SLED DOGS OF THE AMERICAN NORTH: 
ON MASCU LINITY, WHITENESS, AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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The saga of the working sled dog in Alaska came to an end with a gala media event, made possible by three things: a nineteenth-century frontier disaster, twentieth-century modern communications and medicine, and the legendary pluck of a dog named Balto. In January of 1925, winter ice on Norton Sound had long since formed, freezing Nome, Alaska (situated right next to the Arctic Circle) into its winter isolation. The former gold rush town of 1,430 people lay inaccessible to the outside world, save for one method of communication—the telegraph line, which the Army Signal Corps had established in the early part of the century—and one method of transport: the dog sled. That January, the only doctor in Nome, Curtis Welch, found that the diphtheria antitoxin serum he had ordered from the continental US had not arrived. Soon enough he started getting patients with signs of the disease. Welch telegraphed the public health department in Washington and asked them for help. In all of Alaska, officials could only find about a third of the amount of serum that Dr. Welch needed to save the town. The stage was set for the drama that followed.

Some, including Nome’s mayor and Alaska’s territorial representative, advocated sending an airplane from Fairbanks, but the governor, Scott Bone, did not trust that the airplane would make it and decided to rely on the old-time technology of dog sleds. Bone put together a relay race

1 Coverage of the debate regarding the sending of an airplane from Fairbanks can be found in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, edited and written by W. F. Thompson, an Alaska “booster” who was firmly against the decision to put together a dog relay, arguing that territorial pride was at stake, and that Alaska should show herself “ready to move from the dog-team stage to the airship class”. See W. F. Thompson, “When You Are ‘Called’ You Have To ‘Go,’ Yet What Better Can Any Man Do Than Give His Efforts To The Relief Of Friends In The Friendly Northland?”, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, January 26, 1925; Thompson, “Nome Is Certainly Up Against It, With Several Deaths More Cases Appearing Daily, No Anti-Toxin And Only One Overworked Doctor To Save The Camp An Epidemic”, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner January 27, 1925; Thompson, “When Comes From The Far Places The Cry For Help When Death And Disease Menace There That Call Rings Around The World And Brings The Response”,

that would bring the serum from Nenana, an interior town which was the last one reachable by railroad, overland to Nome, about six hundred miles. The trip usually took fifteen days. Twenty expert mushers, with twenty different teams of dogs, did it in five and a half.  

Correspondents in Nome fed news back to their papers by wireless and telegraph, and over the five-day journey, newspapers across the country covered the serum run step by step. The Nome radio station was ordered to be kept open 24 hours a day, because, said the Nome Daily Nugget, “due to the increased business engendered by the diphtheria epidemic, the number of messages being received and sent [is] running into the hundreds daily.”

The tremendous appeal of the story about the tiny northern town and its children saved by hearty dog heroes stemmed from a potent mixture: one part conservative celebration of frontier masculinity, and one part exultation in the medical achievements of modern society. Citizens thrilled to see diphtheria—a disease that killed many children every year prior to the end of the nineteenth century, and that had only recently become curable—roundly beaten, even at the apparent ends of the earth. After the serum had reached Nome, the New York Sun’s editorial page wrote, “Science made the antitoxin that is in Nome today, but science could not get it there. All the mechanical transportation marvels of modern times faltered in the presence of the elements…Other engines might freeze and choke, but that oldest of motors, the heart, whose fuel is blood and whose spark is courage, never stalls but once.” The dogs and men of the serum run embodied an appealing mix of modern achievement and ancient virtue. (Similar patterns can be seen in the celebrity of Charles Lindbergh, who made his trans-Atlantic flight two years after the serum run.) The appeal of these heroes, as Roderick Nash argues in his re-conception of the


4 Quoted in Salisbury, 244.

5 See John W. Ward, “The Meaning of Lindbergh’s Flight,” American Quarterly Vol. 10. No. 1 (Spring, 1958): 3–16. Ward writes: “Lindbergh gave the American people a glimpse of what they liked to think themselves to be at a time when they feared they had deserted their own vision of themselves…Lindbergh’s flight was the occasion
popular image of the loose, forward-thinking 1920s of the Jazz Age, was essentially conservative. Their actions all promised that a society that could become so advanced as to invent a cure for diphtheria, a way to communicate across the ether, or a machine that could fly, could also maintain the ability to produce men (or dogs!) whose unselfish, unrefined masculinity remained cast in the mold of old-fashioned heroes.

Regressively classic though their virtues may have been, the dogs were feted in a decidedly contemporary style. Gunnar Kasson brought lead dog Balto and his teammates down to Los Angeles, where they received a key to the city from Mary Pickford (the key was in the shape of a dog bone), and where they were quickly put into a short movie, "Balto's Dash to Nome," which was filmed near Mt. Rainier. In New York, the city whose health department had been the first to use the new science of bacteriology in the control of diphtheria, a collection was taken up in order to get Balto a statue in Central Park—a bronze that is still there to this day. Anchorage also erected a statue in Balto's honor, as did Nome. And in a speech in front of the United States Senate, immediately after the serum run, Senator Clarence Dill, of Washington State (standing in for Alaska, which, as a territory, did not have representation in the Senate), proclaimed: "The classic victory of these dogs and men will probably be the last of its kind, and is certainly a fitting finish to the long history of brilliant achievement made by dog teams in the far North."

Unfortunately for Balto and his teammates, while images and ideas of their heroism lived on, their actual quality of life declined. Their remaining years in the contiguous United States were characterized by waxing and waning public interest in their physical presence. Within a year after the serum run, Kasson returned to the North, and Balto and his team were sold to a vaudeville producer and spent some time languishing in sideshows in Los Angeles. In 1927, a businessman from Cleveland named George Kimble recognized Balto in a dime museum.

of a public act of regeneration in which the nation momentarily rededicated itself to something, the loss of which was keenly felt” (7).
6 "Dog Saviors of Nome Enjoying Thrill of Lives," Los Angeles Times, April 19, 1925.
and decided to make an effort to buy him out of captivity. In a campaign organized by the *Plain Dealer*, the city raised $2,000 to purchase the team, and they were installed at the Brookside Zoo.\(^{10}\) 15,000 people visited them on their first day in residence. There they gave rides to children and did other promotional work. Although Balto and his team were celebrated for their love of work and strain particular to Alaska’s frontier conditions, and could not, in any case, have relished being stuck in a cage at a zoo, no contemporary commentators saw a logical disjuncture in this virtual life sentence. When Balto died, he was stuffed and collected at the city’s Museum of Natural History. You can still see him there, and you can also, if you like, buy a small copy of him in stuffed animal form.\(^ {11}\)

Balto was only the most famous of a string of sled dogs celebrated for their exploits in the frozen North in the era between the Gold Rush and the 1930s. In many cases, such as Balto’s, these dogs were given celebrity on what was seemingly their own terms. Balto was known by his name, and his musher credited him with the enormous success of the completed serum run. In this, he was similar to other dogs, fictional or non-, who became household names—Rowdy, Togo, Buck, Chinook. All were known as paragons of strength and virtue.

Accounts of their exploits would seem to invest these particular animals with a large amount of agency. According to the surface values of these narratives, extreme frontier situations created stronger bonds between men and certain animals. Here, men recognized and upheld their dogs’ particular qualities, befriended them, and sometimes even allowed them to transgress their orders, trusting that these dogs would know what was best for the team and for the humans driving it. This degree of observable personality and moral fiber (as the language of the age would have it) was part of the fascination that the public had with Balto and his predecessors.

However, the relationship between men and dogs was also a site for men to recast ideas that they had about the nature of whiteness and masculinity. Looked at this way, dogs’ actions could be seen as reflections of their owners’ prowess; as parables for the lives of white men

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\(^{10}\) "Husky Dogs to Live in Cleveland," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1927.

on the frontier; and as useful analogs for the actions of men fluctuating between the life of the city and the lost vision of the frontier.

To understand how canine agency worked in dog stories written about the North, I will first describe the formation of contemporary ideas of Alaska as a haven for the white race—and in particular, a site of rejuvenation for the white male. In her work on the cultural meanings of Alaska, Susan Kollin writes that Alaska’s place in what she calls the nation’s “spatial imagination” has meant that the state has served as an “important locale for Euro-American men who seek the wild, that element of the national past which modernity promises to forever banish.”12 At the beginning of the twentieth century, these ideas about the reclamation of human contact with “wilderness” were fundamental to the ways in which canine bodies were constructed in the popular imagination. Memoirs, fiction, periodical literature and other sources idealized the labor relationship between the new white Alaskan and his sled dogs—a relationship in which canine or worker agency was lauded, within certain boundaries. I posit that these images, rather than merely describing the capacities of certain dogs, offered a utopic re-vision of the possibilities of a collaborative relationship between labor and management, supervisor and supervised, in the new landscape of Alaska. Finally, I will explore the popular myth of the wolf-dog, describing how white Alaskan males used stories of the bodies of their dogs to explore ideas of domestication, “wildness,” and control.

All of these human anxieties about race, gender, and work must also be understood through another layer of context: that of fascinations with the category of “animal” at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Mark Feldman, following in the tradition of Erica Fudge’s call for “holistic histories” of animals, writes that representations of animals at this time showed a “significance and urgency” that was particular to a post-Darwinian mindset attempting to understand the relationship between the human and the animal: “During this period, representations of animals were used to rethink the human—in particular, the structure and nature of human interiority.”13 I would add that a place-based understanding of the man–dog relationship in Alaska provides an unusual platform for a rethinking

12 Susan Kollin, Nature’s State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 92.

of the possibilities of human-animal relationships. In thinking about Alaskan wilderness, and Alaskan dogs, white men tested out theories of both the desirable and undesirable animality of different categories of humans, and the desirable humanity of some particular animals.

*The Great White State: Alaska as Anglo-Nordic Refuge*

Alaska’s romantic position in the imagination of white writers of the late nineteenth and early 20th century must be placed firmly in the realm of racial ideology, and an understanding of Alaska’s racial significance must be employed in describing dog stories written by white men (as were all of the sources I examine). White opinion of the time held that Alaska was a refuge for Anglo-Americans during a time of racial threat. Eric T. L. Love argues that many potential United States imperial acquisitions during this era were stymied by racist sentiment opposed to the incorporation of non-white nations into the body politic. Alaska formed a significant exception to this rule. Some expansionists, Love writes, who were frightened of acquiring tropical locales full of unruly black or brown populations, “looked to the north, guided by tradition, history, an unquestioned faith in manifest destiny, and commonplace assumptions regarding race and natural law.”

The public idea of Alaska, after its acquisition in 1867, saw the territory as a toehold of an expanding American empire. Although the most common understanding of the acquisition’s public reception points to the fact that pre-Gold Rush pundits nicknamed the newest American land “Seward’s Folly” or “Seward’s Icebox”—ridiculing Secretary of State William Seward for having advocated the purchase of a supposedly icy and inhospitable tract—historian Richard E. Welch, Jr has delineated a second and more powerful imperial undercurrent in public opinion about the Alaskan acquisition. Welch writes that a tipping point in public perceptions came when intimations of the possibility of the annexation of Canada as an extension of the Alaska purchase became public. Welch analyzes newspaper responses to the purchase of Alaska in 1867, pointing to evidence that newspaper editorials of the time not

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only approved of the idea, but also touted Alaska as the first step on the road to colonization of all of Canada.\textsuperscript{15} This imperial ambition may seem awkward or strange for present-day observers to acknowledge, but was quite accepted in the nineteenth (and early twentieth) century.

One of the main factors in white affection for Alaska was the idea that the climate of the territory would activate the most sterling qualities of the white (Nordic) race—and, implicitly, keep others of less desirable colors at bay. Love points to the influence of scientist Louis Agassiz, whose \textit{Essay on Classification} (1851) described the ways in which each race was suited to its climate zone. Love writes that Agassiz corresponded with Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner in 1867, to urge him to support the purchase of Alaska. Anglo-Saxons were destined, said Agassiz, to prosper in the northern temperate zones. Stephen Jay Gould, in his work on scientific racism, summarizes Agassiz’ thought on the place of the North in the birthright of Nordic white people:

Fortunately, nature shall be the accomplice of moral virtue; for people, free to choose, gravitate naturally toward the climates of their original homeland. The black species, created for hot and humid conditions, will prevail in the Southern lowlands, though whites will maintain dominion over the seashore and elevated ground. The new South will contain some Negro states…but the bracing North is not a congenial home for carefree and lackadaisical people, created for warmer regions.\textsuperscript{16}

Agassiz’ North would act as a natural barrier between white people and brown people, equalizing pressure between the races and creating natural segregation, while enhancing the positive qualities of the “white” race: rationality, a strong work ethic, and intelligence. Stories about men and dogs in Alaska, as we shall see, focused on this notion of the unlocking of racial possibility through contact with the landscape of the North.

Many popular conceptions of Alaska as a space during this time period echoed this intellectual fixation on the whiteness and Nordicness of the men who moved up North, and on their natural fitness for the land itself. The idea of the Nordic or Anglo immigrant’s “natural” place within the landscape of the North erased the Native Alaskan’s claim on the land, creating, as it did, an image of an empty place,


ready to receive the returning superior races which were worthy of its
greatness. Alaskan stories of racial regeneration reiterated American
patterns of frontier literary description described by Bruce Greenfield,
who examines the ways in which those prototypical American explorer-
authors Lewis and Clark created authority in their writings. Greenfield
observes that Lewis and Clark “invoke their own aesthetic responses as
an authority for their presence in what they know are inhabited lands.”
In this way, appreciation for the Alaskan scenery, an appreciation which
white authors saw as specific to themselves, became the natural proof
of land ownership.

Beyond using their own ability to appreciate Alaska’s scenery to
establish their natural right to inhabit the landscape, white authors
praising Alaska also pointed to their bodily responses to the climate
as a way to establish authority. During a time when anxieties over the
body’s responses to industrialization ran high, Alaska’s positive effects
on the white body seemed to establish the naturalness of the white
presence in the North. A visiting correspondent from Harper’s, writ-
ing in 1909 after the heat of the gold rushes, observed that many new
Alaskans tended to be Swedish or Norwegian, writing approvingly that
the “material environment,” or climactic conditions, in which these
races had been forged was favorable, and thus “a high type of man was
produced. Because of [these material conditions] these races stand at the
forefront of the nations in stature and in the vital quality of endurance.
They display to us the superlative animal man, so far as he is known
to this period of our humanity’s progression.” The reporter continued,
oberving that these Nordics, reinserted in the Nordic environment,
reached beyond their former achievements, inspired by this new land:
“I do not remember to have met a single man living the outdoor life of
Alaska who showed any lack of energy or, indeed, the slightest inclina-
tion toward laziness. The very air itself most assuredly is a mighty spur
to endeavor. It is not in the least unreasonable to believe that the future
Alaskan will be the most industrious man of the Caucasian race.”

17 Bruce Greenfield, “The Problem of the Discoverer’s Authority in Lewis and Clark’s
History,” in Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exotism,
Imperialism, ed. Jonathon Arac and Harriet Ritvo (Philadelphia: University of Penn-
18 Roy Norton, “The New Man of the North,” Harper’s, 8/21/09, 0016ad-0020a. For
other examples of contemporary characterization of Alaska as a “land of the Vikings”,
see also a review of musher Leonhard Seppala’s autobiography, “Brief Reviews,” New
York Times, Oct 12, 1930, BR11; the autobiography of Brig. Gen. William L. Mitchell,
All of this rhetoric around a supposed link to the Vikings and other Nordic "races" served, of course, not only to establish a white claim on the land, but also to exclude those who were not racially descended from this stock.

This human baggage of racial anxiety, which the qualities of the Alaskan landscape promised to mitigate and assuage, forms the background for the way in which sled dogs were used and understood in popular culture of the time. If positive qualities of "white" were to be reinscribed and reinforced through the salubrious atmosphere of the North, stories about the actions of sled dogs were an integral part of the story of this reinscription. Through their positive and constructive interactions with the white explorers, as well as their own bodily responses to the Alaskan landscape, they reaffirmed the "right" of the white man to colonize this new frontier and mirrored the racial regeneration that white men perceived as taking place on Alaskan ground.

The New Workplace of the North: Whites, Sled Dogs, Domestication, and Partnership

Imagination of a successful white colonization of Alaska depended on the conception of utopic workplaces. These were sites in which white men could, using their newfound racial inheritance of endurance and strength, bequeathed to them by the salubrious climate, labor in order to transform a perceived pre-modern landscape into one which would render forth its riches and advantages. Stories about human relationships with working canines formed ideas of the type of labor that would flourish in the imaginative space of Alaska. Canine agency, whether freely allowed or directed by relationships with their owners/supervisors, was integral to these stories.

Male writers characterized their relationships with dogs in Alaska as perfect working partnerships. As in so many other aspects, Alaska provided the site for a more perfect union—in this case, a union of the owner and the worker; the supervisor and the supervised; the order-giver

_The Opening of Alaska_, ed. Lyman L. Woodman (Anchorage, AK: Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1982), 4; editorial comment, _Alaska-Yukon Magazine_, March 1908 5:1, 63–64. _The Alaska-Yukon Magazine_ began its life as "Alaska's Magazine," and changed its name around the time that the Seattle Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (1909) began its planning stages. When citing pieces from the publication, I will the name in use at the time of the article's printing.
and the obedient (and perhaps, in an implied fashion, the master and the slave). When describing their relationships with their “lead dogs” in particular, men characterized the interactions as something on the order of a love affair. In this sense, their idealized Alaskan partnership both reflects and rejects ideas of standardization and control in the working relationship prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century. Essential to this rejection is the glorification of animal agency. Men interacting with dogs in Alaska wanted to think of their working partnerships as based on interactions between two fully invested subjects—within certain bounds.

In some ways, these relationships could be seen as simple exercises of white masculine power. Donna Haraway writes in her Companion Species Manifesto about a certain class of humanity who might view the owning and training of “companion species”—animals, such as dogs, which have evolved alongside and been accustomed to work with humanity—as an exercise of will, or an assertion of dominance. A genre of people who Haraway calls “humanist technophiliacs” might see domestication as an act of domination, or an exertion of self-power (or, as Haraway puts it, “the paradigmatic act of masculine, single-parent, self-birthing, whereby man makes himself repetitively as he invents (creates) his tools.”)  

However, the man-animal relationships on display in the books and memoirs of Alaskan settlers seem to complicate this framework. In most of these stories, the working relationship is conceptually re-humanized, in a way that stands as a tacit rebuke to the “civilized” or contentiously mechanized new working world back “down South.” Here, these powerful partnership stories argue, great things are still accomplished on a small scale, with actors working together, instead of in conflict. Coverage of the serum run illustrates this utopian ideal. In this situation, the dogs were seen as absolutely the opposite of the machines (airplanes) that made the bid to replace them. Dogs, in their very non-machininess, recreated an imaginary past working world infused with emotional meaning.

The partnership between a musher and his lead dog was the object of most of the commentary on the wonders of sled dogs in the working


20 Alaskans since the early 20th century have used the word “Outside” to denominate non-Alaskan space.
Emotions that mushers felt for their dogs ran the gamut from respect to a sense of true partnership and love.

In many of these cases, the man-dog relationship reads like a father-son, or a husband-wife dichotomy. Men remember dogs as trusted companions in fondly recounted endeavors—adventures that actual wives or sons would be too fragile to face. Susan Johnson, in her study of the camps of the California Gold Rush, points out that the lack of (white) women in these spaces led to a wide array of domestic arrangements, many highly unconventional, and a concurrent disruption of gender roles. Johnson writes that this disruption meant that “even in short a time as the Gold Rush years and even in so small a place as the Southern Mines, meanings proliferated, evolved, collided.”  

Alaskan gold miners experienced many of the same disruptions, with the rush of men to the north resulting in a wholly homosocial environment.

In this male world, dogs—while nominally used as workers—were also the emotional allies of white explorers. (The Nome Daily Nugget headlined news of the arrival of the diphtheria serum “The Dog of the North, The White Man’s Best Friend North of ’55, Comes to the Rescue of Nome with Diphtheria Antitoxin.”) These man-male dog friendships are notable for their supposedly superior qualities of honesty, loyalty, and trust. A fictional sourdough (or seasoned Alaskan resident) named Jim, created for an Alaska’s Magazine story of 1905, tells another man of his feelings for his dog, Summit, who has been kidnapped by evil Indians. The sourdough anchors his description of their bond by pointing to the dog’s ability to feel human emotion, and cites a specific instance in which that emotional tie saved Jim from backcountry disaster:

Summit was the best living friend I had and he possessed as much feeling—downright heart feeling—as you or I, Buck. Why, when I was sitting by the fire last night, drinking loneliness, I thought of the time when he saved my life on the Tonsina, and when I lost all the grub off my back in the Kotsina River, and stood helpless on the bank as our supplies drifted down around the bend, and I thought of Summit as he ran over that high point and chased down along the bank, then swam into the swift-running

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Nome Daily Nugget, February 14, 1925, 1.
current and brought that small package to shore—the only grub within one hundred miles.  

These bonds, deriving from the mutual effort of the two species in a forbidding land, are seen as superior to many human-human relationships.

The understanding between a man and his dog, importantly, extended beyond that of a man and a domesticated beast back in the imaginative space of “civilization.” This partnership was superior to the keeping of a dog for decorative or entertainment purposes, because it was forged around work. Hudson Stuck, a missionary and the Episcopal Archdeacon of the Yukon, who was the first white man to ascend Denali in 1913 and who traveled extensively through the territory on a dogsled, wrote of the mix of respect and love necessary between a man and a dog before the two could form a partnership. Eulogizing a dog named Nanook, who was killed when kicked by a horse, Stuck remembers their relationship: “Nanook was a most independent dog and took to himself an air of partnership rather than subjection. Any man can make friends with any dog if he will, there is no question about that, but it takes a long time and mutual trust and mutual forbearance and mutual appreciation to make a partnership. Not every dog is fit to be partner with a man; nor every man, I think, fit to be partner with a dog.”

In this assessment, the bond between man and “independent” dog certifies the man—Stuck—as possessing a legitimate masculinity. Perhaps the most famous Alaskan man-dog pair, Buck and John Thornton, of Jack London’s Call of the Wild, exemplifies this process of validation. Buck seems able to discern that Thornton is, at last, the master he has been looking for—one who is man enough to be worth submitting to. This love-at-first-sight is described in terms suitable to any number of sentimental novels:

Buck would lie by the hour, eager, alert, at Thornton’s feet, looking up into his face, dwelling upon it, studying it, following with keenest interest each fleeting expression, every movement and change of feature. Or, as chance might have it, he would lie farther away, to the side and rear, watching the outlines of the man and the occasional movements of his body. And often, such was the communion in which they lived.

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24 Hudson Stuck, Thousand Miles With A Dog Sled: A Narrative of Winter Travel in Interior Alaska (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1988 [repub., original printing, Scribner’s, 1914]), 238.
strength of Buck’s gaze would draw John Thornton’s head around, and he would return the gaze, without speech, his heart shining out of his eyes as Buck’s heart shone out.25

E. Anthony Rotundo describes what he calls “noble submission,” a concept of manhood in currency at the end of the nineteenth century, which held that masculinity could allow for self-sacrifice in the context of having found a fellow man—a leader, either military or corporate—who would be worthy of such a sacrifice. This new ideal of self-sacrifice in masculine relationships could explain the emphasis on these dogs’ fierce loyalty and devotion.26

But both Buck and Nanook, as imagined by these authors, seem to be able to be submissive while maintaining their status as equal partners. Through their characters, they avoided the unattractive prospect of being, as Stuck puts it, a subject to the will of the man/owner. Their continued independence—signaled by Nanook’s insistence on stealing and eating food when left within his reach, and making some trail decisions for himself; and by Buck’s eventual vanishing back into the wild—is what made these dogs worthy friends and partners. These details also allowed them to retain their masculine qualities, implicitly adding to the masculinity of those men who own them. The independent agency of these dogs implied that the working relationship of man and dog in Alaska was one imbued with dignity, love, and equality.

Most of the dogs these men dwelt upon in their narratives functioned in the position of lead dogs. The place of the lead dog was to serve as the liaison between the will of the man and the understanding of the rest of the dogs in the dog team. Men who wrote about lead dogs invested them with desirable leadership qualities such as confidence, authority, and a mystical ability to command respect from their fellow dogs. By articulating their respect for these qualities, these men implicitly branded their lead dogs as embodying desirable human leadership traits prized by the male culture of the time; and—by extension—themselves as possessing similar qualities, for they were, of course, the ones who were ultimately in charge.

Leaders acted as translators for their masters, enforcing the will of the supervisor even when the team wanted to disobey. Arthur Bartlett’s

1926 juvenile fiction starring a lead dog named Spunk took a village in New England as its setting, but the relationship between Spunk and his young master takes on many of the same qualities as the Alaskan ideal described in other books, showing the way in which the Alaskan mystique could be translated into northern settings in other parts of the United States. Spunk saves the team and the driver from disaster when they are on a winter jaunt up New Hampshire’s Mount Washington, forestalling a rebellion when the team falters on a knife-edge ridge. “Spunk stood immovable in his tracks, resisting with every ounce of energy in his great body the slight downward pull that had already started. Then, as some tenseness seemed to come over the whole team, as though the moment for the dash was at hand, he emitted a sharp growl. That was all, but it arrested that fatal mutiny just as it was about to start.”

The famed musher Leonhard Seppala wrote that his lead dog Togo, who was a lesser-known hero of the serum run, was similarly able to make the team perform when Seppala’s communication with them failed. Bringing a string of dogs past a second string on a trail could be treacherous, Seppala explained, because the dogs were inclined to tangle with the foreign animals and create a snarl that could delay the team. When his team was in this position, “as long as Togo could see [the foreign string] behind him, he would jump into his collar, yelp, and run ahead, and his team mates seemed to understand him.”

For this ability, among others, Seppala thought Togo was the best natural lead dog the North had ever seen.

Lead dogs such as Togo emerge out of a process of natural selection, making the sled dog team into a meritocracy of talents. Arthur Walden was a Bostonian who worked as a “dog-puncher” (one who hauled freight by dog sled) during the Gold Rush, and later started an influential kennel in New Hampshire. Walden described his most significant dog relationship, with a hound named Chinook, who ended up as the stud for his entire line of sled dogs. Chinook, when a puppy, was originally put in the position of wheel dog, but immediately demanded

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29 Seppala resented Togo’s being passed over for fame in favor of Balto, who Seppala viewed as an incidental hero (a “newspaper dog”), certainly undeserving of a statue in Central Park. Ricker, 280–81.
to be made lead. Eva Brunell Seeley and Martha A. L. Lane wrote a biography of Chinook and his sons and daughters, which explicitly sought to impart moral lessons to a juvenile audience (a function for which the animal appeal and working condition of the sled dog seems particularly suited, both in the early years of the century and today). Seeley and Lane explain to their child-readers that Chinook displayed desirable qualities of initiative in his coup, which unseated his brother as lead: “Taking the harness in his teeth he jumped up and down, saying as plainly as words could have done: ‘Oh, please let me try! Let me show what I can do!’ From that day on, he’s the leader and the rest of the dogs love to follow him.”31 Scotty Allan, another famed musher of Nome, owned a favorite lead dog, Baldy, who was initially seen as a freight or working dog, more valuable for muscle than for intelligence. Baldy eventually proves himself when put in the position of lead when the team is in dire straits during a storm and one of the other leaders is injured.32 By figuring these dogs as superior to their teammates, authors emphasized their agency in taking control of their circumstances, but also told themselves the story of a perfect human meritocracy, one in which qualities of leadership would naturally be recognized.

The desire to achieve happiness through work distinguishes these Alaskan dogs, both when in the lead and when working in other team positions, from their implied opposites: pampered and non-active dogs, produced by civilization and overbreeding. Bartlett writes of Spunk’s teammates that they were a motley crew, not conforming to particular aesthetic standards, but that in this situation, aesthetics were less important than the internal impetus to work: “These are not the aristocrats of dogdom—the bluebloods. These are the redbloods. Theirs is an aristocracy of life and action.”33 Through this rhetoric of the advantages of activity over inert, civilized living, these stories reconstitute a workplace in which the sheer desire to work and willingness to exert could gain a dog—or a man—the success and happiness he wanted.

30 The story of Balto, for example, was the subject of a children’s animated movie, which came out in 1995. In this film, Kevin Bacon voices the character of Balto, a scrappy outcast half-wolf who makes good through his natural qualities of perseverance and endurance. Two sequels went straight to video in 2002 and 2004.
31 Eva Brunnell Seeley and Martha A. L. Lane, Chinook and his Family: True Dog Stories (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1930), 14–16.
32 Darling, 171.
33 Bartlett, 169.
Authors who described man-dog relationships in the North emphasized the honesty, love, and dignity inherent in the partnership. Through their descriptions of animals, they reclaimed workplaces with workers who delighted in laboring for their masters, and masters who were able to carry on their work without interference from outside forces or friction with labor. And in doing so, they created a particular type of circumscribed and lauded canine agency, one that reflected well upon owners and strengthened the bonds between man and dog.

The Lupine in the Canine: Dog-Wolves and the Romance of Recapitulation

Another way in which sled dog stories articulated issues of human and animal agency was played out via a characteristically early 20th century fascination with blood, lineage, ancestry, and evolution. Almost without exception, the Alaskan sled dog story referred to the dog's wolfish ancestry, emphasizing the domesticated/wild opposition. Whether the wolf in the dog is conceptualized as deriving from a distant ancestor, as was the case with Jack London's famous Buck, or whether the dog himself is seen as half, or even three-quarters, wolf, writings about Alaska's canine inhabitants attributed the dogs' toughness and aggressiveness to their lupine heritage.

The frequency of this construction and its widespread nature speaks to its popularity among the reading public. Newspaper accounts of the serum run, for example, often called Kasson's team "Siberian wolves." Several different newspapers published Kasson's debriefing after the run, which was initially reported by the New York World. The Los Angeles Times chose to pull "Dogs Half Wolves" as the first subhed in their article. The Chicago Daily Tribune, dealing with the same material, pulled "Kasson's Dogs Half Wolf."34 Slim Williams, an Alaska booster and neonate who drove a dog team from Alaska to Washington, DC in 1932, in a stunt intended to raise support for a highway along the same route, went on the Chautauqua lecture circuit afterwards and was advertised with a flier reading "Slim Williams: The Alaskan Adventurer and Musher Who Became World Famous For Driving His Wolf-Dog

SLED DOGS OF THE AMERICAN NORTH

Timn 5,600 Miles Blazing the Proposed Alaska-US Highway.”\textsuperscript{35} A stereographic image of men with a dog team, published at the turn of this century, dwells heavily on the dogs’ savagery:

The leader looks very much like a wolf. He belongs to a tribe called Malemute. That is, he is a tamed wolf of a northern kind. These wolves are captured by the Eskimos when they are little puppies and are trained. But even when tamed it would not be safe for a stranger to come too close to them. If you were to lay your hand on this dog’s head, the chances are his fangs would be snapping at you a moment afterwards. Most of the Malemutes used are raised from the tamed wolves.

The fact that the white sourdough leading the dog team has his hand on the lead dog’s head lends the scene a sense of romantic danger and dominant masculinity.\textsuperscript{36} These qualities of the Alaskan sled dog story were at least partially created by public demand. As Roderick Nash says of Jack London’s two books about dogs who flirt with the dog-wolf boundary, \textit{Call of the Wild} and \textit{White Fang}, \textit{Call}, in which a dog goes from civilized to wild, was far more popular than \textit{Fang}, in which a wolf takes the opposite path.\textsuperscript{37}

The origin story of the dog-wolf could take any number of forms. Seeley and Lane wrote that the Indians would create this hybrid by their breeding methods. This story, while intended to appeal to their child audience, also, like the origin story of the stereographic slide, colorfully proposed an Indian world with permeable wild-human boundaries: “Once in a while an Indian driver would find a motherless baby wolf half dead in the snow and would carry it home for his children to feed and play with. It was often possible to tame the little stranger and to teach him how to help pull the sled with the dogs of the household. In time a new breed of worker, half wolf and half dog, might be found in many of the teams.”\textsuperscript{38} Some stories pictured white men taming or incorporating wolves into their dog teams, such as the story which ran in \textit{Alaska Magazine} in 1906 and dealt with the life of Eli Smith, a mail carrier. Of Smith’s leader, Wolfe, the writer notes “The useful

\textsuperscript{35} See flier, page T. K. Williams’ lecture was advertised as “Rugged—Picturesque—Humorous—Philosophical”, a perfect encapsulation of the sourdough mystique.


\textsuperscript{38} Seeley and Lane, 18.
SLIM WILLIAMS

The Alaskan Adventurer and Musher Who Became World Famous for Driving His Wolf-Dog Team 5,600 Miles Blazing the Proposed Alaska - U. S. Highway.

RUGGED - PICTURESQUE - HUMOROUS - PHILOSOPHICAL


career of this noble beast is all the more interesting because he is a full-blooded wolf, captured in the wilds of the Far North and trained to lead a plebian dog team. Thus, in captivity, he is a leader of dogs, even as he was a king among wolves of the wild.”39 In these stories, the domesticating powers of white men were tested against the ultimate denizens of the wild.

Others proposed that a miscegenation based on lust was the origin of the dog-wolf hybrid. Robert Joseph Diven gives his fictional dog Rowdy this type of lineage, writing that Rowdy was the product of a liaison between his dog mother, a “Russian wolfhound of magnificent proportions,” and his wolf father, “a full-blood wolf, of great size and beauty,”40 who meet when the father’s wolf pack swings by the camp where the mother’s owner has her tethered outside. The titillation of this type of animal story proved irresistible to writers who would turn their noses up at “squam-men” (Anglos who married or lived with Indian or Alaska Native women).

It is impossible to discern from afar whether the men who wrote of taming or breeding wolves were telling the truth. Later scientific analysis has shown that cross-breeding between husky dogs and wolves was unlikely for a number of biological reasons.\footnote{Ian Kenneth MacRury, *The Inuit Dog: Its Provenance, Environment, and History* (Inuit Sled Dog International, Harwinton, CT, 1991), 8, 40.} But the popularity of this story, be it true or false, speaks to a fascination with, and romanticization of, the wolf—a fixation that seems significant, given Americans’ historical determination to extirpate the lupine element. Historian Jon T. Coleman writes that the American attitude toward the wolf has journeyed from “unanimity to ambiguity,” and the place of the sled dog in this journey marks an interesting moment in this growing ambiguity.\footnote{Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 4.}

Coleman writes that early settlers in New England and nineteenth-century westward-moving pioneers viewed the wolf as a threatening and undesirable species, and that they acted accordingly, killing wolves with brutal abandon and cruelty. Some writers, cleaving to this earlier attitude, treated the Alaskan sled dog’s wolfish tendencies as undesirable or frightening. One particular supposed quality of wolves—their apparently conscious ability to lay plans which counteract or destroy the plans or desires of the human—forms the basis of most negative stories about wolf-dogs, and provides an interesting point of comparison when considering questions of desirable or undesirable types of canine or lupine agency. A story in *Alaska Life*, published in 1939, wrote of a wolf with “enough husky in him to make him man-smart.” This particular wolf-husky infiltrates dog teams, stealing food at night and killing defenseless domesticated dogs when the owner is not watching. This fantasy, which makes a point of the slyness and guile of the wolf, echoes attitudes, fueled by years of folklore, of earlier settlers toward the species, which they saw as plotting against them in a human way. At the end of the story, the narrator, having finally ferreted out the infiltrator, kills him and makes a rug out of his hide: “I look it over every now and then and heave a sigh and promise myself not to raise any more huskies with wolf in them.”\footnote{Joseph Lester, “Never Give Your Promise to a Dead Man: A Legendary Tale of the Arctic,” *Alaska Life*, July 1939, 22.} For Lester, as well as other writers of the time, being part-wolf is no badge of honor.
These older, fearful attitudes were beginning to give way, at the very
time that Alaska was being settled by Anglos, to a new admiration for
the wolf. Coleman writes that during the beginning of the 20th century,
the federal government began to bureaucratize the killing of wolves,
entirping the species from most of the continental United States by the
end of the 1940s. However, this mass scientific project of the killing of
wolves also resulted in a growing respect for the animals, “introducing
the doomed yet heroic ‘last wolves’ into the lexicon of wolf legends.”
These “last wolves” manifested many qualities that these men, who
sought to kill them, paradoxically admired, in much the same mode
as James Fenimore Cooper’s primitivist respect for the noble-savage
Native Americans of his Last of the Mohicans (1826).

In Alaska, a factor that played into Anglo admiration of dogs’ wolfish
qualities was a now-outmoded offshoot of early Darwinism that enjoyed
great popularity in its day: the theory of recapitulation. German biolo-
gist Ernst Haeckel conceived of what came to be called “recapitulation
theory” in 1866. The basic form of the theory held that each individual,
through its development, would go through the entire course of evo-
lution taken by the species. This idea’s intellectual resonance was felt
in the discourses of education—as exemplified by early psychologist
G. Stanley Hall’s view of child development as analogous to the dev-
lopment of the (Western, Anglo) human species. In Hall’s view,
the child is the savage; the adolescent, society in its nascent states of
reasoning; the adult, the fully formed, up-to-date Western society.
Adolescence, by this theory, is a stormy time in part because this is
the era in which each individual human is infused with the knowledge
of an advanced race. Later, the idea moved into the realm of racial
theory, as many scientific racists took the view that “advanced” soci-
eties represented the entire range of human experience, while more
“primitive” societies were stuck at an early stage. This particular form
of scientific racism consigned “primitive” people to a permanent state
of childhood—as could be seen, for example, in the constant charac-
terization of the Inuit as “happy children.”

44 Coleman, 12.
45 Dorothy Ross, G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet (Chicago: University
Recapitulation theory also played a part in what many have described as the fin-de-siècle crisis of urbanized manliness.\textsuperscript{46} Gail Bederman, in her discussion of Hall’s involvement with recapitulation theory, writes that Hall believed the answer to this conundrum—civilization = unmanliness, yet savagery = regression—would lie in a controlled dose of primitive impulses such as rage, anger, and sexual passion, administered during a childhood that would allow a (male) child to feel these passions and derive virility from them, without infecting his whole life with their less desirable qualities.\textsuperscript{47}

Importantly, this theory emphasized the ability of the human to shift back and forth in and out of this animality. In his writing on manhood in the early 20th century, John Kasson points out that what drew fans to the fictional ape-man Tarzan, the magician Harry Houdini, and muscleman Eugene Sandow was the “transformation from weakness to supreme strength, from vulnerability to triumph, from anonymity to heroism, from the confinement of modern life to the recovery of freedom.”\textsuperscript{48} Favorable descriptions of dogs with wolfish tendencies both embody a popularization of recapitulation theory’s emphasis on the strength of savagery, and amplify what Kasson points out as an obsession with the ability to morph back and forth between the poles of subjection and strength. Through fantasies of wolf-dogs whose strength came from their wild blood, but who nonetheless remained obedient to, and controlled by their masters, Americans deeply questioned what it meant to be “domesticated” and what place the “racial inheritance” of aggression, endurance, and physical strength might have in the life of a man living in modern society.

The end of recapitulation theory’s scientific heyday came before most of the texts that I am examining in this study were published. By the first years of the century, the theory had been discredited in the biological realm, and Hall was forced to alter the tone of his rhetoric; however, Bederman points to a newspaper article from 1915 in which manly passions of anger and aggression are clearly credited with salubrious effects, arguing that this shows evidence that the theory may have had

\textsuperscript{46} See, for example, George Mosse, The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 78.


continuing "legs" within the culture, if not the scientific establishment.\textsuperscript{49} Certainly, naturalist writers such as London and Frank Norris engaged with these themes. Mark Feldman writes, for example, these writers were engaged in an "effort to represent the post-Darwinian subject," an effort shared by philosophers and scientists including Nietzsche and Freud, who "came to rethink the relationship between the animal and human, and to imagine human evolution and history as processes of internalizing and caging the animal within the human."\textsuperscript{50}

Alaska seemed to act as a convenient testing ground for recapitulation theory, stripping away, as it did, other accoutrements of late civilization. Humans in these Northland stories sometimes temporarily burst the bonds of civility/evolution/history when faced with the primal landscape. A sourdough named Kent, star of an adventure novel written at the late date of 1942, when confronted with being marooned in the bush without food, accesses these impulses in his struggle to survive: "Meeting nature barehanded with the tools of man's intelligence taken away from him, Kent acted much as the wolf or fox would act. He set his mind on a course he must follow and clung to it. He kept going and he kept his senses alert."\textsuperscript{51} Here, the brush with death acts as a strong drug, liberating the civilized human from the requirements of society, transforming him into a sort of a beast.

The savage traits of sled dogs also tend to come out in moments of stress, as when Diven's Rowdy, having been goaded into a fight by a rival dog named Devil's Dream, becomes wolfish in his brawling style. The narrator writes:

As I watched Rowdy leap about, trying now one and now another of the wolf's fighting tactics, I could see that my playful friend of a few minutes before had been transformed. Ferocity and cunning now possessed him to such a degree as I had never before witnessed in any creature. Every feature of my affectionate playmate had disappeared. The wild nature in him was now dominant. In his eyes, as in the eyes of the Devil's Dream, flamed the lust to terrorize, to rend, to kill.\textsuperscript{52}

Dogs who combined aspects of the wolfish and the civilized also often deployed their savagery in service of their masters. Scotty Allan, lost

\textsuperscript{49} Bederman, 116.
\textsuperscript{50} Feldman, 165.
\textsuperscript{52} Diven, 19.
on the trail, writes that his two lead dogs found the way for him again, using their sense of smell: “It was the wolf in them [Kid and Baldy] that was finding the trail for me, but the pride and courage of their dog blood that was leading their team on against the blinding gale.”

London describes Buck’s supreme strength and physical superiority as the ideal combination of civilized and wild traits: “[Buck’s] cunning was wolf cunning, and wild cunning; his intelligence, shepherd intelligence and St. Bernard intelligence; and all this, plus an experience gained in the finest of schools, made him as formidable a creature as any that roamed the wild.” Buck is a combination of street-smart and educated, and both traits come from his blood. His love for John Thornton leads him to kill the Yeehat Indians who he finds out have murdered his master—and to kill them in a savage fashion, abandoning the constrictions of human rules. Wolf dogs—the ones being lionized in these fictions—never turn on the men they love. Their loyalty re-inscribes the vitality of the man-dog relationship and implies that the superhuman Anglo-American man, in his ability to control a dog who is a wolf, is also able to control a piece of the wild Alaskan landscape itself.

However much these dog/wolves were controlled, however, they always maintained a wild core that writers idealized as an outlet from society’s bonds. Writers often described a romantic vanishing of some of these wolf-dogs back into the Northern forests. Even when he is at the height of his love affair with John Thornton, London leaves Buck an out, foreshadowing his eventual vanishing: “Faithfulness and devotion, things born of fire and roof, were his; yet he retained his wildness and williness. He was a thing of the wild, come in from the wild to sit by John Thornton’s fire, rather than a dog of the soft Southland stamped with the marks of generations of civilization.” The narrator of a story written by Ralph Johnson, which ran in Alaska Sportsman, describes a dog named Chinook who lives for a while with two partnered sourdoughs. Chinook, after a time with the two, eventually “slinks away into the forest.” The narrator, back in “civilization,” muses on his old friend’s fate: “As the evening shadows fall I often picture Chinook leading the pack up there, in the northern woods. I wonder

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53 Allan, 189.
54 London, 1903, 71.
55 London, 1903, 76.
56 London, 1903, 55.
if we should ever go back there and suddenly run across him on some trail—would he recognize us? Or, would he bare his fangs and dash back in the forest to his mates? Someday, we may return and see."\(^{57}\) The always-open possibility of retreat to wolfishness was a powerful fantasy of escape, of Kasson’s “recovery of freedom,” possible for dogs who live in the polar areas (but, importantly, giving a sense of freedom to their masters as well).

The full significance of this ultimate recovery of agency can be seen in one of the most powerful vanishing-dog stories of the era. Arthur Walden’s Chinook (no relation to Johnson’s fictional dog), who embodied the loyal and obedient qualities of the master lead dog, eventually took this escape valve at the end of his life. Walden, who had returned from his time in Alaska to establish a kennel in New Hampshire with Chinook as its lead stud dog, volunteered his services—and, of course, those of his dogs—for Richard Byrd’s 1929 expedition to Antarctica. Chinook came along, although he was twelve years old and beginning to fail in strength. According to the legend, as retold by Seeley and Lane, Chinook faced a challenge from a rival dog who wanted to take over his alpha-dog status in the kennel, and failed to “best” him. It was Chinook’s birthday. “That night he woke his master by laying a cold nose against his cheek. Three times he did this, each time receiving a comforting pat on the head. Little did Mr. Walden think at the time that the old dog was saying good-by,” wrote Seeley and Lane.\(^{58}\) After this “farewell,” Chinook wandered away into the Antarctic wild, never to be seen again. A newspaper account of the happening, from 1930, wrote: “[Chinook] was not to be found when the team was harnessed, and one of the men remembered seeing him trotting off toward the cold horizon. What happened to him no one will ever know, but men wise in the lore of dogs shake their heads and murmur that the old ones do commit suicide when they feel themselves no longer able to carry on.”\(^{59}\)

Chinook’s story encapsulates the contradictions of the human idea of canine wildness—and canine agency. On the one hand, Chinook’s suicide is an attractive story to the men and women who tell it because

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\(^{58}\) Seeley and Lane, 202–03.

it implies that even a dog who is by breeding and training practically 
the alter ego of the man who owns him can still find it inside himself 
to claim the radical and deadly autonomy of a suicide in the wild 
Antarctic landscape. The story, interpreted this way, says that even the 
most civilized and caged human man could possibly access a similar 
connection with the wild freedom of pure animal instinct. He could 
assert control over his life by refusing, at the moment of crisis, to conform to the rules of human society. At the same time, Chinook's 
suicide comes at a time when he sees himself as no longer able to be of service to his master. This act of freedom, of transformation, could also be seen as the ultimate result of the human conditioning which 
Chinook has been given. In this last act, Chinook frees his master from 
the burden of taking care of him as he ages and loses his usefulness—as 
he slips from the realm of the human partner into the animal needs of 
his body, needing care and giving back no tangible benefit. Thus, the complicated figure of the dog-wolf seems to defy human control, but also fulfills human desires for freedom, autonomy, and wildness.

Conclusions: The Free and the Wild

Famed sled dogs of Alaskan lore embodied the white male’s complicated relationship with work, obedience, freedom, and wildness in the time of technological advances and increasing urbanization. The actions of these dogs are often seen as most precious when they come not from the result of training or domestication, but from some inner well of strength or power: a wolfish ancestry, an innate intelligence, or a capacity to love. By prizing these inherent qualities of the individual dog over their training methods or the strictures of civilization, authors showed their extreme cultural need for stories that promised that even workers or other oppressed subjects could be freed by landscape, place, and climate.

Of course, in these stories, the actions of the dogs are useful more for human thought than for the animals themselves, leaving their actual agency up to question. Perhaps nothing illustrates this contradiction better than Balto’s final resting place in the zoo in Cleveland. A dog whose heroism was based on his work in a strenuous environment was sold numerous times, denying his own probable desires to return to his Northern home, and then left caged for the rest of his natural
life, a living display, at the whim of children and adult humans. Balto’s cage is the ultimate expression of the conditionality of actual freedom for these Northern dogs, whose fictional freedom meant so much to so many readers.