Labors of Love: People, Dogs, and Affect in North American Arctic Borderlands, 1700–1900

Bathsheba Demuth

In winter, the Yukon River watershed quiets and fills with snow. By March and April, eastern Beringia—roughly the land from Alaska's Norton Sound north to the Beaufort Sea and eastward to the juncture of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers—is covered in drifts six or more feet deep. Paths fill with each new storm. In summer, taiga and tundra goes boggy, alternating knots of sedge grasses with pooled water. Arctic and sub-Arctic terrain and seasons make movement laborious, the land a great sink into which peoples' labor pours.

It has been centuries, however, since people moved through eastern Beringia alone: dogs expand the capacity for humans to cross this space. Historically, canine labor enabled trade, politics, and the basic tasks of finding food and fuel, particularly in winter. Until snowmobiles and airplanes became common in the 1950s, how people shared and contested space was done partly on canine terms. And those terms were both material and emotional: to work well with people, dogs required relationships of close affiliation, established by consistent mutual care and interaction.

Attending to the critical role and affective facets of dog labor in eastern Beringia pulls together insights from three significant but usually distinct historiographies: those of borderlands, animals, and emotion. Between the late 1700s and early 1900s, the lands from Norton Sound up the Yukon River drainage were recognizably borderlands, in the sense advanced by a field that emphasizes the power and longevity of Indigenous nations, the contingencies of imperial expansion, and the contradictory, generative nature of spaces where jurisdiction is partial and contested. Borderlands are worlds where the shape of relationships and hierarchies of power remain plastic, their contours unfixed.[1]

[1] Samuel Truett, "Settler Colonialism and the Borderlands of Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 76 (July 2019), 435–42; Andrew K. Frank and A. Glenn Crothers, eds., *Borderland Narratives: Negotiation and Accommodation in North America's Contested Spaces, 1500–1850* (Gainesville, 2017); Alice L. Baumgartner, "The Line of Positive Safety: Borders and Boundaries in the Rio Grande Valley, 1848–1880," *Journal of American History,* 101 (March 2015), 1106–22; Michel Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People* (Regina, 2015); Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (New Haven, 2015); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Brian

— MILTON WEIL WITH HIS MALAMUTE CHORUS, NOME ALASKA. 959

Milton Weil with a passenger and his team of howling malamutes in Nome, Alaska, between 1903 and 1907. *P12-064, Alaska State Library, B.B. Dobbs Photo Collection.*

In eastern Beringia, boundaries were made and remade by dogs and people working together. Canine work shaped the social lives of Indigenous Iñupiat, Yup'ik, and Dené nations long before European presence. In the early 1800s, dogs carried agents of the Russian and British Empires into eastern Beringia; in the late 1800s, they did the same for emissaries of the American and Canadian nation-states. Dogs were not just present; they were requisite parts of borderland political and economic projects. Requisite did not mean dogs worked with people in uniform ways. Three distinct human-canine cultures met in eastern Beringia: those of the Iñupiat and Yup'ik (referred to as Eskimo in older literature), those of Dené (Athapaskan) peoples including the Hän, Gwich'in, and Koyukon, and those of European and American foreigners. In mingling, these cultures changed how people and dogs worked together, even as the dogs helped define the boundaries between people. The borderlands were a multispecies creation.[2]

DeLay ed., *North American Borderlands* (New York, 2013). The essay that defined borderlands as now used by many scholars is Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *Journal of American History,* 98 (Sept. 2011), 338–61.

[2] Historians have not given much attention to eastern Beringia. During the Russian imperial period, most work is on southeastern Alaska. See Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867* (New York, 2011); and James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785–1841* (Seattle, 1992). Recent works focus to the west and east. See, for example, Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York, 2019); and Andrew Stuhl, *Unfreezing the Arctic: Science, Colonialism, and the Transformation of Inuit Lands* (Chicago, 2016). Histories of the Yukon River are usually confined by national boundaries. See, for example, Ken S. Coates and William R. Morrison,

For environmental and animal historians, and in Indigenous histories that have long emphasized the wills and socially constitutive roles of other-than-human beings, eastern Beringia's borderlands are yet another place where species beyond *Homo sapiens* have shaped the past. But the record along the Yukon River offers more than an additional example of animal agency, labor, or even the recreational canine-human joy invoked by Donna Haraway. Dogs and people were mutually dependent in very material terms, as people fed dogs and dogs moved people. But dogs also comprehended and responded to human emotions, and worked best for people with whom they shared an affectionate relationship, where fear was not the primary motivator, and where care was stable enough to become mutual. That is, dogs made demands on their human familiars to express and control their emotions in ways that supported interspecies bonds and communication. Historians of emotion have long argued that emotional expression can illuminate social organization, political authority, and understanding. In eastern Beringia, some of the emotions shaping social life had canine origins, not just because people had emotions in response to dogs, but because dogs had emotional responses to humans. This essay borrows from the historiography of human emotions an attention to identifying gestures and communities of affect in the past, but it expands membership in those communities to species other than people.[3]

That dogs work best for people with whom they have emotional connection is the result of a shared history, the millennia-long move along the continuum between wild

---

Land of the Midnight Sun: A History of the Yukon (1988; Montreal, 2017). Or they are confined to specific events, such as in Katherine Morse, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush* (Seattle, 2003). An exception is John R. Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North: The Contest among Native and Foreign Nations for the Bering Strait Fur Trade* (New Haven, 2009). The land from the Yukon River north is home to multiple linguistic groups and nations, including the Deg Xinag, Upper Kuskokwim, and Holikachuk. This paper focuses on three larger linguistic and territorial groups of Dené, the Hän, Gwich'in, and Koyukon, in addition to the Yup'ik and Iñupiat. Borderlands histories that foreground animals include Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York, 2004); Mary E. Mendoza, "Fencing the Line: Race, Environment, and the Changing Visual Landscape at the U.S.-Mexico Divide," in *Border Spaces: Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera,* ed. Katherine G. Morrissey and John-Michael H. Warner (Tucson, 2018), 39–65; and Tyler Boulware, "'Skilful Jockies' and 'Good Sadlers': Native Americans and Horses in the Southeastern Borderlands," in *Borderland Narratives,* ed. Frank and Crothers, 68–95. On ecological boundaries, see Lissa K. Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea* (Seattle, 2012); Reid, *Sea Is My Country;* and Kristin Hoganson, "Meat in the Middle: Converging Borderlands in the U.S. Midwest, 1865–1900," *Journal of American History,* 98 (March 2012), 1025–51.

[3] Histories foregrounding animal agency include Drew A. Swanson, "Mountain Meeting Ground: History at an Intersection of Species," in *The Historical Animal,* ed. Susan Nance (New York, 2015), 240–57; Philip Howell, "Animals, Agency, and History," in *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History,* ed. Hilda Kean and Philip Howell (New York, 2018), 197–221; Demuth, *Floating Coast;* Frederick L. Brown, *The City Is More than Human: An Animal History of Seattle* (Seattle, 2016); and Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* (Baltimore, 2013). On the erasure of Indigenous theory, see Zoe Todd, "From Fish Lives to Fish Law: Learning to See Indigenous Legal Orders in Canada," in *The Ethnographic Case,* ed. Emily Yates-Doerr and Christine Labuski (Manchester, Eng., 2018), chapter 19, https://www.matteringpress.org/books/the-ethnographic-case; and Marcy Norton, "The Chicken or the *Iegue:* Human-Animal Relationships and the Columbian Exchange," *American Historical Review,* 120 (Feb. 2015), 28–60. Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, 2003). There is excellent work on animal labor, mostly in urban spaces. See Andrew A. Robichaud, *Animal City: The Domestication of America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2019); Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008); and Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, 2007). Nicole Eustace et al., "*AHR* Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions," *American Historical Review,* 117 (Dec. 2012), 1487–531, 1503, 1496. Histories of affect are wide ranging. On work on guilt and pride, see Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014). On humor, see Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, 1998). On pain, see Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (New York, 2014). On the social theory of affect, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, 2014). On borderlands as spaces of human affect, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987; San Francisco, 2012).

wolves and domestic *Canis lupus familiaris*. A kind of canine, distinct enough in behavior to live closely—and probably collaboratively—with humans seems to have emerged independently in the Middle East, Siberia, China, Europe, and North America. When this occurred is open to archeological debate, with estimates ranging from 15,000 to 30,000 or perhaps even 100,000 years ago. Even the most conservative date means dogs have the longest domestic relationship with people of any animal. By 14,000 years ago, millennia before *Canis lupus* morphologically became *familiaris,* transformed by breeding into the myriad shapes of contemporary dogs, they were socially important enough to be buried like human family. One such dog was interred, between four hundred and nine hundred years ago, in a log coffin along Alaska's Beringian coast, its head pointed due west like the people entombed nearby.[4]

These burials convey the value people gave dogs in life. Part of that value comes from the fact that dogs also value people. Both humans and canines are able to recognize, socially interact with, and learn from members of their own and another species. This capacity makes cooperation between species possible. Such dual identification is also the result of a process that was not entirely led by humans. Where older theories of domestication saw people alone as taming and breeding wolves into dogs, newer literature emphasizes how the social abilities of both species allowed for a gradual, mutualistic relationship to form, one that gave proto-dogs and people more security and hunting success, and did so before humans took an active role in canine reproductive choices. Our two species learned to work together toward an end beneficial to both.[5]

In this co-evolutionary process, humans might have lost some of their sense of smell, depending instead on keener lupine acuity. Dogs became more like adolescent wolves, less aggressive and wary. But both species also gained abilities. Most people, even those not raised with dogs, can identify happiness, anger, and other emotions from canine expressions. Dogs understand human emotions and reciprocate them, communicating through

[4] I am both following and departing from the work of evolutionary historians. I am following by arguing that human societies are the result of and participate in ongoing evolution with other animals, and that attention to biological pasts and presents opens new methods of interpretation. This position is mapped out in Edmund Russell, *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth* (New York, 2010). It is furthered in, among other works, Sam White, "From Globalized Pig Breeds to Capitalist Pigs: A Study in Animal Cultures and Evolutionary History," *Environmental History,* 16 (Jan. 2011), 94–120; and Abraham Gibson, *Feral Animals in the American South: An Evolutionary History* (New York, 2016). I am departing, in that evolutionary histories infrequently focus on animal agency and are quite free of affect. See, for example, Edmund Russell, *Greyhound Nation: A Coevolutionary History of England, 1200–1900* (New York, 2018). On the domestic-wild continuum, see Harriet Ritvo, *Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras: Essays on Animals and History* (Charlottesville, 2010), 108. On domestication, see Norton, "Chicken or the *Iegue*," 30–32. Data on domestication are drawn from Raymond Pierotti and Brandy R. Fogg, *The First Domestication: How Wolves and Humans Coevolved* (New Haven, 2017), 1–47; Darcy F. Morey, *Dogs: Domestication and the Development of a Social Bond* (New York, 2010), 12–56; and Darcy F. Morey, "The Early Evolution of the Domestic Dog," *American Scientist,* 82 (July–Aug. 1994), 336–47; O. Thalmann et al., "Complete Mitochondrial Genomes of Ancient Canids Suggests a European Origin of Domestic Dogs," *Science,* 342 (no. 6160, 2013), 871–74; Pat Shipman, *The Invaders: How Humans and Their Dogs Drove Neanderthals to Extinction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), 1–8; and Máire Ní Leathlobhair et al., "The Evolutionary History of Dogs in the Americas," *Science,* 361 (no. 6397, 2018), 81–85. Mietje Germonpré et al., "Paleolithic Dog Skulls at the Gravettian Předmostí Site, the Czech Republic," *Journal of Archaeological Science,* 39 (Jan. 2012), 184–202. Leathlobhair et al., "Evolutionary History of Dogs in the Americas"; Helge Larsen and Froelich G. Rainey, *Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture* (New York, 1942), 121. This dog grave is unusual in the area.

[5] Werner Müller, "The Domestication of the Wolf—the Inevitable First?," in *The First Steps of Animal Domestication: New Archaeozoological Techniques,* ed. J.-D. Vigne, J. Peters, and D. Helmer (Oxford, 2005), 34–40, 35; József Topál et al., "Attachment Behavior in Dogs (Canis Familiaris): A New Application of Ainsworth's (1969) Strange Situation Test," *Journal of Comparative Psychology,* 112 (no. 3, 1998), 219–29. On sociality, see Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction* (New York, 2013), 194–220. On domestication, see Pierotti and Fogg, *First Domestication,* 190–22; and Morey, *Dogs,* 188–207. On co-evolution, see Russell, *Evolutionary History,* 85–102.

eyebrow movements, ear posture, and other gestures. The intensity of identification, the bond between human and dog, is not universal; dogs form deeper attachments with people who regularly give social rewards, like praise and petting, and will withdraw obedience in response to human emotional outbursts or inconstancies.[6]

Dogs and people have thus evolved to emote with each other. A strong affective, co-social bond is key—even more so than food rewards—to dogs' responding to human wants, like following a scent or quieting a bark. That is, cross-species emotion is a critical part of laboring with dogs. A history that takes seriously the role of human-dog work is also therefore a history of what kinds of emotional relationships existed between the two species, if and how these relations changed, and with what consequence. This essay is an attempt to tease out the ephemera of such interspecies affect from the material project of moving and bordering space with dogs, particularly via dog traction: the use of dogs to pull sleds, also called mushing.[7]

In eastern Beringia, mushing was part of three distinct periods of border creation and re-formation: the borders of Indigenous nations in the late 1700s and early 1800s, before sustained foreign presence; the shifts resulting from the mid-nineteenth-century expansion of the Russian and British Empires; and, finally, the spatial changes imposed by settler-colonial property lines during the Klondike and Nome gold rushes from the 1890s to the 1910s. What follows maps changes not only in human borders but also in the kinds of borders and control exerted over dogs, and the role of interspecies affect in both. In 1700, humans had only partial control of their canines and mutable sovereignty over land. By 1920, canine autonomy in eastern Beringia had faded alongside human political, economic, and jurisdictional multiplicity. In the borderlands, it was not just human values, politics, and sovereignty that had no set telos: the same was true for the form of the co-evolutionary relationship we call domestication.

Part 1: Nations and Dogs: Indigenous Borderlands, 1780s–1830s

Dog traction might have been the first task people deliberately bred dogs to perform, starting some 9,500 years ago in Siberia. In the North American Arctic, pulling sleds is a relatively new kind of canine work. Between seven hundred and one thousand years ago, a culture that archeologists call the Thule spread eastward from the Bering Strait, enabled by their whaling technology and dogs trained to pull in harness. Archeological evidence and oral histories indicate the Thule intermingled with or displaced other societies in the high Arctic and pushed into Dené territory. Dog traction helped move Thule culture all the way to Greenland.[8]

---

[6] Russell, *Evolutionary History,* 63–65; Colin Groves, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of Being Domesticated," *Perspectives in Human Biology,* 4 (no. 1, 1999), 1–12; Helen M. Leach, "Human Domestication Reconsidered," *Current Anthropology,* 44 (June 2003), 349–68; Miho Nagasawa et al., "Oxytocin-Gaze Positive Loop and the Coevolution of Human-Dog Bonds," *Science,* 348 (no. 6232, 2015), 333–36; Morey, *Dogs,* 208–25. Nagasawa et al., "Oxytocin-Gaze Positive Loop and the Coevolution of Human-Dog Bonds," 333–36; Ludwig Huber et al., "Would Dogs Copy Irrelevant Actions from Their Human Caregiver?," *Learning & Behavior,* 46 (Dec. 2018), 387–97. This is also my experience in training sled dogs.

[7] Debottam Bhattacharjee et al., "Free-Ranging Dogs Prefer Petting over Food in Repeated Interactions with Unfamiliar Humans," *Journal of Experimental Biology,* 24 (no. 220, 2017), 4654–660; Clive D. L. Wynne, *Dog Is Love: Why and How Your Dog Loves You* (New York, 2019), 45–72.

[8] Mikkel-Holger S. Sinding et al., "Arctic-Adapted Dogs Emerged at the Pleistocene-Holocene Transition," *Science,* 368 (no. 6498, 2020), 1495–99. There is debate over Thule dates, but the usual range is 1000–1450 AD. See T. Max Friesen and Charles D. Arnold, "The Timing of the Thule Migration: New Dates from the Western Canadian

Thule unity splintered and re-formed after the fifteenth century, coalescing into Inuit in Canada and Greenland, and Iñupiat in eastern Beringia. Along Norton Sound, Iñupiaq nations shared borders with the linguistically and culturally similar Yup'ik. Both cultures lived with dogs. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Iñupiaq and Yup'ik oral records and the few extant European accounts describe many kinds of dog work. In camp, dogs kept wolves and foxes away. Dogs helped with the hunt by sniffing out seal breathing holes in the ice, worrying bears, or chasing down caribou. And dogs hauled boats across the sea ice and pulled blubber home from a successful kill. Inland, where the choice game was moose and caribou, dogs carried meat in sleds or packs on their backs. A family with three dogs could move between six and nine hundred pounds as far as ten miles a day.[9]

Dog labor expanded more than the just the hunting range of their Yup'ik and Iñupiaq minders. Canines helped make the boundaries in the human social world. By the early 1800s, Yup'ik and Iñupiaq country was divided spatially into small nations with defined territories, economic strategies, and variations on linguistic and cultural practices. Inland, Iñupiat and Yup'ik territory verged into the fluid borders of Dené peoples. Iñupiaq and Yup'ik boundaries were usually established around topography—a river valley, series of lakes, a point of land—and changed with shifts in the environment, like an altered caribou migration route, or due to human politics.[10]

Dogs were not usually part of instigating violence in these borderlands. The canine military role was defensive; they could distinguish between outsiders and people in their community, and raised a howl at the sight or smell of strangers. But dogs were fundamental to maintaining trade alliances across peacetime borders. Particularly in Iñupiaq and Yup'ik lands, different nations had different kinds of wealth; the Iñupiaq Tikigagmit nation, for example, lived on a bowhead migration route and might want to exchange whale blubber for the wood from Iñupiaq Nunamiut territory. Inland, Yup'ik and Iñupiat traded with Koyukon and, in a relationship sometimes defined by war, with Gwich'in. The luxury of borders was partly the result of dog labor, as it helped give every nation access to the full spectrum of Arctic resources while inhabiting and defending a circumscribed territory.[11]

Arctic," *American Antiquity,* 73 (no. 3, 2008), 527–38. Hans Christian Gulløv and Martin Appelt, "Social Bonding and Shamanism among Late Dorset Groups in High Arctic Greenland," in *The Archaeology of Shamanism,* ed. Neil S. Price (London, 2001), 146–62; T. Max Friesen, "Contemporaneity of Dorset and Thule Cultures in the North American Arctic: New Radiocarbon Dates from Victoria Island, Nunavut," *Current Anthropology,* 45 (no. 5, 2004), 685–91. Dené histories emphasize that they have always been in eastern Beringia. See Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Shirleen Smith, *People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich'in Elders/Googwandak Nakhwach'ànjòo Van Tat Gwich'in* (Edmonton, 2009), 25–62; Inuit accounts discuss how, while some ancestors have been on their land since time immemorial, others moved from the east. See Inge Kleivan, "Inuit Oral Tradition about Tunit in Greenland: New Perspectives in Greenlandic Archaeology," in *The Paleo-Eskimo Cultures of Greenland,* ed. Bjarne Grønnow and John Pind (Copenhagen, 1996), 215–36.

[9] Edward William Nelson, *The Eskimo about Bering Strait* (Washington, 1899), 121; John Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* (Washington, 1892), 263; Roger Wells Jr. and John W. Kelly, *English-Eskimo and Eskimo-English Vocabularies, Preceded by Ethnographical Memoranda concerning the Arctic Eskimos in Alaska and Siberia, by John W. Kelly* (Washington, 1890), 25. George M. Stoney, "Explorations in Alaska," *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute,* 25 (no. 92, 1899), 819.

[10] On the term *nation,* see Ernest S. Burch Jr., *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska* (Fairbanks, 1998), 8. On borders in Dené country, see Paul Nadasdy, *Sovereignty's Entailments: First Nation State Formation in the Yukon* (Toronto, 2017), 203–4.

[11] Ernest S. Burch Jr., *Alliance and Conflict: The World System of the Iñupiaq Eskimo* (Lincoln, 2005), 76. Shepard Krech III, "Interethnic Relations in the Lower Mackenzie River Region," *Arctic Anthropology,* 16 (no. 2, 1979), 102–22.

A pack dog named Murphy with his full kit in 1912 or 1914. *Pederson Postcard Album, UAF-1998-53-9, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

By the early 1800s, dogs also helped move European goods into eastern Beringia. Chukchi traders bought Russian pots, beads, tobacco, and other items with furs along the Kolyma River, carried them to the Bering Sea by dog and reindeer teams, then transported them by boat across the Bering Strait. Once in North America, goods moved inland by dog power. A knife originating in Russia could, over months and years, reach as far east as the Mackenzie River, caught up in the seasonal waves of movement in eastern Beringia. In Iñupiaq country alone, some two thousand people helped by five thousand dogs moved a thousand metric tons of material across two thousand or more miles each winter. Travel was timed around dog capacities; people planned trips in months and hours of the day when snow conditions would not damage paws.[12]

Dogs were also part of national cultural distinctions. Yup'ik and Iñupiat used dog traction. Most families had two or three canines, not enough to move a loaded sled alone, so men pushed from behind as a woman—usually the person who had raised the dogs—ran ahead, calling them by name and offering bits of meat or fish. Sometimes people would take a towline and pull with their dogs. One observer in the 1800s described a group of forty people and fifty dogs heading for the mountains along the Kobuk River, "their sleds being drawn by men, women and dogs all hitched up together."[13]

---

[12] Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North,* 1–114; Demuth, *Floating Coast,* 44–101. Nelson, *Eskimo about Behring Strait,* 211; L. C. Hooper, *Report of the Cruise of the U.S. Revenue Steamer 'Thomas Corwin' in the Arctic Ocean, 1880* (Washington, 1881), 28; Ernest Burch Jr., "Inter-regional Transportation in Traditional Northwest Alaska," *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska,* 17 (Dec. 1975), 1–11, 9; Ernest S. Burch Jr., *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations* (Fairbanks, 2006), 287.

[13] Henry D. Woolfe, "The Seventh or Arctic District," in *Report on Population and Resources of Alaska at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, 1893), 129–52, 148; Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition,* 358–59, 264, 268. George M. Stoney, "Explorations in Alaska," *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute,* 25 (no. 91, 1899), 576.

The dogs in those teams were stocky and large, fifty or sixty pounds, and grew heavier at increased latitude, with curled tails, pricked ears, slightly flattened muzzles, and such a drive to pull that, as ethnographer John Murdoch wrote, "people generally have to pull back on the sled and drag back on the harness till the team comes to a halt." They were distinct from Dené dogs, who had short, motley coats, longer legs, sharper faces, and likely weighed between thirty-five and fifty pounds. Dené families had a dog or two, and sometimes no dogs at all. And they did not use dog traction. Canines tracked game or carried meat, tents, and other necessities in panniers on their backs. In summer, as Gwich'in Elder Noel Andre explained, dogs "pulled the boat," during trips upriver. But, except for some communities along the lower Yukon who adopted Yup'ik dog traction by the nineteenth century, dogs did not pull Dené sleds. Dené nations, distinct from Iñupiat and Yup'ik in language and territory, also had different cultures of human-canine work.[14]

Regardless of how dogs labored with people, the relationship was intimate. Iñupiaq and Yup'ik women would "often carry a young puppy around in their jackets as they would a child." Adult dogs bonded with the families that raised them and were treated as important members of the community, known by their individual strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, valuable skills—such as finding trails or tracking game—or penchants for mischief. In winter, people fed their dogs fish, caribou, or walrus meat, and made them beds of dried grass. But human care was not constant. Canines lived on the literal threshold, not allowed beyond the entries of tents or the half-underground houses of coastal villages. In the summer, dogs were untethered and fed themselves from what they could catch and scavenge. Villages and camps were home to forms of dog sociality autonomous from people, as dogs fought and bred and ate according to their own hierarchies and desires. Puppies were usually the result of canine, rather than human, choices.[15]

The status of a dog, what a dog *was,* was also liminal. They were the only domestic animals in eastern Beringia—in one Koyukon dialect the word for "dog" is used like the English "tame"—making them both like and unlike other animals. Yup'ik, Iñupiat, and Dené moved through a world in which animals were once people and people could transform into animals. The environment teemed with more-than-human persons who had souls and passed moral judgement on human actions and thoughts. Dogs were not an exception. In some Yup'ik visions of the afterlife, a person's spirit had to walk through a village of dog souls; people who had beaten dogs in life would have their souls shredded

---

[14] Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition,* 358–59. See also Burch, *Social Life in Northwest Alaska,* 285; and Robert Spencer, *The Northern Alaskan Eskimo: A Study in Ecology and Society* (Washington, 1959), 468. Strachan Jones, "The Kutchin Tribes*,*" in *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution 1866* (Washington, 1866), 324; Richard K. Nelson, *Hunters of the Northern Forest: Designs for Survival among Alaskan Kutchin* (Chicago, 1973), 170–73; John Richardson, *Fauna Boreali-Americana; or the Zoology of the Northern Parts of British America* (London, 1829), 75–78. Michael Heine et al., eds., *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak: The History and Stories of the Gwichya Gwich'in, as Told by the Elders of Tsiigehtshik* (Fort McPherson, 2007), 73, 69; Nelson, *Hunters of the Northern Forest,* 170–72; Stoney, "Explorations in Alaska," *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute,* 25 (no. 91, 1899), 576; Alexander Hunter Murray, *Journal of the Yukon, 1847–48,* ed. L. J. Burpee (Ottawa, 1910), 72; Frederick Schwatka, "Military Reconnoissance in Alaska," in *Compilation of Narratives of Exploration in Alaska* (Washington, 1900), 343; Frederica de Laguna and Donald Horton, "The Prehistory of Northern North America as Seen from the Yukon," *Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology,* 3 (1947), 1–360, 33; Richard K. Nelson, "Relationships between Eskimo and Athapaskan Cultures in Alaska: An Ethnographic Perspective," *Arctic Anthropology,* 11 (1974), 48–53.

[15] Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition,* 357–58. Nelson, *Eskimo about Bering Strait,* 435. "The Fifth or Kuskokwim District," in *Report on Population and Resources of Alaska at the Eleventh Census,* 101; Heine et al., eds., *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak,* 72–73; Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition,* 58–359; Richard K. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago, 1983), 192.

by them in death. Edward W. Nelson described in the 1880s how "Dogs are never beaten for biting a person, as it is claimed that should this be done the *inua* [soul] of the dog would become angry and prevent the wound from healing." To Yup'ik and Dené, howling dogs meant a human death was imminent. In Iñupiaq country, dogs could transform into people. Or be saviors: Ralph Gallahorn, from Noatuk, told a story of a dog that saved a boy stranded on an ice floe, and another about a man whose mother was a dog; her "milk . . . made [him] very strong." Dogs cared for people in more mundane ways too, as on the lower Yukon where dogs were considered so affiliated to their owners no one else could safely approach.[16]

Yet in a world where people often became wild animals, they did not become dogs; when dogs became human it was usually to reciprocate kindness. In some circumstances, dogs were unclean, offensive to wild species or sacred places. Dogs lived on the domestic borderland, between the untame world beyond camp and the human spaces within. And dogs, unlike other animals, did not speak. The explanation, for some Dené, was emotional: Raven took dogs' power of speech to keep people from loving them too much. If dogs could talk, their deaths would be like the deaths of family. No matter how loved, dogs only sometimes had souls and sometimes were impure, were known by name but often lived apart. Always dogs ran around the edges of the soulful world, laboring with people to remake barriers of space into known land.[17]

Part 2: Transitional Teams: Imperial Borderlands, 1810s–1860s

It was into this complex social world of Indigenous national distinctions, trade alliances, and human-dog work-worlds that European empires entered in the early decades of the nineteenth century, looking to make their own borders. From the west, the Russian tsar's concessionary, the Rossiisko-Amerikanskaia kompaniia (Russian American Company, or RAK) expanded across the Bering Sea, to converge with the British Empire's equivalent, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) as its traders ventured from the east through Canada.

European empires were in eastern Beringia for two things: to assert territorial claims for their governments and to make wealth from beaver, muskrat, fox, and the other fur species that had been trapped to rareness across Siberia and North America. HBC and RAK employees usually had a limited role in harvesting fur; as was common to the fur trade elsewhere, Europeans traded for pelts trapped by Indigenous hunters. Making imperial claims in eastern Beringia was a trading venture. Trade required moving weight over distance. Such movement, as Russian lieutenant L. A. Zagoskin wrote in 1842, relied on "the construction of sleds and buying of dogs."[18]

Dogs were critical to the British and Russian ambitions to claim space and control exchange, and thus to shaping imperial borderlands. The RAK and HBC also imported ideas

---

[16] Jules Jetté, "On Ten'a Folk-Lore," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* 38 (July–Dec. 1908), 314–15. Edwin S. Hall Jr., *The Eskimo Storyteller: Folktales from Noatak, Alaska* (Knoxville, 1975), 488; Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup'ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (Norman, 1994), 239–40. Nelson, *Eskimo about Bering Strait,* 435; Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages,* 276–77, 240; Heine et al., eds., *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak,* 22. Clark M. Garber, *Stories and Legends of the Bering Strait Eskimo* (Boston, 1940), 227; Hall, *Eskimo Storyteller,* 151. Cornelius Osgood, *Ingalik Mental Culture* (New Haven, 1959), 27.

[17] Nelson, *Eskimo about Bering Strait,* 438–39; Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages,* 111, 120; Jetté, "On Ten'a Folk-Lore," 14–15. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven,* 191.

[18] L. A. Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842–1844: The First Ethnographic and Geographic Investigations in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Valleys of Alaska,* ed. Henry N. Michael (Toronto, 1967), 89.

and methods of working with canines. Agents from both empires were familiar with dog traction before arriving in eastern Beringia and usually had worked with teams trained to follow vocal cues. Where Iñupiaq and Yup'ik led or pulled alongside their dogs and were therefore able to guide them physically, voice-trained animals had to know and reliably heed, at minimum, words for *right, left,* and *go*. Speaking to dogs running at the head of a long team gave mushers little direct physical control over their animals. Whips were common, and often necessary to stop dogfights, but fear alone could not make effective, dependable lead dogs. Instead, voice commands worked where dogs experienced consistent human care, a set of interspecies affective conditions that shaped British and Russian ambitions to create borders and how dog work looked along their contours.

From the West: Russian Imperial Canines

When Lieutenant Zagoskin described his need for dogs, he was at the Mikhailovsky Redoubt, the fort established by the RAK on Norton Sound in 1833 and followed, six years later, by a post farther up the Yukon River at Nulato. From the earliest ventures into eastern Beringia, Russian explorers and RAK personnel were attentive to canines. Many had spent time on Kamchatka, where they learned dog traction from Indigenous mushers; by the nineteenth century, dog populations, health, and breeds were regular topics of imperial administrative correspondence since teams were critical to collecting fur tribute for the tsar. The RAK also paid keen attention to canines in Alaska. "Their dogs are the same kinds as those of the Chukchi," A. F. Kashevarov wrote in 1838, comparing Yup'ik and Iñupiaq animals to those from across the Bering Strait.[19]

The Yup'ik and Iñupiat who Kashervarov met were, like the Chukchi, longtime users of dog traction. But they did not use leaders trained to voice cues, and their teams pulled goods but rarely people. Russian observers interpreted this as dogs working *with* rather than *for* people, an absence of hierarchy indicating cultural lack. "Among the North American tribes the art of travel with dogs is in its infancy," Zagoskin wrote, "they have no lead dogs, no trained teams, and they never sit on the sled." Moreover, Iñupiat, Yup'ik, and Dené—where they used traction—tied their dogs directly to the sled stanchions in an uneven fan, rather than using a towline hitch, where dogs either ran singly or two abreast, attached to a central line anchored to the sled's front. Russian agents deemed the fan method, despite its practicality on sea ice, inefficient.[20]

The perception that North American canines were disobedient and disorganized led the RAK to attempt a trans-species "civilizing" effort. In 1836, the RAK imported thirteen dogs to Mikhailovsky Redoubt from Kamchatka and a trainer to teach mushing with voice trained leaders. All along the river, the RAK introduced a "regular system . . .

---

[19] "Svedeniia o postanovke shkol'no-missionerskogo dela na Chukotskom p-ove" (Information about the organization of missionary-school work on the Chukotka Peninsula), n.d., f. 702, op. 1, d. 682, l. 25 (Russian State Historical Archive of the Far East, Vladivostok, Russia). On dogs in Kamchatka generally, see S. P. Krasheninnikov, *Opisanie zemli Kamchatki: s prilozheniem raportov, donesenii i krugikh neopublikovannykh materialov* (Description of the land of Kamchatka: With attached reports, dispatches, and other unpublished materials) (1755; Moscow, 1949); Lisa Strecker, "Northern Relations: People, Sled Dogs, and Salmon in Kamchatka (Russian Far East)" in *Dogs in the North: Stories of Cooperation and Co-Domestication,* ed. Robert J. Losey, Robert P. Wishart, and Jan Peter Lauren Loovers, (New York, 2018), 61–86. A. F. Kashevarov, *A.F. Kashevarov's Coastal Explorations in Northwestern Alaska, 1838,* ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus (Chicago, 1977), 58.

[20] Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America,* ed. Michael, 117, 127.

of harnessing the dogs in pairs to a towline" and training the "best dogs" to "go out ahead . . . in whatever direction the driver indicates by his commands."[21]

The results were mixed. North of Norton Sound, in Iñupiaq country, Russian dog driving remained as marginal as Russian presence. Farther south, near the RAK posts on the Yukon, Yup'ik and Dené communities sometimes adopted the towline hitch. But most people still did not ride in sleds, as this required teams of five or more in country where sometimes "the lack of dogs," as Iakov Netsvetov wrote in 1862, prevented moving at all. RAK employees were often reliant on small Yup'ik or Dené teams and had to pull, push, and snowshoe alongside so that imperial Russian mushing looked more like Native Alaskan methods than the imported ideal.[22]

The use of voice cues also had limited dissemination. The practice was rejected by some Koyukon communities, who understood speaking directly to dogs as offensive to the animals. Into the 1880s, Yup'ik trained their dogs to pull but not to respond to vocal signals. Even among RAK employees, voice control required a kind of relationship that the conditions of Russian imperialism made hard to sustain. Training dogs to respond accurately to words relied on consistent interaction between a dog driver and team, the base for the affective bond that inspired canine obedience. As William Healey Dall learned on the Russian-American Telegraph Expedition in the late 1860s, dogs "are very practical, showing affection only for the man who feeds them, and for him only as long as he feeds them." Without stable, long-term relationships to produce "affection," dogs did not reliably follow directions. At RAK posts, staff turnover was high. The "dogs never have time to get used to one man," Zagoskin wrote, "and are baffled by the inexperience of the drivers." Dogs would not lead without care. Two decades after Zagoskin lamented the unruly, leaderless state of Alaskan dogs, monk Ilarion Peremezhko described how "it is absolutely necessary for one man to run in front [of the team] in order that the lead dog might be led, otherwise it would not dare move." Russia's imperial borderland was too affectively inconsistent for human-dog voice commands to be dependable, a condition that frustrated imperial expansion across wintery space.[23]

---

[21] Letter 226, May 4, 1836, Communications Sent Vol. 31, Rossiisko-Amerikanskaia kompaniia Records (Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks); Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America,* ed. Michael, 127.

[22] Woolfe, "Seventh or Arctic District," 149. Annette McFadyen Clark, *Koyukuk River Culture* (Ottawa, 1974), 142. Iakov Netsvetov, *The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: The Yukon Years, 1845–1863,* ed. Richard Pierce, trans. Lydia T. Black (Kingston, 1984), 448, 459. Murray, *Journal of the Yukon,* ed. Burpee, 44–45; Katherine Arendt, "Dynamics of the Fur Trade on the Middle Yukon River, Alaska, 1839 to 1868" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1996), 100–102. Disease outbreaks often caused a lack of dogs in Kamchatka. N. V. Slyunin, *Okhotsko-Kamchatskiy Kray: Estestvenno-Istoricheskoe opisanie* (The Okhotsk-Kamchatka region: A descriptive natural history) (St. Petersburg, 1900), 629.

[23] On voice cues, see Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven,* 191. On voice signals, see "Fifth or Kuskokwin District," 102. In my experience also, dogs may refuse to work for people who are inconstant either in their presence or emotional behavior. For a similar response in pet dogs, see Judith Benz-Schwarzburg, Susana Monsó, and Ludwig Huber, "How Dogs Perceive Humans and How Humans Should Treat Their Pet Dogs: Linking Cognition with Ethics," *Frontiers in Psychology,* Dec. 16, 2020, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584037; and Friederike Range and Zsófia Virányi, "Social Cognition and Emotions Underlying Dog Behavior," in *The Domestic Dog: Its Evolution, Behavior, and Interactions with People,* ed. James Serpell (New York, 2017), 182–209. Some behaviorists use "care" and "love" to describe the canine emotional state necessary for listening to humans. See Wynne, *Dog Is Love;* and Frans De Waal, "What Is an Animal Emotion?," *The Year in Cognitive Neuroscience, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (New York, 2011), 191–206. William H. Dall, *Alaska and Its Resources* (Boston, 1897), 186. Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America,* ed. Michael, 127. Ilarion Peremezhko travel journal, Oct. 25, 1861, Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America, Diocese of Alaska, Microfilm 169 (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

A musher, possibly John Mahalcik, pulls his handsled together with his dog, likely between Rampart and Fairbanks, Alaska, around the turn of the twentieth century. *Falcon Joslin Papers, UAF-1979-41-270, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

From the East: The British Hudson's Bay Company

Hundreds of miles up the Yukon River from the Russian Empire's posts, the Hudson's Bay Company imported their own dog practices. The methods originated with British and French traders who, in the 1600s, adapted Indigenous forms of dog traction for military conflict and trade along the Great Lakes. Other HBC employees learned how to work with dogs from the Inuit. By the time the HBC established LaPierre House on the Bell River 1846 and Fort Yukon in 1847, a French name—mushing, from *marche,* to walk—and the English commands of *gee* and *haw* for right and left were used in training "the mongrel breed which the Canadian voyagers rear for draught," the animals critical to moving HBC communications and goods west.[24]

LaPierre House and Fort Yukon were on Gwich'in land, where dogs were not used to pull sleds. Like their Russian counterparts, many British traders took this as a sign of primitiveness. The Gwich'in were "still sunk in barbarism," as the "women are literally beasts of burden" without domestic animals to help with the "heavy work." To the British, the Gwich'in had brought their animals only partway along a fixed evolutionary telos

---

[24] Patricia A. McCormack, "An Ethnohistory of Dogs in the Mackenzie Basin (Western Subarctic)," in *Dogs in the North,* ed. Losey, Wishart, and Loovers, 105–51. For a case of dogs in military conflict, see George Sheldon, ed., *What Befell Stephen Williams in His Captivity* (Deerfield, 1889), 1–2. Inuit east of Gwich'in country were using voice commands by the 1820s. Richardson, *Fauna Boreali-Americana,* 77, 81.

to full domestication. At particular fault was how "rare," missionary Hudson Stuck wrote, were "any sort of pains . . . taken about the breeding of dogs." Having reproductive lives outside human control resulted, to the HBC, in "miserable creatures no larger than foxes," prone to eating their harnesses and fighting.[25]

Gwich'in histories contradict such judgements of weakness—four dogs "could carry out around two caribou," Hyacinthe Andre recalled—and emphasize the dogs' intelligence. Moreover, despite what the HBC assumed, the desirability of dog traction was not obvious in Gwich'in country before the British arrived. Unlike Yup'ik, Iñupiaq, or Dené living near the coast, where surplus sea mammal flesh dependably fed larger numbers of dogs, the calories for a team in the interior required a substantial increase in fishing or hunting. What the HBC introduced was not the idea of traction—something familiar to Gwich'in from wars and trade with Iñupiat and Inuit—but rather a use for more dog work: the fur trade. On this point Gwich'in and HBC histories agree; dogs pulling in harness came with the British, as did tools such as rifles and fishnets that made feeding large teams easier.[26]

The fur trade brought multiple reasons to have more dogs. Some Gwich'in worked as middlemen, collecting pelts in exchange for HBC goods, then hauling bales of tanned beaver to Fort Yukon or LaPierre House by dog team. Other Native mushers moved mail, HBC personnel, or missionaries such as the Anglican Robert McDonald, who traveled the Bell, Yukon, and Porcupine Rivers guided by "two Indians with two trains of dogs." And there was trapping itself. Hauling pelts over long distances was an activity best done "with dogs and sleds by the first ice." Valuable species such as muskrat, beaver, and fox had dispersed populations, requiring traps and deadfalls strung across miles of taiga and tundra. Traps had to be checked often to protect pelts from scavengers. Dogs enabled long traplines by pulling a trapper's kit farther than an individual or family could, and let women trap with young children.[27]

Trappers and dogs developed close relationships on the trail. Human care for dogs was critical; one Elder remembered how the "first thing I did was—even before you had hot tea—you went and took your dogs out of harness, and made a bed for them with branches," then fed the team. Such attention was repaid, Indigenous mushers noticed, by the dogs' hard work. And although snow conditions or terrain sometimes necessitated human effort alongside "the labour of the dogs," Dené on the upper Yukon related to their teams through spoken cues. The use and training of leaders was patterned by long-term HBC employees. John Firth, who married a Gwich'in woman and lived for decades at Peel River Post, had presence many Russian agents lacked, and is credited with teaching surrounding communities how to train dogs with voice commands.[28]

[25] William L. Hardisty, *The Loucheux Indians* (Washington, 1866), 312. Hudson Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled: A Narrative of Winter Travel in Interior Alaska* (New York, 1914), 395. Jones, "Kutchin Tribes," 324; "The Siberian Dog," n.d., manuscript, p. 1, box 5, Reed Family Papers (Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives); Nelson, *Hunters of the Northern Forest,* 170–72; George R. Adams, *Life on the Yukon, 1865–1867* (Kingston, 1982), 62–63.

[26] Heine et al., eds., *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak,* 114–15.

[27] April 19, 1872, 85/97, File 1872, MSS 195, Robert McDonald fonds (Yukon Territorial Archives, Whitehorse, Canada). Reports of William H. Ennis, p. 2b, folder 10, box 1, RU7213 (Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington). Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Smith, *People of the Lakes,* 105.

[28] Heine et al., eds., *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak,* 119. Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 261; Bathsheba Demuth conversation with Stanley Njootli, Aug. 2019, notes (in Bathsheba Demuth's possession). See also Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Smith, *People of the Lakes,* 67; Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North,* 306; and Heine et al., eds., *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak,* 116–17.

Across eastern Beringia, neither the British Empire nor the Russian Empire had enough local personnel to advance their imperial goals alone. This included dog work. Near Russian posts, Yup'ik and Koyukon kept their own practices of dog traction. Gwich'in, for their own political and economic reasons, took up pulling dogs and voice directions. All along the Yukon, asking a dog to turn right or left required building a relational world between canine and human in which the lead dogs' affiliation with the musher was strong enough to inspire obedience. Only where Indigenous practices and interest supported the affective conditions necessary for dogs to respond to human voice cues did this new form of domestication—dogs with a vocabulary of mushing words—become common.

Dogs on the Borders

Running dogs trained to heed human voices was, for both the RAK and HBC, part of using canine labor to claim and maintain jurisdiction over space. It was a frustrating task. Not only was eastern Beringia massive it was also mountainous where not boggy, prone to blizzards of snow in winter and blizzards of mosquitoes in summer. Patrolling space required dogs, and this dependence made both empires vulnerable. Iñupiat impeded British expeditions by refusing to trade canines, or by an "unwillingness and delay in supplying the necessary food for the dogs." The HBC built Fort Yukon inside Russian territory, hoping the RAK would be unable to find enough dogs to police its claims so far from Nulato. The RAK, which had a policy against selling firearms to Native peoples, was so desperate to assert its presence that it resorted to trading rifles for dogs along the Yukon River. HBC manager Alexander Hunter Murray worried that this was evidence "of [RAK] determination to extend their trade on the Youcon" and a threat to the HBC's trade on Russian-claimed land.[29]

Dogs also moved information. Gwich'in, Koyukon, and other nations along the Yukon carried news of Russian and British movements, prices, and treatment to each empire's rival, once even bearing a letter from Russian trader Andreian Ponomarev to his British counterparts. The competition gave Indigenous nations considerable advantage; Gwich'in used their knowledge of RAK prices to demand better rates for "Beads, Axes, Blankets, Guns, and ammunition and tobacco," from the HBC. And dogs too became part of trade. By 1865, it was possible to buy voice-trained leaders along the lower Yukon. The Hän, whose inland territory allowed exchange with both the HBC and RAK, may have adopted mushing after observing teams at Fort Yukon, or brought the practice upriver from territory they abandoned to avoid the disease and violence of Russian expansion.[30]

---

[29] "Narrative of the Proceedings of Commander T.E.L. Moore, of Her Majesty's Ship 'Plover,'" 1850, copy in file Great Britain, Parliament 1851, box 74, series 3, Ernest S. Burch Jr. Papers (Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives). "Journal of the Proceedings of Mr. W.R. Hobson (Mate), 1854," copy in Burch Papers, series 3, box 74, file Great Britain, Parliament 1855, *ibid.* See also William Barr, "The Use of Dog Sledges during the British Search for the Missing Franklin Expedition in the North American Arctic Islands, 1848–59," *Arctic,* 62 (Sept. 2009), 257–72. Murray, *Journal of the Yukon,* ed. Burpee, 45, 71. See also Arendt, "Dynamics of the Fur Trade on the Middle Yukon River," 101.

[30] Arendt, "Dynamics of the Fur Trade on the Middle Yukon River," 133. Alexander Hunter Murray, "Journal of an Expedition to Build a Hudson's Bay Company Post on the Yukon," 1848, unpaginated, WA MSS 356 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.). On trading, see Shepard Krech III, "The Eastern Kutchin and the Fur Trade, 1800–1860," *Ethnohistory,* 3 (Summer 1976), 213–35; and Murray, *Journal of the Yukon,* ed. Burpee, 58. Adams, *Life on the Yukon,* 111. Murray, *Journal of the Yukon,* ed. Burpee, 82; Helene Dobrowolsky, *Hammerstones: A History of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in* (Dawson City, 2014), 4–6.

Gwich'in sisters Joan and Trleetha Njootli with a catch of ptarmigan and their dog at New Rampart House, Yukon Territory, in the early twentieth century. *Dan Cadzow Papers, UAF-1965-31-80, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

In managing Russian and British presence by controlling access to dogs, information, and fur, Indigenous communities also changed the shape and function of their own borders. Warfare along traditional national lines decreased over the nineteenth century, as controlling access to HBC or RAK posts, sometimes by force, became more strategically important. And violence was generally on the wane after the 1850s, not only because of new

political and economic priorities but also because of invisible passengers that dogs carried along with trade goods. Beginning with a smallpox outbreak along Norton Sound and the lower Yukon in 1838—which lead to a retaliatory Yup'ik attack on a Russian outpost in 1839—epidemics of measles, smallpox, syphilis, and other diseases erupted sporadically among the Dené, Yup'ik, and Iñupiat. The suffering was immense: Gwich'in nations were reduced to a sixth their original numbers by the 1860s; by the 1890s, Iñupiaq country was a fifth of what it had been thirty years prior. Warfare became untenable. Dogs carrying news, germs, trade goods, and people thus moved across borderlands their capacities helped alter.[31]

Fading Indigenous borders did not mean that they were replaced with the boundaries on European maps. The British and Russian Empires traded in space that they claimed but hardly controlled. Trade dynamics shifted by the year, as Gwich'in, Hän, and Koyukon tested the conditions at Russian and British posts. Both empires, in their correspondence, displayed anxiety about their lack of power, an uneasiness that was partly about animal control, or lack thereof: a paucity of dogs, or of the right dogs, or of dogs with the right training, and from this a paucity of command over animals of international value, beaver and fox and other fur species.[32]

The strategic need for and frequent lack of dogs perhaps contributed to the generally utilitarian discussions of canines by both empires. While nineteenth-century Russian and British cultural ideas about dogs were tinged with sentiment, descriptions from eastern Beringia generally describe dogs as objects of necessity. Dogs were not, in other words, liminal and soul-filled, but animal others. "Pock (the white dog) died yesterday," one British agent wrote, "he has been evidently failing for the last week. I had him skinned, and tried if the other dogs would eat him, but nearly all of them refused." Then there was behavior that thwarted human actions, the "trials and tribulations that a traveler has to go through with the dogs." Some writers ascribed their inability to mush to their dogs' emotional failings. On the lower Yukon, Fredrick Whymper wrote that "it was very difficult to make [the dogs] attached to you," although eventually "they did good service in transporting our goods."[33]

Along the Yukon, the dogs were starting to change and not just as the people around them adapted the shape of sleds, design of harnesses, and use of lead dogs. Trade offered new genetic opportunities. At the mouth of the Yukon, imported dogs from Siberia bred with Yup'ik and Iñupiaq canines, while the HBC traveled to the Beaufort Sea coast "for the purpose of securing sled dogs of the Eskimo" to breed at inland posts, resulting in dogs that to Europeans were "much improved by the introduction of larger animals." And dogs met and made puppies based on decisions autonomous from people. The borderlands, where weak human sovereignty over land and over each other generated new political and

---

[31] Krech, "Eastern Kutchin and the Fur Trade," 213–35; Burch, *Alliance and Conflict,* 53–144. Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North,* 193; Burch, *Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska,* 315. Shepard Krech III, "On the Aboriginal Population of the Kutchin," *Arctic Anthropology,* 15 (no. 1, 1978), 89–104, 99; Burch, *Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska,* 325; Arendt, "Dynamics of the Fur Trade on the Middle Yukon River," 129–30. Commercial hunting of whales, walrus, and caribou, along with Arctic animal population flux, also caused widespread famine.

[32] Arendt, "Dynamics of the Fur Trade on the Middle Yukon River," 94–127; Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North,* 115–224.

[33] Henrietta Mondry, *Political Animals: Representing Dogs in Modern Russian Culture* (Leiden, 2015); Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987). "Journal of the Proceedings of Mr. W.R. Hobson (Mate)." Woolfe, "Seventh or Arctic District," 149. Fredrick Whymper, *Travel and Adventure in the Territory of Alaska* (New York, 1871), 172.

economic forms, also gave dogs the independence and opportunity to generate new kinds of canines.[34]

Part 3: Borderland Genesis: Making Gold Rush Dogs, 1890s–1910s

In 1867, Tsar Alexander II sold Alaska to the United States, and the British Empire granted Canada autonomy. In the imagination of Washington, D.C., London, and Ottawa, there was now a line of national distinction at the 141st meridian west. The Hudson's Bay Company relinquished Fort Yukon to American traders in 1869. Mikhailovsky Redoubt became St. Michaels, a post run by the Alaska Commercial Company. By 1848, and with increasing intensity after the 1860s, American whaling ships drew trade to Point Hope, Barrow, and Herschel Island. In much of eastern Beringia, whalers brought more immediate change than did national claims to land. The demarcation between the United States and Canada was a border but not a boundary, an unpoliced line that would not be officially mapped and marked until the early twentieth century. Eastern Beringia was a nation-state borderland but one without a settler-colonist population.[35]

That changed with the arrival of foreign gold prospectors in sequential gold rushes. The first, at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon Rivers in 1896, made Dawson City. Two years later, word of gold-filled streams brought tens of thousands of people to Nome, on the Seward Peninsula. The Klondike strike was in Dené country, the Nome rush on Iñupiaq land, territories miners connected as they moved between them on the Yukon River and across Norton Sound. Although most prospectors left after a disappointed season, enough remained to form a settler-colonial borderland. Private claims to mineral rights divided the land into a patchwork of localized borders within national territories. Creating and maintaining these individual spaces required dogs. Out of these property lines emerged new human-canine work practices, drawing together Indigenous expertise, imperial training, and the generative space the gold rush made for dogs.[36]

Dogs in the Klondike

The Klondike rush started as a trickle. Miners first panned placer gold on the Yukon tributary of Stewart River in 1885, then farther down the Yukon at Forty Mile River in 1887. The Alaska Commercial Company opened a post to sell shovels and flour to miners, and buy furs from Hän trappers. As the number of miners swelled to a few hundred in 1888, Hän sold them caribou meat, hauled to Forty Mile by dogsled, and leased or sold their teams to prospectors who needed to solve that intractable problem of northern life: moving over land where the "snow was drifting ever deeper and deeper."[37]

---

[34] Caspar Whitney, George Bird Grinnell, and Owen Wister, *Musk-ox, Bison, Sheep and Goat* (London, 1904), 91; William C. Greenfield, "The Sixth or Yukon District," in *Report on Population and Resources of Alaska at the Eleventh Census,* 126.

[35] On borders versus boundaries, see Baumgartner, "Line of Positive Safety," 1107. On how the Yukon border became a boundary, see Norman Alexander Easton, "King George Got Diarrhea: The Yukon-Alaska Boundary Survey, Bill Rupe, and the Scottie Creek Dineh," *Alaska Journal of Anthropology,* 5 (no. 1, 2007), 95–118.

[36] The location of gold deposits was known by Indigenous Beringians. On the Seward Peninsula, see Demuth, *Floating Coast,* 228–55. On the Klondike, see Julie Cruikshank, "Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives: Skookum Jim and the Discovery of Gold," *Ethnohistory,* 39 (Winter 1992), 20–41.

[37] William B. Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* (Hartford, 1898), 518; Dobrowolsky, *Hammerstones,* 14.

Eight years later, three Native Beringians and a foreign prospector found a much larger gold deposit at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. News of the strike brought twenty to thirty thousand hopefuls north in 1897 and 1898. For most, joining this stampede entailed crossing borders: the gold was in Canada, but for anyone coming by ship from Seattle or San Francisco, reaching the Klondike required climbing the Chilkoot Pass out of Alaska or taking a steamboat up the Yukon from the American-controlled Bering Sea. Either route also meant moving weight over distance. By law, prospectors had to enter Canada with a ton of supplies, to prevent starvation or federal bailout. Miners tried horses and mules. But cold, rough winter trails and lack of fodder turned many to dogs.[38]

News of canine necessity—the north "will be explored, traveled, and cultivated by dogs and dogs only," as one newspaper put it—drove up the price of dogs in San Francisco and Seattle. Canine thefts were rampant. Newspapers warned that dogs were not only necessary for hauling miners' gear to Dawson City but also for finding unclaimed land after they arrived, as gold veins were dispersed in hills and creeks. Prospectors arrived in the Klondike with Newfoundlands, Great Danes, or dogs like Buck from Jack London's *Call of the Wild.* Once in the north, miners learned to distinguish these new breeds from large "Eskimo" dogs raised on the lower Yukon, and the smaller "Indian" or "Siwash" dogs common from the Tanana River upstream to Dawson. Some dogs came from Gwich'in land, imported by miners disappointed by their gold luck. "Eskimo" dogs were preferred for their strength, but any Beringian dog was more desirable than the imports, animals with little stamina and paws that became "footsore" in winter. Beringian dogs also seemed to relish laboring with people. As one observer wrote, "Gladly each morning they stand with wagging tails while the cold, frozen harness is clasped about their neck . . . all day long and well into the night they work, work, work."[39]

Many of these working dogs came from Hän communities. Some Hän sold dogs; the influx of miners raised their value from $25–40 in the 1870s to $200 to $500. Other Native families rented the labor of their teams, "loan[ing] out their dogs at one dollar per day." It was an opportunity amid tumult. For Hän living near Dawson City, the gold rush brought displacement, disease, and Canadian law enforcement. Many Hän, and some Gwich'in, worked seasonally, cutting timber or selling fish, cooking or mending clothes, using their wages to supply a year mostly spent away from the rush. Many foreigners would not hire Indigenous laborers to work mine claims or paid them significantly less, and Dawson was functionally segregated, its streets marked by violence and open racial discrimination.[40]

[38] Morse, *Nature of Gold,* 76.

[39] Joaquin Miller, untitled, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* May 1, 1898, p. 47; Morse, *Nature of Gold,* 76. Winfield Scott Mason, *The Frozen Northland: Life with the Esquimo in His Own Country* (New York, 1910), 147. Frederick Schwatka, *Along Alaska's Great River: A Popular Account of the Travels of the Alaska Exploring Expedition* (Chicago, 1900), 220; E. Hazard Wells, "Up and down the Yukon," *Compilation of Narratives of Exploration in Alaska,* 515. Jack London, *Call of the Wild* (New York, 1903). J. C. Castner, "A Story of Hardship and Suffering in Alaska," in *Compilation of Narratives of Exploration in Alaska,* 696.

[40] Cornelius Osgood, *The Han Indians: A Compilation of Ethnographic and Historical Data on the Alaska-Yukon Boundary Area* (New Haven, 1971), 133; Arthur T. Walden, *A Dog-Puncher on the Yukon* (New York, 1928), 114. H. A. Cody, *An Apostle of the North: Memoirs of the Right Reverend William Carpenter Bompas, D.D.* (London, 1908), 279. Heather Green, "The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and the Great Upheaval: Mining, Colonialism, and Environmental Change in the Klondike, 1890–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 2018), 214–68; Dobrowolsky, *Hammerstones,* 29–38. Walden, *Dog-Puncher on the Yukon,* 86; Coates and Morrison, *Land of the Midnight Sun,* 116. The literature on racial hierarchy in America is vast. See, for example, Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston, 1944); Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*

A prospector with a loaded sled and team of hounds, on the trail to the Klondike in 1898. *P21-40 Alaska State Library, Winter & Pond Trail of '98 Photo Collection.*

Yet by renting or buying dogs from people they often deemed lesser, newcomers in the Klondike learned how to harnesses teams, what load a few dogs could pull, and to feed their animals a blend of salmon, lard, and cornmeal. Some miners could afford only one or two dogs and pulled alongside their teams. Those with more animals traveled with "two dogs who could lead if possible," as miners found leaders worked best if they could spell each other from the mental task of listening for directions and setting pace. Mushers had to learn what language their lead dogs understood. Some responded to English "'gee-ing and 'hawing,' stopping and advancing at the word of command." Others were guided "by the voice, using husky Esquimaux words, 'owk'—go to the right; 'arrah'—to the left; and 'holt'—straight on." Like the imperial agents before them, stampeders learned that dogs worked best for people with whom they had a bond. On these trails, mushers came "to understand dog nature," Arthur Walden wrote, as "dogs were always company." Johan Jacobsen described how dogs "felt attached to me" after months of "sharing hunger and discomfort" and howled "woefully" when left alone.[41]

Some foreign and Native mushers earned good wages by selling their affiliation with their dogs to miners to whose patterns of work prevented them from maintaining a well-behaved team. Placer mining was a summer activity. Miners pressed to find a fortune before freeze-up often had no time to tend dogs while they panned and sluiced and dug. Some, unable to spend a $1 per pound on salmon, abdicated even the basic role of provid-ing food, making for packs "very dangerous enemies to one's bacon." Many dogs starved or died when scavenged, uncooked fish bones punctured their stomachs. Those who

(Cambridge, Mass., 2002); and Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of Ameri-can Capitalism* (New York, 2014).

    [41] Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields,* 171; Morse, *Nature of Gold,* 78. Walden, *Dog-Puncher on the Yukon,* 121, 34. For the "'geeing' and 'hawing'" quotation, see Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 397. For the "owk" quotation, see Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields,* 172. Walden, *Dog-Puncher on the Yukon,* 117. Johan Adrian Jacobsen, *Alaskan Voyage, 1881–1883: An Expedition to the Northwest Coast of America,* trans. Erna Gunther (Chicago, 1977), 185–86.

Teetł'it Gwich'in trading fresh meat in Dawson City, Yukon, probably at the turn of the twen-tieth century. *Selid-Bassoc Photograph Collection,* UAF-1964-92-404, *Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks*

survived were less affiliated with people come winter, after months of fighting and breed-ing in spaces bordering but autonomous from human care or demands. The results were puppies with parents from across eastern Beringia and far beyond, animals born from the canine independence and genetic opportunities made of the Klondike borderlands.[42]

Dogs as Conveners of Social Worlds

In 1898, news of a gold discovery on the Seward Peninsula reached the Klondike. Dogs in Dawson were suddenly "worth their weight in gold," as hundreds of miners attempted the journey down the frozen Yukon to the Bering Sea. The rush from Dawson to Nome further mixed canines, as stampeders exchanged tired dogs for animals purchased in Dené and Yup'ik communities.[43]

As in the Klondike, the prospectors who arrived in Nome saw value with very differ-ent contours than did Iñupaiq and Yup'ik. Where Native Alaskans saw a land filled with plenty and bristling with soulful beings, outsiders found "one of the bleakest, coldest and most barren countries in the world." The appeal for the miners was the gold in the streams and soil, so they filed legal claims based on geology. Their assertions of private property

---

[42] Josiah Edward Spurr, *Through the Yukon Gold Diggings: A Narrative of Personal Travel* (Boston, 1900), 209. Schwatka, *Along Alaska's Great River,* 314.
[43] Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields,* 484.

broke the Seward Peninsula into a borderland of small parcels; where an Indigenous nation's territory or imperial trade route covered hundreds of square miles, a miner's title was to twenty acres. Following deposits of dispersed gold also dispersed people. To assert legal claim once gold was located, a miner had to "improve" the land by building dwellings and mining infrastructure. Holding a claim practically required miners' presence to prevent the claim jumping rampant on the peninsula. So, as William Woleben wrote on arriving in Nome, "the first new word for me to learn is 'Mush, Mush on,' which is the expression used in driving the dog teams." Without dogs, "the white miner of Alaska today could scarcely get along."[44]

In summer, dogs pulled small boats up streams or hauled gear on their backs. In winter, teams pulled people and supplies. Even after short rail lines and roads eased transit for the heaviest loads in the early 1900s, dogs were in constant use "where quick service is desired and light freight is to be transported." From October to June, when the sea ice closed shipping to the Seward Peninsula, mail arrived by dog team. Joseph Grinnell wrote in his diary of taking "a sled and two dogs" out "to visit the various camps up the river and find out all the news." Dog labor made both economic and social life possible, collapsing the space geology threw up between gold claims; a miniature version of the geography that teams once crossed between Indigenous territories or imperial posts.[45]

Dogs also required expertise. Iñupiaq communities, whose borders and alliances had shifted in the wake of the trade and disease brought by whaling ships, now used wooden sleds, larger teams, and sometimes leaders for trapping and other work. Prospectors with their own dogs rested at roadhouses run by Iñupiaq families. Miners arriving after Nome's first season often learned how to mush—as well as navigate the tundra and sea ice—from Native drivers and teams. Sometimes, Iñupiaq guides led miners to new gold discoveries. The trails were places of sustained contact between Indigenous peoples and miners in a social order marked, like in Dawson City, by segregation and prejudice. But the fiction of white superiority was more easily sustained in Nome than on the trail, where Iñupiat taught prospectors, as Grinnell wrote, "everything about the river and country." Indigenous knowledge paradoxically helped make the Seward Peninsula into a minutely bordered land.[46]

What a dog was, as a being in the world, was also a point of imperfect, unexpected, and generally unacknowledged convergence between mushers Indigenous and otherwise. Most miners came north quite sure that all bearers of souls were human. Dogs bordered on an exception. "Each dog has a name," Grinnell wrote, "and his character qualities become as well known to us as those of a human individual." Moses Cruikshank, a Dené musher, remembered dogs by their disposition and drive. Others described dogs' inner

[44] James Augustus Hall, *Starving on a Bed of Gold: Or the World's Longest Fast* (Santa Cruz, 1909), 3. On miners' impact, see Jacob Ahwinona interview, #2007-03-03, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program (Rasmuson Library). Diary 1900, transcript, p. 7, William J. Woleben Papers (Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives). For the "white miner" quotation, see Hall, *Starving on a Bed of Gold,* 111.

[45] E. S. Harrison, *Nome and Seward Peninsula: History, Description, Biographies, and Stories* (Seattle, 1905), 115, 143. Joseph Grinnell, *Gold Hunting in Alaska, as Told by Joseph Grinnell,* ed. Elizabeth Grinnell (Elgin, 1901), 37.

[46] Whalers made sled timber available on the treeless coast, while survey crews for the international telegraph brought tandem hitches and lead dogs north to Norton Sound. Murdoch "Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition," 360; Jacobsen, *Alaskan Voyage,* 94. M. Clark, *Roadhouse Tales or Nome in 1900* (Girard, 1902), 66; Mary Kellogg Sullivan, *A Woman Who Went to Alaska* (Boston, 1902), 269. Wayne Eben interview, Nov. 10, 1992, #90-06-326, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program (Rasmuson Library). Lanier McKee, *The Land of Nome: A Narrative Sketch of the Rush to Our Bering Sea Gold-Fields, the Country, Its Mines and Its People, and the History of a Great Conspiracy, 1900–1901* (New York, 1902), 7. Grinnell, *Gold Hunting in Alaska,* ed. Grinnell, 17.

lives, or their laziness, greed, decorum, work ethic, or sweetness; some were certain that while dogs understood words for left, right, and stop, they also knew far more and simply could not tell mushers. Dené dog-driver Effie Kokraine described how it was dogs that taught mushers their individual abilities, particularly which animals wanted to lead.[47]

For northwestern Alaska's Indigenous inhabitants, dogs had long been liminal but necessary animals. Dogs sometimes had souls, and people might once have been dogs. For foreigners, people were sometimes dogs, but dogs sometimes appeared to have souls. While a terrible person might be called a dog, a good dog was "man's best friend," a being that "shared the hardships and suffering" of miners. Or, as another prospector put it, the "more you see of a certain class of people, the better you love a dog." How people treated their soulful animals was a sign of their moral condition, a frame of reference that crossed racial lines. M. Clark praised Iñupiat because they did not "beat or abuse" their dogs. Hudson Stuck contrasted the brutality of inexperienced white men with how "the Esquimaux prize and cherish their dogs." Having an emotive rapport with a team was critical to working well with them, and working well with dogs was a sign of humanity. Across eastern Beringia, the people who labored closely with canines, and endowed them with characteristics such as trust, love, jealousy, and desire, were also the people deemed most human.[48]

Dogs enabled spaces of generative contact in the gold rush borderland. At the center were the dogs themselves, and literal genesis. As in the Klondike, but with even more variation, mining on the Seward Peninsula expanded canine genetic possibilities. Villages north on the Alaska coast sold burly "Malamute" type dogs to Nome. These animals met dogs born around Dawson, the decedents of HBC and RAK animals, and smaller "Siwash" canines from along the Yukon. Traders imported blue-eyed, white, quick-footed Chukchi dogs from the Russian side of the Bering Strait. Some mushers held that wolves interbred with domestic canines. And ships from the south unloaded "setters and pointers, hounds of various sorts, mastiffs, Saint Bernards, and Newfoundlands," resulting in "a general admixture of breeds."[49]

Around Nome many of these dogs were loose in the summer, with "breeding . . . left to chance"—or rather, to dog choice. What emerged were novel canine attributes: shorter and longer coats, varying gaits, different eye colors—sometimes in the same dog—tender or tough feet, "spike eared, beautifully built dogs," or "long-bodied, long-legged and floopy-eared" animals. Some were "work dogs entirely," able to pull 500-pound loads, others were "built for speed." Seeing the differential abilities between dogs, and able to assemble teams specialized for pace or strength, people around Nome began to hold races.

[47] Grinnell, *Gold Hunting in Alaska,* ed. Grinnell, 48. Moses Cruikshank interview, Feb. 21, 1986, #86-29, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program (Rasmuson Library). Dall, *Alaska and Its Resources*, 186; Harrison, *Nome and Seward Peninsula,* 185. Effie Kokrine interview I, Feb. 10, 1987, #87-16, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program (Rasmuson Library).

[48] Harrison, *Nome and Seward Peninsula,* 186. For the prospector's quotation, see McKee, *Land of Nome,* 180. Clark, *Roadhouse Tales or Nome in 1900,* 206, 241. See also Sullivan, *Woman Who Went to Alaska,* 117. Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 401, 403. Eastern Beringia is an example of a wider turn toward humane treatment of animals in Britain and the United States. See Ritvo, *Animal Estate;* Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Jessica Wang, "Dogs and the Making of the American State: Voluntary Association, State Power, and the Politics of Animal Control in New York City, 1850–1920," *Journal of American History,* 98 (March 2012), 998–1024; Janet Davis, *The Gospel of Kindness: Animal Welfare and the Making of Modern America* (New York, 2016); and Robichaud, *Animal City,* 128–96.

[49] Kathleen Lopp Smith and Verbeck Smith, eds., *Ice Window: Letters from a Bering Strait Village, 1892–1902* (Fairbanks, 2001), 171. Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 392. "Siberian Dog," 2–3. Walden, *Dog-Puncher on the Yukon,* 210. For the quotation about breeds, see Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 392.

From their autonomous world of mating and rearing pups, dogs born on the private-property borderlands made a new human-dog world: one in which dogs worked with people not for economic or political purposes, but for sport.[50]

Dog races were informal at first, a way to pass winters when mining slowed while keeping dogs trained. By the advent of Nome's All-Alaska Sweepstakes in 1908, competitions had rules, betting spreads, and dedicated fans. Some of the Sweepstakes' champion mushers were newcomers, such as the Norwegian-born Leonhard Seppala or Scotty Allan, an immigrant from Scotland. Others were Native; Koyukon mushers were by the twentieth century some of the best in Alaska, paying close attention to how "dogs must pull evenly together, harmonically, if the team is to perform at its best." Emiu, an Iñupiaq man born in Nome, was known by the nickname Split-the-Wind because his teams regularly won the Sweepstakes.[51]

With racing came a new dedication to care. Canine nutrition preoccupied mushers beyond supplying adequate calories, as they experimented with what kinds of food could shave minutes or hours off a race time. Scotty Allan swore by switching from "seal, walrus, and whale meat" to the "best beef, mutton, and eggs" before a race, while others fed their teams cooked fish. When icy trails grew abrasive, mushers used flannel or leather booties to protect dogs' feet; when winters were particularly bitter, they sewed rabbit-skin jackets to protect thinner-coated breeds; and when the spring sun rose, they sewed mosquito-net dog goggles to prevent snow blindness. Sleds became lighter and harnesses padded and retooled to put less strain on dogs' shoulders, innovations also adopted by teams used to haul freight, mail, and people.[52]

Along with the increased care came increased control. This was particularly true of canine reproduction. Competitive mushers began tracking the ancestry of their teams, recording the percentage of "malamute," "Siberian," "foxhound," or other breeds, and the responsiveness of particular lead dogs. Scotty Allan wrote that his best leader was "a half-breed setter and malamute. He had the malamute feet and stamina, the setter's intelligence and heart." Seppala ran teams of dogs imported from Siberia. In summer, racing dogs were well fed but lived in pens or were tied, rather than roaming free to choose mates.[53]

In a physical sense, canine lives and genetic futures had come inside borders by the early twentieth century, a new form of domestication that put dog genetics under human control. Racing and working dogs were no longer liminal, half-autonomous animals living under human sovereignty only part of the year. Nor did they work on the margins of the affectively unstable imperial borderlands, pulling various sled styles in a mix of

[50] Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 396. Native mushers often controlled dog breeding to prevent overpopulation. Nelson, *Hunters of the Northern Forest,* 171; Kokrine interview I. Cruikshank interview. John Poling interview, 1980, #83-16-06, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program (Rasmuson Library); Cruikshank interview.

[51] Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven,* 190. George Attla, one of the most celebrated Alaskan mushers, was Dené. Harold Noice, *With Stefansson in the Arctic* (New York, 1924), 239.

[52] A. A. "Scotty" Allan, *Gold, Men, and Dogs* (New York, 1931), 181; Kokrine interview I. Clark, *Roadhouse Tales or Nome in 1900,* 231; Allan, *Gold, Men, and Dogs,* 181–83. Pete Curran Jr. interview, 1980, #83-16-08, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program (Rasmuson Library).

[53] "Siberian Dog"; "All Alaska Sweepstakes Records," n.d., manuscripts, box 5, Reed Family Papers. Allan, *Gold, Men, and Dogs,* 219 "Siberian Dog" p. 9. Sled dogs were bred for work not aesthetics. The American Kennel Club–certified Siberian Huskies bred for looks are too slow to race competitively, making sled dogs different than the greyhounds in Russell, *Greyhound Nation,* 165–84. They are also different from other dogs in Harriet Ritvo, "Pride and Pedigree: The Evolution of the Victorian Dog Fancy," *Victorian Studies,* 29 (Winter 1986), 227–253.

A crowd gathers in Nome, Alaska, to greet the winners of the Sixth All-Alaska Sweepstakes in 1913. Fay Delzene is the musher, with the winning time of 75 hours, 42 minutes, and 27 seconds to run 408 miles. *Seiffert Family Photographs,* UAF-1985-122-381, *Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

harness types, responding to Russian, English, and Indigenous languages. Instead, dogs ran in long teams, six, eight, ten, twelve animals strong, sometimes two abreast, following leaders able and willing to act on human requests, usually given in English. Many worked, hauling mail and freight and people. Some raced. Regardless of how they labored, dogs crossed territory where sovereign control was far clearer than in the previous century. The changed regime of domestication, with seasons of social and genetic freedom traded over for regularity and consistent food, was an analogue to the surrounding human context. The borderlands in eastern Beringia had become bordered land.[54]

Yet inside those borders, dogs still made affective demands on the humans who tended them. Mushers, both Beringian and foreign, agreed that an emotional bond, what Hudson Stuck called "a deep sympathy with the animals," was critical to racing success or good working teams. Effie Kokrine, speaking in the later twentieth century, described her relationship with her dogs as based on mutual affection: "there's so much you have to understand about [your dogs] and they have to understand about you . . . the best of all, I think, is having your—your dog trust you." The form of domestication in eastern Beringia had changed, but even with their reproductive and physical lives under increased human jurisdiction, dogs still disciplined the emotional relationship with the people they moved.[55]

[54] For an urban analogue, see Robichaud, *Animal City,* 195.
[55] Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled,* 400. Kokrine interview I.

Conclusion: The Power of Affect

On a trail along the Bering Sea coast once crossed by gold prospectors, a dog named Joey picked a fight with Danny, the husky running ahead of him in Nicolas Petit's team. They were two hundred miles from the finish of the 2019 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. Petit was favored to win. But Joey would not quit snarling and biting. Petit finally yelled at Joey. "I raise my voice a little bit and they are all like, 'Oh, boy, that's not normal,'" Petit explained later. "I try to be as calming and collected with my dogs as possible all the time, so they heard an upset daddy." The affective pact between musher and dogs was broken. The team refused to move. After hours of cajoling, trying different lead dogs, walking ahead, and offering treats, Petit withdrew from the race.[56]

What does such a moment mean for historians and other scholars thinking of animals, emotions, and boundaries? First, for historians of borderlands, it shows how places of mutable human sovereignty and cultural mixing can also be spaces where animal autonomy and genetic possibilities are also in play. Borderlands are home to experiments not just in human political, economic, and cultural arrangements, but also in the relationships between people and animals that we call domestication. As the historian Abraham Gibson writes, domestication is an "ancient covenant [that] must be forged anew every generation." That covenant can take different forms, a renegotiation that allows not just for various ideas about what a dog is but also for multiple variations on co-working and co-living relationships. In the Indigenous and imperial borderlands, and into the gold rush period, eastern Beringia was home to multiple variants of domestication. These plural forms started to fade with the routinized legal, economic, and political relationships of the 1920s, in nation-states beginning to base their claims to legitimacy on managing human and, eventually, animal welfare. The kind of care dogs had demanded in the previous century, through their willingness or refusal to work, was becoming a norm, while the physical autonomy dogs once enjoyed was mostly gone. But the past shows how the conditions of domestication now naturalized within national borders should not be taken as a historical constant.[57]

Secondly, eastern Beringia's past offers an argument for looking to historical sources for evidence of animals' expressions of affect. As historians of emotion have noted about people, such expressions are not the same as knowing the feelings, the inner states, of a historical subject. Similarly, scholars of animal behavior distinguish between emotions, which are bodily experiences with physical manifestations, and feelings, the subjective interpretation of an emotion by a consciousness. It may never be possible to know what a dog in eastern Beringia felt. But knowledge of a being's interior consciousness is not necessary to trace animals' *emotional* lives, as they emerge in descriptions of dogs refusing to listen or working with tails a-wag, or how those emotions influenced human politics, economics, and culture. On the borderlands of the Yukon River watershed and Bering

---

[56] Mark Thiessen, "Iditarod Competitor Whose Dogs Quit Says They Got Spooked," *ABC News,* March 22, 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/wireStory/iditarod-musher-discounts-critics-dogs-refused-run-61857903.

[57] Gibson, *Feral Animals in the American South,* 1. Autonomous dogs appear throughout Abraham Gibson's work as well. In a different vein, for a work that discusses phases of domestication, see Richard W. Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships* (New York, 2007). On ideas of welfare in postbellum America, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (New York, 2017), and Susan J. Pearson, *The Rights of the Defenseless: Protecting Animals and Children in Gilded Age America* (Chicago, 2011).

Sea coast, dogs demanded a set of affective conditions in exchange for working and heeding vocal cues: consistency, affiliation, trust, care. As Donna Haraway argues, dog love is not unconditional. The very conditionality of canine attachment disciplined how people could behave. Thus, even as human control over dog lives solidified, the hierarchies between people and dogs did not always settle into the dynamic of trainer and trained, owner and owned. Instead, both borderlands and bordered land were maintained around the rules of interspecies affect. Creating an emotional bond across species enabled everything from trade to mining claims. Betraying that bond could be detrimental to personal survival or imperial ambition. It can still end a race.[58]

---

[58] On the question of expression, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review,* 107 (June 2002), 821–45. Frans de Waal, *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves* (New York, 2019), 125–28. Ingrid Tauge contends that even animal emotions are not knowable. See Ingrid H. Tauge, "The History of Emotional Attachment to Animals," in *Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History,* ed. Kean and Howell, 345–66. Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2007), 205–48. On more plastic ideas of hierarchy, see Susanne Bauer, Nils Güttler, and Martina Schlünder, "Encounters in Borderlands: Borderlining Animals and Technology at Frankfurt Airport," *Environmental Humanities,* 11 (no. 2, 2019), 247–79.