

RACE TO THE POLE:

Matthew Henson, Arctic Explorer

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Abstract: In his memoir, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), Matthew Henson describes the toll of his and Peary's race to the Pole. This record of the 1908-09 Arctic expedition complicates established understandings of the "Dash to the Pole" and his own role as Peary's assistant. Donald B. Macmillan declared in *How Peary Reached the Pole: The Personal Story of His Assistant* (2008) that Peary could not have done it without Henson (275), whose text uncovers an accomplished writer and explorer at work. The complicated character of Robert E. Peary figures prominently in his pages, though in a less independent version than in other accounts. Henson details the highly skilled labor he performs in the Arctic, and his own personality and perceptions. He shares, to a degree, the value systems of his Commander and the white members of the expedition, including the emphasis on heroic masculinity. But he also inscribes his racial heritage into his memoir, and his close, if complex, relation to the Inughuit. The result of intricate balancing acts, Henson's silences echo in his text, revealing what could not be articulated by an African American member of Peary's legendary expeditions. Henson's contemporaries paid little attention to his accomplishments, since white American and European explorers dominated the field of Arctic travel, but his contribution received more attention as the 20th Century progressed. His experience suggests the costs and the crises—personal, national, and international—of a contested icescape increasingly visible and accessible in the 21st Century.

Introduction

In a photo taken immediately after Matthew Henson had returned from the race across the Arctic Ocean to the North Pole, the wear and tear of Commander Robert E. Peary's last expedition shows. Used as an illustration in Henson's *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), the photo and its caption invite readers to study "the effect of excessive strain" (40) and to compare this photo to others taken before and after Henson's exploration in the Arctic.¹ In his memoir, Henson describes the toll of his and Peary's race to the Pole: "When I reached the ship again and gazed into my little mirror, it was the pinched and wrinkled visage of an old man that peered out at me, but the eyes still twinkled and life was still entrancing" (46). Both the strain of his appearance and his zest continue in his record of the 1908-09 expedition, in which he complicates established understandings of the "Dash to the Pole" and his own role as Peary's assistant. Initially, Henson was marginalized due to the racial systems of his time, but his contribution to Peary's expeditions has subsequently received increased attention. Donald B. Macmillan writes about Henson in *How Peary Reached the Pole: The Personal Story of His Assistant*, republished in 2008, that Peary could not have done it without him (275).

Henson's contemporaries paid little attention to his accomplishments, since white American and European explorers dominated the

field of Arctic travel. Henson was not given membership to the Explorers Club till 1937, but he gradually became more visible as the twentieth century progressed. Biographies of Matthew Henson include Bradley Robinson, *Dark Companion* (1947), Floyd Miller, *Ahdoolo! The Biography of Matthew A. Henson* (1963), Edward F. Dolan, *Matthew Henson, Black Explorer* (1979), Michael Gilman, *Matthew Henson: Explorer* (1988), Dolores Johnson, *Onward: A Photobiography of African-American Polar Explorer Matthew Henson* (2006), as well as articles on various aspects of his contribution to Arctic explorations.

Children's and young adult books about Henson, such as Baron Bedesky's *Peary and Henson: The Race to the North Pole* (2006), have now appeared. Gilman's illustrated book on Henson came out in the "Black Americans of Achievement Series," with an introductory essay by Coretta Scott King. *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* became *A Black Explorer at the North Pole*, published in 1989 with an added introduction by Susan A. Kaplan, then Director of the Peary-Macmillan Arctic Museum (which now hosts a virtual Henson exhibition). Even with new and old controversies, she notes, "Henson was a remarkable individual who overcame prejudice and a disadvantaged childhood and became an accomplished Arctic explorer, and a key individual in one of the most famous expeditions of all time" (xxiii). In 1996 an oceanic survey ship was baptized U.S.N.S. Henson in his honor, and in 2000 he received posthumously the Hubbard Medal from the National Geographic Society, first awarded to

1 Page numbers refer to the Project Gutenberg eBook of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, by Matthew A. Henson.

Peary in 1906. Admirers now follow Henson's trail, as Chris Blade documents in his *Callaloo* article "In the Footsteps of Matthew Henson: Photographs of Terry Adkins on His Final Trip to the Arctic Circle, July 2013" (2017). The National Geographic Adventure Blog uploaded in 2014 "The Legacy of Arctic Explorer Matthew Henson" by James Mills in honor of Black History Month.

In 1912, however, Henson had to fight with words for recognition. While most Henson scholarship has focused on Henson's contribution to Arctic exploration, two articles deal more closely with his autobiographical endeavors. In "Matthew Henson and the Antinomies of Racial Uplift" (2012) Anthony S. Foy links Henson's "discourse of work, merit and recognition" (21) to Booker T. Washington's ideas of racial uplift, which proved inadequate for the complexities of race and citizenship in the world Henson inhabited, also outside US borders. In "'To Return and Tell the Tale of the Doing': Matthew Henson and the African American Explorer's Identity" (2015), Gary Totten analyzes the genre fluctuations in Henson's memoir between the travel narrative and the slave narrative. The present article details the tribulations of Commander Robert E. Peary's skilled assistant and draws attention to his complicated racial position as a member of the 1908-09 North Pole expedition, as well as its erasure of Inughuit identity and expertise.² Henson's

memoir demonstrates the skills with which he constructs himself as a writer and an explorer in a group of white, Arctic travelers, who often demanded not just his talents, but also his invisibility, loyalty, and silence.

Henson's text uncovers an accomplished author and adventurer at work. The imposing character of Robert E. Peary figures prominently in his pages, but in a "less autonomous" version than in other accounts (Bloom 99). Henson details the highly specialized labor he performs in the Arctic, and he also unveils his own personality and experiences. He shares, to a degree, the value systems of his Commander and the white members of the expedition, including the emphasis on heroic masculinity. But this "son of the tropics," in Peary's phrase (Henson 4), also inscribed his racial heritage into his text, and his close, if complex, relation to the Inughuit. The result of intricate balancing acts, Henson's silences echo in his text, revealing what could not be articulated by an African American member of Peary's legendary expeditions. In short, Henson straddles a floe of white heroic masculinity and one of racial pride and respect for the native Arctic population. He operated under the supervision of "the Great Peary," who masterminded the lives of all expedition members in his quest to secure the Arctic—and the North Pole—for himself and the United States. Henson divulges in his memoir the challenges he overcame and those he did not. Overall, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* suggests the costs and the crises in an increasingly accessible but still contested Arctic icescape.

2 "Inughuit" indicates the Polar population of north-western Greenland. The terms of primary and secondary materials, which mostly use the terms "Eskimo," "Esquimo" or "Inuit," have been retained in quotations.

Who is Matthew Alexander Henson? And Robert Edwin Peary?

Born on August 8, 1866, into a community of tenant farmers, Henson had fled Maryland with his family, who faced Ku Klux Klan violence in the wake of emancipation (Dolan 4f). After the death of both parents, thirteen-year-old Henson became a dishwasher and a waiter in a restaurant, where he heard stories of life on the seas. In 1879, he walked forty miles to Baltimore harbor, where the captain of *Katie Hines* took him aboard as a cabin attendant. Over the next five years, Henson sailed with Captain Childs and his crew to ports in China, Japan, Africa, France, the Russian Arctic, and other destinations. When the Captain died in 1883, Henson met with a bigoted crew aboard the *White Seal* and disembarked in Saint John's, Newfoundland. From the age of eighteen, Henson traveled on the US East Coast, working jobs such as night guard, chauffeur, messenger, dockworker, and bellhop. Upon his return to DC, he became a clerk at Steinmetz's hat store, where his famed encounter with Peary, about to depart for Nicaragua, took place (Gilman 19-22). With skills acquired during his global adventures, Henson became in Nicaragua more than a servant to Peary, who invited him on all subsequent Arctic expeditions, until the two reached—or claimed to reach—the North Pole on April 6, 1909.

Henson begins Chapter X, "Forward March," of his 1912 publication with a photo, "Robert E. Peary in his North Pole Furs" (27). On a black background, Peary stares at the camera with an unsmiling, grave face, his signature



GS02: Robert E. Peary

moustache and stern demeanor creating an impression of a man not given to kindness and empathy. In Henson's words, "the chief characteristic of Commander Peary is persistency, which, coupled with fortitude, is the secret of his success" (10).

Following his father's early death, Peary grew up with his mother in Portland, Maine, and attended Bowdoin College before becoming a draftsman at the US Geodetic Survey. In 1881 he enlisted as a civil engineer in the Navy, thus his assignment for a planned Nicaragua



GS05: Matthew Henson upon his return from the North Pole expedition.

Canal. His first visit to the Arctic took place in 1886, before he met Henson, when he failed to cross Greenland by dog sledge. In the 1891-92 expedition, he reached Independence Fjord and proved Greenland to be an island. His 1898-1902 expedition set a record by reaching the farthest northern point of Greenland, which he named Cape Morris Jessup after his most affluent financial benefactor. He tried unsuccessfully to reach the North Pole with

the 1905-06 expedition but claimed to have succeeded on April 6, 1909. Dr. Frederick Cook, his physician and surgeon in the 1891 expedition, soon took the wind out of his sails. Cook alleged that he had reached the Pole one year ahead of Peary, on April 21, 1908, a claim supported by the University of Copenhagen but later retracted. Thus began the acrid Cook-Peary controversy, which Henson addresses at the end of his autobiography. Peary died in 1920 and was buried in the Arlington National Cemetery, while Henson found a simple grave in Woodlawn Cemetery in 1955. Thanks to the efforts of S. Allen Counter, who describes the process in *North Pole Legacy: Black, White & Eskimo* (1991), his remains were later moved to a site in Arlington not far from Peary's monument raised by the National Geographical Society (Peterson 42).

Vouching for Henson

Henson's memoir reaches his audience only after two authenticating voices have spoken for him. By 1912, the two explorers who had struggled across the Arctic Ocean to the Pole had parted ways, but Peary, introduced as Rear Admiral, U. S. Navy, Retired, authored the Foreword, despite his reluctance to grant other members of his expeditions the right to lecture or write about their shared experiences (Miller 194). He aims to satisfy the curiosity of "friends of Arctic exploration and discovery," who "have been greatly interested in the fact of a colored man being an effective member of a serious Arctic expedition" (3). Peary states that "race, or color, or

bringing-up, or environment, count nothing against a determined heart, if it is backed and aided by intelligence." In the next lines, he stresses Henson's "long and thorough apprenticeship" (3). Given the ongoing Cook controversy, Peary wants to stress the success of his own expedition, with Henson's "participation in the final victory which planted the Stars and Stripes at the North Pole, and won for this country the international prize of nearly four centuries," an accomplishment Peary labels "a distinct credit and feather in the cap of his race" (3).

With no explanation, however, Peary regrets that he cannot be present at the dinner given by the Colored Citizens of New York and Vicinity in 1909, when Henson received a gold watch for his efforts, a meager recognition compared to Peary's many honors and awards. This attention to racial difference permeates Peary's praise for Henson, "son of the tropics" (4), and his awe that "not alone individuals, but *races* . . . stood side by side at the apex of the earth, in the harmonious companionship resulting from hard work, exposure, danger, and a common object" (4). Ultimately, Peary's Foreword praises Henson, wonders at his ability to operate both in tropical and Arctic settings, invents a harmony that others have questioned, and ignores that the "common object"—the wish to reach the Pole—was Peary's own ambition.

Booker T. Washington, the Principal of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, authenticates Henson as well. He begins by explaining why Henson, and not a white

explorer, received the honor of accompanying Peary on the final dash to the Pole. Washington mentions first Henson's "adaptability and fitness for the work" as well as his loyalty, qualities that promoted him from servant to "companion and assistant" to Peary. Washington praises Peary's willingness to see beyond skin color, which gave Henson the chance to prove himself. The Principal of Tuskegee, who promoted vocational training, stresses that Henson combined "knowledge of the books" with "good practical knowledge of everything that was a necessary part of the daily life in the ice-bound wilderness of polar exploration" (6). Washington reminds readers of the contributions of his race to opening the western continent: "Even in the day when the Negro had little or no opportunity to show his ability as a leader, he proved himself at least a splendid follower" (7). Washington mentions the contribution of enslaved Africans to Spanish exploration, but he believes that his race, "which has come up from slavery" (7), has more of a future than a history. To this end, Henson provides a record of achievements that "such a race in such conditions needs for its own encouragement, as well as to justify the hopes of its friends" (7). In short, Washington promotes Henson as an African American role model that might prove to later generations that "courage, fidelity, and ability are honored and awarded under a black skin as well as under a white" (7). As in his Atlanta Exposition Address (1895), Washington blends into his vision of racial equality the qualities—loyalty, fidelity, and practical skills—that might appeal to white audiences.

Writing on Ice

Henson published his book for financial reasons. Later in 1912, at age forty-six, he would become a messenger at the US Customs House in New York City, aided by a letter to President Taft from African American politician Charley Anderson, who had also organized the 1909 dinner in Henson's honor (Dolan 175). To spark public interest, Henson focuses in his book on the 1908-09 race to the Pole, with only perfunctory attention to his many earlier Arctic explorations. Nonetheless, the publication "died quietly" (Miller 202), as Henson states to Charley Anderson: "I got a check for a few hundred dollars from the publisher and that's the last I ever heard of it" (Robinson, *Dark Companion* 226).

But Henson wanted as well to highlight his own contribution to Peary's expedition to the Pole: "To-day there is a more general knowledge of Commander Peary, his work and his success, and a vague understanding of the fact that Commander Peary's sole companion from the realm of civilization, when he stood at the North Pole, was Matthew A. Henson, a Colored man" (Henson 8). The statement solidifies Henson's accomplishment, his name, and his racial identity, and it sets the tone for his record, which blends diary entries from the expedition with later accounts and reflections. This form combines a certain anxiety of authorship with pride and talent. Henson lets readers know that he writes under difficult circumstances, as when he takes out his journal on the ice of the Arctic Ocean: "While we were waiting for the rest of the expedition to gather in, I slumped down – behind a peak

of land or paleocrystic ice, and made the entry in my diary" (32). His communicative skills contradict the anxiety of a non-traditional author and allow Henson to take control of his narrative and the expedition.

His audience awareness manifests itself in efforts to engage his readers, which presumably follow Arctic adventures from the comforts of home. Henson brings them on to the Arctic ice and presents them with a How-to-Survive manual, including sledge reparation: "The fingers freeze. Stop work, pull the hand through the sleeve, and take your icy fingers to your heart; that is, put your hand under your armpit, and when you feel it burning you know it has thawed out. Then start to work again" (28-29). He further uses rhetorical questions to connect with his readership: "You have undoubtedly taken into consideration the pangs of hunger and of cold that you know assailed us, going Poleward, but have you ever considered that we were thirsty for water to drink or hungry for fat?" (38). These questions also help him create suspense, which he uses at the beginning of Chapter XX with a hook: "It was shortly before noon of this day that we barely escaped another fateful calamity" (52). His parallel and climactic constructions serve a similar purpose as he recreates the drama of the *Roosevelt* leaving harbor in August 1908, "with all dogs a-howling, the whistle tooting, and the crew and members cheering" (16). Henson's humor testifies to his renowned kind disposition and keeps his audience entertained (Johnson 38). When an Inughuit assistant scrubs himself in the

water intended for cooking, Henson notes that at least “the water is not wasted and our stew is all the more savory” (17). He adds poetic descriptions of the northern-most Grant Land, despite disclaimers of writerly incompetence: “Imagine gorgeous bleakness, beautiful blankness. . . . Early in February, at noon, a thin band of light appears far to the southward, heralding the approach of the sun, and daily the twilight lengthens, until early in March, the sun, a flaming disk of fiery crimson, shows his distorted image above the horizon” (25). Henson grabs the attention of his audience, but his writing served as well his own agenda.

To counter racial stereotypes, he presents himself as an avid reader, with considerable knowledge of history. During the long dreary midnights of the Arctic, he writes, “I spent many a pleasant hour with my books” (18). His cabin library included titles such as Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Kipling’s *Barrack Room Ballads*, the poetry of Thomas Hood, and the Bible. Henson also mentions Peary’s books *Northward over the Great Ice* and *Nearest the Pole*. In sorting out the traces of unruly dogs with mittens instead of gloves, Henson admits that “unlike Alexander the Great, we dared not cut the ‘Gordian knots,’ but we did get them untangled” (39). He frequently mentions Shakespeare, as when witnessing a brutal dog fight: “I feel justified in using the language of the fairy Ariel, in Shakespeare’s ‘Tempest’: ‘Now is Hell empty, and all the devils are here’” (52). At the close of his text, Henson writes that “Now is Othello’s occupation gone” (57). Given the themes

of jealousy, thwarted ambition, and race in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Henson might here comment on Peary’s successes and his own failure to achieve a similar recognition—and employment.

Traveling with the Pearys

A list of character sketches in Chapter II helps Henson introduce the members of the 1908-09 expedition as he sees fit: John W. Goodsell, Donald B. Macmillan, George Borup, all so-called “tenderfeet,” i.e. new to the Arctic, and the members of the first *Roosevelt* trip: “Commander Peary, Captain Bartlett, Professor Marvin, Chief Engineer Wardwell, Charles Percy the steward and myself” (12). In his Peary sketch, Henson moves past the Commander’s red hair and bushy eyebrows to his “sharp-shooter’s eyes’ of steel gray” and his “peculiar slide-like stride,” caused by the previous loss of eight toes to frostbite. “He has a voice clear and loud,” Henson notes, “and words never fail him” (12). He resorts to passive voice in describing Peary’s order not to hibernate at Cape Sheridan, as is common during Arctic winters: “Constant activity and travel were insisted on” (19). Yet he changes constantly between “I” and “we” in recording all Arctic activities, his pronouns suggesting a certain ambivalence towards the Commander and his plans.

From his place in the polar hierarchy, Henson keeps an eye on Peary, given to humming when all is well (17) but often in the grips of darker moods. Henson comments especially on Peary’s stern leadership, which sends Henson picking up punctured tins of alcohol-cases in Chapter VII: “I wish you

could have seen me soldering those tins, under the condition of darkness, intense cold, and insufficient furnace arrangements I had to endure. If ever there was a job for a demon in Hades, that was it" (21). Peary pushes forward at any cost: "He immediately began to shout and issue orders, and, by the time he had calmed down," Henson writes, "both Captain Bartlett and George Borup had loaded up and pushed forward on to the ice of the Arctic Ocean, bound for the trophy of over four hundred years of effort." He concludes that "The Peary discipline is the iron hand ungloved" (26). On board the *Roosevelt*, Peary's cabin is a *state* room (Henson's emphasis), or "the Holy of Holies," with a "No Admittance" sign nailed over the door, blocking the way to the Commander's piano, a photograph of Teddy Roosevelt, and a private bathroom with a tub (17). But admiration hides in Henson's portrait of Peary. He states on one occasion that "no other than a Peary party would have attempted to travel in such weather" (29), and he seems as determined as the Commander himself. In Chapter XV, "The Pole," Henson writes that day and night were one: "My thoughts were on the going and getting forward and nothing else." With no words exchanged, Peary and Henson understood "that we were the men who, it had been ordained, should unlock the door which held the mystery of the Arctic" (41). This understanding—and Henson's admiration—would not last.

Josephine Diebitsch-Peary appears only briefly in Henson's text, though the two knew each other well. Both participated in the Peary

Expedition to Greenland in 1891-92, when Peary broke his leg aboard the *Kite* and was carried to the expedition headquarters near the mouth of MacCormick Fjord strapped to a board. Diebitsch-Peary and Henson lived together in Red Cliff house, along with mineralogist John Verhoeff and a neighboring Inughuit family, after Peary, Eivind Astrup, a Norwegian explorer, and others set out for Independence Fjord (Weems 112-23). In her account of this second Peary expedition, *My Arctic Journey: A Year among Ice-Fields and Eskimos* (1894), Diebitsch-Peary deprives Henson—and the Inughuit—of individual agency. While she calls white expedition members by full names, Henson remains "Matt" and surfaces in her text only as he carries out the work she assigns him. "I decided to have Matt sleep on shore to-night, should the others go on board the 'Kite,'" she writes soon after arrival (July 29, n. p.). "Matt got supper to-night, and will from now until May 1 prepare all meals under my supervision. This gives me more time to myself. Besides not confining me to the house" (November 17, n. p.). In his own record, Henson refers to Peary's wife with some reservations. He mentions her in the context of the 1893 expedition, when she had given birth at Anniversary Lodge to Marie Ahnighito Peary, the famed "Snow Baby," who had returned to the US with her mother on September 12, 1893: "Mrs. Peary also took a young Eskimo girl, well known among us as 'Miss Bill' along with her, and kept her for nearly a year, when she gladly permitted her to return to Greenland and her own people" (9). He remembers his twenty-fifth birthday at Red Cliff house, when Peary had decided

to throw him a party. Henson acknowledges grudgingly Diebitsch-Peary's hand in the celebration: "I suppose that it was due to her that the occasion was made a memorable one for me" (15). Finally, Henson spots her on a white steam yacht meeting the *Roosevelt* upon its return from the North Pole expedition. The whiteness and the distance determined Henson's relation to Peary's wife, both in their lives and their texts (57). One paragraph later, he compares himself to Othello, thus foregrounding the racial component in his life with the Commander's wife.

The Indispensable Henson

Though Henson carried out numerous tasks in Diebitsch-Peary's account of the second Peary expedition, she does not recognize his potential or his contribution. His own memoir foregrounds the work that made him indispensable to her husband. He begins on August 8-9, 1908, by shifting loads from the accompanying *Erik* to the *Roosevelt*, and he adds that he has been walrus-hunting and taxidermizing (15). He lists his tasks in the following chapter: "I have a steady job carpentering, also interpreting, barbering, tailoring, dog-training, and chasing Eskimos out of my quarters" (17). To this impressive set of skills, he adds the building and repairing of sledges (18), cooking (22), igloo-building (23), navigating (22), survival lessons (24), medical advice and assistance (31), gauging distances (41), breaking ice, and repairing whaleboats (50), with only one example of many given in parentheses. Henson's work was grounded in endurance and persistence, qualities that

also the Commander boasted. Henson often mentions his heavy workload: "I know it; the same old story, a man's work and a dog's life, and what does it amount to? What good is to be done? I am tired, sick, sore, and discouraged" (18). A few pages later, he writes: "There was something in the way of work going on all of the time. I was away from the ship on two hunting trips of about ten days each, and while at headquarters, I shaped and built over two dozen sledges, besides doing lots of other work" (20). Henson's labor highlights his multifaceted skills, way beyond Diebitsch-Peary's horizon. Einar-Arne Drivenes explains in "Polarmannen" ([The Polar Man] 2007) that Arctic survival demanded both certain innate qualities and a general knowledge, acquired through indigenous mentorship (77). Henson writes himself into equality by stressing his vital contribution in the Arctic, and he justifies Peary's choosing him for the final dash, while white men such as Marvin, Bartlett and MacDonald had to return to the *Roosevelt* without getting as close to the Pole.

In *The North Pole*, Peary offers a less flattering explanation. He did not think Henson capable of returning to land alone, and his race prevented Peary from sending him back: "He had not, as a racial inheritance, the daring and initiative of Bartlett, or Marvin, or Macmillan, or Borup. I owed it to him not to subject him to dangers and responsibilities which he was temperamentally unfit to face" (116). In a *Phylon* article, "The Travails of Matthew Henson" (1975), Ward McAfee exposes the racist response to Henson by Peary and others, and he adds another reason

for Henson's coming to the Pole. Perhaps Peary "chose Henson so that he would not have to share honors with a white man" (409). In short, Henson was no rival to Peary because of his race. McAfee mentions as well that racist skeptics used Henson's presumed submission to question Peary's success: "Peary, they speculated, never reached the Pole, but commanded Henson to support him in his lie" (407). His article sees the North Pole episode and its aftermath as "a lightning rod of white supremacist thought patterns in early twentieth-century America" (410).

Racial Alliances

Henson's title suggests the racial awareness that prompted his insistence on inclusion and equality, however muted. Foy argues that the "memoir attempts to depict the North Pole as a frontier where work, rather than race, determines the black explorer's worth" (28). Henson inscribes his blackness with allusions to the blues, and to keep warm, he "frequently did the double-shuffle and an old Virginia break-down" (24). He mentions the advantage of a flat nose in freezing weather and pokes fun of Goodsell's "greenish-yellow complexion," while the long darkness has made his own resemble "a ginger cake with too much saleratus in it" (24). Henson walks a tightrope here, between racial caricature and assertion. His dance may, as Foy points out, suggest the minstrel show's nostalgia for antebellum plantation life and the "shuffling darky." Yet Henson places this racial representation into an Arctic setting that betrays its absurdity. Foy notes that, as with the

nose and complexion references, "Henson's double-voiced 'double-shuffle' acts as a strategic racial allusion. In each of these cases, he acknowledges his blackness while trying to elude the difference that this difference may hold for his readers" (29). In *Gender on Ice* (1993), Lisa Bloom commends Henson for construing blackness as a presence, not an absence, given the historical context. She agrees that Henson's racial allegiance shows up in his approach to the Inughuit population (98). The famous meeting between members of the 1891-92 Arctic explorers and the inhabitants of Northern Greenland appear in most accounts of Henson's travels. Gilman describes their reaction to Henson in some detail:

One of the Eskimos, a man named Ikwah, spotted Henson and ran over to him, speaking excitedly in the Eskimo language. The man held his arm next to Henson's for comparison, and Henson saw that their skin color was similar. Ikwah grinned and said 'Innuit, Innuit,' repeating the Eskimo word for his people. Because Henson was not a kabloona (a white person), Ikwah believed that Henson must be an Eskimo who had been lost from his tribe and had forgotten his true language. Ikwah and his family decided to adopt Henson. (34)

If Peary could not have done it without Henson, Henson could not have done it without the Inughuit. They taught him their language, dog-handling, sledge construction, igloo-building, and survival skills that benefited all members of Peary's Arctic expeditions. Henson places his native assistants at the

center of his text, where he himself resides, and he adds supplemental narrative energy to the Inughuit in Appendix I, "Notes on the Esquimos," and in Appendix II, which he calls "List of Smith Sound Esquimos," beginning with Ac-com-o-ding'-wah and ending several pages later with We-shark'-oup-si and two unnamed female babies. Henson's long list indicates both his desire to give the Inughuit visibility and a wish for control, a tension also apparent in his descriptions of his native assistants and their families.

He groups himself with the Inughuit in an ethnic enclave cast against a white background. A photograph of a young Henson amidst Arctic inhabitants resembles a family group picture, with a caption in Dolores Johnson's photo biography in Henson's own words: "for periods covering more than twelve months, I have been for all intents an Esquimo, with Esquimos for companions, speaking their language, dressing in the same kind of clothes, living in the same kind of dens, eating the same food, enjoying their pleasures, and frequently sharing their griefs" (photo following Johnson 25). In his memoir, Henson learns the names of individual tribe members and describes them in character sketches. Readers get acquainted with Merktoshah, the oldest member of the tribe, and with Mene or Minik, the young boy Peary brought to the States with his family

and then abandoned to his tragic life.³ Henson worries about the "innocent" (31) Inughuit and the consequences of their meeting with whalers and explorers. He considers them "the best-natured people on earth, with no bad habits of their own, but a ready ability to assimilate the vices of civilization" (20). He regrets that Danish missionaries and sailors distribute tobacco even to toddlers, and his view of the Inughuit future is gloomy: "It is my conviction that the life of this little tribe is doomed, and that extinction is nearly due" (20). He cites decreasing population numbers and blames "the commercial hunter" for transforming a "land of plenty" (20) into a "land of desolation" (21), with seals, walrus, reindeer, and muskoxen gone from the coasts and forcing the native hunters inland. Frederick E. Nelson summarizes in "Ice Follies" (2012) the motivation for polar exploration in four words: "Commerce," "sovereignty," "adventure," and "knowledge" (547). In a 2002 *Polar Geography* article, Russell W. Gibbons and Raimund E. Goerler find that a true account of "deception, subjection, and in many instances extermination of native peoples in the Western Hemisphere between the 15th and 19th Centuries remains as a sordid and inglorious, if less frequently told, chapter of exploration and expansion" (1). Henson wants to protect the Inughuit — perhaps, as Totten argues, because he sees them as "noble

3 This story is narrated more fully by Kenn Harper in *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo* (1986) and "The Minik Affair: The Role of the American Museum of Natural History" (2002). The Peary-Macmillan Arctic Museum commemorates him with the virtual exhibition "Caught in the Middle: The Tragic Life of Minik Wallace."

savages corrupted through contact with outsiders" (65). He dislikes Peary's instructions to remove Nipsangwah and Myah from the *Roosevelt* but to keep their seven curs aboard. He obeys the Commander, but "it was not a pleasant task" (15). He explains his resistance with uncharacteristic directness: "I have known men who needed dogs less to pay a great deal more for one pup than was paid to Nipsangwah for his pack of seven. The dogs are a valuable asset to these people and these two men were dependent on their little teams to a greater extent than on the plates and cups of tin which they received in exchange of them" (15). In short, Peary cheats the native men, and not only on this occasion.

The Meteorites

Henson recalls Peary's removal of three meteorites the Inughuit depended upon for iron, discovered during the winter of 1894-95 with the help of native guides, to the American Museum of Natural History: "The Woman," "The Dog," and, in 1897, the seventy-ton "The Tent." Henson does not outright criticize, but he mentions Peary's "persistence" in securing the meteorites. He writes about "The Tent": "my back still aches when I think of the hard work I did to help load that monster aboard the *Hope*" (10). In "Robert E. Peary and the Cape York Meteorites," Patricia A. M. Huntington writes that "what is uncontroversial about the meteorites is that they allowed the Inuit to live in the Iron Age rather than the Stone Age" (56). She also shares Henson's masked criticism: "Given the Inuit's reliance on the meteorites, one can understand their

reluctance to lead European explorers to them, and until a very determined Robert E. Peary decided to find them, their location was concealed" (57). In 1909, Josephine Diebitsch-Peary claimed the meteorites as a gift to herself and argued for using the money they brought in for her children's education. She received a check for \$40,000, an amount sufficient "to pay for room, board, tuition, books, and pocket money for 19 years at a private college" (Huntington 62). Henson disliked the meteorite removal, which secured Peary an exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History and funding for new Arctic ventures. The Museum caption now concedes that "The Tent" remains the biggest meteorite "in captivity" (Huntington 64). Henson refers to The Tent as Peary's "prize" and reports that he brought it "safely" to New York, where it now "reposes" in the museum (10). After all, he did assist Peary in bringing the meteorites aboard ship, though presumably refusing to do so was not an option.

Imperial Eyes

Henson's own interactions with the Inughuit had elements of white explorers' prejudice. Like Peary, Henson often uses the possessive in writing about "my Esquimos" or "my boys" (28), and his assistants go unnamed until he gets closer to the Pole. His perspective resembles the colonial gaze Marie Louise Pratt identifies in *Imperial Eyes* (1992), for ex. in his tendency, shared with Peary, of seeing the Inghuits in swarms, as when he complains of their presence everywhere on the *Roosevelt*, where they hamper his work

(15). Like Diebitsch-Peary, he calls them "huskies" (15), and like Peary in *The North Pole*, he refers to the Inughuit as children (48), perhaps to suggest their innocence. Henson's tension-filled representation of the indigenous population suggests his adoption of dominant-culture values, or his support of them for his own benefit. These shared value systems include Henson's view of the North, his patriotism, and his faith in heroic masculinity, with a certain derogation of women in its wake.

Henson employs the standard war metaphors in describing the "fight with nature" in the Arctic that results in final "conquest," though one he ascribes to Peary's "fighting-power" and "deathless ambition" (45). Before departure, he writes: "I am waiting for the command to attack the savage ice-and rock-bound fortress of the North" (10). He bids "farewell to all the world" when he travels North (14), where he recalls episodes from "down in civilization" (35). Like other members of the expedition, he fails to recognize the culture and customs of the Arctic, a project the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen took on with *The People of the Polar North* (1908). Instead, Henson uses the US as a measuring stick, as when he finds the midnight light at Disco Island "almost as bright as early evening twilight in New York on the Fourth of July" (13), or when he compares the odor of the native families aboard the *Roosevelt* to the "aroma of an East Side lunch-room" (20). Like Peary and the others, he speaks of the "irresistible influence that beckoned us on" (26), suggesting the "wild,

misgiving mystery of the North Pole" (11) that drew himself, Peary, and earlier expeditions northward. Sherrill E. Grace argues in *Canada and the Idea of North* (2007) that the North is an idea as much as a mappable and measurable physical region (xii). In this vein, Henson participates in the Foucauldian discursive formation of the North to which Peary and others subscribed (Grace xiii).

Heroic (American) Masculinity

Henson sides with Peary in seeing their polar expedition as a patriotic, manly enterprise. Peary writes in *The North Pole*: "This expedition went north in an American-built ship, by the American route, in command of an American, to secure if possible an American trophy" (18). When Peary takes out the silk flag his wife had sewn years earlier and plants the Stars and Stripes on top of his igloo in Camp Morris K. Jesup, named after the Peary Arctic Club president, Henson realizes the importance of the site: the end of their race to the Pole. "A thrill of patriotism ran through me," he recalls, "and I raised my voice to cheer the starry emblem." He identifies with their shared colonial project, their right to claim the Pole for North America, symbolized by the flag, which he identifies with nation and masculine virtues—and with Peary: "this badge of honor and courage was also blood-stained and battlescarred, for at several places there were blank squares marking the spots where pieces had been cut out of the 'Farthest' of the brave bearer, and left with it the records in the cairns, as mute but as eloquent witnesses of his achievement" (42-43). Henson's patriotism

allows him to enter a symbolic relation with power and masculinity, which the Commander and his flag in this passage represent. Bloom explains: "The official public discourse available to Henson allows him to participate in the discovery of the North Pole, but not to claim an individual identity in relation to his success" (52). If Peary in the Arctic embodies a Super-Deluxe whiteness, Henson can only hope for the marginal position of the racial other, as he well knows. "I felt a savage joy and exaltation," he writes. "As in the past, from the beginning of history, wherever the world's work was done by a white man, he had been accompanied by a colored man" (43). The repetition of "man" suggests what is Henson's prize at the Pole. In "Manliness and Exploration" (2015), Michael Robinson explains: "To stand at the North Pole was to achieve an almost impossible feat, one that, in the doing, might express something rare, perhaps lost, in the industrial age of the Western world: The essential, elemental qualities of manliness itself" (90). Arctic explorers embodied "the strenuous life," with their Arctic struggles countering the "emasculating effects" of modern American culture (94). Peary had named his ship the *Roosevelt* in honor of Theodore Roosevelt, who by the early twentieth century had become "the patron saint of manly physical culture" (96). On July 7, 1908, Roosevelt went on board the vessel and bade his host a spirited good-bye (Weems 235).

Rather than distancing himself from this muscular nationalism, Henson cherishes the male comradery in the Arctic that racism prevented at home. His many first-person plural pronouns inscribe him in the masculine

community of Polar explorers, evident when he bids Marvin goodbye on March 26, 1908, having himself been selected to continue on to the Pole: "he congratulated me and we gave each other the strong, fraternal grip of our honored fraternity" (37). He condemns the Inughuit who had turned back at the "Big Lead," an open stretch of water preventing onward movement, as cowards (44-45), while he praises others, Peary especially, as heroic in looks and accomplishments. Back at the *Roosevelt*, "his steel-gray eyes flashed forth the light of glorious victory, and though he always carried himself proudly, there had come about him an air of erect assurance that was exhilarating" (48). Dr. Goodsell returns to the ship on June 15, with a heavy load of botanical samples, meat, and skins, and he too looks the role: "His physical equipment was the finest; a giant in stature and strength" (49). As Lena Aarekol argues in "Arctic Trophy Hunters, Tourism, and Masculinities, 1827-1914" (2016), "trophy hunting made possible performances of different forms of masculinity, not only the conquest and mastery of nature but also the interest in and care for nature" (123, cp. 137). This different kind of masculinity might explain Henson's fondness for Goodsell, "withal the gentlest of men having an even, mellow disposition that never was ruffled" (49). Goodsell, in short, resembles Henson and validates his own masculine performance.

With *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, Henson creates a gender-segregated text, which few women enter. The authors of "Living on the Edge: Inughuit Women and Geography of Contact" (2016) examine archival and archaeological

evidence of women's work for the 1905-06 and 1908-09 Peary expeditions and find that female labor "was a crucial element and essential to the safety of everyone involved." Nevertheless, they continue, "women and their experience have been essentially written out of the literature of Arctic exploration" (1). Significantly, in Henson's memoir, Ahlikahsingwah has made a suit for Professor Marvin of reindeer skin and polar bearskin (26), and Henson also mentions "Miss Bill," the young indigenous woman Diebitsch-Peary brought to the US and then returned. "She is known as a 'Holy Terror,'" Henson writes after mentioning her three marriages and subsequent desertions. "I do not know why, but I have my suspicions" (9). His suspicions do not include *piblokto* or Arctic hysteria, a catch-all term for various anxiety-induced illnesses, now explained by the strain of contact between Euro-American explorers and the Inughuit between 1890 and 1920 (Dick). Henson respects the leader of a dog team, "the King," but notes that "it is always the females who start the trouble" (19). Mrs. Peary appears briefly in his memoir, but his own (second) wife, Lucy Ross Henson, does not. To uphold his claim to manhood, Henson—who would upon return hold a job as messenger "boy" (Bloom 97)—dismisses or puts down women. In "Gendering Arctic Memory" (2021), Silke Reeploeg states: "Arctic expeditions, particularly those led by Robert Peary and others trained in military or naval traditions, produced a homogenized, 'hypermasculine region' . . . with a scientific and cultural history that created solid patterns of homosocial environments" (1063).

Henson's Silences

Henson treads carefully across the Arctic Ocean to get to the Pole, and cracks in his text suggest missing or silenced information. Peary wrote the Foreword to *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* and saw to its publication, and other readers might not appreciate an overly frank approach to difficult or tabooed topics either. Henson performs what post-colonial scholars have called "a haunted and depressed" writing back from the Center (Reeploeg 1063). The cost of Henson's adherence to white Arctic masculinity appears in asides only: "With the coming of daylight a man gets more cheerful, but it was still twilight when we left Cape Columbia, and melancholy would sometimes grip, as it often did during the darkness of midwinter" (26). Gazing out at the Arctic Ocean, Henson has at his back "the land of sadness" (26). Upon his return to the *Roosevelt*, he grieves over the death of Ross Marvin, who had accompanied Peary to 86° 38' north before the Commander ordered his return to Cape Columbia. Henson gives Marvin's death considerable narrative energy in his Chapter XVII, "Safe on the Roosevelt—Poor Marvin," but the circumstances of Marvin's death seem hazy.

In Henson's account, Marvin had traveled ahead of three Inughuit assistants and had disappeared through the thin ice. The Inughuit had found the ice newly formed around him, with only his fur clothes showing underneath. Instead of trying to rescue Marvin, they had unloaded all his belongings onto the ice to prevent his spirit from following them. Henson does not question what happened, but he

seems aware of alternative narratives: “I feel that had he been with civilized companions the sad story of Marvin’s death would not have to be told” (48). Had the Inughuit attempted to rescue the Professor, he writes, they could not have kept him alive, because of the freezing temperature and because “they knew nothing of restoring life to the drowned.” Henson calls the assistants “foolish boys” and concludes about Marvin’s death: “No blame can be laid on his childish companions” (48). The Danish explorer Peter Freuchen promotes a different version of Marvin’s death in *Min Grønlandske Ungdom* [My Greenlandic Youth] (1936):

Inukitsork was quite exhausted, and Marvin believed that he was too heavy a burden on their sledge teams. It was when they hurried home after having placed cairns for Peary’s North Pole camp. Therefore, Marvin ordered Inukitsork to be left behind in an igloo and move forward without him. But the two others—one was Inukitsork’s cousin Qidlugtoq—refused to abandon him. A quarrel ensued and Qidlugtoq shot the professor. (233, my translation)

In 2005, Kenn Harper offered a fuller version of the event and explained that the truth came out when “Qilluttooq” had been converted to Christianity and confessed to the missionary in Thule, where Freuchen ran the trade station, that he had shot Marvin, whose behavior had grown increasingly irrational. Because Henson repeatedly excuses the Inughuit by stressing their innocence, he may have wished to silence this different narrative.

Henson’s account of the final Poleward journey has its own gaps. Peary rides a sledge in the rear for parts of the exhausting marches, weakened by insomnia and impatience: “I do not think that he slept for one hour from April 2 until after he had loaded us up and ordered us to go back over our old trail, and I often think that from the instant when the order to return was given until the land was again sighted, he was in a continuous daze” (42). When Henson believes their journey has ended at the Pole, he ungloves his right hand and extends it “to congratulate him on the success of their eighteen years of effort.” Peary does not take his hand, in Henson’s explanation perhaps because something got into his eyes, or the sun had caused him pain (43). After the first two marches back, Peary is “practically a dead weight” (45). Back on the *Roosevelt*, Peary shuts himself up in his cabin, to Henson’s surprise and chagrin: “I wondered when the Commander would want to see me” (47). In the following chapter, Henson wonders again about Peary’s behavior over the next three weeks: “I would catch a fleeting glimpse of Commander Peary, but not once in all of that time did he speak to me” (48). Henson gives no further explanation in his text, but at the age of eighty-eight, he disclosed in an interview with Robert H. Fowler of the National Historical Society what had occurred. Peary had stayed in the back while Henson broke the trail, and he then “overran the Pole by two miles” (Fowler 48). When he had built his igloo, he confessed to Peary: “I think I’m the first man to sit on top of the world” (Fowler 49). Peary got so angry that Henson emptied his rifle, the only

one in the party, of all cartridges, to avoid being murdered in his sleep. Henson had not stopped short before the Pole, which Peary had planned to reach without him, and Peary never forgave him. But he ordered Henson to stay behind at Camp Columbia a few days before heading back to the *Roosevelt*. Henson explains: "He wanted to be the first to take the news back. I didn't care" (Fowler 50). Bloom finds that with this alternative narrative, "Henson presents himself as not only the true discoverer of the North Pole but also cleverer than Peary by showing how he was able to outwit Peary at his own game" (100).

Upon his return to the *Roosevelt*, Peary was informed that Dr. Frederick Cook claimed to have reached the Pole on April 21, 1908—a year earlier. Peary refuted his claim in the *New York Times* by stating that Cook had "simply handed the public a gold brick" (MacMillan 268). This statement cost Peary considerable good-will, but the Cook controversy raged on. Henson devotes most of Chapter XX to the story, which he and others at Etah, including Etookahshoo and Ahpellaah, the men who had been with Cook for a year, found "so ridiculous and absurd that we simply laughed at it" (54). He knew Cook well from a stay with his relatives during a bout of eye sickness and from two previous Peary expeditions: "Aside from his medical ability, we had no faith in him whatever. He was not even good for a day's work, and the idea of his making such an astounding claim as having reached the Pole was so ludicrous that, after our laugh, we dropped the matter altogether" (54). Henson sides wholeheartedly with Peary, but

his chapter suggests that he is not as silent in this matter as he claims to be: "I feel that all of the debts of gratitude have been liquidated by my silence in this controversy, and I will have nothing more to say in regard to him and his claims" (55). But another significant silence resounds in Henson's memoir.

Both Henson and Peary had fathered sons with Inughuit women in the Arctic, Peary two and Henson one. Readers of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* will know that Henson adopted an orphaned boy, Kudlooktoo, while on Red Cliff and converted him into a "presentable Young American" (9), but he fades out of Henson's life and text after this presentation. For Peary, sexual relations with Inughuit women were part of his plan: "Is it asking too much of masculine human nature to expect it to remain in an Arctic climate enduring constant hardship, without one relieving feature. Feminine companionship not only causes greater contentment, but as a matter of both mental and physical health and the retention of the top notch of Manhood it is a necessity" (Weems 72). In a book review essay for *Inuit Studies*, "Sex, Lies, and Northern Explorations" (2008), Murielle Nagy warns against explaining Peary's behavior with a "so-called 'traditional practice' of exchange of wives between Inuit partners," since he did not include his own wife in the arrangement. In 1900, when Mrs. Peary met Ahlikasingwah, who told her Peary had fathered her infant, Peary remained unapologetic (172). Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen engaged liberally in this sort of feminine companionship (Bown xxi), rooted in white

explorers' power and privilege. Niels Barfoed reveals in his Rasmussen biography that a former Inughuit mistress of Rasmussen's, Arnarulunguak, was married off to one of Peary's sons (398). Barfoed also states that Rasmussen travelled in the Arctic for the sake of white men only (408).

In *North Pole Promise: Black, White, and Inuit Friends* (2017), S. Allen Counter provides details in his chapter "The Secret Sons." Peary had two sons with Ahlikasingwah, one in 1906, when Henson's son with Akatingwah was also born. Counter writes that all participants of the Arctic expeditions knew this "fiercely kept secret," which would have ruined Peary's reputation in the US and dimmed his achievement with Henson at the Pole. They subscribed, as did Henson, to the "code of silence" surrounding the sexual relations of white men with women of color in this era. Counter notes that both Peary and Henson left the Arctic forever in 1909: "It was the last time the boys saw their fathers" (34-35). Counter invited the two surviving, eighty-year-old sons, Kali Peary and Anaukaq Henson, to the US in the summer of 1987 and found the American Hensons eager to meet their new relatives, while the Pearys kept their distance, except for Kali's brief visit to Robert Peary Jr. and his wife's home in Maine. Jean Craighead George, who reviewed Counter's work in "Written in the Ice" (1991), notes especially that Kali found it hard to talk about his father, who "did not help me or my mother in any way" (33). Henson remains in his text as quiet as the grave in Woodlawn Cemetery his son visited, but the trip resulted

in Henson's removal to Arlington and new interest in Polar exploration.

Henson ends his memoir with what Foy calls "a homosocial fantasy": "I long to see them all again! The brave, cheery companions of the trail in the North. I long to see again the lithe figure of my Commander! and to hear again his clear, ringing voice urging and encouraging me onward, with his 'Well done, my boy'" (189). The fantasy demands that Henson retreat to a position of subservience, signaled by "my Commander" and "my boy," positions contradicting Henson's wish for comradeship and equality. This tension also persists in his final literary reference to himself as Othello, followed by two lines from Kipling's "L'Envoi," which conclude his memoir: "The Old Trail!/ The Trail that is always New!" (57). Caught between ideologies of race and imperialism, Henson attempts to inscribe himself into the masculine community of Arctic exploration and the ideology of racial uplift that Washington introduced. Instead, he remains "a mere shadow in the heart of whiteness" (Foy 39), a "son of the tropics" displaced in Arctic discovery and often ignored, except in his own text.

The Great Peary?

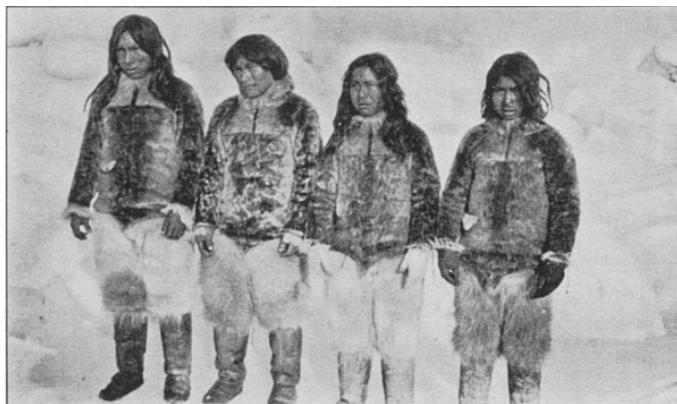
Peary moved on to honors and awards, the Thanks of Congress, a promotion to Rear Admiral and two terms as the president of The Explorers Club before he retired in 1911. He embodied the muscular American manhood promoted by President Roosevelt, who sent the 1908-09 expedition off on the ship named

after him. Recalling his youth in Greenland, Freuchen expresses his admiration for Peary on behalf of Arctic explorers as he follows in his footsteps near Navy Cliff, where Peary in 1892 had incorrectly mapped a canal:

We can thank Peary for much of what we now know of Arctic conditions. I felt deeply honored to stand here in his famous spot. The few matches, here for twenty years, his footsteps, still visible in the gravel, and the rocks his hands had touched and used for cairns became for me holy relics; they meant much more to me than the many stories I had heard about him, and the books written about and by him. (146, my translation)

Peary looms large in the scholarship on Arctic exploration, which traditionally focuses on the tenacity and courage of individual explorers. In the translated study *Polarforskningens Helte* [The Heroes of Polar Research] (1963), which features Peary on the cover, Ralph K. Andrist structures his book around individual explores and gives Peary alone credit for reaching the North Pole. Focusing on Peary's dogged Polar ambition, scholars have individualized the quest for the Pole as one man's stubborn, even maniacal polar quest, at the cost of his African American fellow traveler, the Inughuit, and the capitalist and nationalist interests that funded Peary's expeditions. But Peary's reputation has waned, due first to the Cook controversy and later because of the stolen meteorites, the unflattering Minik affair, the abandonment of his mixed-race sons, his hegemonic masculinity, and the colonial

project sponsored by Teddy Roosevelt, whose statue in front of the American Museum of Natural History, where Minik's father's bones were exhibited, was dismantled in January 2022 (Reuters). Peary's claim to have reached the Pole has also been disproved. In *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction?* (1973), Dennis Rawlins doubted both Cook's and Peary's results. In May 1984, the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* published an article with a title that in English would read: "Neither Cook nor Peary Reached the North Pole: The former Revealed to be a Hoax while he was celebrated in Copenhagen" (Thomsen II:3). On August 22, 1984, John Noble Wilford's "Doubts Cast on Peary's Claim to Pole" appeared in *The New York Times* (Section B, 7). Finally, in 1988, British explorer Wally Herbert concluded in a *National Geographic* article "Commander Robert E. Peary: Did He Reach the Pole?" that he did not, though his expedition might have come as close as 30 to 60 miles from the Pole (404). John E. Weems took on the Peary myth in *Peary: The Explorer and the Man* (1988). Nonetheless, William E. Molett fiercely defended the 1908-09 expedition and its claim to the Pole in *Robert Peary and Matthew Henson at the North Pole* (1996). And Herbert still praised the "driving force, purpose, commitment, motivation of the man, this giant of a man, for he is the man in all of us" (413), thus consolidating Peary's status as a masculine role model. Cook supporter Farley Fowatt agreed in *The Polar Passion* (1967) (12). In "a throw-back to Peary's days," Will Steger and Paul Schurke headed a seven-man, one-woman expedition to reach the Pole, "solely by our own power and



GS03: "Ooqueah, Odaq, Egingwah and Sigluk at the North Pole."

perseverance and that of our forty-nine sled dogs" (4). Their successful journey, which the leaders describe in *North to the Pole* (1987), was intended as an exercise in "faith to the indomitable power of the human spirit" (4). But they dedicated their book to "the spirit of Matthew Henson, the greatest unsung hero in the history of Arctic exploration" (n. p.).

Conclusion

If Peary's reputation has sunk, Henson's has risen. In a century when Black Lives Matter, he has in *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912) created a space that destabilizes the 1908-09 Peary narrative by producing a counter-discourse. Heidi Hansson writes in "Staging the Arctic 1819-1909 and 2014" (2015) that "the official discourse of Arctic heroism is in dialogue with alternative discourses where the value of both the Arctic project and heroic masculinity is less stable" (51). Like earlier African American autobiographers, Henson uses writing and reading to establish his claim for equality and agency, a strategy Totten ties to the slave narrative (53-54). He uses words

as tools to connect with his readership, and his various rhetorical strategies—questions to the audience, suspenseful drama, climactic constructions, humor, and a whiff of poetry—establish him as a credible and gifted narrator and eyewitness. Like Frederick Douglass, he also controls the people around him through his pen. He evaluates members of the expedition, including the Commander and his wife, both through character sketches, subtle criticism, and omissions, and he credits his own multifaceted work for the expedition as a source of its success. He maneuvers across racial terrain with inscriptions of his own race and with a promotion of the Inughuit, without whom the American explorers would literally have died, as Lile Dick argues in "Aboriginal-European Relations During the Great Ages of North Polar Exploration" (2002). Henson recognizes the individuality and names of the native laborers, and he poses with all the four Inughuit men who helped Peary claim the Pole: Ooqueah, Ootah, Egingwah, and Seegloo. His navigation across the Arctic and social terrain entailed, however, his recognition, and even acceptance, of dominant value systems such as nationalism, colonialism, and hegemonic masculinity. Henson participated in the conspiracy of silence involving Marvin's death, the race to the Pole and back, and the sons both he and Peary abandoned to their fate in the Arctic. The result, as *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* demonstrates, is a series of dilemmas, or contradictions, which Henson's participation in Arctic adventures necessitated and required. Many roles compete in his recollection of the North Pole expedition, where he found the community, the sense of

belonging, and the racial intermingling the US did not offer. Together the Commander and his fellow explorer had caught the “Arctic fever” (Peary 20), and together they raced to the Pole, which only for Peary made possible the fame he had dreamed of—and predicted—as a boy. For Henson, the journey North did not follow the path to liberty that Douglass and others had mapped, and his memoir did not become the “narrative of ascent” that would extend the “geography of freedom” into Arctic terrain (Foy 35). With *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, Henson broke the icy road to full recognition and came closer to this goal, if still not close enough.

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