



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## What's the Matter with Arctic Alaska?

Pekkonen, Mikko

### Citation

Pekkonen, M. (2024). What's the Matter with Arctic Alaska? *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*, (4), 81-100. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3764631>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3764631>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## What's the Matter with Arctic Alaska?

Mikko Pekkonen

*We got our very own share of the oil profits—each and every Alaskan.*

*How can you be against oil development when it puts money directly in your pocket?*

*You're so wrapped up in oil it feels wrong to criticize it. You're called a hypocrite. Even worse, you feel like one.*

Molly Rettig, *Finding True North* (2021)

---

Some say Alaska is cold and desolate, while others point to the particular vulnerability of its nature as its biggest problem. My childhood home is a stage for these contradictory images, where aesthetic landscapes meet a wealth of crude oil in its northernmost borough: the North Slope. The oil companies that operate on the North Slope are aware that they do so on borrowed time, either because at some point there will be no more space left to drill without drawing the ire of Native communities and conservationists or because eventually all of the oil will be pumped out. Questions of value, place, and material production on the North Slope arise each time an oil company produces an advertisement or photographs its operations. This genre of photography is an important tool in oil companies' communication strategies. Photographs of oil infrastructure—rigs and pipelines—are used in promotional materials and articles favorable to the industry. To stay on the right side of the natural resource debates that have long been a fixture of Alaskan politics, oil companies compose themselves in a particular light using photography.

My close reading of visual media on oil reveals stark similarities between their aesthetics and techniques, and those employed by more traditional artists and photographers who also take Alaska as their subject. Roland Barthes defines the photograph

as “certainly not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon*” in that a photograph itself is not reality, but perfectly denotes reality.<sup>1</sup> On its own, without cultural assumptions, a photograph cannot connote concepts; the objects in the photograph refer only to themselves, and so they denote reality rather than connote a message through a system of signs.<sup>2</sup> Barthes goes on to state the techniques and styles employed in capturing a photograph tug on cultural assumptions and referents, thus giving the photograph meaning beyond denoted reality. In other words, every decision the photographer makes in the production and dissemination of a photograph connotes some message. For a viewer to derive meaning from a photograph, the photographer’s choice of scale, framing, focus, subject, shape, color, or perspective must symbolize something, becoming signifiers.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not necessarily mean the same techniques and styles used on the same subject matter will always produce the same meanings. The platforms hosting an image, along with the content of any texts associated with that image, have the potential to influence, and even completely change, its meaning and connotations.<sup>4</sup> Both the techniques of photography and the modes of communication surrounding a photograph are used to convey a message.

In this article, I analyze the photographic techniques of the Alaskan oil industry, identifying three strategic messages that these connote. The first is that land planned for oil development is empty and can be used for nothing else. The second is that oil development and nature are compatible; one does not come at the cost of the other. The third is that human well-being is linked to maintaining and expanding oil extraction. The advertisements and article headers that I analyze come from the magazine *Alaska Business*, which writes about developments in Alaska’s various industries. These photographs were originally published in 2023, and chosen for their temporal proximity both to the present day and to highly publicized changes to future North Slope oil and gas projects. Other

---

<sup>1</sup> Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 196. Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, 199.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, 194, 205.

photographs that I analyze were provided by ConocoPhillips—an oil company that operates on the North Slope—from their media gallery designed to be used by journalists. Each specific example in this article was chosen either because of its placement in *Alaska Business* or because it is meant to be used in journalism, as these are platforms for communicating to a general audience about the oil industry. These photographs are how the industry wants to be seen.

The industry photographs will be compared to wilderness photography, particularly Subhankar Banerjee’s work in the North Slope.<sup>5</sup> They will also be compared to the Late Romanticist paintings of Sydney Laurence, who traveled to Alaska at the turn of the twentieth century seeking unbridled wilderness and solitude. To demonstrate how exactly the oil companies communicate the extraction of matter in Alaska, I analyze the similarities between images produced by artists and corporations. Alaska can be cold and desolate, remote and peaceful, or teeming with life. The photographs in this article point toward a polysemic vision of Alaska that is neither vulnerable wilderness nor useless wasteland.

### Crop

Sierra Club and *National Geographic* photographers, and landscape photographers inspired by their work, try to portray their subjects as ‘wilderness,’ untouched by humans and worthy of preservation due to its aesthetic beauty. Oil companies, on the other hand, often portray landscapes as ‘wastelands’ unworthy of anything but change and development. The concept of the empty and unworthy wasteland has a long history in the English-speaking world. Studying areas in Great Britain designated as wastelands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Vittoria Di Palma explains that wasteland has been understood as “any place that is hostile to human survival.”<sup>6</sup> This presents wasteland as “culture’s antithesis,” depriving people of the things needed to survive and instead containing potential danger.<sup>7</sup> Di Palma argues that wasteland is not empty, despite

---

<sup>5</sup> Examples of this work can be found at Arctic Refuge Art, “Subhankar Banerjee;” Burke Museum, “Photo Gallery.”

<sup>6</sup> Di Palma, *Wasteland*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, 3–4.

historical contentions to the contrary, but is construed as functionally empty because it is simply full of the wrong things.<sup>8</sup> Henry Nash Smith's observations of explorers of the American West in the nineteenth century go even further. Smith suggests that these explorers viewed the desert beyond the Rocky Mountains as an actively corruptive force, solidifying the connection between wasteland and danger. The thought was that anybody who tried to remain in the desert either died or became 'uncivilized.' 'Uncivilized' in this context implies nomadic and non-farming lifestyles, which were undesirable to the point where lands occupied by nomadic and non-farming people were seen as 'empty.'<sup>9</sup> Since Western exploration of the Arctic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it had been consistently likened to a wasteland. Noelle Belanger has connected depictions of the Arctic to strikingly similar depictions of the moon following the invention of photography. Both are shown as flat, monochromatic, alien, inhospitable, cold, and only just out of reach.<sup>10</sup> From the seventeenth to the twentieth century, wasteland has been conceptualized as 'empty' in some way.

The concept of emptiness is, therefore, foundational to the concept of wasteland. In their introduction to the edited volume *Empty Spaces*, Courtney J. Campbell, Allegra Giovine, and Jennifer Keating define emptiness as "containing fewer people, fewer signs of life, [and] fewer traces of human activity," while sharing Di Palma's observation that emptiness is relational and, as a matter of perception, a "highly subjective phenomenon."<sup>11</sup> Though the definition of emptiness is subjective, the explorers discussed by Smith certainly saw the desert as empty in this way. Where emptiness is understood as a lack of humans and human constructions, the question of whether a space is empty is contingent on how people perceive such lacks, "as the outcome of *both* imaginative and physical work."<sup>12</sup> Authors such as Smith, Di Palma, and Joe Lockard argue that areas constructed as empty are never

---

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*, 43-44.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 176-177.

<sup>10</sup> Belanger, "'It Looks Like the Surface of the Moon,'" 216, 226-228.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, Giovine, and Keating, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, 5. Italics in original.

truly empty, but presenting them this way advances a specific purpose. Likewise, Wendy Harding makes clear that emptiness “is a notion created or constructed by human interactions” and “areas were pronounced empty and conceived of as empty in order to serve precise objectives.”<sup>13</sup>

Because both wilderness and wasteland are similarly defined by their conceptual lack of humans, and are thus ‘empty,’ the differences between them must derive from cultural associations. Wilderness is seen as ‘pure’ and ‘untouched’ without humans, and is most associated with rugged nature. The same landscape—a derelict quarry, for example—can be framed either as a wasteland unfit for human habitation or an opportunity to let wilderness take over and ‘reclaim’ what was lost.<sup>14</sup> These differing approaches to human neglect create a hierarchy between wilderness and wasteland, where a wilderness without humans is preferable and therefore more worthy of conservation or neglect than a wasteland.<sup>15</sup> These two concepts, wilderness and wasteland, have both been applied to the North Slope, but for opposing purposes. When the landscape is seen as a wasteland, oil companies are justified to use it to their liking, while seeing it as wilderness gives conservation efforts their *raison d’être*. Photography, and in particular photographic techniques, can reinforce how a landscape is perceived, whether as a wasteland or a wilderness.

### White Point

The first set of photographs I analyze contain the clearest examples of the oil industry’s presentation of Alaska as wasteland. I compare the improvement of this wasteland that comes from the existence of an oil rig to similar arguments made about Alaska’s role as a potential nuclear testing site. Subsequently, I argue that while Banerjee’s use of size, perspective, and color make his photographs bear resemblance to those produced by the oil industry, the subtle differences in his techniques result in completely different connotations for the same landscape. Fig. 1 shows an oil rig during

---

<sup>13</sup> Harding, *The Myth*, 10–11.

<sup>14</sup> Di Palma, *Wasteland*, 242–243.

<sup>15</sup> Herrmann, “The Birth,” 316.

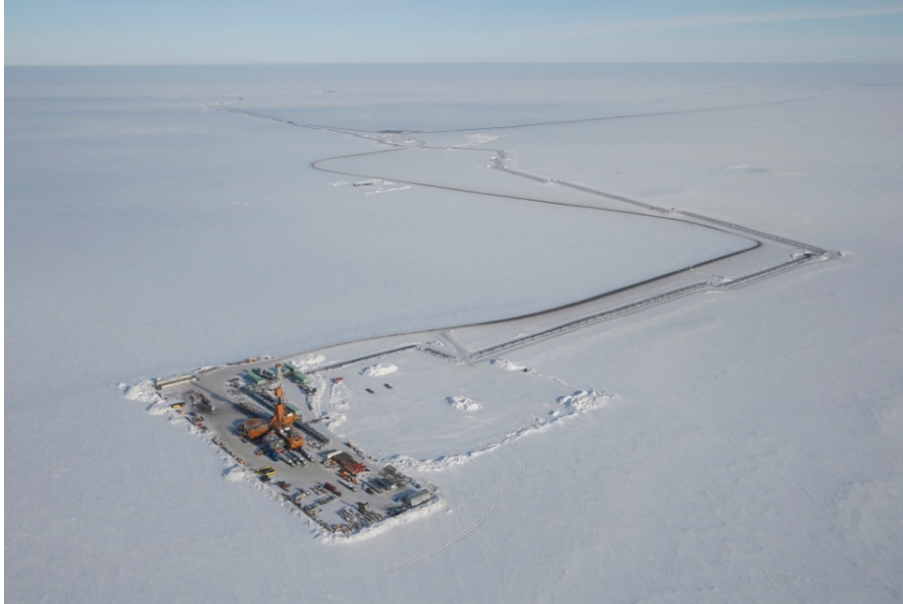


Figure 1: *Alpine: Western North Slope, Alaska*. Original in color.

wintertime. No wildlife or people that could possibly be affected by the rig are shown; the end of the road tapers into the horizon line, and the landscape is flat and white. The rig seems almost out of place because it is located on a blank landscape where perspective is hard to find. It appears isolated and completely disconnected from anything else.

Fig. 2 is similar, though large parts of the photograph are obscured by a stylized map of Alaska, and the rig is visually smaller. Both fig. 1 and fig. 2 depict Alaska as a wasteland in the sense that there is nothing beyond the oil rig. As with other examples of wastelands, the photographs show Alaska as inhospitable and barren, but they are different in their quite literal depiction of emptiness as a monochromatic white sheet. This presupposed knowledge that flatness and monochromaticity equate to emptiness makes the connotation of the image stronger. The viewers' assumptions play a crucial part in the meaning-making of the photographic techniques.<sup>16</sup> Where the danger of other wastelands comes from both a lack of support for humans and the presence of

---

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 201, 208.



Figure 2: *Hydrocarbons Pave the Way for Pick.Click.Give.* Originally published in *Alaska Business* May, 2023. Original in color.

threats to humans, these images seem to show only a lack. Obscuring large parts of the photograph in fig. 2 serves this purpose further; the only thing of note is the oil rig, and what surrounds it is unimportant. The low saturation and lack of color, as well as the scale of the oil rigs, show isolation, desolation, and a wasteland that humans have turned productive. These small foci, the oil rigs, are making an otherwise useless and empty landscape useful and noteworthy. Their presence is only positive, as there is nothing in the landscape that could possibly be affected by them. In other words, nothing is there but the oil rigs, so no material is damaged by their presence.

The implicit objective of these images is not simply to convince us that the wasteland is being put to good use, but also to depict the Arctic as completely empty to alleviate fears of ecological destruction resulting from oil development. These same arguments, with similar imagery, have also been used by Alaska's political leaders. Former senator Frank Murkowski held up a blank poster board in Washington, D.C., saying, "this is a picture of ANWR [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge] as it exists for about nine months



of the year . . . It's unattractive; don't be misinformed."<sup>17</sup> Another Alaska senator, Ted Stevens, displayed a photograph of the North Slope on national television: "I defy anyone to say that this is a beautiful place that has to be preserved for the future."<sup>18</sup> Parallels can be drawn to the narratives surrounding nuclear testing sites. Lockard has examined these narratives, revealing how nuclear testing within geographic emptiness is justified as causing the least amount of destruction to more important areas. The implicit question Lockard asks is: to what exactly is the least amount of destruction being wrought? Di Palma, Harding, and Lockard all agree that wastelands are constructed through a process of ignoring an area's fullness and construing the space as empty. "These lands have been designated by metropolitan policymakers as suitable sacrificial sites," Lockard argues.<sup>19</sup> Before testing the area must be seen as empty, specifically of humans, and after testing it becomes too irradiated for humans to safely exist in it.<sup>20</sup>

Nuclear testing sites are chosen for their "absent functions rather than present life."<sup>21</sup> And yet, something must still be sacrificed in order to make these places sacrificial sites. Life—including human life—exists in such places, but this is ignored so the areas can be made useful through their destruction.<sup>22</sup> When trying to find a new location to test nuclear weapons in the 1950s, the United States federal government put the moon and the North Slope on the shortlist specifically because of the features that Belanger identifies as working to construe the two as similar, namely a flat and empty landscape and a lack of sizeable human populations. In the end, the North Slope was chosen, with one of the benefits being that it would then be known for something other than emptiness. Before the project could be completed, Native Alaskan resistance to it started a larger movement that eventually led to its cancellation.<sup>23</sup> Similar resistance to new oil developments is the result of efforts to preserve

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Banerjee, "From Kolkata to Kaktovik," 6–7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Lockard, "Desert(ed) Geographies," 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Kollin, "The Wild, Wild North," 71.

what already exists on the North Slope, and similar messages of emptiness are used to advance these developments, serving to counter such resistance. A key difference between nuclear testing and oil development, however, is that the former is purely destructive, with the amorphous goal of advancing science and security, while the latter has destruction as a side effect to the main goal of extracting matter. This material edge that an oil rig has over a nuclear bomb adds beneficial utility to an otherwise empty wasteland. It is this addition, this positive impact to the landscape, that oil companies employ in their messaging.

In his depictions of the very same North Slope landscapes, Banerjee uses aerial views, similar to that of fig. 1, to accomplish a specific narrative through size, scale, color, and shape. His most well-known photograph *Caribou Migration I*, among others, exemplifies this. From the sky, migrating groups of animals appear tiny compared to the vast, flat landscape around them. White birds contrast with brown tundra, and brown caribou contrast with white ice. Not only is this meant to show how much bigger than them the surrounding ecosystem is, but also to focus on the animals in a process of migration from faraway places. These are not photographs of isolation, like figs. 1 and 2.<sup>24</sup> Banerjee's focus on migrating animals depicts wilderness untouched by humans rather than an empty wasteland that has been put to use. His visually small foci are a means to show large numbers of animals, whereas a visually small oil rig connotes a small aesthetic and environmental impact.<sup>25</sup> Banerjee's use of muted colors to accentuate what does exist on the North Slope, and his choice to reveal its flatness with an aerial view, is meant to depict the landscape as full, meaningful, and big even without humans, in contrast to how I argue these techniques are used in public relations.<sup>26</sup> Even though Banerjee's techniques are similar to those used by oil industry photographers, the resulting message is completely different. Banerjee's depictions are empty of humans, but full of life. This is completely antithetical to the depiction of the very same landscapes by oil industry photography.

---

<sup>24</sup> Dunaway, "Reframing," 176; *Defending*, 203.

<sup>25</sup> Dunaway, "Reframing," 171.

<sup>26</sup> Dunaway, *Defending*, 202-203.

### Saturation

The next set of industry photographs resemble the traditional view of Alaskan wilderness as minimally impacted by humans as seen in Romanticist art of the State from the nineteenth century, through to the calendars and coffee table books of the twenty-first century. The compatibility of nature, humans, and oil—and the power dynamics therein—connoted by these industry images is compared to the work of Sydney Laurence to argue for his continued influence on Alaskan image-making. Banerjee subverts these narratives of compatibility through his photographs as examples of an opposing way nature, humans, and oil interact on the North Slope. Fig. 3 is an article header in *Alaska Business* depicting a healthy green forest, a healthy river (or so it appears from this perspective), and a minuscule pipe that happens to move through it all. Besides the dirt road that is cut off at the bottom of the photo, no other human impacts can be seen. In many ways the photograph resembles the paintings of Sydney Laurence, where human impact on the land in the foreground is small compared to the strong and eternal presence of mountains in the background.<sup>27</sup> Fig. 4 is a painting of Laurence's, titled *The Streams are Full of Them*, showing a log bear cache used for storing food next to a stream where a person is fishing. A single, looming mountain in the background gives the two subjects in the foreground the perspective needed for the viewer to understand that they are small and insignificant. Isolation and remoteness are signified by the bear cache and the fishing rod being made of natural materials, almost as if taken from the surrounding forest. In the painting there is no sense that other humans or man-made materials are close to this scene. Even the title of the painting suggests that using the land for one's individual gain is warranted, as it will always be able to provide more. The forest is still dense despite human use of its logs and branches, one person cannot possibly fish enough to deplete the stream's stocks, and through everything the mountain remains unmoved. Humans are at the mercy of nature in this idealistic depiction of Alaska, and their

---

<sup>27</sup> Duffy, "Resource Industry," 143.

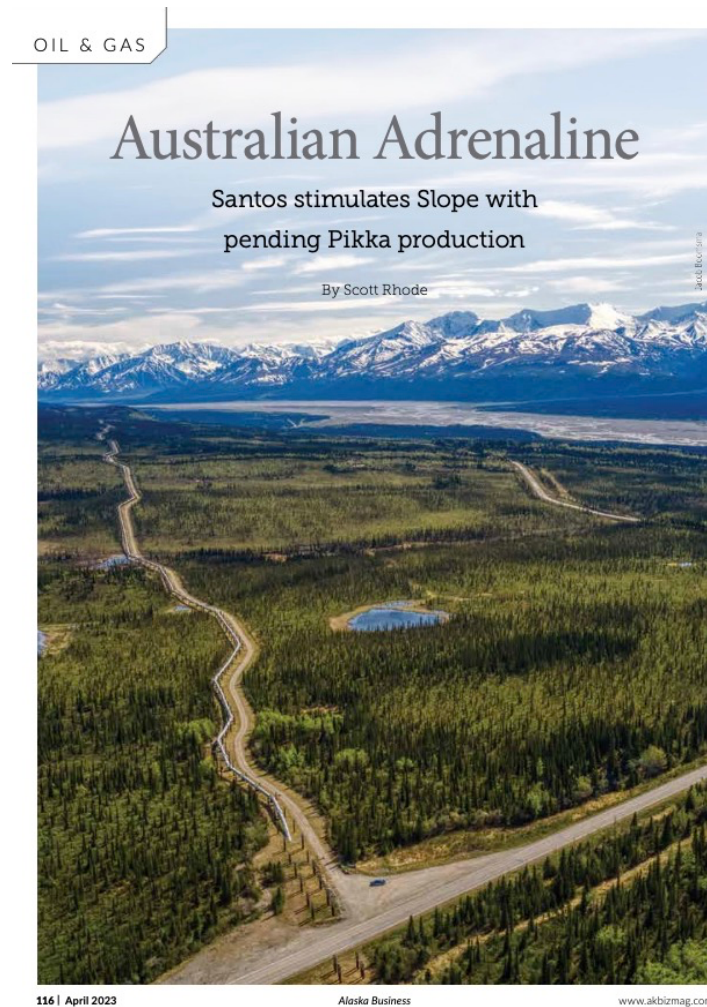


Figure 3: *Australian Adrenaline: Santos Stimulates Slope with Pending Pikka Production*. Originally published in *Alaska Business* April, 2023. Original in color.

presence does little to affect it.

In an advertisement for Udelhoven Oilfield System Services (UOSS) originally published in *Alaska Business* in its 2023 Power List issue, two logos can be seen. The first is a circular seal in the top middle depicting the UOSS logo, and the bottom third of the image is occupied by a transparent logo with 'Udelhoven' written across it in a stylized font. The photograph behind these two logos depicts a nighttime winter scene of mountains and the aurora borealis. The land is mostly obscured by the transparent logo at the bottom, so the



Figure 4: *The Streams are Full of Them*. Sydney Laurence. Ca. 1915-1923. Courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art. Original in color.

focus of the photograph itself is on the aurora, which is partially covered by the UOSS logo. The transparent logo is also covering a shiny silver-colored pipeline. In this Udelhoven advertisement, the logos superimposed over the photograph are doing a significant amount of signifying work. Without the logos, the focus would be on the pipeline. Instead, because of the transparent logo the pipeline is made less visible, making the aurora the clearest part of the image. Again, the resemblance to Laurence's subject matter is striking. Because the pipeline in the foreground is made less significant by the logo, the focus is on the tips of the mountains not obscured by the transparent logo and on the aurora. The implication of this advertisement's formatting is that human impact on the landscape is minimal; the unceasing and brightly colored aurora and the power of the mountains can withstand any human involvement.

Fig. 3 and the Udelhoven advertisement purport to show how the landscape is impacted by oil development. This impact is depicted as small, and the landscape as resilient to it. In contrast to figs. 1 and 2, where oil rigs are surrounded by nothingness, these pipelines are surrounded by things. If these photographs are to be understood as depicting wilderness instead of wasteland, it is a unique kind of wilderness. The lack of humans is evident, but not the lack of human impact. Instead of showing the landscape with no human impacts at all, as a traditional wilderness photographer might, the photographs instead minimize these impacts. The message is that what little destruction is happening in the wilderness is not enough to ruin it, and that this destruction is necessary to transport oil. Alaska's nature is not fragile enough to be significantly impacted by a pipeline, so this small patch of wilderness is not worth preserving. The photographs are careful to portray enough of a human footprint to show the landscape's resilience to it, but not so much of a footprint that the pipeline would appear to be running through a populated area. In other words, the photographs clearly represent places far away from human habitation, where the presence of a pipeline is less problematic for health or aesthetic reasons. The pipeline photographs establish a hierarchy between humans and nature, where humans are more important. These photographs extend upon Laurence's images; by depicting nature as resilient and eternal, as Laurence does, no amount of intervention will affect it.

Showing Alaska as a wilderness is vital to the pipeline photographs' effectiveness at communicating the insignificance of oil development. The perception that Alaska, especially its North Slope, was untouched by humans made it a more attractive target for development, not less. Fewer people in an area means important matter will be less affected. Whatever did get affected would not be damaged much or could quickly recover from development.<sup>28</sup> Both images show distance from humans, either because of the presence of a dense forest or the presence of colorful aurora borealis denoting distance from areas with light pollution. These symbols of vitality and remoteness are not diminished by a pipeline, especially one whose presence is insignificant. The smallness of the pipelines, the strongly

---

<sup>28</sup> Kollin, "The Wild, Wild North," 67.

saturated colors, and the presence of looming mountains are techniques also used by painters and landscape photographers, but without the intention to justify oil's extraction from and transportation through these landscapes.

The use of saturated colors in wilderness photography is industry norm, argues Trent University professor Finis Dunaway, citing the vibrancy, perfection, and high drama seen in *National Geographic* magazine photographs.<sup>29</sup> Dunaway has also argued that Banerjee's use of colors is a pointed departure from this industry norm of depicting wilderness as saturated.<sup>30</sup> When Banerjee does not use muted colors, he portrays humans and the effects of anthropogenic climate change through vibrant colors. The aesthetics of a multicolored sunset (*Musk Oxen in the Haze of a Toxic North*) or autumnal forest in the remote Arctic (*Fleeting Autumn*) are juxtaposed with the context that such deep reds and oranges in the sky are usually caused by air pollution, and trees this far north can only be the result of a warming climate.<sup>31</sup> The photographs themselves do not give this context, but their associated captions do. Dunaway argues that while in a standard museum or photographic exhibition the captions next to the displays expand upon or reinforce the messages already connoted by the exhibits themselves, Banerjee's captions subvert those messages.<sup>32</sup> By contradicting the images, the texts imbue them with new meanings that would otherwise be lost.<sup>33</sup> Whereas in traditional landscape photography the use of a wide range of saturated colors usually signals fullness, life, and vitality, Banerjee uses this technique to connote a vulnerable landscape already impacted by humans. In this way the photographs commissioned by oil companies take more inspiration from traditional landscape photography than do Banerjee's. Narratives of nature's strength and permanence are undermined by Banerjee's use of color. His photographs appear to show wilderness, but if even the remote north

---

<sup>29</sup> Dunaway, *Defending*, 202.

<sup>30</sup> Dunaway, "Reframing," 169.

<sup>31</sup> Banerjee, "From Kolkata to Kaktovik," 8; Dunaway, "Reframing," 169.

<sup>32</sup> Dunaway, "Reframing," 168.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 206.

of Alaska bear the marks of human life then wilderness as it was once imagined does not exist, and perhaps never did.

### **Bokeh**

In this section, I examine a series of ConocoPhillips advertisements originally published in *Alaska Business* between June and October, 2023, in terms of the oil company's impact on human well-being. I then compare them to the representation of human well-being in Banerjee's photography. In these different visions of the North Slope, what the landscape is filled with, and ultimately what happens when it is emptied, I will argue, communicates the relationship between humans and the landscape differently in each photographic genre. This series of one-page advertisements each show the same aerial view of an oil rig. What is notable about this photograph is that it depicts the oil rig in the summertime, surrounded by flat green grass or moss. In the series a separate photograph is spliced through the oil rig photograph at an angle, each depicting a different individual. They are smiling, wearing safety glasses and ConocoPhillips-branded hard hats. Above their heads are written a first name and job titles. Below the oil rig are the words "more than oil," with a block of text beneath that discussing the company's effects on Alaska's workforce. Unlike the wintertime photograph seen in fig. 1, these photographs are all in full color (i.e., rather than having low saturation or the complete absence of color). The presence of human faces sends a completely different message than any of the other oil industry images. The inclusion of humans with names makes the advertisement more personal. Yes, the oil rig is in this green field, but its existence is justified because these employees and thousands like them would otherwise be out of their jobs. These advertisements are human-centric in a distinct way from the other oil industry images. The inclusion of humanity, rather than its specific exclusion, gives oil infrastructure meaning beyond resource extraction and environmental destruction; if the wasteland is actually full of things worth preserving, these things are nonetheless not worth preserving at the expense of human well-being. What the advertisement explicitly says is that the company does more than drill for oil, but what it implicitly says is that humanity depends on the company's continued operations.



There is a pattern presented by the oil industry in figs. 1, 2, 3, and the Udelhoven and ConocoPhillips advertisements that Lockard also identified in his study on nuclear testing. Figs. 1 and 2 show a place as empty and therefore worthy of destructive improvement—if destroying nothingness is even possible. If it is not possible, there is nothing in the place worthy of preservation anyway. And even if there is something worthy of preservation, the benefits of extracting oil outweigh the cost, as shown in the series of ConocoPhillips advertisements. But at the very least, fig. 3 and the Udelhoven advertisement show the places that are worthy of preservation, the ones that undoubtedly are full, as protected by distance from oil infrastructure—or nuclear testing, as Lockard argues—and so operations ought to continue.<sup>34</sup> Symbols of wasteland’s emptiness, isolation, remoteness, resilience, insignificance, and worthlessness are all used to portray limited or nonexistent destruction of whatever may exist in the landscape. But the oil industry’s impact is not limited to an aesthetic interruption of an apparently untouched wilderness, as their photographs might suggest; the industry is known to cause frequent spills, habitat fragmentation, and pollution, resulting in ecosystem damage, biodiversity loss, and poorer health in Inupiat communities.<sup>35</sup> These concerns resulted in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline being the first major American infrastructure project required to provide an Environmental Impact Statement detailing how the landscape and ecosystem would be affected by it.<sup>36</sup> Each time new oil developments are proposed, they must overcome not only the challenges of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) but also their reputation of destruction despite NEPA’s requirements. Destruction is a known outcome of oil development, but because its main objective is extracting matter this destruction must be justified; messages about wasteland and emptiness, the strength of wilderness, and the economy and human well-being work together to depict the Arctic in a specific, profitable, way.

---

<sup>34</sup> Lockard, “Desert(ed) Geographies,” 5.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, “The Arctic,” 51–52; Dunaway, *Defending* 246; Glenn, Itta, and Napageak Jr., “Local Perspectives,” 612.

<sup>36</sup> Herrmann, “The Birth,” 316.

Banerjee's photographs again stand in contrast to this ethos, while his landscape photography has become more political than others. He does not shy away from depicting human use of the landscape, and instead undermines both the wasteland narratives of oil companies and the wilderness narratives of conservationists. He photographs Iñupiat and Gwich'in hunters butchering whale, caribou, and moose meat.<sup>37</sup> In other photographs, Banerjee depicts these same species migrating to the North Slope. The well-being of humans is shown as contingent on the fullness that these animals provide to the landscape. Should the wildlife disappear, so too will the people, and then the land will truly be empty. Bright red moose filets contrast against the dull hull of a motorboat and the inky water below, and the deep crimson of a caribou being butchered contrasts with white snow and the black coats of the hunters in Banerjee's series titled *Gwich'in and The Caribou*. Where in the images of oil infrastructure the landscape is empty but for oil, in Banerjee's photographs the landscape is starved but for the wildlife and the people who depend on it. In both cases the disappearance of the photographs' focus would leave only emptiness. Banerjee shows through his photographs and tells through his words that oil development is a threat to the things and people that already exist on the North Slope.<sup>38</sup>

### Rendering

It is the extraction of matter that makes oil companies' portrayal of wasteland different from others. Northern Alaska is not depicted as a fragile and untouched wilderness, nor is it depicted as a place incompatible with human survival containing nothing of value. What is to be gained from human development of this wasteland is not just the nebulous concepts of power and expansionism that Henry Nash Smith identified within nineteenth-century America, but tangible oil that is pumped with the oil rigs and transported by the pipeline.<sup>39</sup> All of the photographs analyzed here are taken far away from population centers and cities in some of the most remote places on

---

<sup>37</sup> Dunaway, *Defending*, 199 and "Reframing," 173.

<sup>38</sup> Banerjee, "From Kolkata to Kaktovik," 15.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 7-8.

Earth. This human element of wasteland, or rather the lack of any human element, is central to the message that these photographs convey. Oil developments in Alaska that are too close to villages or that threaten subsistence food harvests are consistently blocked by Native Alaskan organizations.<sup>40</sup> If photography can erase these obstacles from the landscape, which is then conceptually emptied, that landscape can be filled again with an oil rig generating profit.

The relationship between wilderness and wasteland is not a binary one, where each concept is located at an extreme; wilderness and wasteland are similar in more ways than they are different. This article has shown how the subjective nature of these concepts can be used strategically. When photographing the same landscapes in similar ways, different connotations can only be made through carefully manipulating photographic techniques and paratextual elements. In the past, Alaska has been depicted in absolutes: either as wilderness *or* wasteland. Alaska has also been depicted in terms of its various natural resources, where human exploitation of them and questions of sustainability affect how people view the land. Photography's role as a perfect denotation of reality not only gives the medium a powerful persuasive edge but also provides the opportunity to depict separate, even conflicting, subjective realities. Alaska is polysemic, and the many depictions of it collectively corroborate this.

### **Bibliography**

- Arctic Refuge Art. "Subhankar Banerjee." Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://arcticrefuge.art/subhankar-banerjee/>.
- Banerjee, Subhankar. "From Kolkata to Kaktovik En Route to Arctic Voices: Something Like an Introduction." In *Arctic Voices*, edited by Subhankar Banerjee, 1-22. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2012.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Photographic Message." In *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, 194-210. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Belanger, Noelle. "It Looks Like the Surface of the Moon': The Arctic Landscape in the Western Imaginary." In *Arctic Cinemas and the Documentary Ethos*, edited by Lilya Kaganovsky, Scott MacKenzie, and Anna

---

<sup>40</sup> Glenn, Itta, and Napageak Jr., "Local Perspectives," 613-614; Friedman, "Biden Administration Approves Huge Alaska Oil Project;" Matza, "Biden Cancels Trump Drilling Leases."

- Westerstahl Stenport, 215–230. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019.
- Burke Museum. “Photo Gallery.” Seasons of Life and Land. Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://www.burkemuseum.org/static/ANWR/gallery.html>.
- Campbell, Courtney J., Allegra Giovine, and Jennifer Keating. “Introduction: Confronting Emptiness in History.” In *Empty Spaces: Perspectives on Emptiness in Modern History*, edited by Courtney J. Campbell, Allegra Giovine, and Jennifer Keating, 1–14. London: University of London Press, 2019.
- Di Palma, Vittoria. *Wasteland: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Duffy, Annie. “The Natural Resource Industry Visual Impact Paradox: A Perspective on Alaskan Imagery and Art.” In *Images of the North*, edited by Sverrir Jakobsson, 139–148. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.
- Dunaway, Finis. *Defending the Arctic Refuge*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.
- . “Reframing the Last Frontier: Subhankar Banerjee and the Visual Politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 159–180.
- Friedman, Lisa. “Biden Administration Approves Huge Alaska Oil Project.” *New York Times*, March 12, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/12/climate/biden-willow-arctic-drilling-restrictions.html?smid=url-share>.
- Glenn, Richard, Edward Itta, and Thomas Napageak Jr. “Local Perspectives on the Future of Offshore Oil and Gas in Northern Alaska.” In *North by 2020: Perspectives on Alaska’s Changing Social-Ecological Systems*, edited by Amy Lauren Lovcraft and Hajo Eicken, 605–614. Denver, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2011.
- Harding, Wendy. *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place*. Iowa City, IA: Iowa University Press, 2014.
- Herrmann, Victoria. “The Birth of Petroleum Path Dependence: Oil Narratives and Development in the North.” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2019): 301–331.
- Kollin, Susan. “The Wild, Wild North: Nature Writing, Nationalist Ecologies, and Alaska.” *American Literary History* 12, no. 1/2 (2000): 41–78.
- Lockard, Joe. “Desert(ed) Geographies: Cartographies of Nuclear Testing.” *Landscape Review* 6, no. 1 (2000): 3–20.
- Matza, Max. “Biden Cancels Trump Drilling Leases in Alaska’s Largest Wildlife Refuge.” *BBC News*, September 7, 2023. <https://bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-66736453>.
- Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: the American West As Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Wang, Grace. “The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Wildlife Preserve or Oil Reserve?” *Environ* 16, no. 3 (1993): 51–58.

*Mikko Pekkonen*

**List of Images**

- ConocoPhillips. *Alpine: Western North Slope, Alaska*. Accessed May 9, 2024.  
<https://www.conocophillips.com/news-media/multimedia-gallery/>.
- Laurence, Sydney. *The Streams are Full of Them*. c. 1915-1923. U.S. and Canadian Art Department, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas. 1932.3.
- Newman, Amy. *Hydrocarbons Pave the Way for Pick.Click.Give*. *Alaska Business* 39, no. 5 (May): 76-77.
- Rhode, Scott. *Australian Adrenaline: Santos Stimulates Slope with Pending Pikka Production*. *Alaska Business* 39, no. 4 (April): 11.