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What's Really in Alaska?

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Senior English Thesis
Peter Betjemann, Advisor

"We might go to Alaska," Jack said. "Alaska?" Carl said. "What's in Alaska? What would you do up there?" "I wish we could go someplace," Helen said. "What's wrong with here?" Carl said. "What would you guys do in Alaska? I'm serious. I'd like to know." Jack put a potato chip in his mouth and sipped his cream soda. "I don't know. What did you say?" After a while Carl said, "What's in Alaska?" "I don't know," Jack said. "Ask Mary. Mary knows. Mary, what am I going to do up there? Maybe I'll grow those giant cabbages you read about."

Raymond Carver, "What's in Alaska?" (57-8)

The name "Alaska" is taken from the Aleut word "alaxsxaq" that refers to an object to which the sea is directed, in this case the Alaska peninsula and mainland. This is sometimes loosely translated as "great land."

Netstate, "Alaska"

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What's Really in Alaska?

John McPhee and Raymond Carver

Part One: Distance

Alaska: "The Last Frontier"
-- Netstate, "Alaska"

It has often been remarked that the writings of early American nature writers have led to current day environmental protection, and individual nature writers (such as John Muir) have long been connected to American environmentalism. In *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement*, Daniel J. Philippon points out, "In at least five separate cases, a nature writer was prominently involved in the formation and development of an environmental organization," and goes on to give the examples of Theodore Roosevelt and the Boone and Crockett Club, Mabel Osgood Wright and the National Audubon Society, John Muir and the Sierra Club, Aldo Leopold and the Wilderness Society, and lastly, Edward Abbey and Earth First! (Philippon, 2).

Despite this, not all critics view the American early environmental movement as entirely benevolent. In *Nature's State: Imaging Alaska as the Last Frontier*, Susan Kollin argues that the discourse of early American environmental consciousness is closely connected to the discourse of American imperialism and expansionism, all of which were concurrently occurring. Kollin comments, "the environmental discourse shaping Alaska cannot be separated from the nation's larger expansionist concerns and its historical development" (Kollin, 6). And a little later on, she writes,

At the turn of the century, however, a movement also arose that expressed concerns about the proper uses of that national landscape. During this period, frontier discourses helped shape environmentalist rhetoric, and ecological projects became closely linked to U.S. expansionist enterprises. (Kollin, 6)

Further, Kollin posits that "nature tourism" (visiting places for their natural scenery, not for their urban life) is closely tied to imperialist sentiments, explaining "Alexander

Wilson points out that in hindsight these nonindustrial uses [i.e. setting land aside for national parks] have largely turned out to be tourism, an activity that shares much in common with the imperialist adventure by advocating an “unquenchable” appetite for the ‘exotic’ and ‘unchartered’” (Kollin, 12).

Taking a third view, this essay will argue that the language of early writings about the Alaskan natural world (focusing on ones by John Muir and Septima M. Collis) were not only purely environmentalist or imperialist, but rather, early nature writings seem to employ the language of distance and disconnection between man and nature. This vocabulary (one that often uses certain aspects of the traditional sublime convention to highlight the purity and vastness of nature) is not restricted to the two writers discussed. After all, just as it is inevitable that writers will use the language of their culture in their writing, it seems that Collis’s and Muir’s representations of Alaskan nature very much reflect the values and attitudes of late 19th century America.

The importance of calling attention to man’s early established disconnectedness to Alaskan nature is that the effects of this distance are felt and seen today. It may be argued that this distance helped to encourage, and to allow, man’s plundering of the natural world, as it is often easier to cause destruction to something from which one feels disconnected than to something to which one feels attached. A recent example of this distance helping to promote natural devastation may be seen in the U.S. Senate debate over whether to allow the opening of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) for oil and gas drilling. Arguments for drilling (Alaska is big enough for both development and resource protection; gas and oil drilling can’t hurt the Arctic tundra.) may relate to Americans’ historical disconnection from Alaska, which is manifested in commonly held

views that Alaskan nature cannot be damaged by human behaviors and that it is a limitless frontier. After looking at the disconnection promoted by early Alaska travel writers (Collis) and naturalists (Muir), the second half of this paper will examine the ways in which more recent American environmental activism has worked with and against the earlier environmental movement's (unconscious and inadvertent) vocabulary of distance. I will look at how recent environmental groups and writers create, use, and promote a new environmental vocabulary, one that encourages the joining of humans and nature in order to protect the natural world. Lastly, this paper will consider how John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* and Raymond Carver's "What's in Alaska?" appear to see Alaska's (both physical and intellectual) distance from humans as enabling—and perhaps even necessary for—an emotional connection to the land.

Stephen Greenblatt makes an argument parallel to this distance-destruction one in his book *Marvelous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World*, in which he examines the role of wonder in early Spanish accounts of the New World. Greenblatt connects the distance wonder can produce to the Spaniards' ability and desire to plunder the New World's land and exploit its people. Greenblatt highlights the ease of the transition from wonder (what he calls "all that could not be securely held" (Greenblatt, 74)) to destruction of what was once wonder-filled. He writes,

To wonder is to experience both the failure of words—the stumbling recourse to the old chivalric fables—and the failure of vision, since seeing brings no assurance that the objects of sight actually exist. The assurance comes rather from violence: the still moment of admiration gives way to the Spanish penetration of the city and the horrifying chain of events that leads to its destruction. (Greenblatt, 138)

Thus we see here a link between plundering and possession. To destroy is to establish domination, as destroying finally closes the distance between oneself and the unknown.

In 1890, Septima M. Collis, wife of Civil War general C.H.T. Collis, and author of *A Woman's War Record*, sailed, without friends or family, on a cruise ship through Alaska's Sitkan Archipelago. This journey is recounted in her book, *A Woman's Trip to Alaska*, which highlights many aspects of her rail trip from New York City to Washington State, and then her ocean experiences to Alaska. Among the sights discussed are the Fort Wrangell totem poles, Sitka's Russo-Greek church, the Fairweather Mountains, and the Muir Glacier. Seeing the Glacier for the first time, Collis tells readers, "To say I was transfixed, speechless, fascinated to intoxication by the spell of this marvelous development, is no exaggeration." And she reports of the other passengers, "Those who reached the deck first seemed paralyzed, halted, and thus blocked the way for those who were to follow; others kept within the saloon from choice, as though they dreaded some phenomenal convulsion" (Collis, 145).

Collis was a well-educated, well-informed tourist, but not a natural scientist. Her account of her travels is largely tailored to make clear how one may visit Alaska, not how one may understand the land. She begins her Preface by asserting,

In the following pages I have not made even a pretense of writing a scientific or historical work. [...] My sole object is to put on paper, for the benefit of others, the impressions made upon me by the voyage, and to explain how this delightful excursion can be enjoyed without the slightest fatigue or discomfort and at a trifling expense.

However, even in the accounts of the well-known American (though Scottish born) naturalist, John Muir—a founding member of the Sierra Club and one of the organization's first presidents—the territory's natural grandeur is continually emphasized. Observing Glacier Bay after a long solitary hike, Muir notes,

before I had reached a height of a thousand feet the rain ceased, and the clouds began to rise from the lower altitudes, slowly lifting their white

skirts, and lingering in majestic, wing-shaped masses about the mountains that rise out of the broad, icy sea, the highest of all the white mountains, and the greatest of all the glaciers I had yet seen. Climbing higher for a still broader outlook, I made notes and sketched, improving the precious time while sunshine streamed through the luminous fringes of the clouds and fell on the green waters of the fiord, the glittering bergs, the crystal bluffs of the vast glacier, the intensely white, far-spreading fields of ice, and the ineffably chaste and spiritual heights of the Fairweather Range, which were now hidden, now partly revealed, the whole making a picture of icy wildness unspeakably pure and sublime. (Muir, 148-9)

Similar to Collis, Muir uses much of the traditional convention of the sublime in this description of the natural world.¹ Though early in this passage, Muir sexualizes nature, noting that the clouds are “slowly lifting their white skirts,” by the end of this description, Muir has retreated from the landscape, his view increasingly panning out, pulling away from any kind of closeness with the natural world. He sees “the whole making a picture of icy wildness unspeakably pure and sublime.” The shift from sexualizing nature to observing its purity and chastity—Muir literally calls the glacier “ineffably chaste”—seems to suggest that Muir’s interactions with the natural world ultimately tend to ones of distance.²

For Collis and Muir, it seems a natural wonder can only be impressive and worth writing about if it is physically impressive. Both authors continually point out the

¹ The concept of the sublime was first introduced through the work of the philosopher Longinus, though later adopted by the philosopher Edmund Burke, among others. Author Samuel H. Monk notes “The test of the sublime is in its effect” (12); for the object in question to be truly sublime, it must raise some combination of fear and awe in the viewer. The effect the sublime is supposed to have on its observer can be seen in Burke’s description of a flood in Dublin: “It gives me pleasure to see nature in these great though terrible scenes. It fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon itself” (quoted in Monk, 87).

² In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Frazier Nash comments on Muir’s detached descriptive techniques and their perpetuation in other texts, “John Muir started a tradition in 1879 by characterizing Alaska’s wilderness as “pure,” subsequent tourists used adjectives such as “absolute” and “ultimate.” The words “nameless,” “trackless,” and “unknown” figure repeatedly in descriptive prose, and they are meant to be laudatory” (275).

hugeness of what they see, either directly or obliquely. When Collis admires and describes the natural world around her, she writes either about its entirety or large aspects of it. For example, Collis examines an entire landscape from her position on the ship's deck, noting

[. . .] I leaned upon the rail of the ship, peering into the twilight, every now and then catching a glimpse of some new wonder in the distance and trying to mould it into form; filled with an ecstasy of amazement and surprise which I had never before experienced in a somewhat adventurous life. (Collis, 130)

Muir also highlights the hugeness of the natural world. Describing Glacier Bay, he comments, "We rowed up its fiord and landed to make a slight examination of its grand frontal wall. The berg-producing portion we found to be about a mile and a half wide, and broken into an imposing array of jagged spires and pyramids, and flat-topped towers and battlements [. . .]" (Muir, 147). Thus, even here, where Muir is observing one portion of a glacier, he does not choose to "zoom in" on a particular section, but rather "zooms out" to discuss an area "a mile and a half wide."

To be sure, Muir's concern with the greater landscape continues throughout his account. Despite this, at points in his narrative, he does choose to examine smaller aspects of the natural world (for example, some parts of glaciers). However, even in doing this, Muir can be seen as emphasizing nature's grandiosity, for he can explain small aspects of the glaciers only using science; he explains their grandeur by suggesting that they are God-created (i.e. inexplicable for humans). In one instance, while still at Glacier Bay, Muir tells readers that the depressions on glaciers are made by "At length melting, a pit with sloping sides is formed by the falling in of the overlying moraine material into the space first occupied by the buried ice" (Muir, 155). Similarly to Muir's

scientific writing, Collis includes numerical figures to stress the giant size of the matter she is observing, and she often informs readers of the measurements of the objects she sees as well.

By highlighting nature's vastness, the authors appear to imply that the only way humans may relate to the natural world is by failing to comprehend it. Readers understand that the natural world cannot be considered in human terms and further, that nature as a whole cannot be understood scientifically; humans relate to it through awe of it. This is cyclical, for feelings of awe are not knowledge-producing but rather, knowledge-denying. Awe encourages nature to be viewed continually as humanly "unknowable," thus increasing the gap between man and the natural world.

Additionally, the authors' concern with representing Alaskan nature as great in size suggests that they are viewing the landscape from a physical distance, for things may appear especially impressive when seen from far away. Following, these two writers appear to be advocating that in order for nature to be traditionally sublime, it must be kept at a distance. Though Muir interacts closely with the natural world (he hikes and climbs), he still distances himself from it when he wants to describe its sublimity; he climbs the mountain-slopes so that he may admire the view from them (145).

Additionally, in many instances where Muir discusses the grandness of the scenery around him, he will only briefly mention how he was able to get himself to this viewing situation, thus suggesting that moments of physical closeness with nature are not as worthy of mention as moments of physical distance. He writes,

Pushing our way slowly through the packed bergs, and passing headland after headland, looking eagerly forward, the glacier and its fountain mountains were still beyond sight, cut off by other projecting headland capes, towards which I urged my way, enjoying the extraordinary

grandeur of the wild unfinished Yosemite. [. . .] No ice-work that I have ever seen surpasses this, either in the magnitude of the feature or the effectiveness of composition. (Muir, 226-7)

In this description, readers are not told about the experience of “pushing” through “the packed bergs,” nor about Muir’s urging his way.

Collis, too, distances herself from nature in order to “appreciate” it. The natural environment’s sublimity is lost to her when she finds herself physically too close to the natural world. In two such instances on her trip, Collis comes “too close” to nature. After exclaiming over the Muir Glacier’s size and colors, Collis spies some “dirty water” near her boat and reacts strongly against it. She writes,

As a contrast to all that is pure and chaste in the scene before us, there rushes out from the eastern end of the glacier a sub-glacial stream of thick dirty water, much resembling, as it boils up from its cavernous outlet, the mud geyser of the Yellowstone; this is a perpetually flowing river charged with sediment and *debris*, from the scouring process produced by the friction of the moving ice along its bed of rock; it gives the water in the inlet a thick gray color, utterly destroying the charm of its otherwise transparent character. (Collis, 149)

Though in this passage Collis indicates that she understands why the water has its brown color, she is angry that it does not live up to how it appears from far away. Further, after climbing the Muir Glacier, Collis tells her readers that “In fact I would advise all who wish to preserve the impression of Muir Glacier in it pure, idealized, unsullied grandeur, to stay aboard and gaze on its beautiful face” (Collis, 157).

Collis and Muir emphasize the disconnection between humans and nature by denigrating the Alaskan Native American populations. Both writers appear to believe the Alaskan Native American populations are inherently of a lower class than themselves, and even suggest that they are drunks or cheaters, willing to do anything for money.

Collis notes that the Native American women will not let themselves be photographed

until "We held aloft a silver dollar." After this, "Instantly there was a change. The superstition [of being photographed] simply consisted in the belief that it was not healthy to do anything without being paid for it, a superstition which seems to pervade waiters, and porters, and chambermaids, and that class of people all over the world" (Collis, 99-100). Though Muir allows Native Americans a certain extent of environmental knowledge (using the "good, brave ones" on his canoe trips), he often comments on their drunkenness as well as on their desire to learn Christianity from himself and the members of his party (Muir, 36). The lack of "real human" (i.e. white) interaction with the natural world adds to the traditional sublimity of this landscape, for it implies that "real humans" cannot survive for extended amounts of time in this setting. From these accounts, there seems to be no "human" long-term sustainable way of living in Alaska; humans cannot interact with nature on equal terms.

Further, besides disconnecting their readers from what they are describing, Collis and Muir emotionally and physically distance their readers from Alaska in ways not relating to descriptions of a specific environment. Both writers concentrate on their journeys to Alaska, thereby highlighting how Alaska is geographically removed from the rest of America.

Critics have called attention to other ways the distance inherent to the traditional ways of seeing nature concept of the sublime may have caused damage to the environment. In "The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics," Deborah Bright looks more concretely at how early representations of the natural world's sublimity are connected to human devastation of

nature. Bright suggests that early photographs, though tied to the beginnings of environmental awareness, were also connected to environmental destruction by encouraging land development. She writes,

William Henry Jackson's dramatic views of Yellowstone's geothermal spectacles are often cited as instrumental in convincing Congress to create the first national park in 1872. But this move (like the move to nationalize Banff a decade later) was powerfully backed by railroad interests that owned most of the tourist concessions and rights of way. (Bright, 61)

Later in her essay, she makes clear that sublime stereographs were partially responsible for the commodification of nature, acting as points of reference for travelers. These pictures enabled tourists to recognize and appreciate certain aspects of nature:

stereographs set the standards for scenic viewing pleasure. On their travels, tourists sought out the spectacular features they had already been shown in pictures: giant redwoods, spewing geysers, precipitous canyons, majestic mountains, and painted deserts. On an industrial scale never before realized, scenery was commodified, packaged, and sold to a mass public, its consumption a sign of leisure and status [. . .] (Bright, 61)

Most significantly, she argues that these widespread, impressive images of nature encouraged mass tourism, which was not conducted in an environmentally-friendly way³ (arguably, perhaps because nature was popularly viewed as being indestructible). "But the popularity of this genre of leisure consumption began to take its toll. Nature was literally being loved to death. In 1908 sixty-nine thousand travelers visited national parks. By 1921 annual attendance soared past one million" (Bright, 61).

Additionally, Henry Nash Smith and Lawrence Buell both contend that it is possible for wide-scale environmental destruction to occur in certain environments *because* other areas are viewed as great and limitless. For both writers, the

³ Collis, too, encourages tourism to Alaska. Towards the end of her book, she tells readers "What I have seen, you and they may see. Three hundred and fifty dollars cannot be more profitably spent for a summer vacation, and this is more than it costs from New York to the icebergs and back" (192-3). This paper will address tourism in Part Two, as well as in Part Three.

disconnectedness between man and nature has consequences not only for specific areas, but also for man's relationship with the natural world as a whole. Smith points out that the West has historically been seen by people such as Frederick Jackson Turner as a "Safety valve" and "bank account," thus excusing the destruction of other lands (Smith, 254). Further, in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Buell writes that "Historically, artistic representations of the natural environment have served as agents both of provocation and of compartmentalization, calling us to think ecocentrically but often conspiring with the readerly temptation to cordon off scenery into pretty ghettos" (Buell, 4).

Part Two: Closeness

"Wild Alaska is closer than you think."

-- Daniel Scott, "Hotel Captain Cook"

The environmental lobby's attempts to transform the conventional notions of nature's sublimity (located in its distance) is in many ways parallel to what feminist critics such as Patricia Yaeger have advocated doing to this traditional conception. Yaeger envisions a sublimity that resists the accepted notion of the sublime, one that she sees as being concerned with power and domination. Similarly, the modern environmental lobby attempts to modify the convention of the sublime, from a notion which seems to advocate the disconnection between humans and the natural world, to a way of understanding nature as awe-inspiring and grand, but also intensely vulnerable to human actions. In her essay, "Toward a Female Sublime," Yaeger emphasizes the need for a sublimity of closeness rather than one of distance. She describes the traditional notion of the sublime as the "old-fashioned sublime of domination, the vertical sublime

which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others,” and continues, “The Romantic sublime is a genre that is, historically and psychologically, a masculine mode of writing and relationship. [. . .] [It is] concerned with self-centered imperialism, with a ‘pursuit of the infinitude of the private self’ [. . .]” (Yaeger, 191-2). Yaeger’s antidote to this method of description is the female sublime, a sublime that connects the viewer with the viewed, encouraging coexistence, not domination of one over the other. Using Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘The Moose’ as an example of this sublime, she comments that in this poem, “The self, despite its self-centered illusions, is not obliterated [by the sublime object], nor is the object swallowed up by the subject that has perceived it, but the moment of self-structuring is revealed in its doubleness” (Yaeger, 207). In their separate methods but similar outcomes, it seems that both Yaeger and today’s environmentalists understand the importance of connecting humans to what is sublime, or finding a place for humans within what is sublime.

One of the distinctive differences between the earlier portrayals of Alaska and two more recent representations of Alaska (the Alaska Rainforest Campaign’s pamphlet “Alaska Rainforest: The Future is in Your Hands” and Chad Kister’s *Arctic Quest: Odyssey Through a Threatened Wilderness*) is that the later two are directly responding to perceived threats on specific Alaskan wild lands, while the other accounts are not. The Alaska Rainforest Campaign (ARC), made up of American regional and national environmental groups including the Alaska Wilderness League, Defenders of Wildlife, Earthjustice, Eyak Perservation Council, Audubon Alaska, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, Sitka Conservation Society, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, US PIRG, and the Wilderness Society, works to advance

the preservation of two national forests in Alaska, the Tongass and the Chugach. This particular pamphlet focuses on promoting the Alaska Rainforest Conservation Act, which was introduced to Congress on February 27th, 2003 by Connecticut Representative Rosa DeLauro. In his book, Kister, an Ohio native and environmental activist, argues against the development of oil and gas drilling in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), an area that since the 1970s has come under periodic pressure to be opened up to oil and gas development. Because each text is obviously concerned a direct threat to the environment, it seems reasonable to assume that the authors of these two texts are trying to encourage their readers to care about and to protect the natural places they describe. In other words, these texts must do what earlier representations of Alaska were not concerned with doing, and did not do. While Collis and Muir are interested in the vastness of Alaska, these more recent texts are focused on certain areas in the state; the ARC pamphlet and Kister book need to inspire human connection with these specific locations. To establish a link between humans and the environment, ARC and Kister modify the sublimity of the natural world, depicting simultaneously its vulnerability to human's destructive impulses. The modern environmental literatures also celebrate the lifestyles of different Alaskan native peoples, displaying examples of healthy and sustained relationships between humans and the natural world. Additionally, both texts encourage Americans' connection with these areas by making clear that these lands are national lands, places for Americans to visit and to be involved with, just as Americans are with the lands closer to them. Further, the texts are written in an easy to read language, discouraging the possibility of reader alienation from them, and lastly, by

leaving out personal details, Kister can be seen to be promoting readers' connection with his text and the subject of his text through readers' identification with himself.

Neither the ARC pamphlet nor Kister deny the sublimity of Alaska's landscapes; indeed, they both stress the sublimity of Alaska's forests in traditional ways (pristine and grand characteristics), as well as in a new way (its incredible aliveness). However, differing from previous accounts, ARC and Kister clearly show that the land is threatened by human behaviors. In modifying the historical representation of Alaska in this way, modern environmentalists can be seen as encouraging a human connection to the landscape. The land is dependent on human actions; it is not, and has not been, too sublime to resist humans actions towards it. Further, these texts encourage their readers to understand that humans now have the choice to either ameliorate their past destruction, or to continue to destroy.

The ARC pamphlet utilizes some of the same language as Collis and Muir, calling the Chugach "pristine, wild and ideally suited for Wilderness" (ARC, 2) and noting that "Visitors are drawn [to the Tongass and Chugach forests] by the spectacular landscapes of mountains, glaciers, and forest, by the chance to see wildlife, catch fish, and enjoy world-renowned recreational activities. Most of all, people come to experience an awe-inspiring sense of wilderness" (ARC, 9). These phrases harken back to the traditional myth of Alaska not only through their vocabulary of the sublime, but also through their references to wilderness as a sort of transcendental concept that needs no explanation. To visually prove Alaska's sublimity, the pamphlet includes photographs of land in the Tongass and Chugach (a few of which even include humans posed next to trees, displaying the striking difference in size between the two). Further, in a manner quite

reminiscent of Collis and Muir, the pamphlet uses measurements of nature to convey its sublimity to readers. For example, the pamphlet notes that in the Tongass, "Towering groves of Sitka spruce and Western hemlock trees grow to over 200 feet tall and as long as 1,000 years" (ARC, 3). In addition to being impressive on their own, these numbers demonstrate how wild, how untouched the land in the Tongass is. There are few trees in the lower forty-eight states that will grow to these heights, yet the Tongass is home to "groves." Further, the use of "groves" is interesting because this word connotes sublimity as well as domesticity, distance and connection. Groves in the lower forty-eight are farm trees, cultivated by humans; groves in the Tongass are wild, cultivated by no human. The ARC pamphlet also highlights a kind of sublimity that is little found in Collis and Muir, the sublimity of nature's aliveness. The text emphasizes the diverse animal life in the forests, explaining to readers that the Chugach is "Home to wolves, grizzly bears, sea otters, orcas and other sensitive wildlife species. The Chugach includes tide water glaciers, towering mountain peaks, and some of the richest wild salmon spawning in America" (ARC, 2).

Both the destruction humans have historically caused this land, as well as the potential human destruction that is threatening the land now, are referred to throughout the literature. In a passage about the Tongass, the pamphlet states that the forest is "one of the last places in North America where every plant and animal species that existed before European contact is still here," calling attention to the environmental destruction Europeans caused (ARC, 3). In addition, the pamphlet distinguishes between land that is sublime and land that is no longer. For the environmental groups in ARC, the not sublime lands are areas that have been destroyed by humans. A photograph of a logged area in the

Tongass shows part of the forest still standing, but large portions in the center cleared away, and lines of logging roads running through it. In the back of the photograph, the mountains with snow and evergreens still remain, suggesting that the cleared area was once majestic as well (ARC, 4-5).⁴ The pamphlet implies that all of the wilderness is part of a sublime system, one that humans can either destroy or appreciate.

Kister describes nature's grandness in a manner similar to ARC, leaving no doubt in the readers' minds of its sublimity, but stressing the fragility of the natural world by focusing on how easily man has destroyed (and can continue to destroy) it.

Demonstrating this, he compares the already developed for oil and gas drilling areas of Alaska (such as Prudhoe Bay, which he must hike through before reaching ANWR), and the yet undeveloped ANWR. Throughout the book, he writes enthusiastically about ANWR's beauty and grandness. He describes mountains as "mystical and elegant monuments of the landscape" (Kister, 53) and later tells readers, "I felt as if I was traveling in a dream, with this splendid temple all to myself. Everywhere I turned, more beauty awaited me. It is easy to understand why, for those who make the trip, it is a life-changing event" (Kister, 77). Further, in a passage where his language is almost identical to Collis's and Muir's, he notes, "The air smelled of diverse floral perfume. Cooking pancakes over a fire, I sat back and enjoyed the charm of the wilderness. It was everywhere in the Arctic Refuge's virgin sea of beauty, ready to greet the open senses. It was an opportunity available to all yet is rarely seen by most" (Kister, 134). Similar to Collis and Muir, Kister chooses not to scientifically explain the sublimity of the natural world, yet strikingly different from these two authors, Kister does scientifically explain

⁴ For a more extensive discussion of the photographs that were used historically and are used today to describe Alaska, see page 17.

the damage humans do to the landscape. By doing this, he is able to make obvious humankind's role in the protection and devastation of the earth. Discussing oil spills, Kister notes,

The impact of oil spills in the Arctic is far more severe than in warmer climates. Breakdown of benzene and other oil pollutants is several times slower in the Arctic than in temperate zones. The tundra belt is also much thinner, more prone to damage and slower to recover. Diesel fuel, the most commonly spilled pollutant is acutely toxic to plant life. The long-term impact of the industry is becoming clear: spill sites from half a century ago in the National Petroleum Reserve in northwest Alaska have shown little vegetative recovery. (Kister, 15-16)

In addition, Kister uses numerical figures to depict both nature's sublimity as well as man's impact on the natural world. In his Preface, he tells readers that "On the 1.5 million acre coastal plain [of the Arctic Ocean], up to 200,000 caribou unite to give birth." Later, describing some of the development of the Prudhoe Bay area, Kister observes, "Development of the roads, parking lots, buildings, poisonous waste dumps and pipelines of Prudhoe Bay consumed an estimated 60 million cubic yards of gravel, enough to fill 90,000 football fields to a depth of three feet. Years of dredging has [sic] disrupted the river ecosystem" (Kister, 12). As in ARC's use of "groves," Kister's decision to invoke "football fields" to help in his description enables him to combine domesticity with awe, thus relating the destruction that has been done in terms with which his readers are familiar.

The images in the ARC brochure and Kister's book also work to modify readers' traditional notions of the land. While Kister and ARC do include images of Alaska's natural grandeur, such as shots of mountains and clear bodies of water (for example, see Figure Six), both these texts also use images to depict the damaging impact humans have had on the landscape (ARC, 4). Further, the ARC pamphlet has some images showing

humans interacting with nature: a man fishing in a stream (ARC, 7), a pair of hikers (ARC, 9), solitary hikers (ARC, 3), and, in many cases, even when nature is portrayed as clearly sublime (the image is not of a small part of a stream or a single tree, but of numerous mountains), a human is present, enjoying the natural scene (see Figure Six). In this way, the pamphlet appears to imply that humans can interact with nature; they can be connected to the natural world. In addition to changing the accepted notion of the sublime in these manners, Kister adds to his book numerous photographs of very obviously non-sublime images such as Prudhoe Bay (Kister, 136) and his backpack (Kister, 139). The photographs of Prudhoe Bay may serve as a reminder to readers that humans can damage the sublime, and Kister's backpack images can be seen to represent the more mundane and practical aspects of traveling in Alaska.

Further, comparisons may be drawn between the physical position of humans in Collis's photographs and in those used by ARC (Figures Two and Three). For the most part, neither Collis nor Muir includes humans in their pictures of Alaska, yet in one where Collis does, humans are grouped together, on top of a glacier. (In addition, the title of this photograph is "On Top.") In one of the images ARC uses in its pamphlet, a logger is placed on top of a tree stump, looking down at the land he has cleared (Figure Three). For Collis, humans on top of a glacier is positive, for it signifies human achievement. Humans have braved nature, and they have mastered it. For ARC, humans above nature is negative, for it represents a gross lack of understanding on the part of humans. The logger may only be above nature because he has committed an atrocious crime; he has needlessly cut down many trees.

Another way the modern environmental movement modifies the historical myths is by calling attention to Alaskan Native Americans, people who have been intimately living with the natural world for thousands of years. In contrast to Muir's and Collis's negative accounts of native Alaskans, Kister and ARC celebrate the way of life of the Natives Americans living in the Alaska. Both these texts use specific Native American populations as examples of people who are connected with the natural world. Neither the ARC pamphlet nor Kister goes so far as to suggest that the average American ought to give up his life in the lower forty-eight and permanently adopt these Native Americans' ways of living. However, by calling attention to the fact that close relationships with nature still exist in practice (albeit, are threatened), ARC and Kister alike seem to be changing the traditional notion of nature's untouchable sublimity. This wild landscape can (and does) provide for humans in ways much more than giving them inspiration transcendental emotional experiences; this land provides basic needs such as food and shelter for people. The pamphlet quotes a Native American, Mike Jackson, a Tlingit Indian from the village of Kake, as saying, " 'Old-growth forests are our grub box. Over fifty percent of what we eat we gather from the beaches, water, and sky.' " The text goes on to note, "Protecting Alaska's rainforest also protects the unique Alaskan way of life. Thousands of Alaskans depend heavily on the bounty of the rainforest to put food on their tables, a practice known as "subsistence" hunting and fishing" (ARC, 10). Significantly, the text here differentiates between necessary hunting and fishing, what thousands of Alaskans are said to practice, and the needless destruction that American companies cause (referred to farther down the page as "industrial-scale clearcutting"). Kister, too, points out that Native Americans depend on nature for their lives. A member

of the Gwich'in community, Lincoln Tritt tells Kister, " 'We learn a lot from the environment. More than from the schools. All of our knowledge is out there in the woods. Our kitchen, our workplace, our storehouse, our school are all out there in the woods' " (Kister, 219).

Seen more in the ARC literature than in Kister's book, another method that may encourage human's relationship with the natural world is the use of language that calls attention to this connection to nature. In the ARC pamphlet, readers are reminded that the land in Alaska is part of America, just as is the land in the lower forty-eight. The pamphlet directly links Americans in the lower forty-eight to the Tongass and Chugach by calling these forests "our" rainforests, and "America's" largest forests (ARC, 3). Here, the use of "our," as well as the less obvious insistence on the forests' "national" status, can be seen to encourage American citizens' responsible connection to these forests. Additionally, the pamphlet compares Alaska to the other states, a technique that on the one hand demonstrates the impressive size of Alaska, but on the other, suggests connections between the land in Alaska and land in the rest of America. For instance, readers are told that the "Tongass covers an area equal to the size of West Virginia," perhaps enabling West Virginians (and those from communities around this area) to immediately connect to this faraway land (ARC, 3). Further, the pamphlet chooses to point out that the bald eagle—one of the symbols of America—lives in Alaska's old-growth forests. It notes, "In Alaska's rainforest, eagles occur in higher densities than anywhere else in the world" (ARC, 8).

The pamphlet's attempt to nationalize the Alaskan wilderness is significant because through this nationalization, the natural world is portrayed as an American's

heritage and right, but not his/her property, just as the bald eagle is his/her national bird, not his/her pet. By doing this, ARC is able to treat threats posed to the Chugach and Tongass as national problems that every citizen of the United States has an equal obligation to work to fix. The pamphlet emphatically seeks the aid all of its readers in helping the forests emphasizing that all Americans must work together to save these wild places: "If we wish to see Alaska's rainforest remain a beautiful, lush, and pristine wonder, then we must shift the government policies away from subsidized industrial-scale logging to sustainable ecosystem management approaches that protect the remote wildlands of these forests" (ARC, 4). Kister, too, emphasizes the concept of citizen action through the United States' Government to protect ANWR. In his Preface, he positions individual Americans against "oil companies and their hired, mostly Republican law makers."

Additionally, both texts try to connect their readers to the natural world in a physical way; they both encourage visitors to Alaska. The pamphlet portrays the Chugach and Tongass as open to all, though it does not discuss the feasibility or price of such a visit. Further, the pamphlet uses tourism to show the negative consequences of environmental destruction by stating that destruction of these forests would lessen tourism.⁵ Kister also argues that anyone can –and should—visit Alaska. Kister relates a conversation he had with Larry Landers, the director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, in which Landers comments, " 'Look at the people who go on the raft trips [to Alaska]. They are not wealthy people. If you want to see it enough, Americans can afford it.' " Kister replies, " 'Yeah, I'm not wealthy and I am going to

⁵ It should be noted that while ARC encourages visitors to Alaska, it does not specify what kind of tourism it wants. That is, the pamphlet makes no mention of the negative environmental impacts cruise ships have on Alaska's lands and seas. However, this paper does; see page 23.

spend the whole summer here' ” (Kister, Preface). This theme carries on throughout the book. For example, in an earlier quoted passage in which he discusses cooking his breakfast and admiring nature around him, Kister makes clear that he is observing a scene anyone can see.

In ways other than their actual descriptions of Alaska, Kister and ARC appear to attempt to connect their readers with their writing subject. Both the pamphlet and Kister's book are written simply, in ways that seem to anticipate as well as facilitate a wide readership. Kister makes frequent use of semi-clichéd language as well as defines all terms that might be considered technical (such as “permafrost”). In turn, lack of literary distance between readers and these environmental texts may encourage readers' closeness to the subject of their work. Further, the pamphlet and Kister both appeal to their readers rather than confront them. The pamphlet focuses its attacks on companies that exploit the natural resources to produce. By doing this, ARC appears to be setting up an opposition between its readers—the national forests' prospective visitors—and the companies that, according to the pamphlet, will destroy the forests (companies that will, in effect, take away the national forests from its visitors). This is clear when the pamphlet fails to point out that the timber companies are making items from the Alaskan trees that Americans will, most likely, be able to buy. This additional information could complicate the equation of American citizens against these companies, as it would hint that American citizens are also on the culprit side.

In addition to not alienating his readers by his prose, throughout the text, Kister appears to use himself as a character as a means of connecting his readers to the landscape he is discussing. Kister chooses to include few details that specifically

differentiate him from the reader (e.g. there are no personal memories about his family and friends, no incidents that happened to him before he left for Alaska). In this way, the boundary between the reader and writer is blurred. Since readers know hardly anything that individualizes Kister, it does not seem very difficult for them to imagine themselves as him, and following, his experience in Alaska could be their own. Throughout the book, Kister is mainly interested in discussing the trip itself and issues that surround the trip (how he finds or does not find food, how the scenery changes, how the temperatures change).

Though Kister's and ARC's portrayals of Alaska endeavor to modify traditional ways of seeing Alaska, it should be noted that not all present-day representations are interested in doing this. In fact, representations of the Alaskan landscape that have more in common with Collis's and Muir's descriptions are still produced and still circulate widely in popular culture. The advertisements for a well-known line of cruise vacations, Princess Cruises, show (verbally and visually) an Alaska that is purely sublime, not an Alaska that is tightly connected to human impulses and actions. The company's website advertises two Alaskan tours, the "Voyage of the Glaciers" (described as taking "a seven-day cruise through some of Alaska's most amazing sites, including splendid Glacier bay and College Fiord") and the "Inside Passage" ("Explore historic Alaskan towns, as well as, [sic] glacier cruising into glorious Tracy Arm") (<http://www.princess.com/destination/alaska/cruises.html>). The website stresses that cruise ship "guests" will be treated to "a nonstop odyssey of glorious landscapes, majestic wildlife and exploration of some of the most remarkable points on the planet" (<http://www.princess.com/destination/alaska/experience.html>). Also similar to Collis

and Muir, Princess combines quasi-scientific language and descriptions to magnify the sublimity of the natural world. Of the Alaskan glaciers, the website reports,

Winding down from mountains and fiords, these massive rivers of ice are often on the move, some dropping their bounty into the sea in a most spectacular fashion. The process is known as “calving,” and some tidewater glaciers shed enormous chunks of ice several times an hour. In most cases, the cascading wall of ice you see is several hundred years old. (<http://www.princess.com/destination/alaska/glaciers.html>)

The photographs of Alaska (Figure Five) this cruise company shows are quite reminiscent of the ones in Collis’s and Muir’s texts. In all three cases, many images of the natural wonders are at a distance, capturing their grandeur. Further, the images the cruise ship uses do not show people interacting with the natural world, thus perhaps suggesting a distance between humans and the environment.

Interestingly, not only do these images advance the disconnection between humans and nature, which may be seen to have damaging effects on the future of Alaska’s wild landscapes, actual cruise ship tourism to Alaska is literally responsible for significant environmental devastation. As Cat Lazaroff, writing for the Environment News Service points out,

Aside from collisions with marine mammals, cruise ships bring with them the risk of oil spills, increased air pollution, and a disturbance of wildlife. Cruise companies in Alaska recently have been guilty of illegally dumping sewage, plastics, toxic chemicals, and oil as well as falsifying records to conceal violations. (Lazaroff, <http://envs-newswire.com/ens/oct/2001/2001-10-12-06.asp>)

Further, a press release issued by the National Parks Conservation Association titled “Cruise Ship Rider Threatens Death Sentence for Glacier Bay Wildlife” links increased cruise ship activity in Alaska’s Glacier Bay with environmental destruction and animal life devastation (http://www.npca.org/media_center/PressReleaseDetail.asp?id=70).

Part Three: Distance and Closeness

What's Really in Alaska?

The relationship between verbal and visual representations of the natural world and the intended outcome of these depictions was made clear to me the summer I worked in the Alaska Wilderness League's California field office. For three months, I wrote letters to the editors of California newspapers about tax-payer subsidized logging in the Tongass and the proposed drilling in ANWR. Though the newspapers I sent my letters to ranged from those with wide circulations (*The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sacramento Bee*) to ones with considerably smaller circulations (*The Oakland Tribune*, *The Fresno Bee*, *Napa News*), all of my letters stressed the same point: connection, connection, connection. Like the ARC pamphlet and Kister's book, the letters emphasized that these lands deserved our consideration because they were "ours." At the time, this language seemed to me—not strange— but embarrassing, too crude, too obvious. Why did I have to argue to Californian residents that the natural world should be protected because it was, in theory anyway, theirs? Should not wilderness be preserved because it is wasteful to destroy it? And why do we have to feel connected to land in order to save it?

But yet, it seems that this connection is a vital first step in preservation. We have seen the destruction resulting from disconnection. Stephen Greenblatt argues that the distance of wonder may have helped enable the Spanish plundering of the Americas, and it seems to me, to a large extent, the historically established distance between humans and the natural world is at least partially responsible for the many anti-environmental actions

of ourselves and our government, a most recent example being the U.S. Senate's decision to open up ANWR for oil and gas development.⁶ Arguably, a main reason behind this decision is that the U.S. needs the oil that supposedly the Arctic may be able to provide, but is it not easier to back this development, one that will devastate a fragile ecosystem, as well as disrupt the lives of certain Native American tribes, in a land that one finds (and is found by many) to be emotionally and physically far away?

Up to this third section, the texts considered in this paper come from two specific moments in American environmental consciousness. Collis and Muir were writing at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. At this time, the American public was becoming increasingly aware of the natural environment: numerous natural history museums and national parks were founded, and many large-scale city parks were established. The texts by ARC and Kister are from the third, the most recent, environmental movement. These texts were written at a time when the language of environmentalism, as well as the identification of environmental problems, is more and more moving from a vocabulary known by a few and easily dismissed as fringe concerns to a vocabulary known by many and issues that are familiar to the majority of Americans.

Collis's and Muir's ways of seeing the natural world rely on creating and promoting distance between humans and nature. Though both these accounts certainly appreciate the beauty and grandness of the natural landscape, they do not seem to understand how or express that humans are interconnected to this particular environment.

⁶ The US Senate voted 51-49 on March 16, 2005 to allow drilling in 1.5 million acres of ANWR's 19.6 million acres. Though oil companies have been attempting to open up ANWR since 1987, this vote is significant as it is the first time that the president, Senate and House of Representatives have all agreed on drilling.

Humans are touched by the impressive natural sites, yet their role in the environment remains that of a literal and figurative visitor: they see; they are moved; they leave. Contrastingly, modern environmentalists work to establish and promote a relationship between humans and the natural world. Throughout this literature, readers are made aware of their role in past destruction and their role in protecting the environment for the present and the future.

I would like to conclude this paper by moving away from strictly environmentalist texts, pieces that issue specific political demands on their readers, and instead, to turn to two works written in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the debate over Alaskan land use became an issue discussed in Washington as well as in the media. Thus, during this time, the specific question of Alaska reentered the public's awareness and imagination in a way that it had not since, perhaps, the Gold Rush. Both John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* and Raymond Carver's short story "What's in Alaska?" appear to modify Alaska's sublimity, just as the pamphlets from today's environmental lobby and texts from environmental activist authors do. However, this is not to say that McPhee's or Carver's representations are going for, or, for that matter, have the same results as the later descriptions. Unlike modern environmentalists' portrayals of Alaska, neither McPhee nor Carver discusses Alaska's fragility; humans are not tied to the land through a connection of environmental stewardship.

McPhee and Carver portray the Alaskan natural world as distant from humans, unlike any place they have experienced in their lives, but at the same time, as close to them, and in some ways, as absolutely integral to their well-being. Drawing connections between Americans and Alaska's wilderness, McPhee emphasizes Alaska's physical

similarities to land in the lower forty-eight, and both he and Carver demonstrate that Alaska—the concept of Alaska—is an emotional/imaginative necessity for all Americans.

Though throughout *Coming into the Country*, McPhee depicts Alaska as different from land that exists in the lower forty-eight, he also shows that Alaskan wilderness has certain elements in common with land in the lower forty-eight. Even in his argument that Alaska is unlike wilderness in the rest of the U.S. because it remains largely untouched and because it is on a much larger scale than any other land in the country, readers see McPhee hinting at connections between nature in Alaska and nature in the other states. Thus, at first, readers may feel detached from Alaska, but ultimately, they are linked to this natural landscape. He writes that 32 million acres of land in Alaska are being considered by Congress to be set aside as national park lands, and notes that this is “more than all the Yosemite, all the Yellowstone, all the Grand Canyons and Sequoias put together [. . .] For cartographic perspective, thirty-two million acres slightly exceeds the area of the state of New York.” Taken by themselves, these references to New York State (the third largest in the continental U.S.) and the considerably sized national parks are impressive. However, McPhee goes further, making clear that in Alaska, 32 million acres is not *that much*. He points out that this number of acres “is less than a tenth of Alaska, which consists of three hundred and seventy-five million acres” (McPhee, 17). McPhee’s use of comparisons is interesting because it does two things for the reader: it distances them from Alaska, showing how impossibly huge the state is, and it also connects them to Alaska, for he names places with which his readers are well familiar.

Demonstrating how untouched much of Alaska is, McPhee discusses the “dirty” streams of the Eastern U.S. and the many “pure” streams in Alaska.

In the sixteenth century, the streams of eastern America ran clear (except in flood), but after people began taking the vegetation off the soil mantle and then leaving their fields fallow when crops were not there, rain carried the soil into the streams. The process continues, and when one looks at such streams today, in their seasonal varieties of chocolate, their distant past is—even to the even to the imagination—completely lost. (McPhee, 16)

Contrastingly, there is a timeless quality in many Alaskan rivers, as humans have not yet interfered with them. McPhee points out, for “this Alaskan river [. . .] the sixteenth century has not yet ended, nor the fifteenth, nor the fifth. The river flows, as it has since immemorial time, in balance with itself” (McPhee, 16). While being scientific, this comparison stresses the sublimity of Alaskan nature; the clearness of these streams, the purity of their colors, is an aspect of the natural world that both Collis and Muir would remark upon and appreciate. In fact, Collis does call attention to the clearness of Alaskan water throughout her account, and at one point on her journey, she angrily derides a “dirty” sub-glacial stream.

Further, in this passage, McPhee points out that Alaskan land is both similar to land in the lower forty-eight, but also very different from it. Human interaction (in this case, farming) with the land in other states has ruined the natural colors. Alaska, on the other hand, has not been subject to farming; for the most part, the land in Alaska has never been cultivated, and thus, its streams remain pure. In addition, McPhee focuses on process and linear time for the Eastern streams; first people began to take “vegetation off the soil mantle,” then left “their fields fallow when crops were not there,” and the result—“rain carried the soil into the streams” occurred. This is the way Western society

tends to organize its time: from A to B with the result of C. Contrastingly, the “time” of the Alaskan stream is timeless. There is no step-by-step process imposed on it; the stream could exist in any century.

While making all these differences apparent, this passage also demonstrates similarities between Alaska and the rest of the U.S. The streams in the continental U.S. were once—before farming—clear, as the Alaska streams remain today. This commentary on the human-induced changes to the natural world enables McPhee to imply that not all of Alaska’s sublimity is unique to Alaska, but rather, that Alaskan wilderness had much in common with American land prior to its development. This conclusion is radically different from earlier ways of thinking about Alaska, which seemed to lead one to the conclusion that Alaska was an alien territory. Here, Alaska is linked to the other American states, but it is obvious that Alaska is now remarkably different from other areas of wilderness.

In addition, McPhee calls attention to the differences and similarities between Alaska and the rest of America when he notes that Alaska is

[. . .] everything wild it has ever said to be. Alaska runs off the edge of the imagination, with its tracklessness, its beyond-the-ridgeline surprises, its hundreds of millions of acres of wilderness—this so-called “last frontier,” which is certainly all of that, yet for the most part is not a frontier at all but immemorial landscape in an all but unapproached state. (McPhee, 133)

While McPhee is making apparent that Alaska is unlike the lower forty-eight, his use of the phrase “last frontier” is striking because it reminds readers of the other areas in the lower U.S. that were once designated as such.

McPhee does not only demonstrate readers’ connection to Alaska by emphasizing similarities in the two landscapes. In a more straightforward manner, McPhee shows that

Americans are physically (i.e. those who choose to live in Alaska) or emotionally (i.e. those who live in the continental U.S.) attached to the land. McPhee literally shows human connection to the land by largely focusing his book on the people of Alaska: the environmentalists and land developers living in the cities, as well as the Caucasian and Native Americans men and women, living away from the cities, in “the country” or “the bush.” He tells parts of their stories, what brought them to Alaska; what they expected and what they found once there. In giving his human characters consideration equal to the attention he spends on the natural wonders, McPhee seems to be doing what present day environmentalists do when they highlight the lives of Alaskan Native Americans; he makes clear that humans are able to live in, relate to, and connect with the natural world.

Similar to his linking humans to the natural world by focusing on “characters of Alaska,” in a more philosophical manner, McPhee discusses an intrinsic human need for the natural world that Alaska alone provides (due to its being largely undeveloped). Here readers see that the same aspects which distance humans from nature—Alaska’s practically unimaginable grandness, its space and its beauty—all work to satisfy human imaginative needs. McPhee argues,

In the society as a whole, there is an elemental need for a frontier outlet, for a pioneer place to go—important even to those who do not go there. People are mentioning outer space as, in this respect, all we have left. All we have left is Alaska, which, on the individual level, and by virtue of its climate, will always screen its own, and will not be overrun. If I were writing the ticket, I would say that anyone at all is free to build a cabin on any federal land in the United States that is at least a hundred miles from the nearest town of ten thousand or more—the sole restriction being that you can’t carry in material for walls or roofs or floors. (McPhee, 436)

Though this passage highlights similarities between Alaska and outer space—both are frontiers in the sense that they have remained largely undeveloped and unpopulated—this

passage also differentiates between Alaska and outer space. Alaska is a frontier that is available to humans (at least, in popular imagination, maybe not in law); a person can start a new life for her/himself there. McPhee emphasizes this notion by suggesting his “ticket.” Thus, Alaska is more connected to humans than is outer space because Alaska seems to promise some sort of possibility to an individual, while outer space is a territory restricted to astronauts and NASA engineers.

The idea that there is an American need for a “frontier outlet,”⁷ and that today Alaska is the only space that can be considered a frontier, is not unique to McPhee. In Raymond Carver’s short story, “What’s in Alaska?” two couples, Jack and Mary and Helen and Carl, see Alaska as a kind of fantasy land, a place to start over, a place that is utterly unlike what they are used to at home. At the same time, these two couples struggle with the idea of Alaska because they have no firm conception of what Alaska is; the land is unknown and mysterious. Carver’s depiction of the tension Alaska produces (the human connection to Alaska because of its physical distance existing simultaneously with the human alienation from Alaska because of its distance) is very striking because unlike McPhee, who focuses his book on the people already in Alaska and centers all of the book’s action in Alaska, Carver’s story is set somewhere in the suburbs of the lower forty-eight, with very ordinary-seeming Americans. In this manner, Carver can be seen as examining not only his four characters’ complex and conflicting relationship with Alaska, but, more significantly, the American relationship with Alaska.

The story displays the distance of Alaska by showing the confusion and lack of knowledge people have about the state. The title, “What’s in Alaska?” calls attention to this; the characters keep asking each other: What’s there; what’s there? yet no one seems

⁷ See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*.

to be able to come up with an answer. In one instance, Helen tries to remember something about Alaska, but she fails:

“What did you read?” Carl said. “What?” Helen said. “You said you read something in the paper,” Carl said. Helen laughed. “I was just thinking about Alaska, and I remembered them finding a prehistoric man in a block of ice. Something reminded me.” “That wasn’t Alaska,” Carl said. “Maybe it wasn’t, but it reminded me of it,” Helen said. (Carver, 60)

Interestingly, what Helen associates with Alaska—a prehistoric man in a block of ice—is something that is fascinating, but at the same time, something far removed from every day life, something that has no actual bearing on her life at all. This is a very detached—almost Collis and Muir-like—way to think about Alaska. The fossil of a prehistoric man in a block of ice gives no information about the complexity of life that exists in Alaska today. Further, the only concrete piece of information that any of the characters can come up with is that one can “grow those giant cabbages”⁸ or pumpkins there, information that in many ways seems to ground Alaska not in their reality but instead, adds to the fantastical, fairy tale ideas surrounding the land (Carver, 58).

However, this same distance—this same “fairy taleness” of Alaska— seems to emotionally draw the characters to Alaska. Though they are detached from the land, they are fascinated by it. Further, the very physical distance of Alaska appears to add to the state’s emotional resonance in these characters as well. Carver sets up a distinction between Alaska and his characters’ mundane existences. Their lives at home are boring: they smoke pot together, eat junk food, repeat the same statements again and again, have

⁸ Carver did not invent these “giant cabbages” for his story. McPhee also notes that one can grow large cabbages (as well as many other fruits and vegetables) in the Alaskan soil. In addition to delicious strawberries, McPhee points out, “You can grow carrots, beets, spinach, broccoli, rhubarb, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, zucchini—all in the heart of Alaska—and wheat, barley, alfalfa, oats, and white sweet clover eight feet high. Peas are particularly sweet and aromatic. There is virtually no need for pesticides. Cabbages grow to be two feet in diameter and can weigh seventy pounds. They look like medicine balls.” (171)

extramarital affairs with each other; Alaska is held out as their means of escape, the space that is not “here”—their established lives. From the very first reference to Alaska, the characters express their desire to go to there. Mary tells Jack that she might get a job in Fairbanks, and Jack responds: “ ‘Alaska?’ [. . .] ‘I’ve always wanted to go to Alaska. Does it look pretty definite?’ ” (Carver, 54). The desire to get away affects everyone in the story; even Carl, who at first asks his wife, “ ‘What’s wrong with here?’ ” (Carver, 58) when she says that she wants to move to Alaska like her friends, later includes himself and his wife in the “Alaska” fantasy: “ ‘Cindy’s [their cat] got to learn to hunt if we’re going to Alaska’ ” (Carver, 61). Lastly, Carver articulates his characters’ conception of Alaska as an escape by having them conflate and interchange “someplace” with “Alaska,” as displayed in the interaction between Helen and Carl. Helen begins, “ ‘I wish we could go some place.’ [. . .] ‘What’s wrong with here?’ Carl said. ‘What would you guys do in Alaska?’ ” (Carver, 57-8)

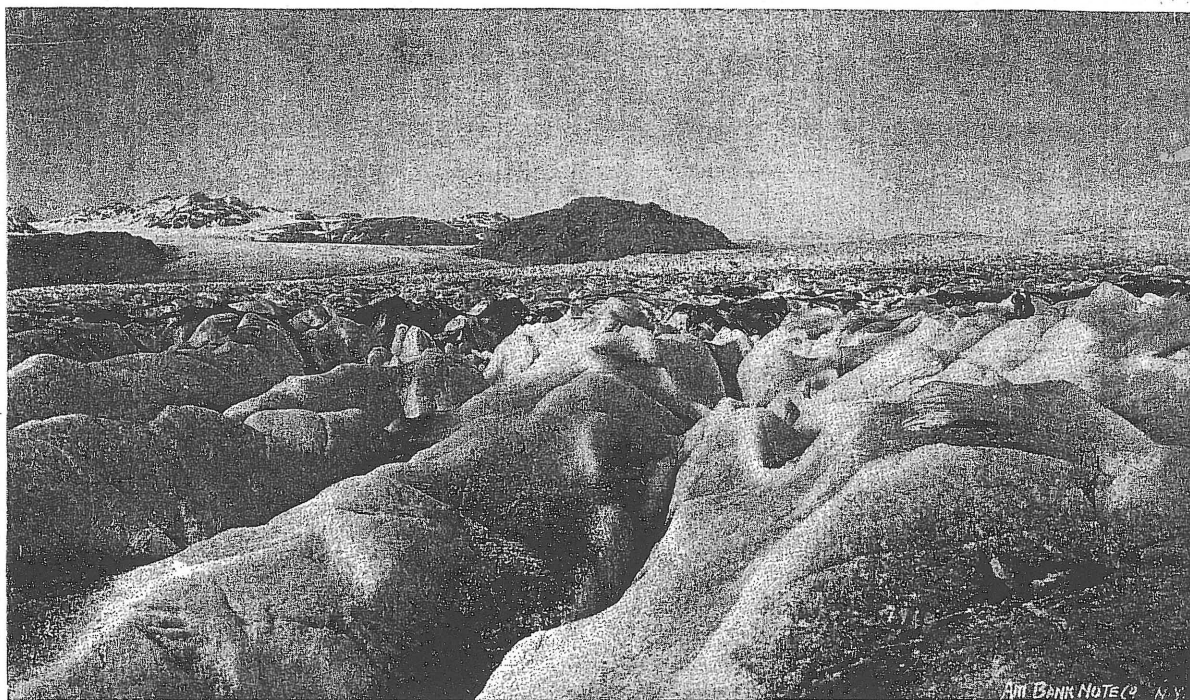
While neither of these descriptions by McPhee and Carver seem overly concerned with encouraging environmental protection (as noted earlier, McPhee observes that “on the individual level, and by virtue of its climate, will not be overrun” (McPhee, 436), clearly not taking into account the destruction that companies, especially those businesses interested in lumber and oil, may produce), both these accounts do show the necessity of Alaska as existing as a physical space, for it is this space that acts as an escape for the human imagination. Unlike earlier authors whose work seems to stress that the only outcome of physical, intellectual and emotional distance is more physical, intellectual and emotional distance, McPhee and Carver complicate this equation, and suggest that distance does indeed advance more distance, but it also may encourage closeness.

Carver's title "What's in Alaska?" asks a question that cannot be answered by the characters in his story, and this paper's title, adapted from Carver, asks a question that this paper cannot answer in only one way. What's really in Alaska? the sublime, the fragile, the distant, the close. More than anything else, for all these texts, Alaska seems to be a mythical place, a destination of the imagination. In some ways then, it is unfortunate that Alaska is an actual, physical space. Perhaps our inability to "pin down" Alaska (and, arguably, our desire not to do so) is ultimately damaging to this state's natural environment. Alaska promises different, even conflicting things to different people, both historically and to this day. The most amazing part is that we continue to believe Alaska will deliver.

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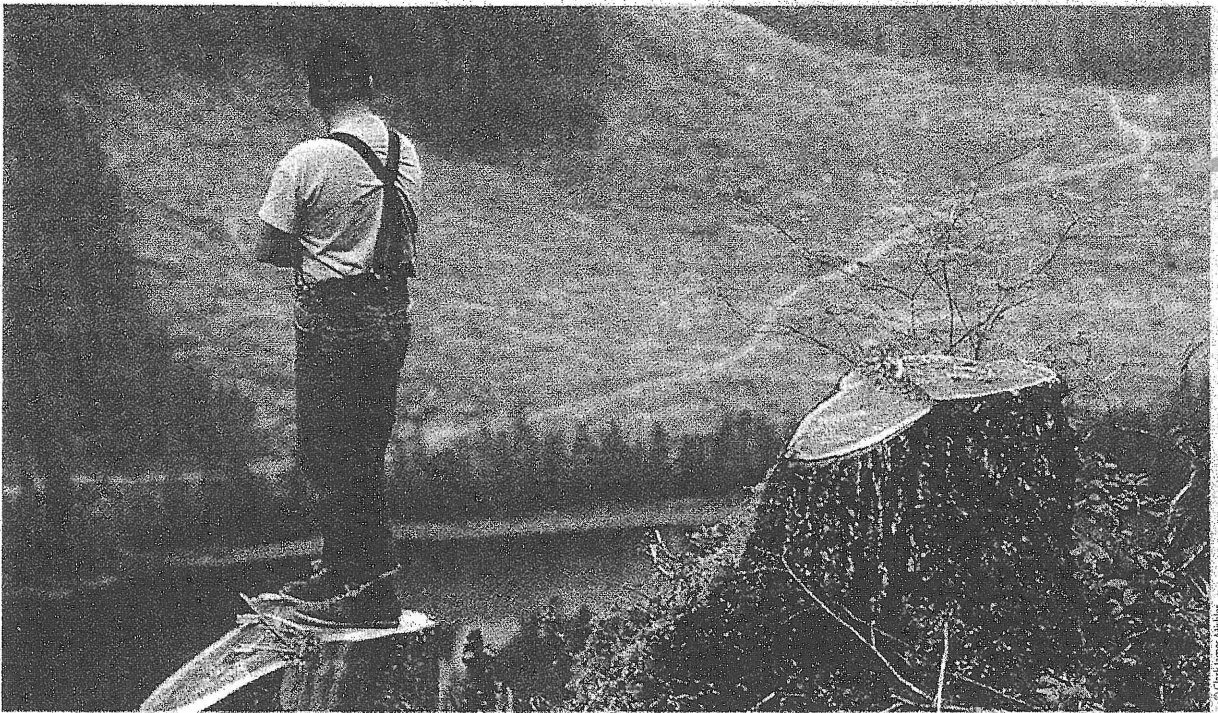
THE TOP OF MUIR GLACIER.

figure one: From Septima M. Collis

figure two: From Septima M. Collis



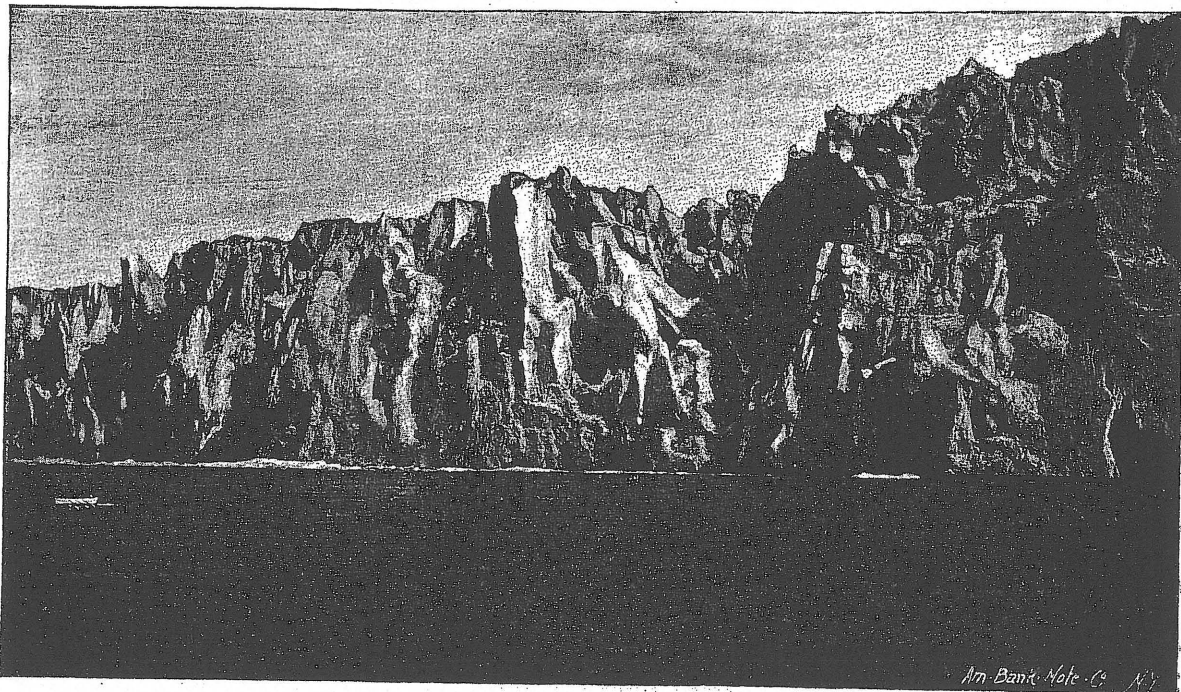
ON TOP.—(Kodak'd by Miss Margaret Watson.)



A worker looks back at a clearcut on Prince of Wales Island, Tongass National Forest.

figure three: from the Alaska Rainforest Campaign pamphlet

figure four: from Septima M. Collis



A BIT OF THE MUIR GLACIER.

figure five: From the Princess Cruises website

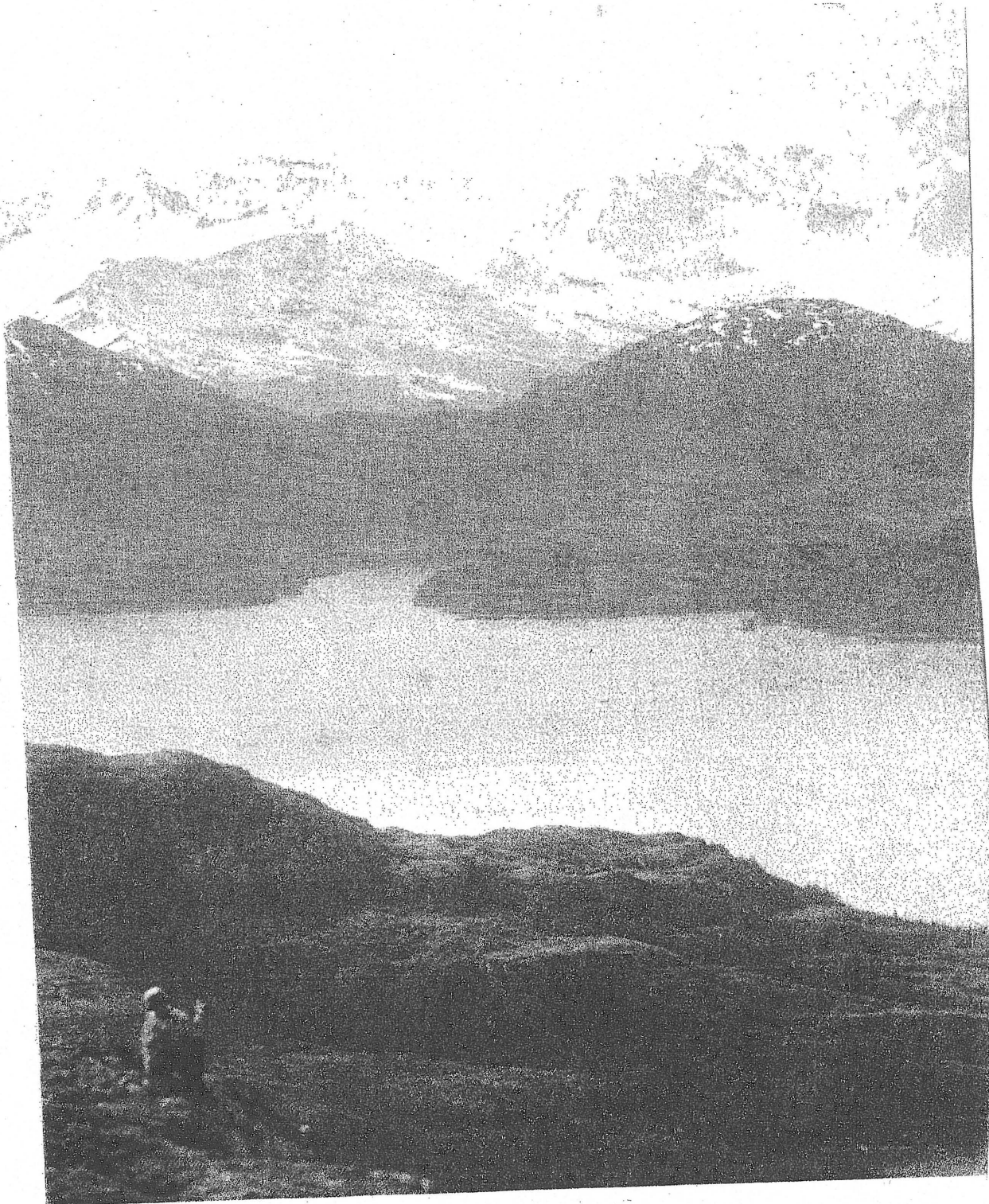
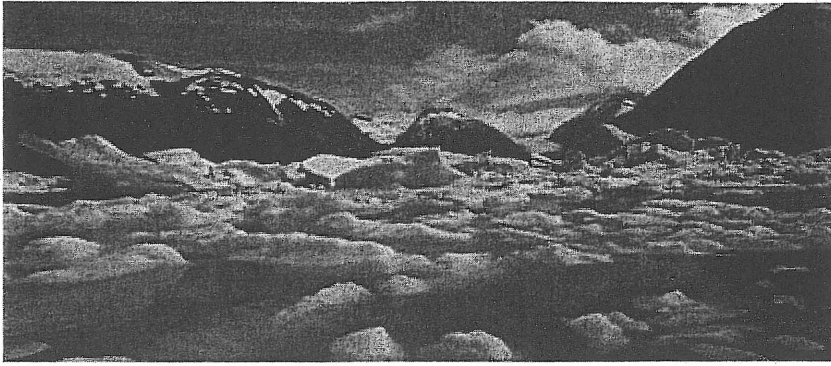


figure six: From the Alaska Rainforest Campaign pamphlet