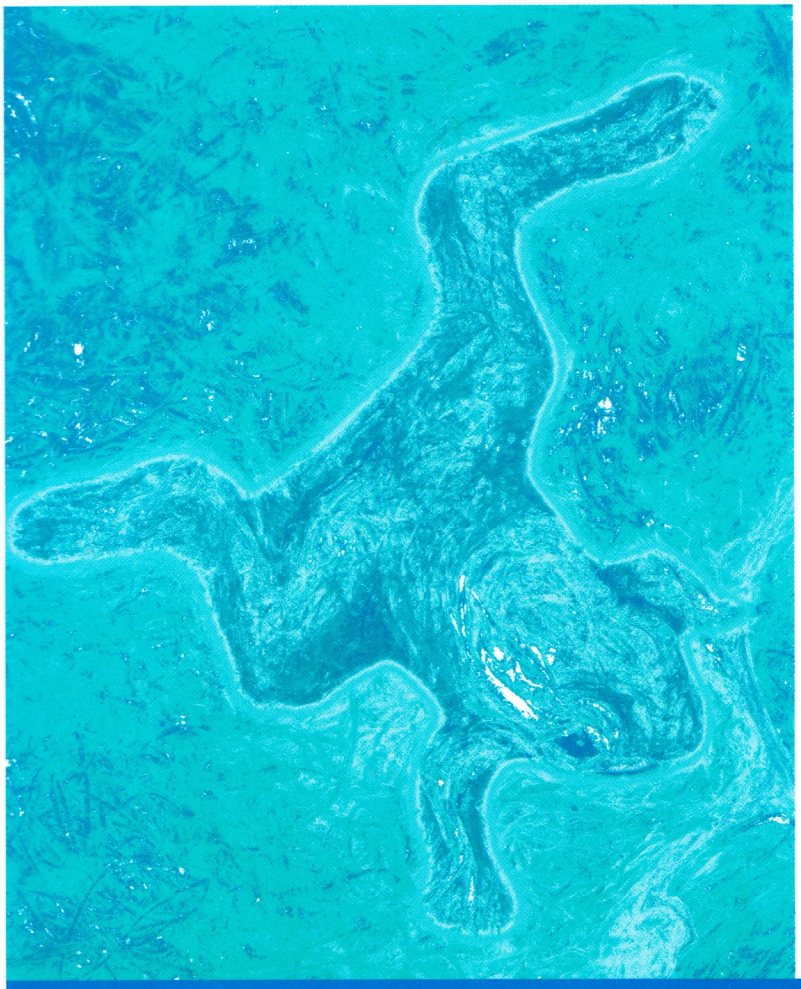
christian r. weisser and sidney i. dobrin, editors



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The Wilderness Strikes Back:

Decolonizing the Imperial Sign in the Borderlands

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> Our beliefs are rooted deep in our earth, no matter what you have done to it and how much of it you have paved over. And if you leave all that concrete unwatched for a year or two, our plants, the native Indian plants, will pierce that concrete and push up through it.
>
> —John (Fire), *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*

John (Fire) Lame Deer's assertion comprises an appropriate point of departure for this discussion insofar as it establishes the conjunction between place, identity, and resistance. Furthermore, it establishes the active, interactive, and reactive nature of "nature." It celebrates the tendency of nature to repossess the land that was seized from it, to recolonize it if you will, to reassert its "title" to the land. As depicted by Lame Deer (whose voice continues to resonate across the landscape of contemporary Native America since the publication of his as-told-to autobiography in 1972) nature is a perfect trope for indigenous resistance. In Alaska, as elsewhere, this resistance is about reclaiming "title" not only to the land, but to many other things besides: ancestral lifeways associated with the land and Native American identity in all of its shifting multiplicity—in short, the Alaskan natives' resistance is about reclaiming "title" to themselves.

In this chapter I want to posit the Alaskan environment as a master trope not only for indigenous identity, but for native resistance as well—resistance to neocolonial imperialism in general, and to its particular manifestation in borderland signifying practices. I want to explore the implications of this tension between signification and a native landscape, between the colonizer's tendency to take possession through naming and the

Alaskan environment's ability to elude linguistic containment. I want to develop as well the implications of foregrounding the environment as a category of critical inquiry in Composition Studies: a category that I believe is as significant as the categories of race, class, and gender that have driven so much of the discourse in the field. I particularly want to develop the usefulness of the environment as a topos of inquiry for actualizing the second, and oft-neglected aspect of Freirean praxis: for translating academic analysis of oppression in its various guises into meaningful social action.

In the course of this discussion I will analyze the manner in which signification functions as a vehicle of cultural domination, deploying as an analytical tool a postcolonial reading of representation in the borderlands across a spectrum of texts: the place-names imposed on an indigenous landscape, the representations of that landscape and of its indigenous peoples by travel writers, and finally the signifying practices embodied in realist novels, such as Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Finally, I want to turn a critical gaze not only on the ethics, effects, and implications of these borderland signifying practices, but on the peculiar intimacy between representation and resistance, between our representations of the Other and the Other's resistance to those representations—one of many intimacies that characterize the colonizer-colonized dynamic.

By "borderland signifying practices," I am referring to that matrix of texts in which the written word was used as an instrument of "cross-cultural domination" at the ends of the empire, in those frontier "contact zones" where Euramerican and indigenous cultures collided (and are still colliding): place-names, travel writing, the realist novel, treaties, acts of Congress (and more recently, environmental impact studies, lesson plans, and "settlements" like the ANLCS [1971])—an entire web of words that was flung far and wide in an effort to "capture" not only the Alaskan landscape but its indigenous peoples. The categories "colonial," "postcolonial," and "neocolonial" are embedded with connotations that distinguish them, yet are subject to misinterpretation and therefore misappropriation. For the purposes of this discussion I am using the term *colonialism* as defined by Stephen Slemon: "an economic and political structure of cross-cultural domination" (Scramble 17). It refers to the historic oppression of one people by another through economic and political means. The term *postcolonial* is embedded with connotations that not only distinguish it from "colonialism," but that are subject to widespread misperception arising from the term *post*. Postcolonialism, as Bill Ashcroft, Gerreths Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin assert,

> Does not mean "post-independence," or "after colonialism," for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of opposition which colonialism brings into being. (117)

Therefore, a less misleading term might be *anticolonialism* insofar as the term does not connote "after" but "against." The term *post* is misleading in another sense: it connotes an uncontaminated, autonomous temporal existence apart from colonialism, when in reality it is derivative of, and imbricated in, "colonialism." Though sequentially ordered, the "colonial" and the "postcolonial" moments are not sequentially distinct: the two coexist. The term *neocolonialism* attests to this antagonistic, cross-engendering relationship between colonialism and postcolonialism, and refers to the perpetuation of historical, orthodox colonialism through new-historical, unorthodox means: education, the media, transnational corporatism, travel writing, the realist novel, and other cultural apparatuses that were historically not part of the colonial process, but that have come in our own time to be the principal means by which "colonialism" (now "neocolonialism") has perpetuated itself as a structure of "cross-cultural domination."

INFINITY/IMPERIALISM

If there is one thing Alaska possesses in abundance, it is space. And if there is one thing the colonizing impulse requires, it is space: whether it is the unfenced acres of the tundra's open space, the uninhabited regions of outer space, or the unmapped universe of cyberspace. All possess what the cultural imperialist requires: a seemingly infinite space inviting a seemingly infinite appetite to take possession of that space. As noted in a recent edition of *Scientific Frontiers,* "when we colonize outer-space we are building a timeless world on which the sun literally never sets."

Infinity thus becomes a master trope for colonization, as Frederic Jameson observes in "Modernism and Imperialism." Likewise, the "Great North Road" of E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* is the insidious materialization of this imperialistic impulse. The road leading to infinity becomes a trope for imperial penetration of the Edenic. As Jameson writes,

> For infinity in this sense, this new grey placelessness, as well as what prepares it, also bears another familiar name. It is in Forster's imperialism, or Empire, to give it its period designation. It is

> Empire which stretches the roads out to infinity, beyond the bounds and the borders of the national state. (323)

The road effects the conjunction between the infinite and the imperial, whether figurative or literal, whether it is the electronic "superhighway" or Forster's imperial highway. Upon just such a "Great North Road," I too had ventured into this borderland: the Alkan Highway. It too ventured "beyond the bounds and borders of the national state," traversing Canada and the Yukon Territory, ever wending its way toward its Edenic destination: a serpent intent on corrupting the object of its relentless penetration.

As with Forster's Great North Road, it too transported a tide of colonists northward (as the Chikoot Trail had during the Gold Rush era), though now they traveled in the guise of oil prospectors and missionaries, of recreationists and tourists, of nature photographers, homesteaders, travel writers, and yes—bush teachers.[1] Whether they recognized themselves as such or not, all bore the telltale signs of Forster's imperialist traveler:

> In the motorcar was another type whom nature favors—the Imperial. Healthy, ever in motion, it hopes to inherit the earth. . . . Strong is the temptation to acclaim it as a superyeoman, who carries his country's virtues overseas. But the imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled the earth he inherits will be grey. (Jameson 323)

Alaska in the last half of the twentieth century was swarming with these industrious imperial types; I saw them all around me in the guise of loggers, coal miners, geologists, sport fishermen, homesteaders, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, nurses, homesteaders, and so forth. All were white, industrious, "ever in motion," and hoping to "inherit" their own piece of a land that once belonged entirely to the native Alaskan. Upon arriving in Alaska they did what settlers do the world over: tried to turn it into the home they left by imposing alien place-names upon it: names usually honoring the imperialistic or historical exploits of white males: Bering, McKinley, and Baranoff.

THE TRAVEL WRITER AS CULTURAL IMPERIALIST

These "superyeomen" were not the only imperial types to prepare the way for the colonization of the indigene's homeland. The myth-making word

as disseminated by the travel writer in the name of cultural tourism is every bit as culpable as the buzz saw, the book, and the bible in laying the groundwork for cultural colonization. The romantic images of the native's homeland that the travel writer transmits to the empire's readership also prepare the way for colonization, constructing in the reader's imagination an image that stimulates the settler impulse. Inspired by these romanticized and reductive visions of the Far North, the settler embarks, following the rhetorical roads constructed by a legion of travel writers. Thus, these linguistic constructs open the land of the indigene to "settlement" long before the settler actually sets foot on the native's soil. The work of the travel writer is an engineering feat every bit as stupendous as that of the imperial road builders, of the Army Corps of Engineers who constructed the Alkan Highway, whose place-names are a rhetorical monument to their own industriousness: Soldier's Pass and Contact Creek. The travel writer has similarly engineered a world creation in words, inventing the land of the indigene (if not the natives themselves) in a manner suitable for consumption by the empire's readership, reducing it to bite-size stereotypes that conform to the prejudices and appetites of that readership—in the same manner that the colonizing appetites of the British reader were whetted by what Eduard W. Said terms the *orientalization* of China: by a matrix of stereotypical representations purveyed by travel writers to the Orient.

The travel writer "paves" the road for cultural genocide by constructing the home of the Alaskan native in one of several ways—all of which serve the colonial or neocolonial enterprise. As Mary Louise Pratt observes in *Imperial Eyes,* the empire writer produces "places that could be thought of as barren, empty, undeveloped, inconceivable, needful of European influence and control, ready to serve European industrial, intellectual, and commercial interests" (35). Pratt's observations are significant insofar as they not only establish the more apparent complicity of industrial and commercial enterprises in the process of cultural genocide, but the more often overlooked complicity of intellectual enterprises in the exploitive practices of colonization: the gathering, production, and dissemination of knowledge (by writers, teachers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and any who "study" the native) has played a ubiquitous role during the neocolonial era of cultural imperialism.

Thus, the travel writer not only misrepresents the Other, but the home of the Other in a manner that invites the colonization of both. Pratt's observations are particularly relevant to Alaska, whose gigantic landscape also seems "barren, empty, undeveloped, inconceivable" and seemingly "needful of European influence and control." The subsequent "development" of this wilderness with the Alkan Highway, the Alaska

Pipeline, the Alaska Railroad, the Alaska Maritime Ferry System, and the "bush" school system show that Alaska too stands ready "to serve Euro-American industrial, intellectual, and commercial interests."

If the land is depicted as "barren" or "untamed" and therefore in need of "settlement" or "development," the native similarly is portrayed as "backward" or "illiterate," and therefore in need of similar development in the form of education or training. The colonizer casts himself in the active, benevolent role of "giver" and the native in the passive and "deficient" role of receiver—and then is outraged or bewildered when the native does not manifest an appropriate appreciation of the "gifts" he or she has received. The native's ingratitude stems from the reality that these "gifts" usually disguise some form of "theft"—usually of their culture. They can only receive the "gifts" of education, capitalism, and Christianity by "paying" with their own lore, language, subsistence lifeways, and pagan beliefs—all as part of a process that Ward Churchill pejoratively calls "genocide with good intentions" (280). In the final analysis, these "words" are the survey markers by which the colonist stakes a claim to the "wilderness"—akin to the red flags tied to trees marked for "harvesting." Signifiers of ownership, possession—and of dispossession. Thus, words are "part of the more general process by which emerging industrial nations took possession of new territory" (Pratt 35).

The place-names the colonizer imposes on the indigene's landscape are therefore just another form of cultural imperialism. They are meant to confer "title" to the land being named. As Paul Carter asserts in "Naming Place," these place-names "do not reflect what is already there: on the contrary, they embody the existential necessity the traveler feels to invent a place he can inhabit. It was the names themselves that brought history into being" (qtd. in Ashcroft 404). Signification thus becomes the initial vehicle for dispossessing the native of title to his or her homeland. The land is repossessed by the colonizer through this linguistic sleight-of-hand. Title is transferred from one culture to the other through the plane of signification. The native's homeland is reinvented rhetorically as a "new world" or as a "last frontier"—as a precondition for transference of ownership from colonized to colonizer. The native's land is given a rhetorical face-lift whose aim is transference of 'title" to the land—an end that signification facilitates by stimulating the settler impulse of the empire's readership.

The indigene's homeland is constructed by the empire's rhetorical road-builders in other ways that also invite the colonization of that land. On the one hand, it is depicted as a second Eden, as a "paradise," a "utopia" offering escape from the ills of civilization, connoting a return to

the "garden," to a simpler life foregrounding communion with nature and wanting only an Adam and Eve to "settle" it. On the other hand, it is portrayed as a vast warehouse of natural resources (of timber, salmon, oil, gold, coal, and bauxite) there for the taking. These mythical depictions of Alaska as a barren wilderness, as a second Eden, or as a modern-day mother lode have all prepared the way for its colonization by Russia and America, and for its ongoing neocolonization by a consortium of transnational corporations: Mobil, Exxon, Chevron USA, Placer Amex, Kodiak Lumber Mills, and so forth.

In the last analysis, as much harm as been done to the home of the native Alaskan by the imperial word as by the pickaxe, the sluice-box, the buzz saw, and the skidder. The American realist novel, no less then the representations of the travel writer, has been complicit in this process.

THE GREAT BOOKS AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

The oppressive circulation of power through discourse requires an economy of discourses, if not a univocal language; similarly, the circulation of power through culture requires an economy of cultures, if not a monoculture; and finally, the circulation of power through literature requires not only an economy of texts (the Western canon) and of genres (the realist novel), but an economy of subject positions, if not a universal subject that marginalizes and/or subsumes difference. Furthermore, these canonical representations of the indigene effect his or her containment through negative stereotypes that circumscribe native identity as closely as the boundaries that delineated the Athabascan Indian reservation in Alaska on which I taught. The Native American is dehumanized in these texts as either a demonic or a noble savage—is confined to the extreme poles of representation that are then posited as the only "authentic" identities for the indigene—even as she is represented as the promiscuous dusky maiden or as the silent, servile handmaiden of her "brave." Moreover, these textual representations not only reinscribe the native's subjugation in the culture at large, but are partly to blame for it. As Homi K. Bhabha asserts, "the objective of colonial discourse is to construct the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" ("The Other Question" 75). Indigenous identity is reduced to the status of an historical artifact on the pages of the American realist novel, even as the native's beads, moccasins, feathers, and drums are housed in museums as the dismembered, metonymic surrogates for the culture as a whole.

London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* are useful examples of American realist novels that reinscribe stereotypical representations of the land and of its indigenous peoples, preparing the way for the conquest of both. The Far North is depicted as either a realm "red in tooth and claw" and needful of taming, or as a veritable treasury of natural resources, a natural Fort Knox whose reserves of gold lack only a "title" of ownership. London's narratives naturalize this headlong landrush, this "settler impulse" that results in the colonization of the Far North—as the native's subsistence life-style is subsumed in the Euramerican cash-based economy. As Anthony Kwame Appiah observes, the realist text naturalizes the colonization of native lands, and thus functions as "part of the tactics of nationalist legitimization" (quoted in Ashcroft et al Griffith, and Tiffin 120).

The realist text naturalizes the process of cultural genocide by circulating stereotypic representations of the native Alaskan as well. In the penultimate passages of *Wild,* London depicts the Alaskan indigene as a bloodthirsty, demonic savage whose white victim "was lying on his face, feathered with arrows like a porcupine . . . the Yeehats were dancing around the wreckage of the spruce-bough lodge" (97). London's representation of the "Yeehats" as little more than beasts and cave dwellers is further evidenced by the imagery he deploys to describe their destruction by the dominant primordial beast, Buck. They are dragged down by the avenging dog "like deer. . . . It was harder to kill a husky dog than them. They were no match at all were it not for their arrows and spears and clubs" (98). Thus, in London's great chain of being, the Alaskan native is situated somewhere just below the master's pet.

From a pedagogical perspective, offering an appreciative reading of London's *Call* and *Fang* on an Athabascan Indian reservation in Alaska is as grimly ironic as teaching Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in colonial African universities—a practice that until recently went unchallenged, as Tiffin observes (97). The circulation of such reductive images of the Alaskan native and of his or her homeland through the signifying practices of the colonizer must be resisted insofar as these representations invite the destruction of both the land and its indigenous peoples. Yet, if these very texts function as vehicles of cultural domination, they can also be utilized as instruments for inaugurating counterhegemonic resistance struggle. How and where? By the composition instructor in the Alaskan classroom. These texts not only need to be read, but reread from a subversive, native-friendly perspective—as part of an inquiry that objectifies the process of colonization that has for centuries objectified the Alaskan native: by making the signifying practices embodied in these texts the focus of inquiry. London's tales, thus, still have a vital place in the canon—even for such a

situated borderland pedagogy: if used not as vehicles of colonization, but of a decolonizing pedagogy whose aim is to expose the operations of colonization as a first critical step toward intervening against it—toward a liberatory, counterrepresentational pedagogy foregrounding an inquiry into the signifying practices embodied in various colonial and neocolonial, canonical and noncanonical texts (realist novels, travel writing, and environmental impact studies).[2] These texts must become the object of a critical, decolonizing gaze, and must be studied as deadly artifacts of assimilation and deracination, of environmental and cultural exploitation, not as shrines to a transcendent monoculture that subsumes difference. Insofar as London's texts (and other borderland narratives) foreground the Alaskan environment and the bicultural life-style of its residents, they comprise effective vehicles for first engaging the interest of the borderland student (assuming that interest in a function of immediacy and relevancy) as a precondition for a more critical inquiry into the adverse effects of the signifying practices they embody. If the Alaskan natives wish to halt the degradation of their homeland and of the subsistence life-style that is dependent upon it, then it seems useful to expose the signifying practices embodied in these various borderland narratives that inaugurate this environmental and cultural erosion—a tendency that will, if unchecked and unchallenged, result in the catastrophic closure of both the indigenous environment and of the subsistence culture that is inseparable from it. As a critical topos situated at the heart of the native's darkness, in the midst of this colonized and politicized terrain, the borderland composition classroom can play a useful, if not strategic role in the Alaskan native's resistance to cultural colonization, by making the context of colonization in general, and its signifying practices in particular, the "texts" to be read, discussed, researched, written about, and debated.[3] In such a politicized terrain, a pedagogy that does not itself become politicized, is unethical to the extent that it also becomes oppressive—by turning a blind eye to oppression.

Not only might the stereotypical signifying practices of these borderland narratives (in all their unholy diversity) be seized upon as the locus of critical inquiry, as the "texts" to be "studied," but the Alaskan environment itself can be posited as a "sign" that defies signification, as the ultimate transcendent signifier, beyond the bounds of signification, of representation, and of linguistic containment: ineffable, resistant, and free—the ultimate trope for the resistance of the native Alaskan: a fireweed flower sprouting in the frozen subsurface, yielding in the wind without yielding the native earth to which it clings. What qualifies the wilderness of the Far North to be the master trope of indigenous resistance? Its innate ability to resist

colonization on both the physical and the linguistic plane. If Alaska's frozen subsurface prevents the great monarchs of the forest from taking root, it also poses a critical barrier to the various forms of colonization, preventing them from taking deep root as well. If its frost heaves buckle the roads by which the colonizer would penetrate, or otherwise "tame" this wilderness, then similarly its undifferentiated oneness eludes linguistic containment. If Alaska's limitless spaces and seemingly infinite resources make it the perfect object for the colonizer's covetous gaze, its ability to resist differentiation enables it to slip the noose of signification. There is a monolithic anonymity, a gray undifferentiated sameness to its seemingly limitless spaces, which subsumes the structures, linguistic or otherwise, the colonizer imposes upon it. The many place-names are themselves subsumed by the vast gaps between them, by the unnamed and unnameable (because undifferentiable) spaces that encompass and ultimately engulf them. Signification is nothing more than a mere outpost in Alaska, a solitary cabin of signs in the midst of an undifferentiated space—which subsumes the very thing that would subsume it. Mountain ranges extend to the horizon without names, reinforcing the sense of "placelessness"—this tyranny of the unnamed. The indigene's homeland resists the colonizer's efforts to name, much less to tame it. It literally defies description—and by so doing, defies capture, preserving something inviolate and forever wild about itself.

The Alaskan wilderness is therefore the perfect trope for indigenous resistance. Could reconnection to such a defiant topos, by reconnecting to the history, lore, customs, and place-names associated with it, do anything but invigorate indigenous resistance and reconstitute indigenous identity (historically inseparable from the land). Indeed, spiritual redemption through reconnection to an ancestral landscape is the central theme of many contemporary Native American narratives (Silko's *Ceremony,* Walsh's *Death of Jim Loney,* and Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*), as Robert M. Nelson observes in *Place and Vision* (99). The recent transformation of Mt. McKinley into Mt. Denali comprises a significant victory in the realm of signification—is a sign that the native's resistance struggle has at last entered the critical arena of signification, where it needs to be waged vigilantly on the many textual fronts where this well-concealed threat appears.

How does the Alaskan wilderness elude linguistic capture? In a realm where boundaries are easily and often blurred in the bicultural ether of hybridity, so too are the boundaries dissolved between the features of the Alaskan landscape: between summit and foothill, mist and snow, and one range and the next: all dissolve into oneness before the colonizing gaze that would have them distinct the better to be named—and would have them named, the better to be possessed. Yet, one cannot name what

cannot be differentiated; one cannot impose a chain of discrete signifiers on that which refuses to be differentiated into discrete features, which refuses to surrender its holistic nature: to be compartmentalized, dismembered, and possessed by the colonizer. Thus, the Alaskan wilderness refuses to surrender "title" to itself, is a "claim" that cannot be "staked"—and as such is the perfect master trope for native resistance. If the Alaskan native was to commission a flag of resistance its dominant symbol would be a "frost heave": a sign signifying the eruptive force of the land, the eternal return of the repressed.

The Alaskan wilderness transcends signification insofar as it refuses differentiation. And for a native people whose identity since the mists of time has been undifferentiated from the land, it comprises a useful trope of resistance, freedom, and holistic integrity. Where does the land end and the native begin? There is no answer to this riddle. We cannot speak of one without speaking of the Other. Differentiation is the first, a priori condition of colonization because it makes possible signification, naming, ownership, and title. How to name that which is all the same? In the Alaskan wilderness, the colonizer is confronted by a geographic hegemony that subsumes his or her cultural hegemony—a totalized landscape that defeats his efforts to totalize it with signs. Like Native American identity itself, the Alaskan landscape slips our every effort to name it—a multiple, slippery, shifting signifier that eludes textual capture: a salmon squirting from the hand that would seize it; the shifting skeins of the aurora racing over the rooftops. This, too is why the Alaskan wilderness is a useful, enduring, and apt trope for indigenous identity and resistance: the two are one—and in more ways than one.

Confronted with the undifferentiated, white hegemony of the Alaskan landscape, the white colonizer realizes one thing: that sooner than conquering this land, it would possess him, dragging him off into its undifferentiated limitless spaces—a white whale to whose icy flanks is lashed an utterly possessed and doomed Ahab. As Paul Carter observes, there is for the colonizer "too great a dissonance between language and the land" (quoted in Ashcroft 403). Consequently, the landscape will never be anything more than a "naive reflection of the language available to describe it" (406). The only language available to the colonizer for describing the indigene's homeland is one imported from his own—one that has no connection to the topos being named, which imposes a false signification upon it. As opposed to the native's signifying process, in which the binary between language and land (with regard to ownership) is reversed: it is the native who is possessed by the land. As Linda Hogan states, "land that will always own us, everywhere it is red" (12).

If Alaska's stunted forests might serve as melancholy tropes for native spirits whose growth has been stunted by the harsh realities of acculturation and deracination, by the long winter of their bicultural alienation, then might not the shape-shifting auroras that play upon this vast white realm also comprise a fitting trope for the elusive, shifting, multiple subject positions assumed by the indigenous Other? Similarly, might not the freedom of the land's unconfined spaces serve as a bitterly ironic counterpoint to the rigidity of racial stereotypes that confine the Alaskan native to a reservation of representation? And finally, if the vast silence of the Far North reinscribes the silencing of the native Other, then perhaps it might also serve as the perfect counterpoint to the dissonant noise of native students coming into voice for the first time.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of the complicity of the borderland teacher in the process of cultural imperialism see my article, "The Bush Teacher as Cultural Imperialist." *Review of Education* 20.1 (Spring 1998): 121–39.
2. See my article, "De-composing the Canon: Alter/Natives and Borderland Pedagogy." *College Literature* (Fall 1998): 30–44, for a more detailed critique of canonical works and for a discussion of useful alternatives for borderland praxis.
3. In my article, "Composing the Eco-Wars: Toward a Literacy of Resistance." *JAC* (April 1999), I critique the signifying practices embodied in an environmental impact study, and their implications for conflict-oriented pedagogy.

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