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‘Our ice-islands’: Images of Alaska in the Reconstruction Era

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Scholars of US imperialism have long recognized Reconstruction as a significant moment in the nation’s expansionist history. Some, like George Handley, have even argued that the Reconstruction South was itself “the first colony of US imperial expansion.”¹ More often, however, the reconstruction of the South has been understood as a domestic precursor to US imperialism beyond the continent. Jamie Winders, for example, has argued that “the Reconstruction South operated as a testing ground for future forays in American empire building.”² Similarly, Jennifer Greeson describes the Reconstruction South as “a site for conceptualizing US empire,” arguing that representations of the region constituted “the first step in conceptualizing an expansion of the United States beyond territorial contiguity.”³ US imperial expansion is usually imagined to begin with the War of 1898 and the US acquisition of Spain’s Pacific territorial possessions. But if Reconstruction must be understood “in relation to” the United States’ growing “campaign of imperialism” rather than “apart from” it, as Brook Thomas suggests, we need to remain cognizant of the fact that extracontinental US expansion occurred in conjunction with Southern Reconstruction, not simply in its wake.⁴

While it is certainly true that 1898 made the United States conscious of itself as an imperial power like never before, the United States had possessed significant extracontinental territory—the islands that comprise Alaska—for over three decades by the time it entered the war with Spain. When the question of US imperialism was debated in 1898, Alaska was an obvious point of reference. In his *Atlantic Monthly* essay “Colonial Lessons of Alaska,” Stanford University president David Starr Jordan uses Alaska as an “object lesson illustrating methods to be avoided in the rule of our future colonies.” Jordan argues that as “a colony, or rather a chain of little colonies,” Alaska has been “merely a means of revenue, a region to be exploited.” “Under the present conditions,” the natural resources of Alaska will soon be exhausted, “the native tribes starved to death,” and Alaska “thrown away like a sucked orange.” He thus concludes that “we should count the cost before accepting ‘colonies,’” and “[i]f we cannot afford to watch them, to care for them, to give them paternal rule when no other is possible, we do wrong to hoist our flag over them.”⁵

Jordan's description of Alaska as "a chain of little colonies" stands in stark contrast to the image of the "last frontier" which has since come to dominate US perceptions of the region. This frontier image—which did not solidify in the public imagination until the twentieth century—has largely effaced perceptions of Alaska that held sway in the years before the Klondike gold rush of 1897. Pre-gold rush Alaska rarely appears in national histories of the United States in more than a cursory account of the circumstances surrounding the 1867 purchase of the territory. The three decades of Alaskan history between the purchase and the gold rush have generally been ignored or dismissed as uneventful and of little interest to those without special investments in the region. When discussed at all, pre-gold rush Alaska has usually been portrayed as "a forgotten and abandoned province" overshadowed by the more pressing concerns of the postbellum era.⁶ Yet as Lee A. Farrow's recent history of the Alaska Purchase notes, "there was actually an ongoing attempt by Washington ... to create offices and positions that would bring order and organization" to Alaska.⁷ Likewise, the preponderance of reports and articles about the territory that filled the pages of late-nineteenth century periodicals attests to a growing interest in Alaska among a significant portion of the population.⁸ Alaska was certainly not forgotten.

Recent calls for a decontinentalization of American studies warrant a reconsideration of the ways that Americans imagined Alaska and its relationship to the rest of the United States in the years prior to the Klondike gold rush.⁹ To understand the ways that nineteenth-century Americans interpreted the Alaska Purchase requires us to read it against the backdrop of Reconstruction. Though historians have often assumed that the reconstruction of the South eclipsed Alaska "on the federal agenda [and] in the public imagination," the last two decades have seen scholars of Reconstruction expanding their focus beyond the traditional regional and temporal boundaries of the campaign.¹⁰ These scholars situate the postbellum reconstruction of the South as part of a broader process of national consolidation initiated by the western territorial acquisitions of the 1840s. "The history of the West," writes Heather Cox Richardson, "was part and parcel of the story of the reconstruction years and must be put back into it. Postwar 'reconstruction' was," according to Richardson, "the literal reconstruction of the North, South, and West into a nation in the aftermath of the Civil War."¹¹ As Stacey L. Smith explains, attention to this "Greater Reconstruction" seeks "to break the North-South regional stranglehold over [US] national history" by reframing Reconstruction as "a continental story of multiple contests" of federal authority.¹² Yet although this broadened perspective has invigorated Reconstruction scholarship, it continues to imagine the continent as the container of the nation despite the fact that Americans in the Reconstruction era were being forced to acknowledge otherwise.

An archipelagic version of American studies thus raises significant questions about the future of Reconstruction studies. Can the study of Reconstruction dispense with this continental framework and remain coherent, or is the field wed to a continental model of the United States as its fundamental unit of analysis? Can an archipelagic turn in American studies enhance the way we think about Reconstruction, or will it demand entirely new narratives of the late-nineteenth century United States?¹³ Alaska provides a good starting point from which to explore these questions. In order to approach Reconstruction from a perspective that does

not hinge on the nation's identification with a continental structure, this essay analyzes the era's representations of Alaska, focusing specifically on the popular image of the territory as a group of icebergs or "ice-islands." First, I examine how this archipelagic image emerged, tracing its origins in the political propaganda of the Reconstruction era. I then analyze how this image resurfaces in Constance Fenimore Woolson's 1880 story of Reconstruction Florida, "The South Devil," which juxtaposes a subtropical swamp with a shattering field of arctic ice. By analyzing Woolson's descriptions of these porous spaces, I explore how "The South Devil" questions the integrity of the continent and the national reunion narratives predicated on it.

Reconstructing the Alaska Purchase

As Hsuan L. Hsu observes, the history of the nineteenth-century United States is characterized by "geographically jarring events" which exposed the overlapping scales of national, transnational, and subnational space. Moments of profound geographical transformation highlighted the "instability of national boundaries" and the tenuous "feelings of spatial belonging" that corresponded to them.¹⁴ As part of the North American continent and an archipelago, Alaska straddles the scale by which many Americans distinguished between domestic and foreign space in the late nineteenth century. Those in favor of the Alaska Purchase incorporated the territory into a continental narrative of US expansion. As Eric T. L. Love explains, expansionist projects that remained "bound to the continent" required little explanation "to a citizenry thoroughly familiar with and invested in the act and discourses of landed expansion."¹⁵ And as Rachel St. John reminds us, "when mid-nineteenth-century Americans referred to the 'continent' they imagined a space that extended from north to south as well as east to west. ... For continental-minded expansionists it was as important that the United States stretch from the North Pole to the Isthmus of Darien as from the Atlantic to the Pacific."¹⁶ Initially, then, the fact that Alaska was not contiguous with any part of the United States did not matter to Americans, who assumed that the acquisition of Alaska would lead to the annexation of British Columbia and the establishment of a unified continental empire at a later date.¹⁷ The fact that islands comprised a majority of the accessible portion of the territory also did not matter. As Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens note, the "dominant continental narrative" of the Americas has long produced "a collective negative hallucination" that has obscured archipelagic spaces.¹⁸ So long as Alaska was amenable to a continental narrative, the thousands of islands that made up the territory could be subsumed within it.

As a result, most Americans did not initially object to the purchase of Alaska. For many, the acquisition of so vast a territory a mere two years after the Civil War seemed a reassuring indication of national ascendancy.¹⁹ However, when British Columbia joined the Confederation of Canada in 1871, shattering US fantasies of a unified continental empire, Alaska's separation became a more serious obstacle to the conceptual integrity of the nation. After all, European Americans had identified the United States with the continent since the Revolutionary period. James D. Drake has demonstrated that "metageographical assumptions about the continent as a naturally unified entity" were instrumental to the American independence movement and the political development of the young republic: "Perceiving the continent as a unified entity meant that if politics were to

conform to nature—an ideal held by many—North America ought to be inhabited by one people, under a single power.”²⁰ According to Myra Jehlen, European settlers of America “saw themselves as building their civilization out of nature itself, as neither the analogue nor the translation of Natural Law but its direct expression.” This identification with “the physical fact of the continent” had allowed Americans to view the nation as an organic embodiment of nature as opposed to the historically contingent political and social orders of Europe.²¹ By disrupting Americans’ ability to identify nation with continent, Alaska’s noncontiguity came to undermine what Mark Rifkin identifies as one of the implicit assumptions underwriting Manifest Destiny: “the supposedly incontestable obviousness of domestic space” as a result of its presumed “inherent coherence and contiguity.”²²

Those who objected to the purchase of Alaska thus sought to portray the enterprise as fundamentally absurd. Although a vocal minority in 1867, opponents of the purchase had at their disposal a ready-made set of arctic images with decades of weight behind it. The US public knew virtually nothing about Alaska at the time of the purchase, and what little it knew of the Far North was derived largely from arctic expedition narratives, a genre predicated on the assumption that the Arctic was virtually uninhabitable. As Russell A. Potter explains, these expedition narratives were dramatized across a wide variety of media—book and periodical illustrations, paintings, panoramas, magic-lantern shows—so that by the mid-nineteenth century Americans imagined the Arctic according to a “long-established visual vocabulary, which included tremendous icebergs, ferocious polar bears, friendly ‘Esquimaux,’ struggling explorers, and ice-bound ships.”²³ Opponents of the Alaska Purchase were quick to attach the imagery of arctic exploration to the newly acquired northern territory. On April 1, the *New York Tribune* asserted that “the announcement” of the purchase “conjures up ... visions of a cold, barren, and uninhabited region ... celebrated only because Capt. [Frederick William] Beechy [sic] and Sir John Franklin voyaged on its coasts.”²⁴ Three days later *The Nation* made a similar claim, describing Alaska as “a frozen wilderness, better known to arctic explorers and whalers than to most other men, and probably of no possible value to any men but them.”²⁵ By presenting Alaska as the perpetual domain of arctic explorers, these editors position the territory inexorably outside of the United States, an assessment in keeping with longstanding perceptions of the Arctic as a space outside of the political world.

As Jen Hill explains, this notion of the Far North as a space separate from “the problematic political, racial, and economic relations of empire,” developed in the early nineteenth century as “a counter to the troubling moral questions raised by” British colonialism in other parts of the world. As “neither colonial nor national space in any traditional sense,” the Arctic “was for Britons a place to reify, stabilize, and naturalize a definition of Britishness that could provide an antidote to increasingly unstable and multiple versions of Britishness that existed at home and in the colonies.”²⁶ When the United States entered the world of arctic exploration in the mid-nineteenth century, it did so to similar effect. As Michael Robinson notes, at a time when growing sectional tensions threatened the future of the United States like never before, arctic exploration offered “a happy distraction” capable of “rally[ing] Americans together at a time when they were tearing themselves apart.”²⁷ The purchase of Alaska thus profoundly reconfigured the nation’s relationship to the Far North,

making a territorial possession of a space that nineteenth-century Americans were long accustomed to imagining in much the same way as “the moon and outer space.”²⁸

As Peter Coates observes, the first image of Alaska to take hold of the national imagination was that of the “icebox,” which reduced Alaska to an arctic wasteland, devoid of any resource that would justify the cost of purchasing and administering the territory.²⁹ This image achieved currency in the scathing newspaper editorials which branded Alaska with a set of derogatory epithets emphasizing the allegedly worthless nature of the territory and its resistance to agricultural development. While “Seward’s Folly” has proven to be the most enduring of these epithets, terms like “Seward’s Ice Box,” “Iceburgia,” and “The Iceberg Purchase” did more to supply Americans with a mental picture of the territory and were visually reinforced by farcical political cartoons. These cartoons often implied that the Alaska Purchase was merely an attempt to distract from the failures of Presidential Reconstruction. This allegation was popularized by Horace Greeley, the influential editor of the widely read *New York Tribune* and perhaps the most outspoken opponent of the Alaska Purchase. Although an avid proponent of westward expansion—often credited with the iconic slogan “Go West, young man”—Greeley did not find in Alaska the promise of the West, nor did he suggest that any young man go there. Rather, Greeley denounced the purchase in no uncertain terms, accusing the Johnson administration of attempting “to cover up its failures at home” with “a stroke of foreign policy.” “The collapse of the President’s home policy is so total and so disastrous,” explains Greeley, “that attention must be diverted elsewhere at any cost. Russian America is a good way off, and so a good place on which to fix the public eye.”³⁰

On April 20, 1867, *Frank Leslie’s Weekly Newspaper* published an editorial cartoon titled “Preparing for the Heated Term” (see Figure 1), which depicts Secretary of State William Henry Seward—the man responsible for orchestrating the purchase—and President Andrew Johnson carrying a large block of ice labelled “RUSSIAN AMERICA,” in a wheelbarrow labelled



Figure 1.
“Preparing for the
Heated Term.”
*Frank Leslie’s
Weekly Newspaper*,
April 20, 1867.

PREPARING FOR THE HEATED TERM.

King Andy and his man Billy lay in a great stock of Russian ice in order to cool down the Congressional majority.



"THE BIG THING."

OLD MOTHER SEWARD. "I'll rub some of this on his sore spot: it may soothe him a little."

Figure 2. "The Big Thing." Harper's Weekly.

“Treaty.” In the background, a Russian diplomat makes off with a seven million-dollar bag of money, and a caption beneath the image reads, “King Andy and his man Billy lay in a great stock of Russian ice in order to cool down the Congressional majority.” This cartoon insinuates that the Alaska Purchase was merely a diversion intended to pacify an incensed American public, a desperate attempt to drum up support on behalf of the immensely unpopular Johnson administration. On the same day, *Harper’s Weekly* published a similar cartoon by famed illustrator Thomas Nast titled “The Big Thing” (see Figure 2). Nast’s cartoon shows Seward wearing a dress and applying “Russian Salve” to the head of an angry Uncle Sam, who is shaking his fist at a picture of a crowned Andrew Johnson. On the wall behind them hangs a picture of Alaska labelled “Map of the Russian Fairy Land / Only \$7,000,000 in Gold.” This map consists entirely of arctic stereotypes: Alaska is a mountainous iceberg with the United States flag flying from its spires; a man holding another US flag is chased by a polar bear. Beneath the cartoon, a caption reads, “Old Mother Seward. ‘I’ll rub some of this on his sore spot. It may soothe him a little.’” Once again, this image presents the Alaska Purchase as nothing more than a strategic attempt to placate an outraged nation.

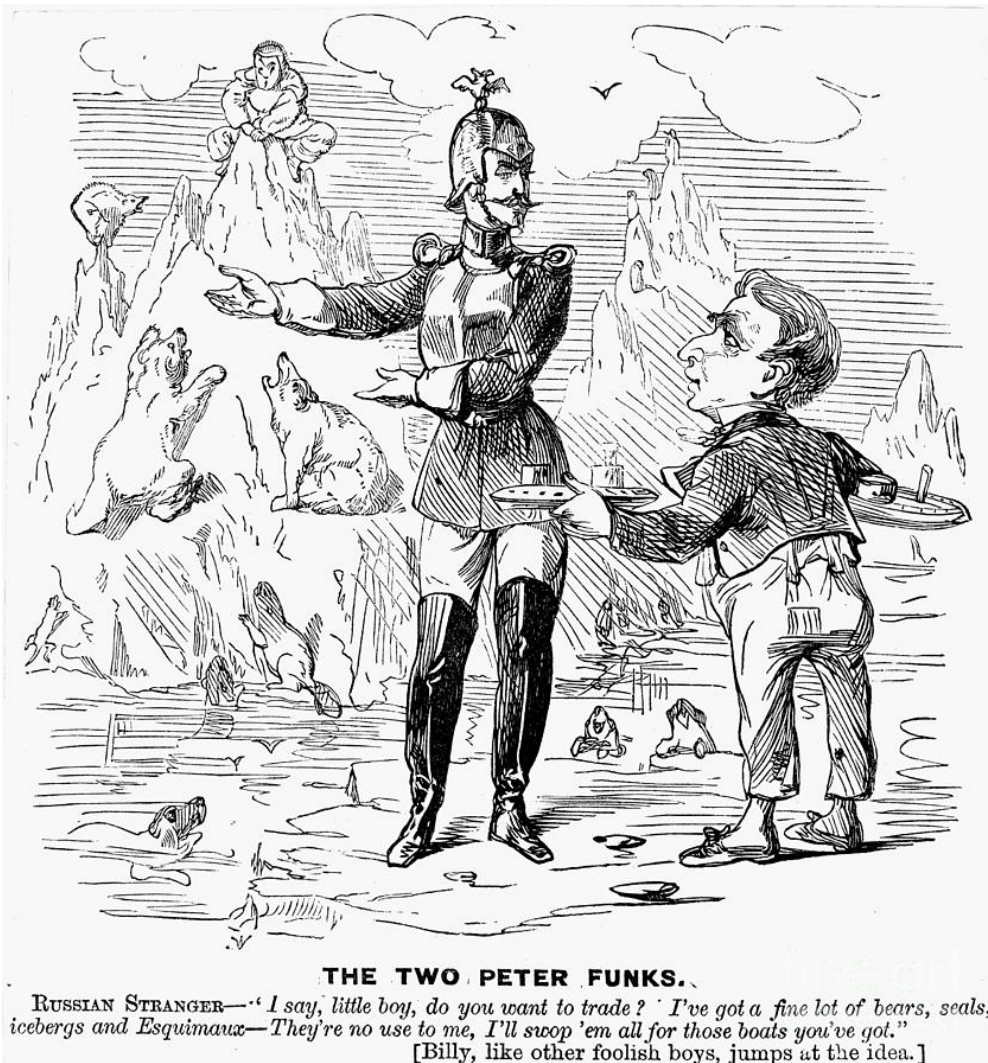


Figure 3.
 “The Two Peter Funks.” Frank Leslie’s Weekly Newspaper.

Other cartoons presented the Alaska Purchase as less an act of political strategy than sheer gullibility. On May 25, 1867, *Frank Leslie's Weekly Newspaper* published "The Two Peter Funks" (see Figure 3), a cartoon which portrays Seward as a child being swindled by a "Russian Stranger." Alaska again appears as a series of gigantic icebergs, this time with a man—presumably an "Esquimaux"—seated atop one of the peaks, just beyond the reach of the ferocious polar bears that surround him. In a caption beneath the image, the Russian asks Seward to trade his toy boats for "a fine lot of bears, seals, icebergs and Esquimaux—They're no use to me," explains the Russian. "I'll swop 'em all for those boats you've got." The caption then notes that "Billy, like other foolish boys, jumps at the idea." By figuring the purchase as a bad trade, this cartoon invites the viewer to contemplate the other uses which seven point two million dollars of taxpayer money might be put to, were it not in the hands of a foolish and fiscally irresponsible administration. As the cartoon's title suggests, there are two Peter Funks—swindlers—in this scenario, and one of them is Seward himself.

By portraying Alaska as a group of frozen islands—if not actual blocks of ice—these images characterize the territory as resistant to agriculture and thus incapable of fostering "American" ways of life. Other cartoons took the inverse approach, staging scenes intended to show the absurdity of incorporating Alaska's Indigenous population into the body politic. On April 27, 1867, *Frank Leslie's Weekly Newspaper* published a cartoon which features Seward and Johnson greeting "Our New Senators" from Alaska (see Figure 4). One is a racist caricature of an Alaskan Native, named "Mr. Kamskatca," and the other is a penguin, inexplicably named "Mr. Seal": "My dear Mr. Kamskatca," exclaims Seward, "you really must dine with me. I have some of the very finest tallow candles and the loveliest train oil you ever tasted, and my whale blubber is exquisite." A similar cartoon, titled "What We May Look for Soon" (see Figure 5), appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on May 4, showing "The Hon. Tookooloto Jabinkoker, Delegate from the Kodiak District" of Alaska, at Delmonico's restaurant in New York City. The caption beneath the image contains a similar racist joke: "train oil," "tallow candles for one," etc.

These cartoons object to the Alaska Purchase on the grounds that the territory was incompatible with the rest of the nation and unfit for settlement. But as Walter Nugent explains, "[s]ettling Alaska with American farmers, as a reason for acquiring it, was low to the point of invisibility for Seward or anyone else" involved in the orchestration of the purchase. Instead, the acquisition of Alaska was part of Seward's broader project of constructing a vast commercial empire across the Pacific. As such, Nugent identifies the Alaska Purchase as the first chapter in a new program of US expansion which shifted emphasis "from settlement to commerce, from peopling an area to controlling its politics and economy."³¹ But if agricultural settlement was irrelevant to Seward, the agrarian ideal remained ingrained in the national self-image.³² Prominent advocates of the purchase, including Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, encouraged Americans to imagine Alaska as a site of US settlement. On April 8, 1867, Sumner delivered a three-hour speech on the Senate floor, outlining the advantages of the Alaska Purchase and the various resources the United States stood to gain by it. In addition to the commercial prospects of Alaskan timber, mineral deposits, furs, and fisheries, Sumner described Alaska as a site of potential agricultural development, noting various crops which

Figure 4. "Our New Senators." Frank Leslie's Weekly Newspaper.



OUR NEW SENATORS.

SECRETARY SEWARD—"My dear Mr. Kamskalca, you really must dine with me. I have some of the very finest tallow candles and the loveliest train oil you ever tasted, and my whale's blubber is exquisite—and pray bring your friend Mr. Seal along with you. The President will be one of the party."

were supposedly being cultivated across the territory.³³ Optimistic assessments of this manner engendered a set of expectations which would prove disappointing, as Americans found themselves largely unable to settle the territory in the following decades.

By 1877, enthusiasm surrounding Alaska had waned to the point that even a positive evaluation of the purchase acknowledged that the territory had been grossly misrepresented by the promotional rhetoric of its supporters. An article in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* proclaimed that although "eloquent advocates" of the purchase had "sketched the country

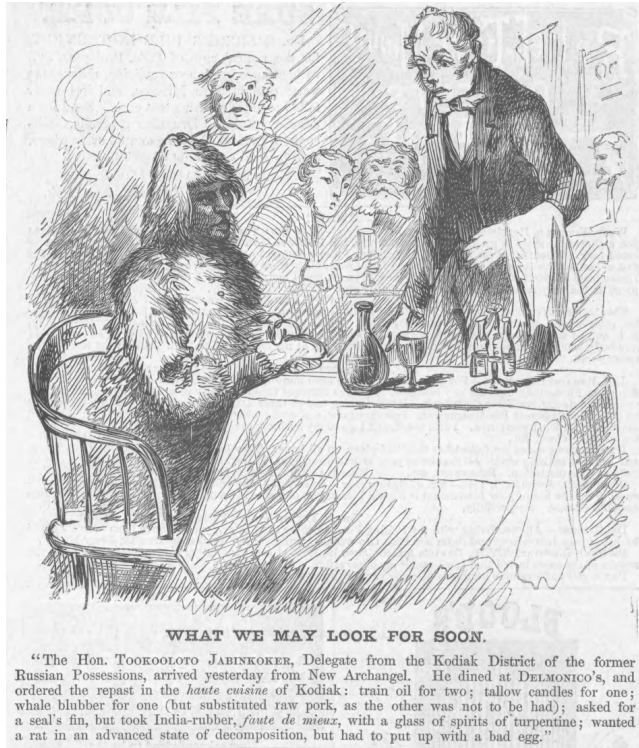


Figure 5. "What We May Look for Soon." *Harper's Weekly*.

as the 'New England of the Pacific,' peopled it with farmers, and covered its bleak hills with flocks," in reality "not an acre of [Alaska] has been or can be successfully cultivated." The writer singles out Charles Sumner in particular, noting that while Sumner was well intentioned, "he was deceived by the cunning advocates of the purchase," and his famous speech in favor of the treaty amounted to "a rich burlesque upon the country." "Alaska will never be ... the land for us," the writer concludes, because nearly five-sixths of the territory "will never be—can never be—the home of civilized humanity."³⁴

In addition to registering the growing sense of pessimism regarding Alaska in the late 1870s, this article shows that Sumner was still associated with the Alaska Purchase a decade after the fact. Not only had Sumner played an instrumental role in generating support for the purchase in the Senate; his published speech "on the cession of Russian America to the United States" became one of the primary sources of information about Alaska available to the US public in 1867. Sumner became so closely associated with the purchase that Emanuel Leutze included him in his famous painting, *Signing of the Alaska Treaty*, despite the fact that Sumner had not been present at the signing. The fact that the purchase was supported by prominent Radical Republicans like Sumner and, to a lesser extent, Thaddeus Stevens, strengthened its association with Congressional Reconstruction. This association was largely the product of the virtually identical timeframes of the two projects. The treaty securing the purchase of Alaska was negotiated and signed in the same month that the First Reconstruction Act passed into law, dividing the ex-Confederate states into military districts. For the next ten years, both

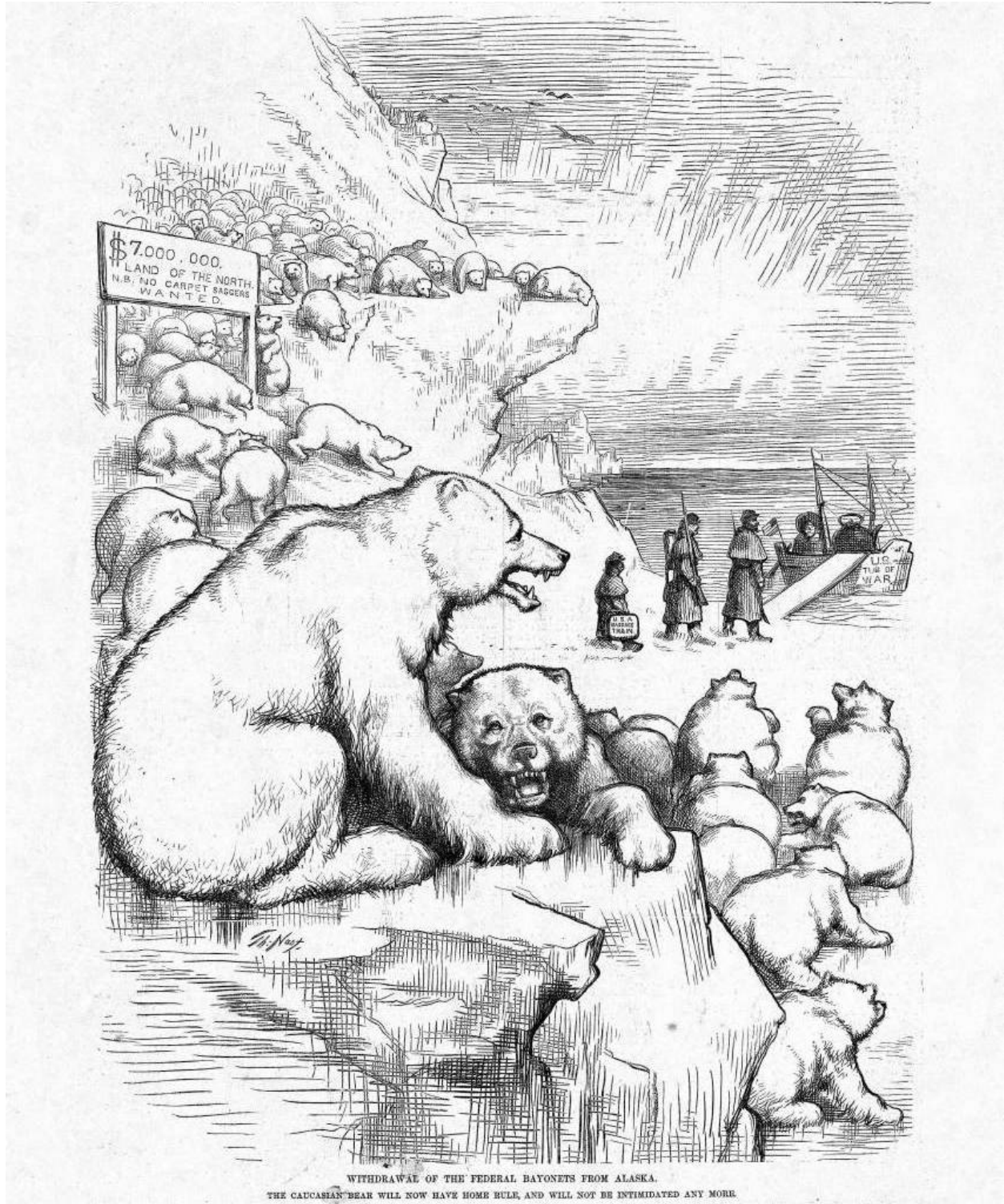
Alaska and portions of the South would remain under military occupation, with news of the two projects appearing alongside each other in the press, practically inviting comparison.

In an 1868 speech, for example, Attorney General Henry Stanbery mobilized comparison with Alaska to illustrate his complaint that Congressional Reconstruction treated the ex-Confederacy as “conquered provinces, not States.” Stanbery bemoaned the fact that the “Reconstruction acts passed by Congress have converted” the former Confederate states “into a lower condition than that of mere territories.” “[I]f ever they were again to become States of the Union,” he explained, they might be expected “to come in by a new title, precisely as in some future day we may choose to make a State of the newly acquired territory of Alaska.”³⁵ By equating the political status of the South under military Reconstruction with that of Alaska, Stanbery no doubt intended to provoke outrage on behalf of the Southern states. However, this resemblance was not lost on those who supported Congressional Reconstruction, especially after the remaining federal troops were withdrawn from both regions in 1877.

On April 22, *Harper’s Weekly* published an editorial cartoon by Thomas Nast depicting the withdrawal of federal troops from Alaska (see Figure 6). Nast’s cartoon again portrays Alaska according to the negative stereotypes put in place by opponents of the purchase a decade earlier: Alaska is a mountainous iceberg, overrun with dozens of polar bears that look on as the few departing soldiers board a small boat, which is powered by a steaming tea kettle. The image clearly portrays federal efforts to control Alaska as utterly ineffectual, but Nast’s captions reassign this image of US military impotence to the South and the recent withdrawal of the remaining federal troops as part of the Compromise of 1877. Perched in the background, a sign reads “\$7,000,000. Land of the North. N.B., No Carpet Baggers Wanted.” A caption beneath the image reads, “Withdrawal of the federal bayonets from Alaska. The Caucasian bear will now have home rule, and will not be intimidated any more.” These references to carpetbaggers and Caucasian home rule invite the viewer to see the end of military Reconstruction through the lens of arctic stereotypes: The ice and polar bears purportedly rendering Alaska hostile to civilization become symbolic of the hostile white ruling class of the South, no more reconstructed than Alaska had been settled. The retreat of the federal soldiers to their tea kettle equates the Compromise of 1877 with a shameful admission of defeat by a nation willing to abandon its responsibilities for a return to domestic comfort.

Despite their opposing political agendas, both Nast’s cartoon and Stanbery’s speech highlight the fact that the Alaska Purchase—and the questions it gave rise to—shaped the ways Americans interpreted the events of Reconstruction. Though Reconstruction is often understood as paving the way for later US imperial expansion beyond the continent, extra-continental colonialism was already underway in Alaska and influencing how Americans conceptualized the postbellum United States. Though the idea of an “unincorporated territory” did not exist in the nineteenth century, Stanbery’s implication that Alaska occupied a “lower condition than that of mere territories” suggests the need for a term that would reflect Alaska’s colonial status. Paul Lai has argued that the “complicated and contradictory layering of sovereignty, power, and cultural history” in the various discontinuous territories

Figure 6. "Withdrawal of the Federal Bayonets from Alaska." *Harper's Weekly*.



of the United States “calls for more analysis of alternative formations of America and American studies.” To that end, Lai offers the phrase “Discontiguous States of America” as a way of bringing together “a range of contradictory ideas occasioned by the presence of many territories within, but not constitutive of, the United States.” “Replacing ‘United’ with ‘Discontiguous,’” he explains, “reminds us of the imperial topography of the United States,” prompting a consideration of its “discontinuities rather than connections.”³⁶ Though Reconstruction studies has grown increasingly focused on the consolidation of the contiguous United States, Lai’s mode of critical analysis asks us to remember the unprecedented extracontinental expansion that occurred in tandem with this process of consolidation.

“The South Devil” and the Boundaries of the Continent

As Jennifer Greeson observes, “Americans in the postwar decades often are imagined as turned inward: isolationist, recovering from their collective domestic trauma, interested only in the specificity and restriction of realist writing.”³⁷ Though the profusion of postbellum local color fiction may seem to confirm this perception, Greeson contends that we need to remain attentive to the “global scope” of Southern local color writing. She argues that because “the Reconstruction South crossed and recrossed the border between domestic and foreign,” Southern local color “melded concerns about national standardization with increasingly aggressive visions of US power projected outward, from a metropolitan center into a peripheral world.”³⁸ The global dimensions of local color fiction are perhaps most pronounced in the wealth of stories and travel sketches depicting subtropical Florida. As Michael O’Brien observes, the cultural legacy of Spanish colonialism rendered nineteenth-century Florida “a remote orphan” in relation to the rest of the nation.³⁹ This cultural incongruity was often registered in geographical terms.

Florida’s seemingly liminal position in relation to the continental United States found voice in the writing of Constance Fenimore Woolson, who wintered there from 1873 to 1879, publishing numerous poems, travel sketches, stories, and novels about the state. John Lowe has argued that Woolson’s unique delineation of coastal Florida makes her an “inventor” of both “Southern local color fiction” and the “transatlantic fiction of the Global South basin.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Sharon D. Kennedy-Nolle has explored how “Woolson repositions the state within the greater context of the Global South by celebrating the Floridian proclivity to diversify and hybridize.”⁴¹ Woolson’s story of Reconstruction Florida, “The South Devil,” however, is much more ambivalent than celebratory in its outlook. Set amidst the ruins of a Spanish plantation and the swamp that borders it, “The South Devil” is rife with the tropes and exoticized descriptions typical of Florida local color. Since its 1880 publication in *The Atlantic Monthly*, critical readings of the story have focused primarily on Woolson’s portrayal of the subtropical swamp, the titular “South Devil.” Though William Dean Howells praised Woolson for “her forbearance” in “not extort[ing] an allegory from the malign morass” of the swamp in an 1887 review, most contemporary critics have not concurred with Howells’s assessment that “[i]t is

a merely animal life which ‘The South Devil’ lives.”⁴² Instead, most have interpreted the story in an overtly symbolic register.⁴³

The central tension of the story derives from the two protagonists’ opposing reactions to the swamp that borders the plantation where they have come to reside. Carl Brenner, a musician and consumptive, is entranced by the swamp, repeatedly venturing into it under its spell, while his stepbrother Mark Deal “hate[s] the beauty of the South Devil,” reluctantly entering it only to rescue Carl when he fails to return.⁴⁴ Critics have analyzed how Woolson situates Florida’s swampy topography within a broader Caribbean world. This becomes most obvious when Carl’s friend Schwartz absconds to the West Indies with Mark’s life savings. Mark tracks Schwartz to the nearby town of San Miguel only to learn that

Schwartz had been seen the previous evening negotiating passage at the last moment on a coasting schooner bound South—one of those nondescript little craft engaged in smuggling and illegal trading, with which the waters of the West Indies are infested. The schooner had made her way out of the harbor by moonlight. Although ostensibly bound for Key West, no one could say with any certainty that she would touch there; bribed by Schwartz, with all the harbors, inlets, and lagoons of the West Indies open to her, pursuit would be worse than hopeless. (162–63)

In addition to highlighting Florida’s proximity to the West Indies, this passage establishes Florida’s position within networks of illicit commerce which thrive in the ostensibly lawless and uncontrollable space that is Woolson’s Caribbean. As John Lowe argues, Woolson connects the alleged moral bankruptcy of the West Indies to its swamp-like geography by having Schwartz escape to the West Indies instead of fleeing into the swamp, the traditional refuge of outlaws, fugitive slaves, and others seeking to elude the law.⁴⁵ The word “infested” further yokes the waters of the West Indies to the Florida swamp, a space teeming with snakes and deadly insects.

As Michele Currie Navakas notes, “[s]cholars have speculated that North American geographic fantasies of Florida’s connection to the Caribbean and points south either voice imperial ambitions to annex Cuba and other parts of the West Indies, or express anxieties that the Caribbean was already too close and could ‘contaminate’ US bodies, culture, and politics.”⁴⁶ “The South Devil” can certainly be read as an expression of Woolson’s “discomfort with the effects of imperialism,” and the blurring of “cultural and racial distinctions” it entails.⁴⁷ However, Navakas also notes that “if we read such fantasies more literally, they express first and foremost uncertainties about where the boundaries of the nation actually are and even what constitutes a boundary and a continent.”⁴⁸ With this in mind, I would argue that the anxieties shaping “The South Devil” are derived from an acute awareness of the porous nature of the continent. Rather than presenting a national geography with clearly demarcated natural boundaries, Woolson depicts a continent that disintegrates at the

periphery. By drawing attention to sites where national and extranational space blur and intermingle, “The South Devil” questions the integrity of the continent and the national reunion narratives predicated on it.

To recognize this requires us to attend to the story’s arctic subplot, through which we learn Mark’s motive for coming to Florida. Though it is clear from the outset that Carl has accompanied Mark to Florida in hopes that “the soft, balmy, fragrant air” will cure his illness, Woolson is more reticent with Mark’s motive, generating suspense by repeatedly deferring this explanation.⁴⁹ If Mark hates the swamp, why has he chosen to live beside it, in a culture and climate vastly different from his Northern home? The first clue comes when Mark tells Carl, “I wanted to get to a place where I could be warm—warm, hot baked; warm through and through; warm all the time. I wanted to get to a place where the very ground was warm” (154–55). In this capacity, Florida serves Mark well, as it did countless tourists who wintered there in the late nineteenth century. The story opens in late December, and yet the temperature reaches “eighty-six degrees in the shade” (139). As the narrator observes, “Everything was hot and soft and brightly colored. Winter? Who knew of winter here?” (141). But when Mark’s backstory emerges midway through the narrative, his constant desire to be warm is revealed as a symptom of his traumatic experience as part of a failed arctic expedition, of which he was the sole survivor. A narrative flashback finds Mark and the other crew members abandoning their icebound ship to walk

doggedly across the ice, the numbing ice, the killing ice, the never-ending, gleaming, taunting, devilish ice. ... On the eleventh day a wind rises; bergs come sailing into view. One moves down upon us. ... Our ice-field breaks into a thousand pieces. We leap from block to block; we cry aloud in our despair; we call to each other, and curse and pray. But the strips of dark water widen between us; our ice-islands grow smaller; and a current bears us onward. We can no longer keep in motion, and freeze as we stand. (158–59)

The next morning, Mark Deal is the only man still alive: “The others are blocks of ice ... each solemnly staring, one foot advanced, as if still keeping up the poor cramped steps with which he had fought off death” (159).

Critics have recognized this arctic expedition as a thinly veiled reference to the Second Grinnell Expedition led by Elisha Kent Kane. That Woolson modeled Mark Deal’s arctic expedition on that of Elisha Kent Kane—and that her readers would recognize this—is beyond question. She even refers to it as the “Kenton Arctic expedition,” deliberately invoking the memory of the historical figure who had become a household name a quarter of a century earlier. In 1853, Kane set out to find British explorer Sir John Franklin, whose expedition in search of the Northwest Passage had been lost since 1845. After Kane’s ship became icebound, he and his crew were forced to undertake an eighty three-day overland march before being rescued. Although Kane’s expedition was clearly a failure, Americans in the 1850s

interpreted it differently: Upon his return, Kane was celebrated as a national hero, and his bestselling narrative of the expedition would be read as a testament to the strength and endurance of Americans in even the harshest of environments.

Woolson's "Kenton Arctic expedition," however, differs from that of Kane in significant ways. Though critics have acknowledged Woolson's alterations, they have not explained why she transforms a narrative of national triumph into one of disaster and death. "Only one man was lost during" Kane's "eighty-three-day ordeal," observes Sharon L. Dean, but "[i]n Woolson's version," only one survives.⁵⁰ Likewise, Kathleen Diffley notes that "Woolson's first readers would have remembered [that] almost all of Kane's crewmen returned from their desperate trek ... across the icecap. But Woolson changed the expedition story to one of dwindling resources and wrenching farewells, a tale of stranded comrades as the ice field breaks up and they drift apart."⁵¹ The body count grows even larger when one remembers that Woolson adds an entire second ship to those lost. Despite Woolson's gestures to Kane, Mark Deal's expedition more closely resembles the lost Franklin expedition, of which there were two ships and no survivors.

Woolson's revision of the Kane narrative reflects a change in the way Americans imagined the nation's relationship to the Arctic. As historians have noted, Kane achieved the status of national icon not through his actual accomplishments but rather through his ability to function as "a fluid symbol of American heroism that transcended many of the divisions that marked this turbulent era."⁵² His ability to transcend these divisions was predicated on his association with the Arctic. As a space that "could be explored without being administered," the Far North allowed Americans like Kane "a place to flex imperial muscle without having to do the heavy lifting required by a colonial empire."⁵³ But by the time Woolson was writing "The South Devil" in the late 1870s, the Arctic was no longer a realm beyond the reach of US politics. Images of the Arctic had become thoroughly politicized in the wake of the Alaska Purchase, and although Woolson makes no reference to Alaska, her fracturing "ice-islands" strongly resonate with the icebox imagery used to protest US imperialism in the Reconstruction Era. Read in this light, Mark Deal's failed arctic expedition resembles a metaphorical reenactment of the fracturing of the United States into noncontiguous territories.

At a time when US writers were still narrating the reconciliation of North and South in the aftermath of the Civil War, Woolson replaces postbellum literature's ubiquitous trope of the romance of reunion with a romance plot that resolves not through the symbolic reconciliation of North and South but rather through the symbolic exclusion of extracontinental space. Late in the story, Mark confesses his love for Carl's cousin Leeza, explaining that his decision to bring Carl to Florida with him was motivated by the fact that both Carl and Leeza have the same blue eyes. Mark's heretofore inexplicable patience with Carl can thus be attributed to the fact that Carl functions as a surrogate for Leeza. However, Mark's relationship with Carl is preceded by another relationship with a man named Proctor, Mark's friend and fellow arctic explorer, who cares for Mark during their desperate attempt to walk to safety over the ice. These homosocial relationships—symbolic of US forays into the Caribbean and the Arctic—must come to an end before Mark can establish a relationship with

Leeza. As both Proctor and Carl fall victim to the deadly environments which they occupy, Woolson symbolically forecloses US expansion beyond the continent, allowing a heterosexual—and thus reproductively viable—relationship to ensue.

Yet despite this symbolic renunciation of extracontinental expansion, “The South Devil” remains acutely aware of the porous nature of the continent. By pairing a shattering field of arctic ice with the dissolving ground of the Florida swamp, Woolson presents a national geography that lacks any clearly delineated boundary between domestic and foreign space. Instead, Woolson depicts a continent that disintegrates at the periphery. As the controversy surrounding the Alaska Purchase attests, many Americans in the Reconstruction Era were profoundly anxious about what constituted national space, where the borders of the nation would be drawn, and on what authority those borders rested. In order to recover a sense of the instability of US national boundaries in the postbellum era—and the national futures which it enabled Americans to contemplate—we need to recover a sense of the ways Americans imagined Alaska in the years before it became legible as the “last frontier.” Bringing Alaska back into our conversations about Reconstruction will enable us to better understand the scope and significance of US imperialism in the nineteenth century.

Notes

¹ George Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 20.

² Jamie Winders, “Imperfectly Imperial: Northern Travel Writers in the Postbellum U.S. South, 1865–1880,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 2 (June 2005), 405.

³ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 275, 250–1.

⁴ Brook Thomas, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 5.

⁵ David Starr Jordan, “Colonial Lessons of Alaska,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 82, no. 493 (1898), 578, 583, 591.

⁶ Ernest Gruening, Governor of the Alaska Territory from 1939 until 1953, cites “[t]he nation’s greater concern for settling the West, Alaska’s ill-founded reputé as an uninhabitable wasteland, and Federal neglect” as reasons why Alaska lay “dormant till the close of the century” (“Introduction,” in *An Alaskan Reader, 1867–1967*, ed. Ernest Gruening [New York: Meredith Press, 1966], xiv).

⁷ Lee A. Farrow, *Seward's Folly: A New Look at the Alaska Purchase* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2016), 82.

⁸ Perhaps the most substantial examination of the national interest in pre-gold rush Alaska is Robert Campbell's *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire along the Inside Passage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), which explores how tourism and the "flood of travel writing" it produced "helped to fix a particular vision of the north in the national imaginations of Americans" (12). As Campbell demonstrates, Alaskan tourism "served as a necessary 'prequel' to the story of the Klondike gold rush," transforming "Alaska into a place of colonial conquest and the natural resource extraction it entailed" (9).

⁹ As Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens observe, "[t]he received metageographical assumption regarding the American hemisphere and the United States in particular has been that these sites are fundamentally continental spaces." "[C]ontinental presumptions" have produced, they argue, "a collective negative hallucination" that has obscured the archipelagic attributes of the Americas. In order to recover a sense of the archipelagic Americas and "the interrelations of America ... and the broader planetary archipelago," Roberts and Stephens call for "a decontinentalization of perceptions of US and generally American space, and a shift toward recognizing the Americas as a set of spaces that has been persistently intertwined with, constituted by, and grounded in the archipelagic" ("Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture," in *Archipelagic American Studies*, eds. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017], 17).

¹⁰ Morgan B. Sherwood, *Exploration of Alaska: 1865–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 6.

¹¹ Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 4.

¹² Stacey L. Smith, "Beyond North and South: Putting the West in the Civil War and Reconstruction," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 4 (2016), 574. The term "Greater Reconstruction" belongs to Elliott West, whose influential essay "Reconstructing Race" precipitated a shift toward a continental focus in the scholarship of Reconstruction by bringing it into conversation with Western history (*Western Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 [2003]: 7–26).

¹³ Gregory P. Downes and Kate Masur have recently argued "that Reconstruction is not the most useful framework for making sense of the many histories of the postwar United States" ("Echoes of War: Rethinking Post-Civil War Governance and Politics," in *The World the Civil War Made*, ed. Gregory P. Downes and Kate Masur [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015], 4). Instead, they call for "new framing questions and

modes of analysis” that “move away from the assumption that the era can be encapsulated as some version of Reconstruction” (2, 5).

¹⁴ Hsuan L. Hsu, *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6–7.

¹⁵ Eric T. L. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 31.

¹⁶ Rachel St. John, “Contingent Continent: Spatial and Geographic Arguments in the Shaping of the Nineteenth-Century United States,” *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (2017): 40–41.

¹⁷ One of the first books published about Alaska, Frederick Whymper’s 1869 *Travel and Adventure in the Territory of Alaska* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869), notes that there were “many, both in England and America, who look on” the US purchase of Alaska “as the first move towards an American occupation of the whole continent, and who foresee that Canada, and British America generally, will sooner or later become part of the United States” (87).

¹⁸ Roberts and Stephens, “Archipelagic American Studies,” 9.

¹⁹ As an 1869 article in *Harper’s Weekly* observed, “[o]ur national vanity was somewhat gratified in knowing that ... we had become possessors of a region ten times as large as New York or Virginia, and about equal to France, Germany, and Great Britain” (“An Artist in Alaska,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 38, no. 227 [1869], 589).

²⁰ James D. Drake, *The Nation’s Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 10–13.

²¹ Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3–5.

²² Mark Rifkin, *Manifesting America: The Imperial Construction of U.S. National Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9, 5.

²³ Russell A. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818–1875* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 121.

²⁴ “The Ceded Territory,” *New-York Tribune*, 1 April 1867, 1.

²⁵ “The Week,” *The Nation* 4, no. 92 (1867), 266.

²⁶ Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 12, 15.

²⁷ Michael F. Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 12.

²⁸ Potter, *Arctic Spectacles*, 3.

²⁹ Peter A. Coates, *The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy: Technology, Conservation, and the Frontier* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991), 30.

³⁰ "The Russian Slice," *New-York Tribune*, 1 April 1867, 4.

³¹ Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 239, 244.

³² For a discussion of the "astonishing longevity of the agrarian ideal," see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 159.

³³ Charles Sumner, *Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the Cession of Russian American to the United States* (Washington: Congressional Globe Office, 1876), 33.

³⁴ "Ten Years' Acquaintance with Alaska," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 55, no. 330 (1877), 805, 812–15.

³⁵ "Up with the Democratic Flag," *Albany Argus*, 11 January 1868, 2.

³⁶ Paul Lai, "Discontiguous States of America: The Paradox of Unincorporation in Craig Santos Perez's Poetics of Chamorro Guam," *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3, no. 2 (2011), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02f4v8m3>.

³⁷ Greeson, *Our South*, 237.

³⁸ Greeson, *Our South*, 259–60.

³⁹ Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 20.

⁴⁰ Lowe, "Constance Fenimore Woolson," 39.

⁴¹ Sharon D. Kennedy-Nolle, *Writing Reconstruction: Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the Postwar South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 36

⁴² "Editor's Study," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 74, no. 441 (1887), 482.

⁴³ For example, in what is the most extended analysis of "The South Devil," Kathleen Diffley reads Woolson's descriptions of "Florida's peculiar topography," and the plant and animal life it contains, as a metaphorical investigation of "differing paradigms for national reform and multiple postwar ways of seeing" ("Cypress, Chameleons, and Snakes: Displacement in Woolson's 'The South Devil,'" in *Witness to Reconstruction:*

Constance Fenimore Woolson and the Postbellum South, 1873–1894, ed. Kathleen Diffley [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011], 203, 196).

⁴⁴ Constance Fenimore Woolson, “The South Devil,” in *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches*, 139–177 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1880), 168.

⁴⁵ Lowe, “Constance Fenimore Woolson,” 43.

⁴⁶ Michele Currie Navakas, *Liquid Landscape: Geography and Settlement at the Edge of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 56.

⁴⁷ Anne E. Boyd, “Tourism, Imperialism, and Hybridity in the Reconstruction South: Woolson’s *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches*,” in *Witness to Reconstruction: Constance Fenimore Woolson and the Postbellum South, 1873–1894*, ed. Kathleen Diffley (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 56.

⁴⁸ Navakas, *Liquid Landscape*, 56.

⁴⁹ Woolson, “The South Devil,” 141

⁵⁰ Sharon L. Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton: Perspectives on Landscape and Art* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 102.

⁵¹ Diffley, “Cypress, Chameleons, and Snakes,” 205.

⁵² Mark Metzler Sawin, *Raising Kane: Elisha Kent Kane and the Culture of Fame in Antebellum America* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2008), 329.

⁵³ Michael F. Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 12.

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