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"Last Frontier. North to the Future." – Oil-Age Alaska and the Environmental Critique in Mei Mei Evans's *Oil and Water*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Mei Mei Evans's 2013 novel *Oil and Water* as a critical response to the competing narratives that have historically shaped three dominant versions of Alaska in the national imagination: as the Last Frontier to be explored, as an enduring frontier promising a balance between resource extraction and environmental protection, and as a wilderness to be preserved. Inspired by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which takes a pivotal place in US environmental history, the novel offers a realistic exploration of the environmental, social, and cultural consequences of oil dependency. By dramatizing the spill's devastating impact on both human and more-than-human life, *Oil and Water* challenges the images of Alaska as a limitless resource frontier and the enduring frontier, while advancing the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected.

KEYWORDS

Oil spill, wilderness, resource extraction, environmental discourse

The history of Alaska is a complex story of territorial expansion, resource exploitation, and unsettled questions of land ownership. These events contributed to shifting and often conflicting narratives about Alaska and its place in the national consciousness of the United States. Alaska's peculiar geography and resource-rich non-human nature shaped the dominant image of Alaska as the Last Frontier, which, according to

Susan Kollin, is "a region whose history has yet to be written and whose virgin lands have yet to be explored" (*Nature's State* 2). More recently, in the early twentieth century, the discovery of substantial oil deposits on the North Slope secured Alaska's place on the national and global petroleumscape map, transforming its economic, political, and social life. This consolidated the public image of Alaska as the Last Frontier versus last wilderness into an "enduring frontier," a term coined by Roxanne Willis, which, however, was challenged in the spring of 1989 when the Exxon Valdez tanker spilled crude oil into the waters of Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska, causing an unprecedented environmental catastrophe and making Alaska "a place to be preserved rather than exploited" (131). Alaska, then, is a prime example of how particular spaces can exist in multiple versions, as it entered the national imagination as a variously versioned frontier, and it is these processes of versioning that the following turns to. As oil continues to shape the state's economy in the twenty-first century, the versioning frontier discourse reflects what Stephen Haycox calls the ongoing "struggle with the basic conceptual dichotomy between development and environmental protection" (353). These ideas permeate the Alaskan social and cultural life. They are present in non-fictional representations of the state and in the "casual publicity" visible in tourism advertisements representing its territory as a unique region of pristine nature and wilderness (352). They also inform cultural production, including fictional narratives that in varied ways respond to the different discourses of Alaska.

Against this backdrop, my article turns to Mei Mei Evans's 2013 novel *Oil and Water* as an example of a fictional narrative in which the conflicting discursive constructions of Alaska are translated into a narrative strategy and an explicit environmental and social critique of the oil-age Alaska. The novel challenges and negotiates the differing versions of Alaska's frontier through the perspectives of boosters and conservationists. While boosters support resource exploitation, conservationists can be divided into two groups: one that recognizes the need for economic development but advocates for a balance between industry and ecological protection, and one that denounces resource exploitation. Through actions and perspectives of the characters who represent these mentalities, Evans's novel negotiates three versions of the frontier: Alaska as a resource frontier to be exploited, as an enduring frontier that balances extraction and ecological protection, and as a wilderness to be preserved. Through its realistic depiction of the socially, culturally, and ecologically detrimental effects of oil dependency, the novel provides a subversive commentary on dominant frontier notions of Alaska. In doing so, it promotes the preservation of Alaska's wilderness while offering a space to critically reflect on the dominant narratives that shape perceptions of the land and culture.

On the one hand, the novel gives a central place to the characters who represent a conservationist mentality oriented toward balancing resource exploitation and environmental protection or who denounce the oil industry. Integral to the story is their attempt to mitigate the spill's impact by helping to save sea animals and wildlife while raising questions of responsibility, morality, and justice. By addressing these issues, the narrative underscores the coexistence and interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life acknowledging their shared vulnerability and recognizing the vast damage that a dependence on oil has caused. By so doing, the novel questions the possibility of balancing resource extraction and environmental protection that the notion of the enduring frontier promises.

On the other hand, the novel explores the booster mentality through the actions of characters who support the oil industry and who subscribe to the "rhetoric of acceptable risks" (Evans 232) it employs to promote spillage as a necessary downside of the oil business. Just as it seems that the oil company does everything to alleviate the damage, it makes a controversial demand: Everyone participating in the clean-up and animal-saving actions must accept the payment. The moral question of whether to accept this "deep-pocket approach" (134) deeply divides the community of Evans's fictional town of Selby which needs to find a way to restore "its former unity" (261).

Since *Oil and Water* shows a strong awareness of Alaskan (colonial) history and centrally includes perspectives of the Native people who were often excluded from the vision of Alaska as the Last Frontier, I frame my analysis historically. This historical framing shows that resource exploitation and oil development shaped discourses that inspired social action which challenged colonial legacies, confronted environmental degradation, and promoted Native land rights and environmental justice, strengthening the vision of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected rather than exploited. The following will begin by laying out the processes of resource exploitation that shaped conflicting narratives of expansion and conservation reflected in the three prominent versions of Alaska: as the Last Frontier (framed through the discourse of boosterism), the enduring frontier, and wilderness to be protected (both of the latter rooted in conservationist ideals). Subsequently, my article analyzes *Oil and Water* as a fictional narrative that negotiates the three frontier discourses, offering a social and environmental critique of oil extraction. I focus on how the actions of characters and their personal experiences of the oil spill challenge the narratives of the Last Frontier and the enduring frontier and advance the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected rather than exploited.

Historical Frameworks and Versions of Alaska

Alaska has a unique place in the cultural geography of the United States. For a long time, it was missing from US-American historical accounts because of its geographic

and cultural distance from the contiguous United States, and because its history did not fit America's expansionist narrative. As Willis puts it: "Remote and mysterious, Alaska did not attract settlers" (11). In her study *Alaska's Place in the West: From the Last Frontier to the Last Great Wilderness*, she explains the reasons behind this. Native Alaskan people resisted the reservation system, and attempts to establish a colony of agricultural settlers failed. The region's vast and shifting landscape with polar nights made it unattractive to settlers. This is not to say that Alaska's history lacks colonial encounters. According to William Iggiagruk Hensley, the Native populations of Alaska "were adversely affected by the Russians, who came in search of valuable furs; then by the whalers and fishermen from ports around the world; and, beginning in the 1890s for several decades, by fortune seekers during the great gold rush" (197). These encounters not only brought diseases to which Native Alaskans had no immunity but also caused widespread starvation by depleting the game and fish on which Indigenous communities depended (197). Nevertheless, Willis points out that, after the gold rush, Alaska disappeared from "many American history textbooks" (2).

Furthermore, prominent narratives depicted Alaska as an isolated "place where people hunt for their own food, build their own houses, and live a rustic life 'close to nature'" (2) which distanced it from the US-American cultural imagination and the notion of American exceptionalism. This perception of Alaska as an isolated place and as an "icebox," a term used by Peter Coates (30), began to shift in the late nineteenth century as mineral exploitation transformed it into the Last Frontier, integrating it into US-American national identity and narrowing the cultural distance between Alaska and the contiguous United States. The most significant changes occurred in 1890 when "the Census Bureau reported that there was no longer a discernable frontier line, and [that] the era of 'free' American land had come to an end" (Willis 12). This was three years before Frederick James Turner famously declared that the American frontier had closed. Boosters, who saw great potential in Alaska for developing industries that resembled Western models, such as the cattle industry, attempted to make Alaska more like the contiguous United States (12). The exploitation of fish, timber, ore, and fur helped shape the narrative that Alaska "should remain a storehouse of natural resources to be exploited by private entrepreneurs" (11). Finally, the successful explorations of Alaska for minerals and the building of the railroad system to attract settlers rendered Alaska the Last Frontier (14).

Granting Alaska this status as Last Frontier, and thereby designating it as a (not-yet-closed) space for settlement and exploration, did more than merely "[lessen] the frontier anxiety" that the Turner thesis famously expressed. It "rendered Alaska comprehensible to Americans" (14–15), narrowing the cultural distance that complicated Alaska's integration into the national consciousness. Victoria Wyatt explains that US-Americans often perceived Alaska "as a metaphorical island – distanced from the

mainland by Canada rather than by an ocean, but distanced all the same" (565). In this light, the concept of the Last Frontier "made Alaska part of America, and everyone could feel confident about how the future of the region would unfold" (Willis 14–15). Alaska emerged as "a national salvation whose existence also alleviates fears about the inevitable environmental doom of the United States" (Kollin, *Nature's State* 5). The idea of the frontier closure meant, among other things, the end of US-American abundance, an abundance tied intrinsically to the exploitation of nature. As William Cronon explains:

> The forests that put roofs over American heads might vanish. The rivers that brought water to American cities might run dry. The coal mines that fueled American factories and heated American homes might give out. If these things happened, the nation's prosperity would surely erode and, with it, the political and personal freedoms that depended on prosperity for their survival. (606)

Alaska's diverse natural world, then, promised a solution to these fears.

However, Alaska's image as the Last Frontier was seriously challenged by the large-scale drilling of oil on the North Slope and the subsequent building of the oil infrastructure, most notably the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. Oil development required "conquering" Alaska's landscape causing environmental destruction which initiated actions to protect the Alaskan wilderness and brought to light the unsettled questions of Native Alaskan land ownership. Conservationist activism and the political struggle by the Native Alaskans over land rights eventually yielded a version of Alaska as the enduring frontier that manages to maintain the balance between economic development and wilderness protection.

Native Alaskan questions concerning land ownership were the heritage of nineteenth-century developments when "Alaska became part of the United States through the Treaty of Concession with Russia" before it became the forty-ninth state of the American Union in 1958 (Williams, "Alaska and Its People" 9). The Treaty vaguely defined the status of the Native Alaskan people which made their rights "de facto nonexistent" (Willis 117). This vagueness became the unifying force in the 1950s and 1960s among the Native Alaskans who were usually "suspicious of one another, as their needs and wants varied from group to group and region to region" (Willis 129). One Alaska Native declared that "it has now become necessary to make a determined stand to protect what is rightfully ours" (qtd. in Willis 118–19). The state and federal government eventually negotiated the settlement that resulted in the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) that "extinguished indigenous land claims in exchange for forty-four million acres and nearly one billion dollars to be managed through twelve regional Alaska Native corporations" (Kollin, "Alaska Native Literature" 28).

According to Roy M. and Shari M. Huhndorf, the passage of ANCSA offered opportunities for financial power and political influence, but its corporate structure made the "land vulnerable to loss, and the separation of tribes from their land" raised issues of sovereignty (68). One Inupiat Eskimo speaking in the name of many Alaskans following the legislative approval of ANCSA said that the ANCSA saw "'the land as something to be measured in terms of profit and losses,' a 'vision of Alaska that makes lots of dollars and no sense to the people who live there, especially the Natives'" (qtd. in Huhndorf and Huhndorf 68). Despite many problematic cultural and societal implications and contested interpretations of the act as, in Evan Peter's words, "a politically correct illusion that perpetuated colonization in contemporary times" (180), or as endangering subsistence lifestyles of the Native Alaskan people, most of them accepted it as "the best settlement they could win" (Huhndorf and Huhndorf 68). Although ambiguous and echoing colonial resource extraction patterns, this settlement marked a turning point, fostering empowerment among Native Alaskan communities who were "subjected to colonial and genocidal pressures" that "took a tremendous toll on Alaska Native societies and almost destroyed them" (Williams, "Solidarity" 202).

Further activism led to the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), which protected millions of acres as national parks and wildlife refuges making it "the largest conservationist act in history, more than doubling the total acres in the U.S. Wilderness Preservation System" (Willis 129). In the public's view, these developments promised to balance oil exploitation with nature conservation. As a result, by 1980, Alaska emerged in the US-American consciousness as "a place that had it all, that protected the interests of everyone. The 'last frontier' was now an 'enduring frontier,' a place where Natives coexisted with non-Natives, and where national and state interests had been brought into balance" (129). Changed public perception of Alaska did not mean the end of struggles as Alaska Natives grappled with maintaining traditional lifestyles within the corporate framework, the state faced challenges from the oil industry's economic power, and Alaskans resisted the influx of regulations tied to federal land management (129). Nevertheless, in the 1980s "these battles became local concerns and Alaska once again faded into the background of national politics" (129).

The narrative of the enduring frontier was destabilized by the Exxon Valdez oil spill that inspired Evans's novel. In the aftermath of this catastrophe, which gained national attention and took a pivotal place in US environmental history, Alaska was "more likely to be described as America's 'last great wilderness,' a place to be preserved rather than exploited" (Willis 131). On March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker, transporting crude oil from the North Slope, ran aground on Blight Reef in Prince William Sound, releasing twelve million gallons of crude oil. As Joanna Burger

explains, with the Alaskan winds and currents, it took only a few days for the crude oil to spread throughout the sound and reach the Gulf of Alaska "and the remote beaches at the end of convoluted fiords" (49). It is widely acknowledged that this disaster resulted from human error, as the captain's instructions were not promptly followed. By the time the crew realized the tanker was headed toward Blight Reef, "barely covered with ice waters," the ship was already locked in autopilot mode, making the crew's efforts to change course futile (47). The outcome was "the largest oil spill in U.S. history, and the sheer magnitude alarmed even the most complacent supporters of big industry and the oil companies" (47). Thousands of birds and sea otters died, and the spill "destroyed the subsistence lifestyle of native Alaskans" (51). For a long time, the spill remained at the forefront of public and scientific concern. It sparked "over a hundred studies outlining 'a process to determine proper compensation to the public for injuries to natural resources'" (53).

This oil spill is not notable solely due to its size. It was considered "most tragic because it took place in an area whose natural beauty was thought to surpass all others" (Kollin, *Nature's State* 2). The media coverage highlighted dramatic images of oil-slicked animals and tainted landscapes, lamenting "the destruction of one of the world's last remaining wilderness areas" (2). The threat was not limited to nature and wildlife. It also endangered the frontier "meanings assigned to Alaska in the popular national imagination" (3). Nevertheless, the frontier myths did not hold the same significance for all Alaska Natives, whose media reports shifted attention away from the dominant narrative toward "the crisis facing a population for whom nearly 50 percent of its food is harvested from the sea and the land" (5). In contrast, many Alaskans "took the news [of the spill] in stride, quietly celebrating the high-paying jobs that would come with the cleanup" (Willis 130). The event of the oil spill is thus a moment that highlights the existence of and tensions between various historical versions of Alaska: as Last Frontier, enduring frontier, and wilderness to protect.

Negotiations of the Frontier Discourse in *Oil and Water*

Oil and Water dramatizes these contrasting responses to the crisis through the perspectives of boosters, who view the oil spill as an acceptable cost of progress, and conservationists, who denounce the oil industry as harmful. By portraying these conflicting viewpoints, the novel negotiates different frontier versions of Alaska. On the one hand, it explores the actions of the oil industry and its staunch supporters, showing how deeply the frontier mentality is tied to resource exploitation. On the other hand, by exploring the community's fight for survival in the wake of the oil spill and by giving a central place to the Native and non-Native characters who voice ethical critiques of resource exploitation, the narrative challenges the version of Alaska as the Last Frontier and the enduring frontier and promotes an image of Alaska as a

wilderness to be protected. In doing so, the novel engages with frontier discourse as an environmental critique, exposing oil's profound impact on history, landscapes, and identities while highlighting the urgent need to preserve Alaska's wilderness.

The novel is inspired by Evans's personal experiences of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which "became a complex symbol of environmental despoliation and corporate greed" (Haycox 336). As Rosanne Pagano points out, Evans worked as a public information officer for the city of Homer in Alaska and, in the aftermath of the spill, "became a trusted voice that helped quell rumors and countered spin." The novel represents a compelling and emotionally charged narrative that probes into the meanings of the oil spill as one of the most serious environmental disasters with long-term consequences. It chronicles 153 days following the spillage when the Mammoth Kuparuk tanker, described in a radio broadcast as "the Mammoth Petroleum Corporation's newest, largest, 'most state-of-the-art' oil tanker," carrying crude oil from the North Slope, "run[s] aground in Montagues Reef" in the Gulf of Alaska, releasing "twelve million gallons" of oil into Alaska's pristine waters. The petroleum industry tries to downplay this event by labeling it "the Critical Incident" (Evans 17), but it turns out that it is one of the largest oil spills globally and an unprecedented environmental disaster for Alaska and its people, a result that the novel ties to its dominant image as: "Last Frontier. North to the Future" (63).

The novel is set in the fictional town of Selby in Alaska at a critical moment of the oil spill. At the center are Gregg, a fisherman, and Lee his deckhand who share "the same thick black hair, same dusky complexion, same Asiatic eyes: her Korean and his Alaska Native blood" (Evans 2). Their discovery of the spill triggers the action of the novel. Waking from a nightmarish dream, Gregg realizes that something is seriously wrong. He smells fuel and in panic moves around his boat to "identify the danger" (13). But "[t]he smell, enormous and cloying, assaults him like a physical force. . . . The overwhelming odor calls to mind raw soil, as of earth scraped open by a bulldozer or backhoe, but it also smells like gasoline" (13-14). Making sure that it is not their skipper that is leaking fuel, Gregg and Lee look at the surrounding water for clues: "The sea appears dense and opaque, a plastic lifelessness to it that he's never seen before. Even in calm conditions – like here, a protected cove – the ocean is a living entity; it kisses your hull. But something is wrong with the water. It lies inanimate and limp, as if dead" (14). At dawn,

> they gaze upon a vast oil slick, its muddy discoloration extending as far as Lee can see, the rocky shoreline strained brownish-black in both directions from the night's high tide. Up close, the water surface is gelatinous, clotted, and coagulated like some kind of infernal gravy, complete with giblets of seaweed and driftwood. (Evans 16–17)

The results of the "most recent survey estimate the size of the spill at five hundred square miles" (Evans 18). The incoming information from oceanographers and state

officials is not encouraging since the spill is not only quickly expanding due to the second-highest tidal sequence of the year but "there is no organized effort to contain it" (18). Communities that are close to the point of spillage are attempting to prevent the slick from reaching the shore but their attempts prove futile and "[n]o one knows what to do" (33). While waiting for some kind of instruction on what measures to undertake, they realize that everyone is endangered: the traditional lifestyle of Native communities, people involved in the seafood industry, and the rich wildlife. But not everyone is worried because the spillage offers an opportunity for another economic boom through the money paid for the cleanup actions by the oil company responsible for the spill. These two perceptions of the spill illustrate the conservationist and the booster mentality. However, the novel does not offer a simplistic understanding of either the conservationist or booster perspectives. Instead, it depicts nuanced character transformations influenced by the spill, illustrating the complexity of ideological change.

Placing a Native Alaskan fisherman at the center of the narrative, the novel creates an authentic space to challenge and reframe Alaska's frontier images. Through Gregg and the perspective of his Native Alaskan friend Wassily, and the radio reporter Daniel, who share the same conservationist mentality, the novel anchors the frontier critique within the broader colonial history. The depiction of the oil spill's impact on Native Alaskan communities exposes how the frontier narrative endangers the subsistence lifestyle of the Native Alaskan communities and justifies environmental exploitation that threatens cultural survival and community well-being.

The characters learn that "the Native community of Pogibshi has been 'oiled' during the night" and that marine biologists caution them "not to eat anything harvested from the sea" (Evans 31). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that "the two Chugachmiut villages on the Barrier Islands each hou[sing] a couple hundred mostly Native residents" will soon be affected. The stakes are high because the Barrier Islands are economically significant as "a huge draw for sightseers" (68). Moreover, they are a habitat for murres "whose eggs' food value has enabled continuous human settlement there over hundreds of years" (68). Gregg immediately thinks of his Native Alaskan friends Wassily and his wife Marie for whom, he thinks, "the case is closed: [s]o much for their Experiment in Indigeneity" (31). What Gregg perceives as an experiment in Indigeneity is the fact that Wassily and Marie with their three children "moved to Pogibshi last year in an attempt to recover a more purely traditional lifestyle. They haven't even had a summer there yet, the only time of year when subsistence comes easy" (31).

One Yup'ik writer, John Active, describes subsistence in the following way: "To take care; not to waste, but to share … To remember my elders, those living and dead … To be watchful at all times that I do not offend the spirits of the fish and animals that

I take for food … To take from land only what I can give to the needy if I have enough to share" (qtd. in Huhndorf and Huhndorf 75). Ken Ross explains that Native Alaskans see natural resources as "integral to their identity and way of life" because "gathering, distribution, processing, and consumption of wild goods [gives] them a sense of well-being and invigorate[s] their communities" (83). Gregg's concern about his Native Alaskan friends signals what Burger says about the Exxon Valdez oil spill: "The disruption of the lives of the people in subsistence-based villages was one of the most severe and long-lasting effects of the entire oil spill" (194).

For Gregg, the disruptive effects of the oil spill represent the consequences of the colonialist resource exploitation:

> Just as uncontained crude oil has proven fatal to the wild coast, he decides, a second wave – of unleashed greed – now toxifies the coastal community. From the earliest days of Russian incursion, Alaska has hosted a sequence of economic booms: the boom trade, logging, gold and copper mining, fishing, Pipeline construction, petroleum extraction. Now it's an oil spill: environmental holocaust turned growth industry. (Evans 155)

By referencing the earliest encounter with the Russians, Gregg situates the modern exploitation of oil within the broader context of colonial history that framed Alaska as the land of plenty initiating the cycle of environmental impoverishment. His rather provocative statement, "environmental holocaust turned growth industry," is a powerful ethical critique of resource exploitation that causes irreversible destruction for profit. Referring to the "second wave of unleashed greed," Gregg suggests that oil extraction not only contaminates the more-than-human world but that it contaminates communities, making them greedy and prioritizing profit while neglecting its environmental costs.

Furthermore, the perspectives of Wassily and Daniel, the radio reporter investigating the cause of the spill, too, demonstrate and critique the underlying colonial power relations of the Last Frontier narrative. Wassily argues that what they are experiencing now resembles war: "It's the same war *kass'aqs* [White people. Western uncivilization.] have been waging against Mother Earth and her creatures, including us original people, since time immemorial" (Evans 184, original emphasis). He explains: "Just ask the Ogoni, in Nigeria. . . . Or the tribes of the Oriente, in Ecuador. Ask what's left of the Osage, right here in the goods of old U.S. of A. They'll give you an earful about what it's like to go head-to-head with oil companies in defense of your life, your land" (184). Wassily here evokes the history of violence that characterizes the colonial encounter between the non-white and white world in the search for oil that connects geographically distant communities through the shared sense of dispossession. He also highlights what John Keeble describes as "the concomitant spiritual way of seeing that the Native people have formed over time" (9) that sets them apart from the "Western

uncivilization" (Evans 184). In this way, Wassily exposes the resource frontier as a site of violence, dispossession, and cultural erasure rather than progress.

Daniel is passionate about finding out the reason for the spill on his own because he is deeply distrustful of the petroleum industry. His distrust is triggered by the attitude of the officials and the oil industry toward the coastal residents and especially Native Alaskans. His perspective highlights the continuance of colonial practices that treat Native Alaskans as outsiders. The oil company is assuring them, third month into the crisis,

> that subsistence foods are "probably" safe to eat. Are they kidding? Daniel can exactly picture Wassily narrowing his eyes in skepticism and distrust. How must it feel to be among the nth generation to inhabit Alaska continuously for millennia, only to have the same people who overran your land and dispossessed you of your aboriginal rights now tell you what you can and cannot eat? (233)

Daniel's distrust ties back to the first encounters between the Native Alaskans and the settlers who saw Alaska as a space to be "civilized" and explored, ignoring generations of Native Alaskans who populated the region. Gregg's, Daniel's, and Wassily's perspectives thus reflect the ongoing effects of colonialism and critique the version of Alaska as the Last Frontier, emphasizing that Native Alaskans are, at the time of the spill, still affected by the decisions of those who have historically occupied their land.

Evans's novel, however, also features characters that challenge the version of Alaska as enduring frontier: As the spill's detrimental environmental and social effects unfold, Gregg, Tess, and Lee are the figures Evans uses to confront the oil industry's actions in deeply personal ways that expose the failure of the enduring frontier. Gregg's anger, Tess's activism, and Lee's sense of disillusionment reveal that Alaska cannot be "a place where economic development peacefully [meets] a wilderness landscape" and protects the interests of everyone (Willis 129). Even before the oil covers the coast of Selby, the oil company assembles bird-cleaning centers where animals are being cleaned or stored for further examination. With the oiled and dead birds arrives the unsettling news of hundreds of dead otters, which causes fear: "'I'm scared. Aren't you? Things are already crazy and oil hasn't hit us yet'" (Evans 71). These words anticipate the state some (not only Gregg) describe as an "environmental holocaust" (100) that emerges once the oil spill reaches Selby. On day six when "Selby gets greased," Mammoth Petroleum "announces the hiring of unskilled workers for beach cleanup" (92). It will stipulate "a flat rate of twenty dollars an hour and additionally provide all-you-can-eat hot meals to all workers" (92). Furthermore, they offer "to pay hundreds of dollars a day in leasing fees" for everyone willing to lend their vessels and boats to transport the workers (92). The company's "cheesy motto" "Energizing our lives" enrages Gregg: "First you destroy the place we live in and wipe out

our livelihood, then you offer to pay us so much you hope we won't notice" (92). Because "beaches [have been] contaminated overnight, the bodies of oiled birds and all manner of dead or dying marine life now begin to wash ashore below town" (92). As a result, "the state posts notices along the waterfront: 'Toxic Substance!' 'Health Hazard!'" (92).

What seems to enrage Gregg even more than the fact that people are accepting the company's payments is the thought that "ravens, foxes, seals and ospreys can't read" these signs which is why they play no role in protecting the animals: "Just as you can't remove this much toxicity from the environment, so too you can't prevent critters – be they finned, furred, or feathered – from coming into contact with it, ingesting it" (Evans 92). Once an animal ingests oil it makes it sick, and "a sick animal is tantamount to a dead animal, since it's the one that can no longer fend for itself" (93). Gregg's concern is shared by Lee who derives meaning and solace from the ocean while considering its inhabitants sacred: "How dare Big Business and government collude in jeopardizing the safety and sanctity of all the astonishing creatures who depend on the ocean for life!" (100). This sentiment is strongly present within the community. As a consequence, "[w]hen the spill buries Selby's beaches in a foot and a half of toxic mud, even those reticent by nature, the most law-abiding of citizens, storm the oil's company's officers in the new hotel to demand action and accountability" (93).

In contrast to Gregg, Lee, and other members of Selby's community who reject the payments and resent the oil industry, others fully embrace the oil spill as a chance for financial benefit, showing the ambivalence the novel's characters articulate regarding Alaska as enduring frontier. The contrasting responses are reflected in "[t]he wide range of sentiment concerning the event" (Evans 234). The slogans: "Boycott Mammoth Petroleum" and "Tanker from the Black Lagoon" versus "Alaskans to Big Oil: THANK YOU!" and "Our hero, Captain Aegnus!" illustrate two opposing attitudes to the oil spill, the petroleum industry in general, and to Alaska as a resource colony or the Last Frontier. The latter can be seen as the result of the "rhetoric of acceptable risks" used by the petroleum industry in the aftermath of the oil spill: "As unfortunate as this event may be, we do well to remember that it's also the normal cost of doing business" (232). Through this rhetoric and "with its money sustaining the community, those who don't curse it have come to worship the oil giant. No doubt some are even convinced they've never had it so good" (233). As a result, "at the height of its spill response, Mammoth Petroleum employs twenty thousand workers" (252), coming from different parts of the state and the world. Many residents of Selby experience the "spill prosperity" (233) also by renting accommodation to "thousands of job seekers" (136). This ambivalence is symbolic of the enduring conflict between the boosters

who support economic progress driven by oil and the conservationists worried about the protection of Alaska's wilderness.

The conflict between the boosters and conservationists causes the "social disintegration of the coastal communities" (Evans 252). The issue of "Mammoth money" continues to divide the coastal community, intensifying rather than easing the conflict. Tess, Daniel's wife and a nurse who came to Selby to help with the cleanup, observes that the conflict between those who are working for the oil company and those who are not is growing, leading to broken friendships and breakups. Ultimately, "mistrust and criticism separate those perceived of as profiting from the spill from those who" are not "seduced by the prospect of becoming 'spillionaires'" (149). As Tess observes, one of the greatest values and strengths of Selby as a community — "the tolerance most people routinely extended to one another," encapsulated in the phrase "Live and let live" — is now likely to never "[recover] its former unity" (261). In an open letter to the editor of the *Anchorage Tribune* she asserts: "Enough is enough . . . The real question is: can we learn to live with less? To have or to be. Is that the real question?" (261). Through this philosophical question, Tess challenges the human dependency on oil and confronts the frontier myth that values Alaska for what can be extracted from it.

Tess, however, did not always have this attitude toward extractive industries, and the change in her perception of oil extraction demonstrates the failure of the enduring frontier. At first, she had difficulties understanding the outrage toward people who agreed to be compensated for participating in the clean-up activities. To her, "those who've quit the bird and otter treatment centers rather than accept Mammoth's wages need to face reality. Of course no one's happy with the situation, but some of us seem to be doing a better job than others of accepting it. Oil is a fact of life, people. Get a grip" (Evans 134). However, the experience of the spill makes her question this conviction so that, at the end of the novel, she asks "what is it about petroleum" that makes "humans sell [their] souls for the stuff?" (262).

This change reflects Evans's broader narrative strategy that relies on character development to challenge the narrative of the enduring frontier and to advance the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected. Tess is not the only character whose experience of the spill fundamentally changes her view of oil extraction from seeing it as an economic necessity to perceiving it as a social, cultural, and environmental threat. Even Gregg and Lee are initially deeply invested in resource exploitation through fishing, the former not being opposed to oil extraction as such but particularly to its risks in relation to Oceanic life. Although gaining his reputation in the community of Selby for his resistance to the oil industry, his activism before the spill was primarily inspired by his personal experience of other oil spills and influenced

by the media reports and images about their destruction of seas around the world. Readers learn that:

> He loathes the oil industry as only a fisherman can. When the Pipeline was first proposed to Congress, in fact, he was one of a group of Alaskans who'd traveled to D.C. at their own expense to lobby for an overland trucking route – anything to preempt industry's plan to transport crude petroleum by sea. The risk of an ocean spill was flat-out unacceptable, these Alaskans argued before the federal law-makers. (Evans 7)

On the one hand, this shows that Gregg and other members of the community of Selby are aware of the detrimental effects of oil infrastructure. On the other hand, this passage reveals a contradiction in Gregg's initial attitude to oil commodification. Although he loathes the oil industry, he was lobbying against it only from the perspective of a fisherman and supported the building of the pipeline on the land because for him it is the ocean, not the land, that is the main source of living. Before denouncing the oil industry in general, Gregg believes in Alaska as an enduring frontier, while trying to avoid or mitigate its detrimental environmental effects.

Even Lee, who has a profound relationship to Alaska's non-human nature, represents an ambivalence regarding Alaska as an enduring frontier, since at least at the beginning of the novel, she does not explicitly advocate against the oil industry. Instead, she acknowledges that it is the reason why she finds herself in Alaska. The family of her friend Tess, for instance, also moved to Alaska "when Mammoth Petroleum hired her father to work as a teamster in Prudhoe Bay" (Evans 89) where oil was first discovered on the North Slope. Many "fathers (and an occasional mother)" followed the oil boom in the North Slope because "the oil company made it very worthwhile for their employees: good pay, excellent benefits, generous bonuses, and time off" (89). Only with the understanding of the scale of the oil spill do the residents of Selby start questioning the cost of their dependence on oil as they demand that the oil industry take responsibility and necessary action to alleviate the damage of the spill. These changing perspectives challenge the notion of Alaska as a place that balances extractive industries and environmental protection and advance a version of Alaska as a wilderness worth preserving.

Since Lee, among all the characters of *Oil and Water*, represents the most profound and closest relationship with the more-than-human world, she also figures as Evans's primary means of expressing a version of Alaska as wilderness to be protected. The novel's depiction of her experience of and reaction to nature's destruction through the oil spill signals the urgency of protecting Alaska's sea life and wilderness:

> Lee's stupefied by the almost complete absence of life along the usually teeming shore. Nothing moves. No red-legged oystercatchers stilt-steeping into the surf; no shrilling peeps darting into the lace of foam at water's edge; no crabs zigging and zagging, their busy legs stitching tiny footprints into wet sand; no countless microscopic copepods spritzing about your feet like carbonation. Now nothing moves except the gulls and

> crows feeding opportunistically and gluttonously on the tainted flesh of the spill-killed. . . . How long before anyone will once more enjoy steamed clams and mussels? How long before fish and shrimp and crab are declared edible? What must it be like for the Chukanoks and others who rely on subsistence, for whom the gathering and eating of wild food is not just occasional novelty but the very means and meanings of existence? (Evans 180–81)

Lee's repetitive use of negatives emphasizes the absence of life and creates a sense of haunting emptiness and stillness of the place that used to thrive with life. Delineating the absence of different life forms – oystercatchers, peeps, crabs, copepods – Lee creates a rhythmic lament for the spill-killed life. The stillness of the scenery is contrasted with the movement of "the gulls and crows feeding opportunistically" on the dead. This contrast creates irony because life persists, but only in scavenging the consequences of death. Asking about the Chukanoks and other Native Alaskans, Lee establishes a direct link between the spill and the uncertain future of communities that depend on the ocean for survival, conveying a sense of injustice and loss that extends from the ocean to the coast. The imagery Lee evokes demonstrates the failure of the frontier myth of Alaska as a place of endless abundance and limitless progress. Her emphasis on erasure and absence mirrors the exhaustion of the more-than-human world and the possible erasure of Indigenous presence. Lee's two questions at the end of the passage expose the necessity to preserve wildlife in order to ensure human survival.

Finally, Lee's actions but also Gregg's tragic loss of his son toward the end of the novel bring forward the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected. Lee laments that "[e]verybody wants something from Alaska. Furs, Gold, copper, zinc. Fish. Oil and timber. Hunting trophies. The 'pristine wilderness experience that renews your spirit' blah blah blah. But whatever it is, everyone's taking something; no one's giving back" (Evans 173). Here, Lee exposes the colonial mindset of the frontier narrative that views Alaska as the land to be relentlessly exploited. Through her sense of disillusionment, the novel brings to the forefront the image of Alaska as a wilderness that needs to be protected rather than a resource to be exploited. Here, Lee's nuanced understanding of the more-than-human world and her suffering due to the tragic death of Gregg's son Aaron, likely caused by exposure to the toxic oil fumes while on the animal saving expedition, demonstrates the failure of Alaska as an enduring frontier.

Aaron's death makes Lee feel most bereft in her life, and it is the moment when she explicitly accuses the oil industry, the state, and the government for failing "not just Alaskans but all Americans, as well as people everywhere who love wild nature, by their failure to take adequate precautions to protect it" (Evans 240). What makes this even more tragic is Gregg's conviction that he could have prevented it by taking Aaron to the doctor's office instead of leaving him alone in the apartment and going

back to his old habit, excessive drinking in the bar. His and the *Kuparuk* tanker captain's mistakes are, Gregg decides, "fuckups beyond forgiveness" (250). He decides to join Alcoholics Anonymous "as a debt to repay Aaron before he can contemplate the luxury of ending his own worthless life" (251). However, instead of engaging in self harm, Gregg decides to give up fishing and live a life that honors his son's memory by starting humanitarian work. Gregg's loss can be understood not only as a personal tragedy but as a symbol of the loss and erasure of the Native Alaskan cultures and the failure of both versions of Alaska as the Last Frontier and the enduring frontier. Because of Aaron's death and because of the damage inflicted on non-human nature, Lee finds it difficult to stay in Selby and decides to finish her studies and pursue "a master's degree in marine biology" (Evans 264).

The novel ends with an image of Lee, the most ardent advocate of nature preservation, wishing to ask her late friend Aaron: "What do you do if you love nature more than people, but people are destroying nature?" (Evans 266). This question initiates the closing imaginary dialogue of the novel:

> So far, all he's told her is that it's not the right question. "Nothing's going to change until people do," she hears him saying, and Lee wonders if humans are really capable of change.
> "Look at you," Gregg's son says. "You've changed. How about giving others the benefit of the doubt?"
> But I am not a joiner, she thinks.
> "Now would be a good time to start," he adds. (Evans 266)

Despite Lee's disillusionment and Gregg's tragic loss, the novel signals that there is hope to change things for the better and that such change starts with us, humans. Lee – for whom "the Northland is her first love," who "is married to Alaska," and who is "most alive when wandering the tundra, exploring the rain forest, or fishing on the ocean" – experiences wilderness as the ultimate value that gives Alaska and "her life meaning" (Evans 11). Lee sees the spill as a clear sign that "[Alaskans] can't have it both ways. Can't enjoy the benefits of resource extraction without any downside. Americans in general – and Alaskans in particular maybe – have grown so accustomed to entitlements that we're completely unwilling to pay the true cost of our lifestyle" (228). Lee's reasoning encapsulates the tension between economic progress and environmental preservation that the novel explores, resulting in its strong impulse to reimagine Alaska not as the Last Frontier nor as an enduring frontier but as a wilderness to be protected. In this sense, *Oil and Water* can be seen as what Lawrence Buell describes as a "unique [act] of environmental imagination" that "may direct thought toward alternative futures" (2).

Conclusion

Oil and Water remains an important fictional record of environmental destruction that participates in the frontier discourse as an environmental critique of the oil-age Alaska. The novel negotiates the competing frontier narratives of resource exploitation and environmental protection through a narrative strategy that relies on the actions of characters who embody booster and conservationist mentalities and whose activism has shaped contradicting versions of Alaska as a Last Frontier and resource colony, an enduring frontier that balances exploitation and preservation, and as a wilderness to be protected. Through its realistic portrayal of the devastating social, cultural, and environmental impacts of oil dependency, it effectively challenges romanticized frontier myths that frame Alaska as a land of endless opportunity. It brings moral and ethical dimensions to thinking of resource extraction by depicting the (Native Alaskan) community's struggle with the manipulative rhetoric of "acceptable risks" that justifies environmental devastation. By giving voice to Native communities often excluded from frontier narratives and emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, *Oil and Water* challenges the myth of Alaska as an inexhaustible resource frontier. Ultimately, it advances a version of Alaska that is valued not for what can be extracted from it but for its cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance. In doing so, the novel signals the need to rethink the human relationship with the land and the ocean as it should be rooted in preservation rather than exploitation. The processes of versioning Alaska demonstrate that resource extraction shapes competing narratives that define the meanings of spaces. Reinterpreting spaces through storytelling is a powerful means of challenging extractive logics and imagining alternative futures both in Alaska and beyond.

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