who unarguably brought diseases and forced religious beliefs onto the indigenous peoples, and appropriated natural resources (371). Whilst for Maher *Disappearance* supports the colonial myth, Susan Kollin (2007) understands Nickerson’s writing to be the “underside of heroic adventure narrative” that questions the survival discourse within a place constructed as exotic (“Survival” 146). Kollin observes an emerging backpacker and outdoor culture in the lower 48 states that is fostered by narrations like Nickerson’s *Disappearance*. The visit to the exotic Other shows Alaska as a place of faraway adventures that has little to do with contemporary American culture.

As the book’s contents are emotionally disturbing, it is no surprise that there are only a handful of reviews. Those, however, demonstrate the forced connection of *Disappearance* to demonstrate an exotic travel destination—a reading which follows Kollin’s approach that illustrates the importance of the used cultural lens and how it influences the perception of the reading. According to Georgia Jones-Davis’s review in the *Los Angeles Times* (1996) the book was triggered as an answer to the publicity gained by Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* (1996). The critic argues that Nickerson demonstrates that “experienced bush pilots” also vanish. Critic Donna Seaman (n.d.), discusses Nickerson’s obsession with the disappearance of Euro-American explorers that, according to Seaman, motivated Nickerson to leave Alaska as long as she still could. Craig Medred (2010) discusses the book fourteen years after its publication in the regional *Alaska Dispatch*. The occasion is that his friend, Kent Roth, who triggered Nickerson’s mediation, has not been found and yet another one of his friends has just disappeared. The review grieves his friends lost in “a torturous wilderness.” He argues that Nickerson paints the picture too narrowly by focusing on specific regions and that instead “the whole friggin’ state is one big Bermuda Triangle.” He continues Nickerson’s narration and shows that *Disappearance* is neither about a post-colonial landscape nor about criticism of gendered adventures, but that instead the disappearance of people and places is a large part of Alaskan identity.

This identity relies on information that might have been the truth to the writer at the time; however, the truth is always shifting. Narrations are artefacts of the timely *sense of place* that might be outdated by the time they are read. To make sense of a story, the narration has to be backed by the imagination, which depends on the mindset of the reader. In the end, how we read the stories tells more about ourselves than about the narration. The reader reconstructs his or her vision of the landscape and focuses on the complex interplay arising from the dichotomy of repulsion and attraction between place and the protagonists. As the reviews of both books demonstrate, the Alaskan place and its inhabitants are mostly observed through a (post-)colonial lens as exotic Other, whilst both authors aim to demonstrate long-standing connections between Alaska and the

lower 48 states. By inviting the reader to become part of a cultural conversation or to add his or her own meaning to a map, Wallis and Nickerson offer a chance to establish a connection between the outside world and Alaska that might influence further discussions about the use of the place, especially with regard to recent environmental debates.

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