13. CROCKER LAND

A Mirage in the Archive

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From the far northern tip of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, famed Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary saw a snow-capped landmass shimmering in the distance. This was just the kind of big discovery he had hoped to make in the international territory-grabbing race to the North Pole. Peary had in fact failed to reach the Pole this time around, but he staked his claim to an exciting resource-laden new land by building a stone cairn on the spot where he stood as he gazed at the glimmering horizon. In the cairn he left a can stuffed with a scrap of an American flag and a note: "Peary. June 28, 1906."

Of all the accomplishments of that 1906 expedition, Peary ranked the sighting of this new land very high. It wasn't a continent, he conceded later, rather a mere island, yet nonetheless there it was, banana-shaped on the maps on which it was subsequently drawn.[1] Peary's expedition had been organized by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the American Geographical Society, funded in large part through donations from major industrialists such as railroad magnate George Crocker, who had contributed $50,000—over $1.6 million 2022 dollars—in return for which he got a new polar land as his namesake. Knowing full well that Crocker Land could be a mirage (because of the prevalence of atmospheric refraction in polar conditions, where steep temperature gradients refract light from a low-lying sun), Peary still made this claim of discovery.[2] He knew his claim would need to be confirmed, and he wanted to keep the American polar expedition industry flourishing: there was money to be made and national prestige to be gained. "My heart leaped the intervening miles of ice as I looked longingly at this land," he wrote about that moment of discovery, "and in fancy I trod its shores . . . even though I knew that that pleasure could only be for another."[3]

The follow-up expedition Peary imagined as he gazed out in the distance was organized several years later by the AMNH (with other institutional partners) and led by Donald B. MacMillan, who had assisted Peary on a previous expedition. The purpose of the Crocker Land Expedition was to confirm Peary's sighting and to explore all aspects of this new land, including the prospect of lucrative game and natural resources. Crucially, to document it all, they would take pictures with state-of-the-art cameras, both still photos and moving pictures.[4] They set out from the Brooklyn Navy Yards for the Arctic in the summer of 1913; in the fall of 1917, two years delayed, with vast sums spent and one Inughuit dead,[5] the last members of the expedition returned. The dispiriting news: Crocker Land was a mirage. Peary, they said, had been deceived by an optical phenomenon. They concluded this because they, too, had seen a mirage as they stood at Peary's cairn, the very point from which Peary had sighted Crocker Land. "We looked toward the distant horizon," MacMillan later recalled. "Glasses were not necessary. There was land everywhere! Had we not just come from far over the horizon we would have returned to our country and reported land just as Peary did."[6]

This story is well known to aficionados of Arctic exploration. It's in fact notorious, and the same questions always attend it: given the common nature of mirages in the Arctic—not to mention all the other difficulties in identifying anything on the Polar Sea, "that moving world of ice, with constantly rising mists"[7]—how could the very experienced Peary have been deceived into thinking he saw land? Did he see anything at all, or was it all just a ruse to get another expedition funded? Did he make this "discovery" under pressure to justify the failed 1906 expedition itself?[8] If he made it up, it wouldn't be the last time he falsified his achievements; there is strong evidence of his awareness that he did not actually reach the Pole when he claimed victory at last in 1909.[9]

What is not well known, though, is the sprawling photographic archive generated by the Crocker Land Expedition. There are 5,500 still photos as well as 12,000 feet of moving pictures. The explorers had not only the latest camera equipment but also a full darkroom in their headquarters in Etah, Greenland, in order to fulfill their photographic mandate. Everything about the Arctic—its human inhabitants, its flora and fauna, its geology, the whole stunning visual field—was new to all but team leader MacMillan; they observed, measured, and took photo after photo, each click of the camera meticulously logged. What can be found in that archive, and perhaps even more consequentially, what cannot?

We went to the archive to see what they saw and shot, and most pointedly, to look for a photograph of that legendary mirage—for mirages are physically real atmospheric events that can be photographed. And since a spectacular

mirage is what Crocker Land turned out to be, we figured the explorers had photographed it. After all, photographs of mirages in Alaska had been published decades earlier; moreover, Arctic mirages were being photographed and published just as the Crocker Land Expedition was being planned.[10] We wanted to see that definitive shot confirming that Crocker Land was (in the unintentionally paradoxical language of the official report) "non-existent at 82° 30′ N, 108° 22′ W."[11]

This chapter narrates our archival pursuit of that mirage photograph. The mirage is the subject of our analysis, and it is also our heuristic, our way of seeing, our analytic. It refracts, duplicates, shifts, distorts, expands our vision. A mirage compelled the explorers, the AMNH officials, the benefactors toward what they didn't have and what they most wanted: a resource-rich land for the United States, Polar spoils for the museum and its benefactors, a place on the map with their own name emblazoned on it. The mirage motivated us as researchers, too, dazzled and drawn by this ephemeral visual phenomenon. It enticed us, and entices us still, into hours of looking. It pulls us. We get close and it vanishes. We can't control it. Partaking of the elusive nature of the North Pole itself—an imaginary point with no dimensions, unfixed to anything and undetectable in the visual field[12]—and partaking, too, of the irrationally wondrous nature of extreme northern latitudes, where north is south, where you can see five suns at once—the mirage reveals the queerness of archives themselves. It expresses the desire, the beckoning, the disappointment we felt in those most ambiguous places. And though that fleetingness and ungovernability have frustrated us, these qualities provoke us to think about archival practice in our current data-hungry, digital environment in which, as a rule, *everything* is collected and archived on a server somewhere. Because a mirage—a live imaging event—shimmers but cannot be corralled, contained, saved, or stored, it prompts us to reconceptualize archival practice as an ongoing, perpetual revelation.[13]

Part 1: "Our Old Friend the Mirage"

Among the papers that accompany the expedition photos, we found an Arctic expedition map at the American Museum of Natural History (see Figure 13.1).[14] MacMillan's proposed route to Crocker Land is superimposed onto a map of a Norwegian expedition that had claimed vast territories for Norway. Crocker Land is literally off the map, inked into the legend as a curved, blue line—the eastern edge of a shoreline of what could be either a limitless landmass, or almost nothing at all. The full contours, location, and existence of Crocker Land figure as sketchy, inexact, and provisional. Yet the very crudeness and intensity

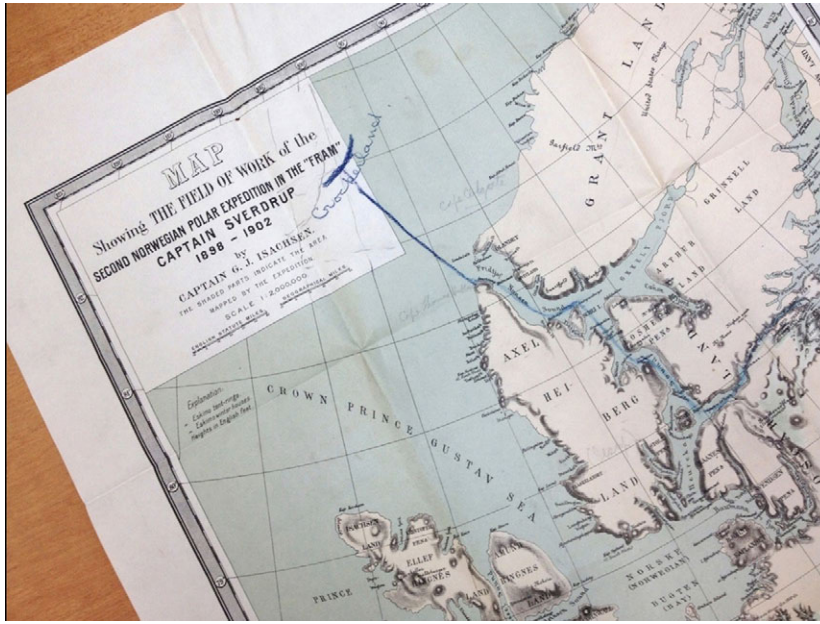

FIGURE 13.1. Expedition map with hand-drawn Crocker Land. Mss. C76, Box 17, folder 9. American Museum of Natural History Library.

of those hand-drawn lines express the imaginative pull of this unknown place, this hypothetical territory whose discovery and exploration could bring personal renown as well as geopolitical power, resources, and influence. As Eric Sundquist notes, Britain and Russia had dominated Arctic exploration in the early nineteenth century, but American "interest in the Arctic increased after Secretary of State William Seward, foreseeing geological wealth and a possible gateway to American control of Canada and parts of Asia, negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867."[15] Though "acquisition" exploration waned after global frontiers closed in the early twentieth century and professional geographers increasingly set research agendas, as Neil Smith reports, Peary and his followers doggedly persisted with their outmoded (and often meretricious) forms of "geographical conquest."[16]

In the spring of 1914, after months of hard travel from Brooklyn to Greenland and more months building their northern headquarters, Donald MacMillan and his team started the grueling journey across the polar ice toward the spot on the map where Peary had placed Crocker Land. Photos in the archive of the six-week-long "dash" across the Polar Sea to Crocker Land show the

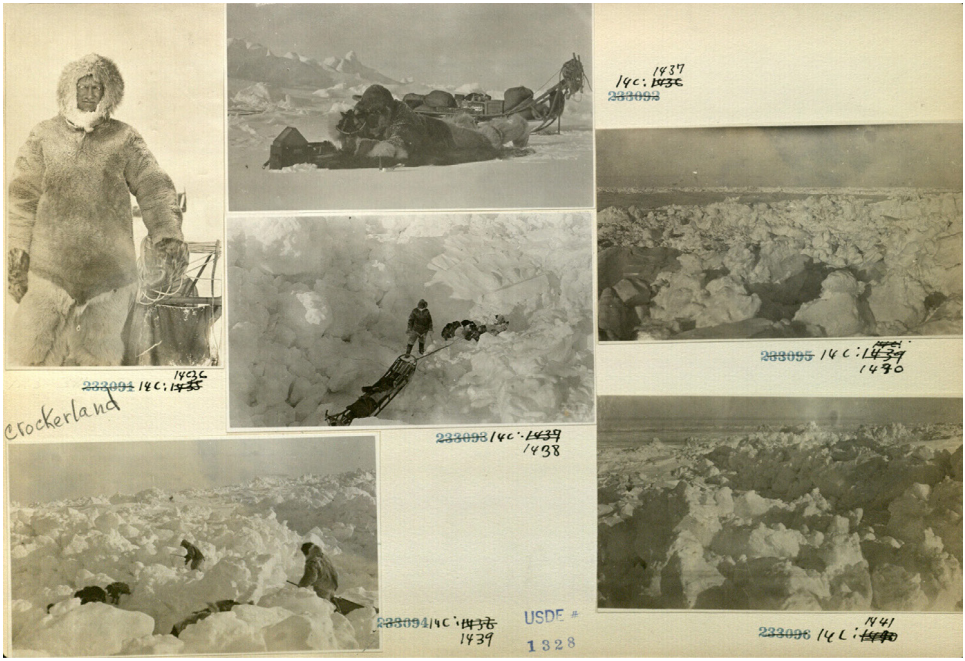

FIGURE 13.2. Crossing the Polar Sea in search of Crocker Land. Image #233091-96, American Museum of Natural History Library.

final four-man crew (MacMillan, FitzHugh Green, and two very experienced Inughuit guides, Ee-took-a-shoo and Pee-ah-wah-to), dogs and sledges, igloo camps, and kills of musk ox and walrus; they give some sense (see Figure 13.2) of the daunting scale of the sea ice and massive pressure ridges, and the staggering challenges posed when crossing the Polar Sea at that time.

After forty-two days, MacMillan and crew finally approached the place on the map where Peary had pinned his new land. It was thrilling, as MacMillan later wrote in his memoir:

> April 21st was a beautiful day; all mist was gone and the clear blue of the sky extended down to the very horizon. . . . There could be no doubt about it. Great heavens! what a land! Hills, valleys, snowcapped peaks extending through at least one hundred and twenty degrees of the horizon.[17]

They walked and walked toward those snowcapped peaks but came no closer to them. The peaks came and went from sight, depending on the time of day and the angle of the sun.

Pee-ah-wah-to said that it was *poo-jok*, mist. He might also have added that it was an *ijiraq*, a shape-shifting creature in Inuit legends that appears with mirages. "Fabulous, transforming ijirait" were sometimes thought to be the cause of *taulittuq*, the experience of walking without getting any closer.[18] But MacMillan insisted they press on until he had to admit that they had passed the place on the map where Crocker Land was marked. Here's a deflated MacMillan later recounting his moment of reckoning:

> We had not only reached [Peary's] brown spot on the map, but we were thirty miles "inland"! You can imagine how earnestly we scanned every foot of that horizon—not a thing in sight. . . . We were convinced that we were in pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp, ever receding, ever changing, ever beckoning.[19]

He wrote to Peary several months after their failure to find Crocker Land: "We were on the brown spot and not a thing in sight, not even our old friend the mirage."[20] Spectacularly deceptive mirages had accompanied them as they made their way across the Polar Sea; Green in his field notes recounts one mirage on April 27, for example, that had lasted for days, looking so much like land that he even descried mountains and valleys there.[21] With the rueful phrase "our old friend the mirage," MacMillan implicitly concedes that that's what both Peary and he had observed.

Once MacMillan reported to the museum that there was no continent, dozens of articles shot out over the wires: "Crocker Land Eludes Explorers," "Crocker Land a Mere Mirage."[22] For years afterward the AMNH tried to justify the huge expense of this four-year fiasco. The expedition had failed to find Crocker Land; this in itself could not have been a huge surprise in those days, because many nonexistent Arctic lands had been sighted and claimed over the years: Sannikov Land (Russia), Bradley Land (United States), even one called *Croker* Land (Great Britain).[23] But the expedition was an embarrassment to the museum: it had gone massively over budget, was marred by antipathies among expedition members and between the museum leadership and MacMillan, and faltered amid tensions between the Inughuit and the white men. The nadir of the enterprise was the senseless death of Pee-ah-wah-to at the hands of FitzHugh Green.[24] In order to defend their pursuit of Crocker Land, everyone involved with the expedition emphasized the geographical, botanical, zoological, geological, ethnographic, and other scientific findings. An ethereal landscape image had been used to sell the junket initially to prospective funders (see Figure 13.3). In publications after the expedition, a photographic image of a lone iceberg in the distance was used as a stand-in for the nonexistent Crocker Land.

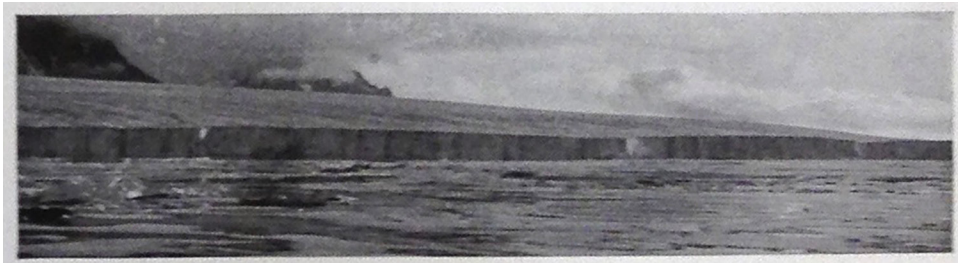

FIGURE 13.3. Landscape suggesting Crocker Land. *Crocker Land Expedition to the North Polar Regions: Statement to Contributors*, 8.

In fulfillment of their scientific mission, the absence of Crocker Land notwithstanding, MacMillan and his team took pictures of just about everything under the Arctic sun. When the daylight receded for the winter and darkness came to stay, MacMillan said that they would keep busy during the perpetual night with their photography.[25] The Arctic visual field is stunning, with gleaming brightness and magnifyingly clear air, but also mists, fogs, clouds, and shimmering "water skies." The aurora borealis is the most legendary of visual effects, but phosphorescence, too, struck the expedition members with its incomparable beauty, and the drama of intense colors in the sky and reflected on the ice is remarked on by the explorers in their journals.[26] The midnight sun captivated the Crocker Land Expedition members, as did icebergs and glaciers and their reflections, of which there are many photographs. In an experimental mode, MacMillan shot striking multiple exposure photographs of the midnight sun (see Figure 13.4).

In addition to documentary photos of landscapes, plants, and animals, MacMillan and his team took photos of the expedition members themselves, indoors and out, and many photos—in the exploitive style of the ethnography of the day—of the Smith Sound Inughuit, on whose shores they built their headquarters and on whose labor they depended.[27] These photos range from "scientific" ethnographic head shots to documentation of hunting, sewing, and other everyday activities, to ostensibly affective photos of Inughuit children and puppies. They are exceptionally power-laden images, including, particularly, shots of an Inughuit woman suffering from "Arctic hysteria." We will discuss those shots in our next section.

What they didn't photograph, though, was the mirage. The archive, with its 5,500 still photos, is large for an expedition of that time. We looked at all of the still images, as well as the film clips, for an image of the mirage. It's not there.

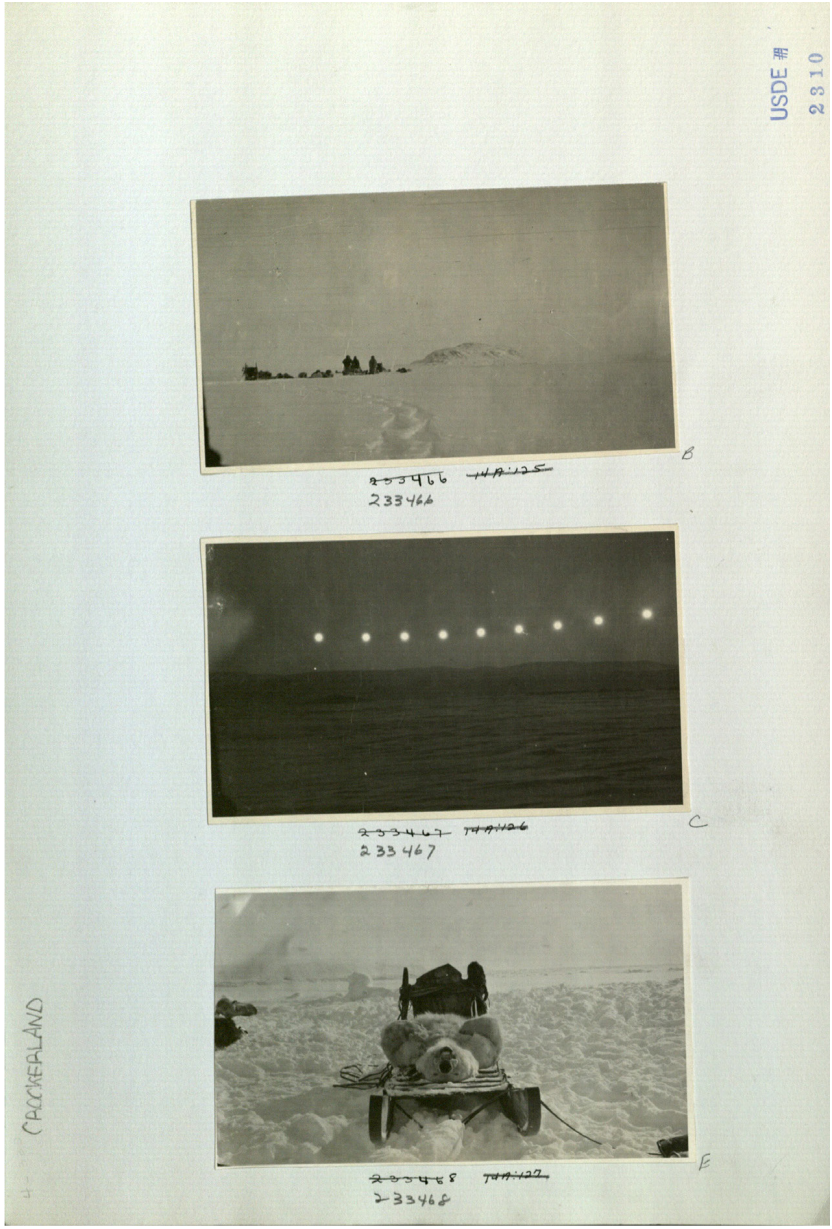

FIGURE 13.4. Expedition photos, including multiple exposure of midnight sun and polar loot. Image #233466-68, American Museum of Natural History Library.

Despite the accounts in field notes of how beautiful and real Crocker Land looked on the journey across the Polar Sea, no photo of it was taken. Instead of the photo we wanted to find, we found a picture MacMillan took at Peary's cairn, where MacMillan and his team, on their way back from the unsuccessful journey, reported seeing a dramatic, panoramic mirage. But curiously, rather than photograph that mirage, MacMillan shot this solid record, intended to be definitive: FitzHugh Green and the American flag (Figure 13.5). Intensifying the record, Green took one of MacMillan, in turn, and that flag.

There are many possible explanations for the lack of the mirage photo in the archive. We are convinced that MacMillan and crew knew they could photograph a mirage. Alfred Wegener, the brilliant German polar traveler and scientist, had made photographing mirages part of his scientific program on one Danish expedition in 1907–1908 (whose results were published in 1911) and another in 1912–1913 (see Figure 13.6).

But the American Anthony Fiala, too, an Arctic explorer well known to MacMillan, had published a photograph of atmospheric refraction in his 1906 book, *Fighting the Polar Ice*.[28] The numerous multiple exposure photographs of the midnight sun confirm the Crocker Land explorers' interest in atmospheric phenomena and their desire and ability to photograph them. But maybe they

FIGURE 13.5. FitzHugh Green at Peary's cairn. Image #233125, American Museum of Natural History Library.

FIGURE 13.6. Mirage, Gundahls Knold, February 1913. Danish Arctic Institute/Alfred Wegener.

didn't want an image of their failure to find a new land. Perhaps, committed to photography's veracity, they didn't use photography to document what they knew was *not* there. Or maybe there is a much more calculated reason: by not fixing the mirage on film, MacMillan and the museum may have tried to co-opt its illusory and shifty nature for their own benefit, deflecting or refracting away the shadiness of the entire enterprise: the dubious heroism, the loose relation to facts, the lack of accountability for Inughuit death, the profiteering via tax-free gift scheme that moved goods from the Inughuits into the museum and private collections, the territory-crazed attempt to prolong the age of "attainment" exploration even beyond Peary's claiming of the North Pole. If Peary was "nightmare American imperialism incarnate," MacMillan was his only begotten son.[29]

"Nationalism was and remains a central text of exploration," writes Neil Smith, and he goes on to quote a review of Mackinder and Lenin: "Even the few remaining 'empty spaces of the world are no longer non-political.'"[30] The mirage—distorting and displacing, always over there, in the distance, just out of reach—provides a perfect optic for the age of expansionism: for expansionist enterprises such as museum collections, nations, and empires (and in the case

of the AMNH, institution and nation/empire are intimately intertwined), and for expansionist dreams. It beckons, but it can't ever be reached; approach too closely and it vanishes, remaining in the realm of desire. Always farther, finally ungraspable: Peary believed that Crocker Land "would become a gateway to other lands or seas"—and when he heard it was a mirage, he *still* held onto the belief that he had seen land.[31] The Crocker Land photographic archive is a refraction of the interests and desires that instigated the expedition: the drive of discovery, the urge toward knowledge, the imperative of territorial claim, the lust for resources—in short, imperialism and all its varied spoils. This archive is unwavering in its explicit promotion of American primacy—it is a "historical agent," to use Regina Kunzel's term, "organized around unwritten logics of inclusion and exclusion, with the power to exalt certain stories, experiences, and events, and to bury others" (such as the experiences of the Inughuit and the body of Pee-ah-wah-to above all)—and yet it was produced by a mirage, whose shimmering illusory unreal realness continues to call and confound us even now. "I wonder, too, if there isn't something queer about archives," Kunzel goes on to speculate, "the way they spark and frustrate our desires."[32] We looked for a photo of the mirage, as if the archive would reveal to us some truth about what really happened up there. Researchers with our own expansionist dreams of knowledge, we looked and looked. Turning over image after image, it was always going to be in the next drawer, the next folder. After pulling the last picture from the last filing cabinet, our prospects vanished. Ephemeral, partial, and distorted, the mirage isn't—and is—in the archive.

Part 2: It's the Ocean

How did we end up rifling through photographs in this strange back room? Our fascination with the infamous mirage that was Crocker Land didn't come out of nowhere. For the past several years I (Marget) have been chasing mirages in films, in texts, and with my camera over land and sea, often bringing Carolyn (with her own research interests) along for the ride.[33] Mirages are photographic—we'll explain that in a moment—and photographs pose problems of archiving with particular intensity. As an image-maker and image-consumer, I waver in my attitude toward photography: rivers, streams, oceans of pictures have diluted my sense of their presence and purpose in the world. I'm glued to the screen. I'm drained of all excitement. I resist the imperatives of social media. I can't stop posting to Instagram. Mostly, I have a lot of questions turning and turning in my mind. Why are we compelled to take all of these pictures? What do we want from them and what do they want from us?

FIGURE 13.7. *Carolyn Looking for the Mirage in the Museum*. Marget Long, 2014.

What can photographs—and more to the point here, the formal and informal archives they form—reveal about archival politics and priorities, past, present, and future? (See Figure 13.7.)

Seeing mirages is a way to get inside photography, to turn it inside out. A mirage is light interacting with matter in the world—a real, if intangible, imaging event that occurs when light is refracted in strange and unearthly ways. Refraction works like this: light rays, which normally move through space in a relatively straight line, are bent when steep thermal gradients are present in the atmosphere. The air acts like a giant lens and creates an inverted image (or sometimes multiple images, both inverted and upright) of a distant object. This mirage image is displaced from the object's geometric position in space and is sometimes quite distorted. In the case of a desert mirage, hot air just above ground is pressed up against cooler air above it; this intense thermal gradient bends the light emanating from the blue sky onto the ground. Because the image of the sky on the ground is blue(ish), we interpret it as water.[34] Arctic mirages occur when temperature differences over snow or ice refract an image of that snow/ice into the sky. In these instances, an observer might interpret the displaced snow or sea ice as a distant mountain or a land mass like the one Peary claimed to have seen.

Both physically and culturally, mirages are images tangled up with desire, imagination, illusion, deception, and disappointment. If we're in a burning desert, water is exactly the thing we most want to see. But the desire is not only ours: to chase a mirage is to chase image-making in a rudimentary but deeply sensory camera-less form, a queer mode where the earth makes distorted, displaced, and inverted new images of itself. As Kaja Silverman would say, this is the world showing us how it wants to be seen.[35]

Carolyn and I parked our rental car near the center of El Mirage Dry Lakebed, a flat expanse on the Mojave Desert in California. It was 112 degrees and the ground couldn't have been dustier or drier. Yet in every direction we saw what looked like beautiful rippling water. Shimmering blue oceans, hazy purplish lakes, and a row of Joshua trees in the distance formed an oasis. The scene was mesmerizing and hard to describe after the fact except to say that what was happening on the lakebed seemed to be both *supernatural* and *superphotographic*: supernatural because we were in the natural world and yet nothing, not even our own bodies, felt quite "natural" or "right" in the presence of the mirages, and superphotographic because when we looked out at the mirages both of us had the strange sensation of being inside of a giant camera and looking at a vast photograph.[36] With great anticipation and excitement we had flown across the country to photograph mirages. But once there I worried that a photograph might drain the liveness—the mirageness—of these alluring images. And yet I grabbed my camera, as we all do now. I clicked away.

Back in New York, though, reviewing these pictures filled me with ideas about what photography was, is, and can be. On one level, they offered a solid and unquestionable record of an atmospheric event on the lakebed: ordinary, old-school index. On another level, the subject of the photographs (the mirage) complicated and even mocked photography's own claims to fidelity. The "water" wasn't really water (see Figures 13.8 and 13.9), yet it could so easily be interpreted as such in the photograph. The tension in this photograph highlights the usefulness of the mirage as an analytic. While all camera-made photographs refer to something that undeniably took place in front of the lens, they simultaneously express unseen desires and imaginaries. For me, these mirage photographs illuminate one of the most interesting aspects of photography: its loose grip on reality. They point to a parallel image-world that might, as Charlotte Cotton has suggested, bend standard visual rules and social relations.[37] The mirage photographs are images of instability, conjecture, and disappointment—an image of photography itself.

To return to the photographic archive in the museum: the bronze busts, the magnificent wooden sledges atop beige filing cabinets, the carefully ordered record of a failed expedition—none of this would exist without Peary's false sighting of his false land mass. How, then, were we to understand what we were seeing? How were we to "read" these photographs? Certainly, a photographic archive instigated by a mirage does not have to be read according to conventional historical logics or standard visual rules. What if we were to turn a mirage's optics back onto it? What if we were to run the Crocker Land archive through a fata morgana machine? A fata morgana is a complex mirage; we appropriate "fata morgana machine" from Salomo Friedlaender's 1920 short story "Fatamorganamaschine," excerpted and disseminated by media theorist Friedrich Kittler.[38]

The sequence of six photos in the top image in Figure 13.10 appears on one sheet, and we've inverted and reversed that sheet on the bottom image. In the top image, you can see the label "PIBLOCTOQ ARCTIC HYSTERIA"; on the back "Inahloo pibloctoq" describes each of these six images. Now, *pibloctoq* (or *piblokto*) is a pseudo-Inuit term for what European and American explorers called "Arctic hysteria," a behavioral manifestation they noticed among Inuit women (pseudo-Inuit, because there is no such Inuit word; this is what Westerners transcribed). Robert Peary characterized it in *The North Pole* as a "nervous affection . . . whose immediate cause is hard to trace" but that might have to do with lost relatives or fear of the future.[39] Westerners multiplied theories about this phenomenon (psychoanalytic, environmental, nutritional, social,

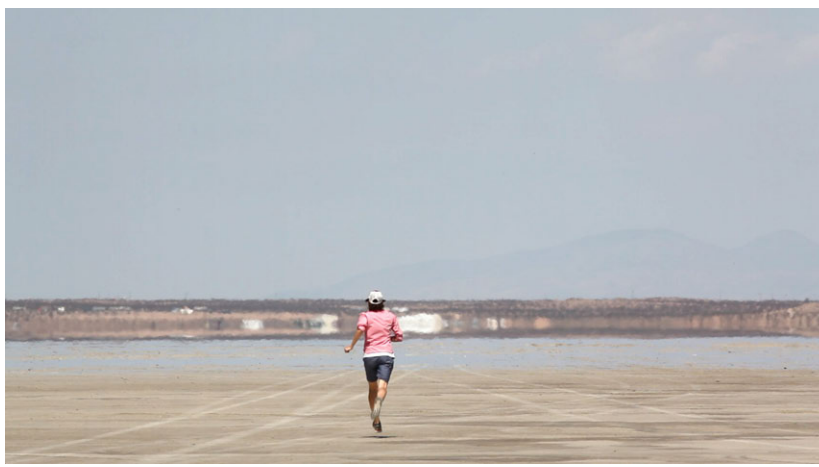

FIGURE 13.8. *You Were Drifting*, video still. Marget Long, 2015.

FIGURE 13.9. *(Inferior) Mirage #11*. Inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, 6 × 4 inches. Marget Long, 2013.

and cultural, as anthropologist Lyle Dick delineates).[40] And theories require pictures, evidence, documentation; thus this top image, imposing a Western European diagnostic gaze on this woman, named Inahloo, apparently unconscious, lying outside, away from any built structure. She is surrounded by a group of men and women (including Westerners) with dogs, and in the penultimate image, she is ministered to by three women along with two dogs.

There is in fact another picture being taken in one of the photos, suggesting that this was not a scene that the explorers just happened to come upon and shoot. Was this whole scene staged for those Western cameras? We know that on an earlier expedition Donald MacMillan—that's probably him, the tallest of the bunch—heard that a woman was in the throes of *pibloctoq* and grabbed his camera; her affect changed entirely at that point and she later insisted that she was faking and that she didn't want him to use her pictures because she was naked. Lyle Dick calls *pibloctoq* an "elusive entity," produced by Western imperialist agendas. Whose hysteria was it, anyway? The Crocker Land explorers were stuck up there for four miserable years; they argued, they pilfered surreptitiously, they killed.

Our deployment of mirage optics highlights the uncertainty about what was happening in front of the lens. When we put these images through our fata

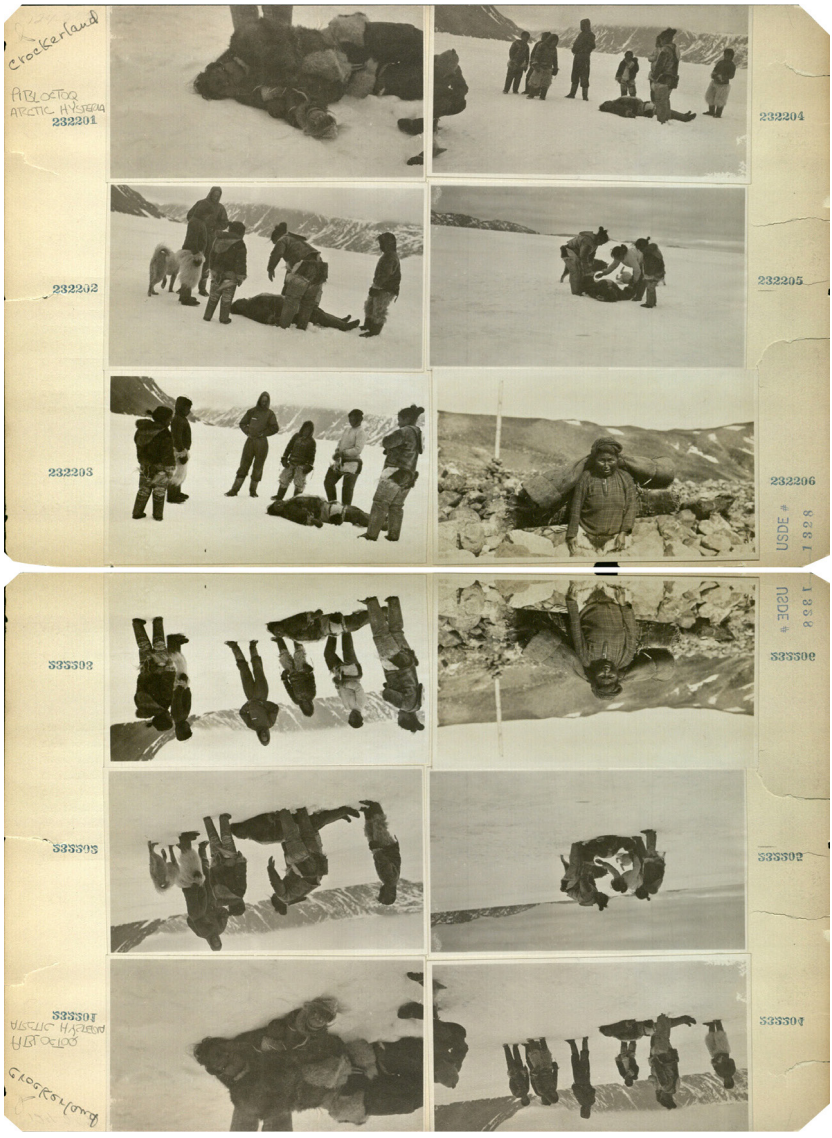

FIGURE 13.10. Pibloctoq Arctic Hysteria. Image #232201-06, American Museum of Natural History Library. Bottom image reversed and inverted.

morgana machine we see something distorted.[41] This distortion in the bottom image of Figure 13.10 allows us to imagine things beyond what a cultural critique will allow us to see. A woman looms above the onlookers. Her physical reality is completely changed; here she is outside the Western imagination. She is levitating, effortlessly dominant. One of the dogs levitates with her. The observers around her fall away, askew.

But that's not the "truth" of Inahloo, either. We may approach it, or her, but it vanishes. Beyond this loopy application of the mechanics of a mirage to this one photograph, the mirage insists that we understand all of the photographs in this archive as unstable, wavering mixtures of the real and the illusory. The expedition members had their own fata morgana machine: photography was not only a way of spending the long winter nights; it was also a lucrative meal ticket long after the expedition finally returned. Indeed, the lecture circuit was part of the funding machinery of the expedition industry, and MacMillan's lectures, copiously illustrated with lantern slides, were a major source of income for his life afterward. MacMillan took images up in the north and, fata morgana–style, displaced them into lecture halls, banquet rooms, and classrooms. Among his many different presentations, MacMillan gave a lecture titled "Removing Crocker Land from the Map." When we opened that folder for the typescript in the archive, it was empty.

Part 3: (Not) Saving Appearances

We had to go north ourselves as we chased our old friend the mirage. We drove up to Maine.[42] Bowdoin College's Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum (PMAM) holds an archive of the Crocker Land Exhibition materials and had mounted a one-hundred-year commemoration of the expedition itself. As we ventured in, we glimpsed Crocker Land on the exhibition wall. Well, not Crocker Land, and not the mirage either, but a substitution—another stand-in. Just as the AMNH used a photograph of a landscape in place of Crocker Land, so Bowdoin's museum used a recent picture of a gigantic mirage over the water near Etah in place of the mirage MacMillan saw from Peary's cairn and didn't photograph (see Figure 13.11).

The caption tells of Peary's sighting the "faint white summits" in 1906 and states that he could not tell, as he stood there, whether he was looking at a mirage or not. But of course Peary never hinted at any uncertainty: whatever his actual experience and motives, he insisted that he had sighted a new land. The photo and caption in the exhibition try to settle the whole unsettled issue: here's a spectacular mirage, so real looking that such a vision fooled Peary. The exhibition

FIGURE 13.11. Exhibition photo of photo (by Dave Walsh, copyright 2009) of a fata morgana extending across the horizon. Carolyn Dinshaw, 2016.

gently saves appearances, so to speak: it uses a photo of a mirage retrospectively to install a question in Peary's mind and therefore to justify the Crocker Land Expedition.

This spectacular photo, when deployed thus, co-opts the mirage for institutional purposes, draining it of its liveness and ephemerality. Trying to present something of that liveness and ephemerality, though, the exhibition actually included a demonstration mirage located under a map of the Arctic: when you peer into a hole and press a button, a mirage appears. Presto! Yet the controlled, on-demand aspect of this mirage runs counter to the open-air, ungovernable aspect of mirages that we have been emphasizing; mounted at the height of a child, at least part of its function would seem to be to answer, jack-in-the-box–style, the demands of restless kids in a museum space.

The archival materials on which this exhibition was partly based are held by the museum; Special Collections in Bowdoin's library holds even more archival documents. We sifted through all these photos, journals, posters for lectures, lantern slides, and other material similar to—at times duplicating—the holdings in the AMNH. Day in and day out we looked, but again, there was no mirage photo to be found. By that time we were intentionally pursuing something that we already knew would fail us. We knew we were never going to reach solid evidence, grounded knowledge, the truth in the unstable, slippery

realm that is an archive. *Not* finding something is, after all, a fundamental experience of working in archives. All archives are as much made of what is absent as what is present; we join many theorists and practitioners in this awareness.

But the mirage has moved our thinking further, beyond the realm of epistemological uncertainty and into a realm where we are ourselves superfluous. Mirages are images made without human activity; they are a "pencil of nature."[43] Their media are the earth, the air, and the sun. Images will continue to emanate from whatever is left after humans and all of our things are burned out and gone. If light and air still exist at the end of human time, the earth will continue to make its own upside-down pictures. Mirages don't need us. They can't and won't be saved and stored. So if mirages are crucial to our understanding of archives, what does all this mean?

In a short essay about imaging and modes of storage, Teju Cole ruminates on whether an image on Snapchat is a photograph at all, since the image disappears so quickly that it doesn't seem to fulfill photography's usual memorial function.[44] Snapchat, Cole goes on to say, meets his definition of photography because the image is saved, even if just for a moment. Even though these pictures vanish from our screens, he notes, they have an "optical afterlife" on a distant server, and the specter of these indelible photos haunts us. For Cole, a more revolutionary technology might be one without the capacity to save, thereby freeing us from "being subject to incessant visual notation," a form of surveillance. Mirages. They fade. They vanish. They can't be harnessed, saved, or capitalized in the usual ways. Maybe a mirage enacts Cole's radical ideal of image-making. A mirage is not reliant on anyone creating or consuming the image. It thus prompts us not only to consider the deeply contingent and partisan act of looking into any archive of photographs, but also to reevaluate the merits of saving images at all.

Acts of saving—amassing, sheltering, storing, retaining—are at the center of archival practice. These activities allow us to keep in touch with the ongoingness of the past; to learn about our present; to imagine possible futures. We would never suggest that the exploitive images of the Crocker Land archive should not be saved; we can learn from those photographs when they are properly contextualized. Nonetheless, many have argued the perils of saving (and displaying) such toxic materials. Veering away from that interminable debate, the mirage in the Crocker Land archive has enabled us to conceptualize future archival practices that value the *unsaveable*.[45]

We write in an era in which the manipulation of data and images by the United States government, particularly when Donald Trump was at its helm, has proven literally treacherous, economically catastrophic, and ultimately

murderous. Trump grabbed and recirculated citizens' racist tweets; mined and exploited personal data on a whim; falsified maps; deleted entire realms of federal records; altered epidemiological data; and on and on. For the purposes of this chapter, we point to the administration's manipulation of 2017 protest records such that photographs of protest signs critical of the so-called president have been altered in the National Archives.[46] In this context, and as only one of many possible approaches to this threatened data landscape, we wonder what kinds of images might be created that *cannot* be subject to these odious ministrations, *cannot* be turned into commodities or otherwise exploitable forms of knowledge. Saving and stockpiling are fundamental to networked capitalism, data its most valuable commodity. Is there a yet-to-be-invented form of image-making and image-archiving that can elude this trap?[47] How can we use the liveness and ungovernability of the mirage to resist the co-optation of our images and ideas?

American Arctic explorer Frederick Cook, who claimed to have reached the North Pole before Robert Peary, wrote of his experiences in the far north: "Mirages turned things topsy turvy. Inverted lands and queer objects ever rose and fell, shrouded in mystery."[48] Huge mirages ever on the horizon, the Arctic was "a disappointing Sahara," where "strange contradictions" tantalized him and his companions. "What a world of paradoxes! All was queer. We were queer ourselves," Cook—or his ghost writer, who seems to have been gay—wrote.[49] A mirage, that geophysical phenomenon at once real and bound up with illusion, undoes conventional logics of here and there, now and then, nowhere and somewhere. With the mirage as our wavering, unreliable, but always provocative guide we have speculated about geographical exploration, about empire, about the promises and disappointments of archives—about places beyond anyone's grasp, animated by desire. After their experience in the Arctic, a place Frederick Cook called Eden, the Promised Land, and Paradise, their very bodies were different: "We were strange to ourselves and strange to others," he reflected. "Henceforth we were native to Nowhere."[50] Though we may still be caught up in our own expansionist dreams, a mirage points beyond. Its unreal realness is live and uncaptured image-making. It offers glimmers of an archive world of ongoing, evanescent revelation.

Notes

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Bowdoin College; and Jørgen Trondhjem and Stig Rasmussen, Danish Arctic Institute, Copenhagen.

1 Peary's letter to Crocker, April 14, 1907, quoted in Davies, *Robert E. Peary*, 165.

2 Danish polar explorers in 1907 had sighted an island that ended up with the name Fata Morgana Land; a fata morgana is a specific kind of spectacular mirage. Confirmation of the existence of that island was the goal of a subsequent Danish expedition. Higgins, *Exploration History*, 167.

3 Peary, *Nearest the Pole*, 207.

4 They brought an Ernemann motion picture camera plus a Graphlex still camera and hand cameras (Eastman Kodak 3A). See Kaplan, "Riding Shortwaves," 422.

5 Inughuit are native peoples of northwest Greenland.

6 MacMillan, "Geographical Report," 397.

7 Cook, *My Attainment of the Pole*, 3. Dr. Frederick A. Cook's claim to have reached the Pole before Peary set off controversy that was settled in Peary's favor by 1911, and Cook was regarded by the Crocker Land team as a charlatan. MacMillan notes the difficulty of judging distances in the far north in "The MacMillan Arctic Expedition."

8 Peary did not mention the sighting of a new land in his field notes, which subsequently disappeared, and noted that day that there was "no land in sight," according to Rawlins, "Contributions." The prospectus published by the museum, *Crocker Land Expedition to the North Polar Regions: Statement to Contributors*, justifies the projected expedition by referring to findings of a tidal expert, in addition to "Eskimo" traditions and prior reports of land in the area. MacMillan's *Four Years in the White North*, "Introduction," mentions evidence supporting Peary's belief. For the most skeptical critique of Crocker Land, see Rawlins, *Peary at the North Pole*, 67–77; see also Herbert, *Noose of Laurels*; Berton, *The Arctic Grail*, 564. The defense of Peary offered by Davies, *Robert E. Peary*, includes a section on Crocker Land (164–69).

9 See Rawlins, qtd. in Smith, *American Empire*, 98.

10 For discussion of Alaska mirage photographs of the late nineteenth century, see Pinney, *The Waterless Sea*. Pinney's book was published after we finished all major work on this chapter; it provides useful corroboration of many points we make here; it is particularly strong on mirages' association with racialization and orientalizing. For photography on Arctic expeditions in this period, including mirages, see Greene, *Arthur Wegener*, 127–54, 286–313.

11 MacMillan, "Geographical Report," 435.

12 Cook, *Return from the Pole*, 56; Bryce, *Cook and Peary*, xi.

13 The Crocker Land archive is an official, institutional archive of analogue materials owned and controlled by a large museum. But our critical analysis is not limited to this kind of archive. The mirage problematizes archival practices in both the analogue and digital spheres, as will become clear in Part 2.

14 AMNH, Crocker Land Expedition Papers, Mss. C76, Box 17, folder 9.

15 Sundquist remarks that US interests in Latin America and "sea routes to the Pacific" rendered the South Pole even more desirable than the North "in the era of manifest destiny." In Sundquist, "Exploration and Empire," ch. 1 of his *Literature of Expansion and Race*, 146–47.

16 Smith, *American Empire*, 85–86.
17 MacMillan, *Four Years in the White North*, 80.
18 Bennett and Rowley, *Uqalurait: An Oral History*, 152 and 155.
19 MacMillan, *Four Years in the White North*, 81. Punctuation altered for clarity.
20 Letter from MacMillan to Peary, August 21, 1914, qtd. in Davies, *Robert E. Peary*, 168.
21 Donald B. MacMillan Collection, Special Collections, Bowdoin College Library, M118.5 v. 25.
22 *New York Tribune*, November 25, 1914; "Mere Mirage," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 27, 1917.
23 "Sannikov Land" was a nineteenth-century "discovery" among the New Siberian Islands; "Bradley Land" was sighted by Cook in 1908 but revealed to be nonexistent; "Croker Land" was sighted on an 1818 expedition to find the Northwest Passage: Berton, *The Arctic Grail*, 591–92, 30–39.
24 Green was in a panic on the Polar Sea, fearing abandonment and expecting submission from the Inughuit. Compare Hunt, *North to the Horizon*, 55–57. Green may have "had designs on Pee-ah-wah-to's wife" (Kaplan and Searles, "Donald B. MacMillan," 127). On tensions between Inughuit and white men, see note in Kaplan, "Riding Shortwaves." MacMillan's 1915 report in *Harper's* implies that Pee-ah-wah-to died in an avalanche or was otherwise buried alive; only later, in *Four Years in the White North*, did he acknowledge that Green, "inexperienced in the handling of Eskimos," had killed him (92). See Smith, *American Empire*, on the "racism" at "the core of Peary's organizational assumptions" (101); Peary was, of course, MacMillan's mentor and his organization of expeditions was the model for MacMillan's.
25 MacMillan, *Four Years in the White North*, 34–35.
26 See, for example, the journal of expedition member Walter Ekblaw, for August 2, 1913 (Bowdoin College, Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, Ekblaw journals, "Crockerland Expedition" [2011.16.264], 63–64).
27 The expedition enlisted Smith Sound Inughuit guides and hunters for help in exploration as well as hunting and trophy gathering, and depended on the sewing skills of the women.
28 J. P. Koch, the leader of the 1912–1913 expedition of which Wegener was a member, wrote in his diary for February 26, 1913, for example: "Wegener started photographing mirages, and he succeeded, despite the low temperature that puts so many obstacles on the Arctic photographer." Copenhagen, Danish Arctic Institute, A327.0.4, vol. 2, 191. Thanks to Jørgen Trondhjem for the English translation. For Anthony Fiala's photograph, see Fiala, *Fighting the Polar Ice*, 161.
29 It wouldn't be the first time an Arctic mirage had been used deliberately to deceive: Cook writes that he tries to keep his Inughuit companions going by telling them they're near land (but he knows it's just a mirage). Expedition member Hunt, disgusted by what he saw as the selfishness of the entire enterprise, wrote of the greed of MacMillan and of museum staffer Hovey, caring nothing of the Inughuit and only interested in money (Hunt, *North to the Horizon*). See Dick, *Muskox Land*, on MacMillan's efforts on behalf of a fur company (273). Peary had on an earlier expedition taken from the Inuit several enormous meteorites—their sole source of metal, now in the museum. On Peary as "nightmare," see Lloyd Rose, "Ice Follies," *Voice Literary Supplement*,

May 1989, 16, qtd. in Smith, *American Empire*, 107. Peary did beget sons of his own, including one with an Inughuit woman; our use of "only begotten son" for MacMillan is metaphorical.

30 Smith, *American Empire*, 108, 110.

31 Peary, qtd. in Kaplan and Searles, "Donald B. MacMillan," 122; Peary's comment reported in "Crocker Land Eludes Explorers," *New York Tribune* (second page of article).

32 Regina Kunzel, in Arondekar et al., "Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion," 214.

33 I've explored this elusive optical phenomenon through a series of interconnected artworks: mirages as the subject of photographs (http://www.margetlong.com/index.php/mirages/photographs-of-mirages-part-ii/), mirages experienced live in the landscape (http://www.margetlong.com/index.php/mirages/mirage-viewing-station/), mirages in film (http://www.margetlong.com/index.php/mirages/you-were-drifting/). Carolyn came to mirages a bit later, when she accompanied me to El Mirage Dry Lakebed on a shoot. Before embarking on this research on the Crocker Land archive, her research touched on impossible spaces such as the Earthly Paradise, located on medieval maps but inaccessible to ordinary humans.

34 A mirage is not only an optical phenomenon; it's a cultural refraction as well, as Pinney, *Waterless Sea*, demonstrates well. The word has been used to describe everything from shady financial doings to digital currency to the promises of an American president. The classic trope in film and animation presents a lost traveler on the desert, out of his mind with thirst, running wildly toward what he thinks is a body of water—only to have it vanish just before contact. In many twentieth-century desert narratives, the mirage magnifies racial and sexual stereotypes.

35 In *The Miracle of Analogy*, Kaja Silverman reminds us that image-making is not a strictly human activity. Leonardo da Vinci believed that there is an aesthetic capacity in all worldly things that allows them to generate images of themselves; Silverman compares these revelations to photographs.

36 Ann Reynolds describes such an experience in "At the Jetty."

37 Cotton, *Photography Is Magic*.

38 Kittler, *Gramophone*, 134–35.

39 Peary, *The North Pole*, 166–67. MacMillan's observations are reported in Brill, "Piblokto."

40 Dick, "Pibloktoq (Arctic Hysteria)."

41 A fata morgana is a complex mirage. We appropriate "fata morgana machine" from Salomo Friedlaender's 1920 short story, *Fatamorganamaschine*, excerpted in Kittler, *Gramophone*, 134–35. While Friedlaender imagines something like a virtual reality apparatus that visually dissolves the difference between optical effect and the "real" world, our mirage-creating instrument—crucially—distorts, refracts, displaces.

42 Bowdoin College bred Arctic explorers (Peary, class of 1877, and MacMillan, class of 1898) as well as their benefactors, such as businessman Thomas Hubbard, class of 1857.

43 *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–1846) is William Henry Fox Talbot's treatise illustrating his revolutionary process of printing on chemically sensitized paper. Talbot's vivid descriptions of "photogenic drawing" where "natural objects . . . delineate themselves" could also characterize the way a mirage works, the way it *writes itself* into the landscape.

44 Cole, "Memories of Things Unseen."

45 Our debt to the archival thinking of Ann Cvetkovich and of José Esteban Muñoz, that absent presence, is palpable here. Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings* extends the idea of the archive to "cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions . . . encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (7). Muñoz identifies the fleeting gestures of queerness that "are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility" in "Ephemera as Evidence" (6); he is writing in a "national and institutional moment of backlash" (7) that we find hauntingly relevant to our current moment of writing.

46 "National Archives Exhibit."

47 There are, of course, archives that have long existed resistantly outside this economy. The Lesbian Herstory Archives immediately comes to mind. This vibrant collection of the artifacts of lesbian lives and activities, for many years a strictly analogue enterprise, is now partly digitized. This will increase access to an already open, inclusive, and non-institutional collection. We recognize the value of access and at the same time wonder what moving materials from "the old table in Brooklyn" to the internet might mean for this archive's continued resistance to monetized uses and unwanted dissemination of its contents.

48 Cook, *My Attainment of the Pole*, 277. For discussion of the aesthetic that may have inflected Cook's descriptions, see Loomis, "The Arctic Sublime."

49 Cook, *Return from the Pole*, 71. For information about Cook's ghostwriter, see Dick, "Robert Peary," esp. 21–22.

50 Cook, *Return from the Pole*, 310.

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