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Sylvia Wynter in the Arctic: early modern expeditionary narratives and the construction of 'Man'

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Abstract *This article locates Martin Frobisher's voyages to the North American Arctic in 1576, 1577 and 1578 in relation to the thought of Jamaican critic and theorist Sylvia Wynter. For Wynter, the post-Columbian settlement and colonisation of the Americas functioned as both a crucible and proving ground for a new, racialised understanding of the human, which she calls 'Man'. Focusing on expeditionary narratives written by sailors on Frobisher's three voyages to Baffin Island, the article treats these narratives as examples of travel writing, a genre occupying the mobile, labile threshold between history and fiction which has often mediated the comprehension of difference, hierarchy and (international) order. Focusing on these texts' treatments of race and otherness, the article argues that the Arctic was a key site where the terms of relationality governing English interaction with the so-called 'New World' and its people were hesitatingly, clumsily and often violently worked out.*

Introduction

On 8 November 1577, an Inuit man was buried at St Stephen's church in Bristol. 'Calichoughe' (as his captors called him) had arrived in England seven weeks earlier, after being taken hostage by the English sailor Martin Frobisher on Baffin Island in what is now northeastern Canada (Settle in Hakluyt 1904 [1589], vol. 7, 216). Despite the foreshortened lives of Calichoughe and the two other captives brought back to England by Frobisher that autumn (an Inuit woman named Arnaq and her infant, Nutaaq, both of whom died later that winter), their brief presence in England nevertheless generated a great deal of excitement and curiosity. William Adams, writing in 1625, describes how 'many [people] beheld' Calichoughe paddling around Bristol harbour in his kayak, demonstrating his hunting skills to the assembled onlookers by harpooning ducks, while Edward Dodding, a doctor who examined Calichoughe's body after his death, expressed 'bitter... grie[f] and sad[ness]' that Queen Elizabeth's 'great hope of seeing him' would remain unfulfilled (Adams 1910

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[1625], 115; Dodding in Collinson 1867, 190–191; see also Cheshire et al. 1980, 30, 41).

Calichoughe, Arnaq and Nutaaq were not the first people from the so-called ‘New World’ to arrive in England, or even the first Inuit to be captured by Frobisher: on the first of his three voyages to Baffin Island, in 1576, Frobisher transported back to England an unnamed man who also died shortly after arrival. Yet, despite the enormous public interest in his prisoners and the effort expended in seizing them, human traffic was not one of Frobisher’s primary goals on any of his three voyages. On his first expedition, his aim was not to settle, conquer or even waylay in America but rather to bypass it entirely in pursuit of ‘that short and easie passage [to Asia] by the North-west, which we haue hetherto so long desired’ (Hakluyt 1850 [1582], 13). After finding deposits of a mineral that hinted at the presence of gold, however, Frobisher and his financiers’ ambitions changed. His second and third voyages were primarily mining expeditions, with the final trip also involving an abortive attempt at settlement.¹

How should Frobisher’s hostage-taking be understood, given its ostensible marginality to his voyages’ stated aims of exploration, extraction and settlement? What terms of relationality guided his engagement with the people he encountered in the Arctic? How did these terms shift and alter in the process of encounter? And how might these events be situated in relation to the (settler-)colonial formations that emerged in their wake? These questions matter because England at the time was not yet a major imperial power, but an isolated and insular nation that struggled to project force abroad: the 1558 Act of Separation had formally confirmed the dislocation of its church from Rome, in the same year that the country lost its last territorial foothold on the European mainland at Calais (Knapp 1992; see also Lemerrier-Goddard & Regard 2013, 6). In this context, Frobisher’s voyages made an important contribution to the emergence of a distinctively English self-identity as a global actor, jostling for position alongside more advanced European colonial projects. In the words of George Best, an officer on Frobisher’s second and third voyages, ‘we may truly infer, that the Englishman in these our days, in his notable discoveries, to the Spaniard and Portingale is nothing inferior ... For what hath the Spaniarde or Portingale done by the southeast and southwest, that the Englishman by the northeast and northwest hath not countervailed the same?’ (Best in Collinson 1867, 19; see also Fuller 2008). Notwithstanding the prominent place that nineteenth-century Arctic expeditions came to occupy in later British colonial imaginaries, however, the region nevertheless remains marginal in discussions about the early-modern formation and development of empire.

This article addresses this gap. I draw on Sylvia Wynter’s account of the transformations in European ‘subjective understanding’ triggered by Columbus’s voyages in order to position Frobisher’s interactions with the Baffin Island Inuit as important and overlooked sites where these transformations took place (Wynter 1994, 27). Columbus, Wynter argues, set in motion a re-evaluation of the boundaries of the human that not only enabled Europeans to orient themselves in the Americas but also informed the programmes of

¹ The ore in question turned out to be worthless, precipitating a legal disagreement over the payment of sailors’ wages and his chief funder’s eventual bankruptcy (Collinson 1867, 317–363).

dispossession, plantation, conquest and genocide that they pursued there. Given England's relative isolation from Catholic Europe in the sixteenth century, however, it is important to understand how this process might have variably played out in different places and at different times. To this end, I argue that Frobisher's voyages are key sites where the extractive, exploitative terms of England's colonial engagement with the 'New World' and its people were hesitatingly, clumsily and often violently worked out. Drawing on Wynter's work, I thus centre the Arctic as an underappreciated and atypical space at which to trace 'the advent and formation of coloniality' (Mignolo 2015, 111).

In order to make this case, I focus on expeditionary narratives written by sailors on each of Frobisher's three voyages to Baffin Island. These formed the primary sources of information about his expeditions for sixteenth-century audiences (excepting those in Bristol and London who saw Calichoughe, Arnaq, Nutaaq and their unnamed compatriot in the flesh). Although framed as straightforwardly 'true' accounts, narratives of this sort were often unreliable or even fantastical in ways that could not easily be identified by their readers (Jahn 2000, 36). For this reason, they are not straightforwardly 'historical' texts. Instead, I understand them as examples of travel writing, occupying the mobile, labile threshold between history and fiction, memory and the imagination. Building on existing studies of travel writing in International Relations [IR], I argue that these expeditionary narratives position the colonial encounters they describe within wider scientific, theological, and poetic discourses about the nature, limits, and variable value of humanity. In so doing, they provide 'a strong heuristic for comprehending the development of modern and contemporary expressions of the international' (Guillaume 2011, 137).

The article proceeds in three sections. In the first, I outline Sylvia Wynter's account of 'the 1492 event', and the racialised 'genre of the human' that it helped to bring into being (1994, 5). In the second, I briefly survey the IR literature on travel writing, and locate sixteenth-century expeditionary narratives within this literary tradition. In the third, I look at narratives from Frobisher's three Arctic voyages with a view to understanding how they contributed to the negotiation and formation of the racialised and quasi-secular genre of the human that Wynter calls 'Man'. With this in mind, I focus first on these texts' treatment of race, and second on their ambivalent 'interest in preserving... and in erasing difference' (Greenblatt 1991, 108–109). A conclusion makes the case for more research into the Arctic as a site of colonial worldmaking.

Genres of the human: Sylvia Wynter and the '1492 event'

In her essay '1492: A New World View', Sylvia Wynter describes how the post-Columbian settlement and colonisation of the Americas functioned as both a crucible and proving ground for a newly racialised conception of the human (1994, 13, 34). Columbus's voyages thus function in Wynter's writing as a fuse, setting in motion a shift away from theocentric visions of geographic and political order towards a more humanistic mode of subjective understanding. At stake in this account is thus what Wynter calls a 'politics of being': a struggle waged over the contours and boundaries of the human (2003, 319).

The centrality of the ‘1492 event’ to this struggle is predicated on the unanswerable challenges that it posed to Scholastic cosmographies, which had judged a western continent to be theologically (and thus materially) impossible (Wynter 2003, 274). These accounts divided the earth into habitable and uninhabitable ‘zones’, with the former centred on Jerusalem and circumscribed by the Atlantic to the west and Cape Bojador to the south, at what is now the border between Mauritania and Western Sahara (Wynter 1994, 22; 2003, 278–279).² Columbus, along with the Portuguese (who had traded with people from the supposedly uninhabitable ‘torrid zone’ since the 1440s, building a fort at Elmina in modern-day Ghana in 1482), exploded such theories by demonstrating that the world’s supposedly ‘uninhabitable’ spaces were anything but.

The collapse of Scholastic geographic order had consequences for the ‘genre of the human’ that it sustained (Wynter 2003, 269; see also Parker 2018). Most obviously, Columbus’s encounters with people who lived in a place where people were not supposed to be demanded a schema through which they (and their positionality with respect to their Christian interlocutors) could be made legible. Columbus initially took possession of the islands on which he landed for the Spanish Crown on the basis of their inhabitants’ ‘idolatry’, implying ‘a providential destiny for the spread of Christendom to be effected through the vessel of the earthly state and *its* quest for territorial expansion’ (Wynter 1994, 28, emphasis in original; see also Greenblatt 1991). The Spanish right to sovereignty in the ‘New World’ was thus initially predicated on Christendom’s providential right to expand its dominion over all non-Christian peoples: ‘there could be no longer *habitable* and [un]*inhabitable*, *inside* the sheepfold or *out*. All was now one sheepfold, and if not, was intended to be *made so*’ (Wynter 1994, 27–28, emphasis in original; 1997, 151).

This syncretism between expansionary and evangelical ambition did not come without its tensions. Most notably, it still ceded temporal power to Rome as the true Church in whose name conquest was legitimised (Wynter 1994, 34; Pagden 1986, 30). In addition, however, its ascription of ‘idolatry’ to people who had not explicitly rejected Christ (having hitherto existed beyond Christendom’s ken) raised theological concerns about the category’s suitability as grounds for expropriation (Wynter 2003, 293). ‘Christ seeks souls, not property’, the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas wrote in the early 1550s. ‘He who wants a large part of mankind to be such that ... he may act like a ferocious executioner toward them, press them into slavery, and through them grow rich, is a despotic master, not a Christian’ (1974 [1552], 40).

Las Casas’ 1550–1551 debate with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda not only ‘offered the first systematic engagement with the question of Spanish rule in the New World and its treatment of Indigenous inhabitants, [but] also revealed the process by which the world of the Indian could be translated into the language of the Renaissance’ (Seth 2010, 43). For Wynter, this process involved the institution of a ‘desupernaturalized’ genre of the human on whose basis the Spanish state’s right to land and resources in the Americas could be renewed. This was a differentiated, hierarchical conception of the human, oriented around a rational, male, European citizen-subject whom Wynter calls

² This is the world depicted in the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, for example (see e.g. Branch 2013, 44, 106–108).

'Man', and who stood at the summit of a classification that defined people not according to their place within or without God's grace, but rather according to perceived 'natural' differences, including reason and its corollary, race (Pagden 1986; Seth 2010, 43–45).³ With this move, the Spanish empire re-legitimised its acts of conquest in terms that no longer required an evangelistic hermeneutic. Instead, the Spaniards could position themselves (because 'rational', because Spaniards) as *naturally* rather than *culturally* or *religiously* different from the Americans they dispossessed and the Black Africans they transported across the Atlantic as slaves. 'Man – in Wynter's formulations – [thus] bec[ame] the measuring stick through which all other forms of being [we]re measured': it functioned as an ideal-type, systematically 'overrepresented' as if coterminous with humankind itself, in such a way as to frame any deviation from its terms as a deficiency (McKittrick 2015, 3; Wynter 2003; Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 154).

As Wynter and other decolonial theorists have long made clear, this historical 'expansion of thought' continues to reverberate in the present, lying at 'the foundations of the post-1492 polities of the Caribbean and the Americas, which, if in a new variant, continue to be legitimated by the nineteenth-century colonial systems of Western Europe, as well as the continuing hierarchies of our present global order' (1994, 34; 2003; see also Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 9–10; Mignolo 2015; Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 154–172; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Quijano 2000, 2007). It is in this capacity that Wynter's thought might most directly be brought to bear on the discipline of International Relations [IR], illuminating as it does the origins of many of the concepts, divisions and hierarchies that continue to structure both international order and the scholarship produced about it. As Beate Jahn argues, 'The discovery of Amerindian peoples ... did not only have implications for ... "domestic" European social and political thought but for its emerging conceptions of the international, too' (2000, xiv). In its account of the 'politics of being' underpinning early modern world-systemic changes, Wynter's thought shows precisely how, why, and to what end this was the case.

Yet while Wynter's account of Man's emergence usefully enables IR scholars to situate the hierarchies and imbalances that continue to structure today's global order within a wider historical context, it nevertheless remains largely Hispano-centric, moving from Columbus's voyage through the sixteenth century debate between las Casas and de Sepúlveda (see also Jahn 2000, 33–71). Given that Wynter understands her narrative to describe a discourse of *global* reach, however – and given England/Britain's subsequent position of global hegemony – questions remain about when and how the shift she describes came to be adopted by Spain's rivals for territory and advantage in the so-called 'New World'. From a perspective like Wynter's that acknowledges 'the relativity and original multiplicity of our genres of being human', one would expect this new humanistic vision of Man to percolate partially and gradually, diverting, branching and multiplying in response to blockages and practical

³ Wynter distinguishes between two stages in Man's development, which she terms Man1 and Man2. The former corresponds to 'Man' as I outline it here, while the latter refers to a 'bio-economic' vision of the human that emerges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that reconfigures the human around bourgeois ideals that privilege Western models of progress at the expense of racialised spaces of 'underdevelopment' (2003: 315–318).

contingencies including a Reformation that had already done much to decentre Scholastic understandings of geography, order, and Man's place within them (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 31). Despite a widespread recognition among decolonial theorists that 'the forms and the effects of... cultural coloniality have been different as regards to times and cases', however, the Arctic has rarely figured as a site at which these variable 'forms and effects' have been produced (Quijano 2007, 169).

This matters because Frobisher's Arctic voyages took place under conditions where neither trade routes nor territory could be guaranteed, where the barriers to European settlement were insurmountable, and in which theocentric frames of reference had already been displaced by a reformation that had elevated a provincial monarch and state above the Universal Church. For these reasons, a form of coloniality emerges that sits at partial remove from the plantation and slavery economies that marked European (and English) expansionism elsewhere. While for Wynter these systems come hand in glove with Man's emergence as 'the effects of Western Europe's epochal shift' in subjective understanding, for Frobisher and his men, on the other hand, questions about the shape and limits of humanity come to the foreground as ends in themselves (1994, 13). By forcibly transporting Calichoughe, Arnaq and Nutaaq back to England, meanwhile, Frobisher brought these questions back to the metropole, as problems that demanded attention if the nation was adequately to situate itself in relation to an emerging global order.

In this article I thus draw on Wynter's genealogy of Man in order to trace and evaluate the politics of being underpinning sixteenth-century English voyages to the Arctic. In so doing, I establish the differential, uneven emergence across multiple times and spaces of what Wynter, following Aníbal Quijano, calls the 'coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom' (2003, 268; see Quijano 2000, 2007). This concept refers to the epistemic, social and political systems – including but not limited to race – that not only structured European colonial projects throughout the early modern period but also persist today.

Methodologically, to trace Man's emergence, and its engendering of colonial systems and practices, requires an understanding of 'how the human represents to itself the life that it lives'; what Wynter elsewhere describes as a 'poetics' oriented around 'symbolic, representational processes' (1994, 8; 2003, 328). This entails a focus on the cultural programmes through which 'the human' is constituted as a social, political subject – one co-identified with certain forms of life to whom particular ethical obligations are owed and distinct from others to whom no such obligations exist (Wynter 1994, 8, 31). In the present case this informs my turn to expeditionary narratives, which provide the most thorough accounts available of Frobisher's voyages as experienced by those under his command. In addition, they also offer insight into the epistemic and hermeneutic frameworks undergirding these voyages' articulations of coloniality, at the moment and in the process of these frameworks' formation and negotiation.

Crucially, these expeditionary narratives are not texts in which the terms of relationality governing Frobisher and his men's conduct towards the Inuit are settled or final: in contrast, they are texts in which these terms are in the process of being worked out. As Mary C. Fuller states, 'the earliest history of the English in America was hardly one of mastery or proficiency... if the history

of those early decades is about any one thing, it is about the ways in which the failure of voyages and colonies was recuperated by rhetoric' (1995, 12). It is precisely this negotiation between failure and 'recuperation' that illuminates the politics of being informing English exploration in the Arctic, as well as its impact on the thought and practice of subsequent English empire-builders.

Travel writing and early modern expeditionary narratives

Notwithstanding its 'received status as a minor literary genre', travel writing has become an important resource for IR scholars concerned with processes of identity construction, practices of differentiation and othering, and the imaginative geographies of empire (Lisle 2006, 1; see also Campbell 1992, 105–152; Jahn 2000, 33–45). Within this literature the narratives of Columbus and other European interlopers in the Americas figure prominently as crucial sources for scholars seeking to understand the practices of contact, communication and conquest that constitute what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls 'the first moment of globality' (2002, 841). For these scholars as for Wynter, the 'discovery' of new continents and peoples represented a 'cultural shock' demanding new frameworks through which the newly-expanded world could be parsed and known (Jahn 2000, 33). This was a demand that navigators as well as jurists and theologians felt compelled to address, with the travelogue providing an important medium through which to do so. For this reason, Xavier Guillaume argues that travel writing is 'one of the primary modes by which difference has been historically appraised, constructed, and represented in the modern West': the genre is understood to illuminate a key moment in the development of a stratified, racialised and Eurocentric global order (2011, 137).

In Wynter's terms, early modern travelogues can be located among the 'discursive formations, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge [that] play [a 'central role'] in the performative enactment of all... genres of being... human' (1994, 31). This article's focus on early modern expeditionary narratives is thus intended to facilitate an interrogation not only of the identities and discursive frames structuring particular interpersonal encounters, but also of the wider politics of being that these encounters (re)produced. It is in this capacity that these expeditionary narratives can inform an understanding of global hierarchies and orders in the process of their emergence, development, and negotiation.

Stephen Greenblatt notes that 'what Renaissance readers (and institutions like trading companies) generally want[ed] in travel literature [wa]s an accurate account of the other, a clear view of the naked truth' (1991, 147). Arctic expeditionary narratives often claimed this accuracy and clarity in their titles: *A True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discoverie ...*, *A True Reporte of the Laste Voyage into the West and Northwest Regions ...*, and so on. Yet despite these claims to straightforward honesty, one can inevitably identify what Stephen Greenblatt describes as 'the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text' (2005, 5). Expeditionary narratives thus played other roles beyond the rote enumeration of tasks and events: they 'had not only to describe what was seen and done

but also to defend their projects, before, during, and after the fact' (Fuller 1995, 14–15).

This latter task was especially important in the Arctic context given that each and every expedition to the American north was an irrefutable failure: none resulted in settlement or plantation, none opened up major trade routes, none found major resource deposits. In this context,

...the task of writing soon became that of rationalising the difference between catastrophic results and infinite expectations, or... between Spanish precedents and English attempts at imitation... In text after apologetic text, discovery of the self substitutes for discovery of... a new passage to Cathay. Each failure becomes a misunderstanding, pointing the way to yet deeper occulted truths (Fuller 1995, 14–15)

The Arctic, in the minds of the English, was thus a product of the imagination – a focal point for fantasies of progress, profit, racial supremacy and moral self-improvement – as much as it was a physical landscape. From this perspective, the material failures of Frobisher's voyages did not debar them from altogether more profound triumphs: in narration, the voyages' failures could be sublimated into deeper quests for individual and national self-realisation that were oriented around Frobisher's encounters with the Inuit and the opportunity these encounters provided for an assertion of English racial and moral superiority (Todorov 1995, 60–70; see also Lisle 2006, 44–47).

Two additional factors facilitated this framing. The first was that a variety of editors – most notably, Richard Hakluyt – reprinted a wide range of expeditionary narratives as part of larger compilations whose purpose was explicitly to promote English colonial expansion. Hakluyt's two major works – *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America and The Islands Adjacent* (1582) and the *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589) – sought both to position England as a nation with a great navigational history and to advocate for its colonial advancement. *Divers Voyages*, for example, begins with a dedication to the poet Philip Sidney, who himself had a lifelong personal and financial interest in American colonization. In it, Hakluyt pleads for support in his mission to advance the cause of English colonisation of the Americas: 'surely if there were in vs that desire to aduance the honour of our countrie which ought to bee in euery good man, wee woulde not all this while haue foreslowne [i.e., forborne, neglected] the possessing of those lands, whiche of equitie and right appertaine vnto vs' (1850 [1582], 8).⁴ Hakluyt's inclusion of narratives from Frobisher's voyages – despite their ostensible failure – constituted them as exemplary instances of the 'desire to aduance the honour of our countrie' that he considered a necessary condition of English empire-building.

⁴ A clue as to the nature of this 'right' comes at the beginning of the third volume of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*, which begins with an account of 'The most ancient Discovery of the West Indies by Madoc the sonne of Owen Guyneth Prince of North-wales, in the yeere 1170' (1904 [1589], vol. 7, 133). Hakluyt cites this mythical journey of an exiled Welsh prince in order to argue that the land 'discovered' by Madoc 'must needs be some part of that Country of which the Spanyards affirme themselves to be the first finders... Whereupon it is manifest that that country was by Britaines discovered, long before Columbus led any Spanyards thither' (1904 [1589], vol. 7, 134).

Further expediting this interpretive move was the basic fact that ‘truth’ and ‘accuracy’ were hard to verify for the readers of sixteenth-century travelogues. As Beate Jahn notes, ‘the Europeans of the late Middle Ages were altogether incapable of distinguishing between the authenticity of an eyewitness account of China, like Marco Polo’s, and the fantastic tales of Sir John Mandeville’ (2000, 35–36). In the context of the Arctic, throughout the late sixteenth century the fictional lands of ‘Frisland’ and ‘Estotiland’ featured on many maps of the north Atlantic, shaping the expectations and imaginations of English sailors travelling to the region,⁵ while the mythical Straits of Anian, which represented the access point into the Northwest Passage from the Pacific Ocean, continued to feature in maps of the region as late as the 1760s. Arctic expeditionary narratives thus circulated in an intertextual ecosystem that also encompassed works of fiction or fancy from which they were not easily distinguishable. This formal inscrutability enabled these texts to be located within a textual environment that was at once historical and literary, ‘factual’ and ‘imaginative’, in turn enabling writers (and curators like Hakluyt) to position the voyages they described as both the fulfilment of England’s expeditionary past and as the harbinger of its glorious imperial future. If ‘colonial relations are constitutive of both the historical development of the genre [of travel writing] and its general poetics’, as Debbie Lisle argues, then the reverse is also true: travelogues likewise helped to define the scope and logic of colonial projects by contextualising them within broader narratives of national self-realisation and expansion (Lisle 2006, 58; see also Costa Lopez, this volume).

The article thus turns towards Martin Frobisher’s three voyages of 1576, 1577 and 1578, reading the expeditionary narratives written by officers and sailors on these expeditions as simultaneously descriptive and imaginative in purpose. These texts make partial and fumbling efforts to interpret a distant land and an unknown people, in such a way as to constitute the expeditions they describe – and their material failures – as moral and epistemic victories. It focuses on two aspects of these texts in particular: first, their treatment of race (which even in the context of the Baffin Island Inuit orbits around the figure of the Black African) and second their ambivalent understanding of the terms of relationality governing English activities in the American north.

Early modern expeditionary narratives and the construction of ‘man’

Martin Frobisher led expeditions to the North American Arctic for three successive summers in the 1570s, initially in search for a passage to Asia and later in order to mine an ore that his funders believed – incorrectly – to contain gold. An experienced mariner, Frobisher had engaged in both merchant trade and privateering for over two decades prior to his Arctic expeditions. Although his career had largely been focused on the seas around Britain and Ireland, he had also participated in two voyages to West Africa in 1553 and 1554 in order to trade for gold, ivory and pepper. On the second of these expeditions Frobisher was sent ashore at Shama (in what is now Ghana) as a ‘pledge of good faith’ while a trade was worked out for five local men who

⁵ This was largely thanks to the 1558 narrative published by Nicolò Zeno the Younger that purported to describe voyages undertaken by his forebears in the 1390s (see Major 1873).

would be taken back to England and trained as interpreters (Dimmock 2022, 37). Soon afterwards the English fleet were forced to retreat by Portuguese traders who themselves took Frobisher prisoner, and from whose possession he eventually made his way back to England (McDermott 2001, 28–44; Dimmock 2022, 36–40).

The commercial objectification and transport of the five Africans Frobisher was in effect traded for not only foreshadows England's developing interest in the transatlantic slave trade, but also Frobisher's own seizures of Inuit on his 1576 and 1577 voyages. These abductions were also ostensibly motivated by the need for interpreters, yet it is not immediately clear why the Arctic expeditions required such assistance in order to pursue their wider objectives (Best in Collinson 1867, 130). Given the enormous effort expended by Frobisher and his men in communicating with, trading with and wreaking extreme and often murderous violence upon the Baffin Island Inuit, however, it is clear that they believed these interactions to be central to their mission. Certainly, these encounters featured centrally in the expeditionary narratives written about his three voyages, as a way of justifying their failure either to establish settlements or to find a passage to Asia (Fuller 1995, 14).

Despite their apparent marginality to his voyages' stated goals and aims, Frobisher's interactions with the Baffin Island Inuit thus remain key to understanding the relationship between the narratives that accompanied his voyages and the wider 'politics of being' underpinning the contemporaneous expansion of English colonial ambition. In particular, while Frobisher and his men are undoubtedly representative of that 'particularly intense dream of possession' that for Stephen Greenblatt defines 'the whole experience of Europeans in America', the narratives they wrote about their voyages reveal an uncertain grasp of the terms of relationality by which 'possession' could be made legible and legitimate (1991, 121). I focus here on two related themes that illustrate this uncertainty. The first is race. In his narrative of 1578, Frobisher's second-in-command George Best attempts to classify the Inuit in relation to a racialised genre of the human oriented around Blackness. Best attempts to move beyond racial theories that understand skin colour to be a symptom of climate (theories that Best argues cannot account for the Inuit, who are darker than the English despite living further north than them). Instead, Best locates Blackness in the body itself, as the legacy of a biblical curse placed on Noah's son Cham (in Collinson 1867, 55–56). Yet this does not answer but rather defers questions about the Inuit's racial identity, given their dislocation from any sort of biblical inheritance (see Smith 2013).

Best's difficulties incorporating the Inuit into his racial schema exemplify a wider ambivalence regarding the nature of the Inuit's difference or otherness *vis-à-vis* their English aggressors. On the one hand, the Inuit are 'ignorant what mercy meaneth': implacably hostile savages worthy of nothing except cruelty, figures with whom no recognisably human relationship is possible (Best in Collinson 1867, 142). Yet on the other, the English desire to procure interpreters, and their continual efforts to trade and barter with the Inuit (albeit on grossly unequal terms) reveal a partial and conditional belief in the possibility of their assimilation into a recognisable genre of the human. Even absent Columbus's evangelistic fervour, one can thus see Frobisher and his men 'queasily oscillat[ing] between the motives of exploitation and

conversion', invoking killing and kindness, massacre and mercy, theft and trade sometimes at the very same stroke (Greenblatt 1991, 108). Taken together, an analysis of these themes reveals Man not as a *fait accompli* but rather in a halting, uncertain and contingent process of formation.

Racialised genres of the human in George best's True Discourse

For Sylvia Wynter, Man's emergence demanded new, 'desupernaturalized' terms of relationality through which European expansion and expropriation could be made legitimate. In this context, race functioned as a 'classificatory logic' that facilitated the subjugation of both Indigenous Americans and Black Africans by constituting them as distinct but related parts of the same secular taxonomy (Wynter 2003, 300; see also Wynter 1997, 159; Shakes 2006, 294–295). Man's emergence thus instituted a hierarchical 'Chain of Being' that stretched from European Man downwards to his Black African other, in turn enabling the racial politics of European settlement in the Americas to intersect symbiotically with the racial politics of transatlantic slavery (Wynter 2003, 300). In this way, 'from the very origin, the issue of race... was and is fundamentally the issue of the genre of the human, Man' (2003, 288).

George Best served as Frobisher's lieutenant in 1577 and as the captain of one of the fifteen ships that comprised his fleet in 1578. He published *A True Discourse ...*, a narrative of all three voyages, in the short period between returning from the final voyage and the subsequent discovery that the ore the fleet had mined did not, in fact, contain gold (Smith 2013, 237). In this light, one might expect Best's narrative to be structured around the voyages' still-apparent commercial success. In fact, Best begins with a treatise intending 'to prove all partes of the worlde habitable' in contradistinction to Scholastic cosmographies – a treatise that contains a lengthy digression on the origins of Blackness (in Collinson 1867, 53–56).

Why does Best require a racial framework at all in order to tell the story of English exploration in the high north, and why does that framework have to be organised around a theory of Blackness? A clue comes when he states that

our people of Meta Incognita (of whome and for whome this discourse is taken in hande) that were broughte this last yeere into Englande, were all generallie of the same coloure that many nations be, lying in the middest of the middle Zone [i.e., the 'torrid' or 'equatorial' zone, synonymous in most sixteenth-century writing with sub-Saharan Africa] (in Collinson 1867, 54).

Two features of this statement require comment. The first is that the people of 'Meta Incognita' – the name given to Baffin Island – are those 'of whom and for whom this discourse is taken in hande'. In other words, Best's narrative explicitly constitutes the Inuit as its animating problem: who are these people who live in a supposedly uninhabitable zone of the earth's surface, and how can they be classified, interpreted, and known?

The second is that Best describes the Inuit as 'the same colour that many nations be... in the... middle Zone'. Best does not explicitly state which 'nations' he is referring to: although this passage comes shortly after a reference to 'an Ethiopian as black as a cole', he also notes how 'under the

Equinoctiall in America, and in the East Indies, and in the Ilands Moluccae the people are not blacke, but tauney and white' (in Collinson 1867, 53). Whether 'blacke' or 'tauney and white', however, Best clearly sees the Inuit's racial identity as a problem that must be disentangled before he can proceed with his narrative. In pursuit of this goal, Best turns immediately to Africa: whether the Inuit are themselves Black or not, it is through the lens of Blackness that their racial identity must be appraised, measured and defined. Implicit in this formulation, of course, is the assumption that Blackness, whatever it is, is a deviation from the norm: it is something that demands explanation, and just as importantly it is something that demands explanation *in order for* Best to be able to ascribe a racial identity to the Inuit, define their relation to the English, and from there move on to narrate the voyages themselves.

Best first notes that the Inuit's dark skin disqualifies the common sixteenth-century idea that race was determined by climate. Citing an 'Ethiopian brought into England' who fathered with a 'faire English woman' a son 'in all respects as blacke as the father was', Best argues that 'blacknes proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, could any thing alter' (in Collinson 1867, 54). Best locates this 'infection' in the biblical curse visited on Noah's son Cham, who disobeyed a commandment not to engage in sexual intercourse during the Flood, fathering a child 'who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde' (in Collinson 1867, 56). While this move enables Best to cast race as a natural difference rather than as an environmental symptom, however, his racial theory comes bound to a geographic schema that entrenches the very Scholastic cosmography that his central argument otherwise seeks to move away from. If Blackness derives from the biblical curse that befell Cham, after all, this still leaves open questions about the geographical distribution of his 'posteritie': why do Cham's Black descendants occupy certain areas of the earth's surface and not others? Best addresses this problem by arguing that each of Noah's sons inherited one of the earth's continents:

after the water was vanished from off the face of the earth, and that the lande was dry, Sem chose that part of the land to inhabite in, which nowe is called Asia, and Japhet had that which now is called Europa, wherein wee dwell, and Africa remained for Cham. (in Collinson 1867, 56)

While this accounts for the Blackness of the 'Ethiopian', however, it leaves the Inuit's racial status uncertain: where does their racial otherness derive from, given their habitation of a continent excluded from this biblical inheritance? At the end of his narrative, Best returns to this question:

These people I judge to be a kind of Tartar, or rather a kind of Samoed, of the same sort and condition of life that the Samoeds bee to the Northeastwards beyond Moscovy ... by late conference with a friend of mine ... who hath great experience of those Samoeds and people of the Northeast, I find that in all their maner of living, those people of the Northeast, and these of the Northwest are like (in Collinson 1867, 281–282)

As 'Tartars', the Inuit can be assimilated into Best's biblically-oriented racial theory – but as Asians, not Africans, and therefore as descendants of Sem rather than the 'blacker and lothsome' Cham from whom the Ethiopian's racial otherness derives. For this reason, as Cassander Smith notes, Best's narrative 'destabilises the very bodies it is intended to stabilise', wrestling with but never finally resolving the Inuit's place within a global racial order (2013, 235). The vision of Man expressed by Best's narrative is thus partial and ambivalent, wedded both to the Inuit's 'by-nature-difference' from their European interlocutors and to this difference's foundation in a biblical geography that does not extend to the 'New World' in which the Inuit live (Wynter 2003, 296). In its incomplete departure from Scholastic cosmographies, Best thus renders the Inuit 'a nebulous, under-theorised presence' within a wider racial taxonomy that assumes whiteness as the norm, while remaining uncertain about the grounds through which this normality can be established (Smith 2013, 245).

As such, Best's account reveals how from the first moment of encounter, the terms of relationality governing English attitudes and actions towards Indigenous Americans were informed and mediated by Blackness. While for Wynter the Black African materialises only 'in the wake' of Man's emergence as 'the physical referent of [his] irrational/subrational Human other', for Best Blackness functions not as the consequence of Man's construction, but rather as its condition. Caught with one foot either side of Wynter's 'epochal shift', Best's narrative thus reveals how Blackness shaped English self-identity in the 'New World' even prior to settlement or widespread participation in the transatlantic slave trade.

Violence, otherness and ambivalent relationality

Best makes simultaneous appeals on one hand to Scholastic cosmographies that provide the Inuit and the English alike with a shared biblical inheritance, and on the other to racial theories that seek to establish natural differences between them. This exemplifies a wider ambivalence that is evident throughout the expeditionary narratives describing Frobisher's voyages, in which the Inuit are constituted as both irrevocably other from and yet also potentially akin to the English, informing an inconstant range of behaviours that vacillate between extremities of violence and entreaties to communicate and trade. While it is tempting to read this inconsistency as a form of hypocrisy, this implies an insincerity that is not at all present in the narratives of Best and his compatriots (see Greenblatt 1991, 70). Instead, the English appear to practice a sort of negative capability, convinced of their own mercy and benevolence even as they trash the Inuit's camps, steal their dogs, and otherwise wreak havoc. If violence can be understood with Judith Butler as a denial of one's relationality to the other to whom one behaves violently, then the English violence towards the Inuit functions as a denial within an affirmation: more often than not, it is precisely the attempt to establish social relations that aggravates the English tendency towards harm (Butler 2020).

Nowhere is this ambivalence more evident than in the 'Bloodie Point' massacre, which took place on the 1577 expedition and which is related in the narratives of both Best and Dionyse Settle. Settle relates how, when scouting the shore in one of the fleet's three ships, the English saw a group of Inuit fleeing inland, away from a small camp. An English party went ashore, 'determining to see, if by faire means we could either allure them to familiarity, or otherwise take some of them' (Settle

in Hakluyt 1904 [1589], vol. 7, 219–220). The choice outlined here – between ‘familiarity’ and entrapment – speaks to the English sailors’ uncertain grasp of the terms of relationality governing their interactions with the Inuit. These terms were rendered even *more* uncertain by an incident that had taken place on the previous year’s voyage, in which five English sailors had gone ashore in order to procure furs and skins from the Inuit, trading them as usual for ‘belles, looking glasses, and other toyes’ of little or no value to themselves (Best in Collinson 1867, 73; see also Greenblatt 1991, 110–111). They were never seen again: the possessors had become the possessed.

Desiring to ‘attaine to some knowledge of those men’, the 1577 party put ashore in pursuit of the fleeing Inuit, who put out to sea in their boats before being driven back towards land by the English pinnaces (Settle in Hakluyt 1904 [1589], vol. 7, 220). Trapped on ‘a point of lande’ (Best in Collinson 1867, 142), Settle relates how the Inuit ‘fiercely assaulted our men’ until it became clear that escape was impossible (in Hakluyt 1904 [1589], 220). Faced with the prospect of imminent defeat, the Inuit ‘desperatly leapt off the Rocks into the Sea, and drowned themselves’ (Settle in Hakluyt 1904 [1589], vol. 7, 220). Settle mourns their deaths, describing the incident as a mere misunderstanding: ‘had [they] submitted themselves, or if by any meanes we could have taken them alive (being their enemies as they judged), we would both have saved them, & also have sought remedy to cure their wounds received at our hands’ (in Hakluyt 1904 [1589], vol. 7, 220).

Here and elsewhere, one sees the English wishing for the Inuit ‘to be at once different and the same, others and brothers’ (Greenblatt 1991, 108–109). The Inuit’s difference, in both Best’s and Settle’s accounts, derives from their refusal to enter into social relations with the English, rather than from any inherent or irrevocable quality – racial or otherwise – that they are perceived to possess. It is for this reason that Best relates how the English continued to make ‘signes of friendship’, with the intent ‘to winne them’ over to familiarity (Best in Collinson 1867, 150–151). The English, in short, retained a faith in their capacity to induce the Inuit to friendly communication and exchange even as they trapped, captured and drove them to their deaths. This lack of self-awareness is of course striking. Yet, it also explains Frobisher’s desire for interpreters, and the acts of capture that this desire inspired.

In England, Frobisher’s captives continued to provoke an ambivalent mixture of identification and alienation among those who saw them. Edward Dodding, the doctor who examined Calichoughe’s body, reports that the Inuit had demonstrated a generalised ‘Anglophobia’ during his brief time in England, while Arnaq was fearful that the English practiced cannibalism (Dodding in Collinson 1867, 190–191; see also Cheshire et al. 1980, 40–41). As understandable as these assumptions and prejudices ought to have been, for Dodding they are evidence of the same misapprehensions that inform Settle’s account of the ‘Bloodie Point’ massacre. It is thus little surprise that Dodding mourns Calichoughe in death only as an ethnographic curiosity, or as a trophy bearing witness to his captors’ exploits in the high north. Yet, at the moment of Calichoughe’s passing, Dodding undermines the extremity of the Inuit’s apparent strangeness by emphasising the possibility of his assimilation into a redemptive Christian universe. While Wynter sees Man as a particular form of ‘co-identification’ that relies on the exclusion of racialised, ‘oppositionally meaningful markers of otherness’ (1994, 32), Dodding’s

narrative, like those of Best and Settle, has not yet worked out how and where to draw this line:

He sang clearly that same tune with which the companions from his region and rank had either mourned or ceremonially marked his final departure when they were standing on the shore (according to those who heard them both) ... I had scarcely left him when he moved from life to death, forcing out as his last words, given in our language, "God be with you." (Dodding in Collinson 1867 [1867], 190; see also Cheshire et al. 1980, 41)

Conclusion

In this article I have located Martin Frobisher's voyages to the Arctic in relation to a wider shift in subjective understanding emerging from post-Columbian engagements with the so-called 'New World'. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter's 'genealogy of discursive formations around the human', I have sought to illuminate the politics of being animating the expeditionary narratives written about Frobisher's three voyages (Bogues 2006, 317). In particular, I have argued that the precise terms of Man's superiority over his Black and Indigenous others had not yet been fully worked out among Frobisher and his men (Wynter 2003, 301). While there is no doubt that the English detailed foundational differences between themselves and the Inuit, they also struggled to theorise the grounds on which these differences could be firmly established within an emerging global racial order. This state of uncertainty often gave rise to violence – not in order to mature, develop or 'civilise' the Inuit, and not for any obvious material benefit, but rather as a way of performatively improvising terms by which the English could position themselves in a distant, alien land. By transporting Inuit back to England, meanwhile, Frobisher imported a politics of colonial encounter with implications for England's own self-identity as a global actor, as a nation with developing expansionary ambitions.

For these reasons, the Arctic expeditions of Frobisher and others deserve to be incorporated more centrally into genealogies of Empire, particularly in the English or British context, where more than a century's worth of expeditions to the American north precede the first Virginia settlements. In the face of these voyages' material failures, the acts of self-definition and self-assertion described by Best, Settle and others became key markers of their significance, facilitating their positioning within wider narratives of English identity, agency and moral integrity that in turn justified and promoted further voyages of plantation, extraction, conquest and settlement (see e.g. Hakluyt 1904 [1589], 101). Yet, one must also be mindful of the silences that define these narratives – most notably, of course, those of the Inuit themselves.

While the English narratives offer no more than fragmentary details concerning the Inuit's own mode of 'subjective understanding', this silence does not always function as an absence of voice. In 1576 Frobisher intended to train his first captive as an interpreter – a plan that involved quite literally *giving* him a voice in order to render him and his compatriots knowable. This was a function which the captured man definitively declined, in ways that mirror and foreshadow continuing Indigenous practices of refusal bearing witness to 'a definite core that... reveal[s] itself... at the very limit of... discourse' (Simpson 2007, 74; see also Simpson 2021). As Best relates, 'when he [the Inuit] found himself in captivity, for very choler and disdaine he bit his tongue in twaine within his mouth' (Best in

Collinson 1867, 74). Here and elsewhere in these narratives, Man struggles to establish and impose himself on an Indigenous presence that refuses its terms. By illuminating this struggle at the moment of its happening, Frobisher's voyages provide important insights into the epistemic and identity-building processes informing early modern colonial worldmaking.

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