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Introduction

A Passion for Blankness: U.S. and British Polar Discourse

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, while writing about Africa, brings in an unexpected reference to the North Pole:

> Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that way) I would put my finger on it and say, "When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember."[1]

As long as the North Pole remained imperfectly charted and still remote from the knowledge of the West it had a romantic appeal, by the very fact of its blankness on a map. On Marlow's childhood map blankness suspends all the ordinary information that usually makes up geographical space and invites him to reinscribe divisions between nations. It is as if the adult Marlow imagines himself a child with a box of crayons, able to color in the map any way he likes. When it comes to coloring in the blank parts, he will not be subject to the disapproval that any child would hear whose crayon wandered past the edge of France into Germany, or who wanted to divide Poland by coloring it half green and half blue. If he was forbidden to color in the known parts in any way he chose, he was permitted to do what he liked with the blank spaces, which were all brought together to the same plane of representation. The very blankness of these

empty parts authorized his access, inviting him to color them in and promising at the same time that he who could begin the process of filling in the blanks was best entitled to possession. Hence, Marlow's fantasy to visit a "particularly inviting blank spot on the map" is constituted by the map, which precedes and legitimizes his desire.

Yet, insofar as Marlow's passion for blankness originated from the document of a colonial map, it was not as "innocent" as suggested by this "childhood" trope. Indeed, Marlow's representation of South America or Africa or Australia as undifferentiated "blank" spaces—pure signifiers without a referent—was only possible within the context of Western colonial expansion. In historical actuality what Marlow refers to as these "many blank spaces of the earth" is not an unrepresentable tabula rasa outside of history or tradition but diverse geographical, historical, and cultural entities. Marking them as "blank" was a discursive strategy that produced the rationale to justify the process of filling them in by the West, through the introduction of Western institutions. Even when blank spaces have been filled, cartographically and discursively, blankness continues to hover in the form of lack attributed to indigenous social formations in need of improvement and reorganization. Theorists of colonial discourse, such as Christopher Miller, contend that it was "European utterances that gave rise to that peculiar empty profile called 'Africa.' "[2] Similarly, Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism* analyzes the ways in which "European discourses constructed a paper reality which [the Westerner] distinguishes from the brute reality, paper or not, of the Orient itself."[3]

What sets the discursive history of the North Pole apart from the scores of other so-called "blank" spaces on the earth examined by Said and Miller was that the pole was literally empty, making its commercial value rather dubious. Unlike the colonial territories of Africa, South America, or Australia, the North Pole was uninhabited, located not on land but on shifting Arctic pack ice. Yet, as pointless as a trek across a barren wasteland may have seemed to those concerned with financial gain, such an exploit had a pervasive scientific appeal. It literalized the colonial fantasy of a tabula rasa where people, history, and culture vanish. The absence of land, peoples, or wildlife to conquer gave polar exploration an aesthetic dimension that allowed the discovery of the North Pole to appear above political and commercial concerns. Thus, paradoxically, it was the lack of material gain from

such an exploit that transformed polar exploration into a new kind of imperial theatre with all its colonial and scientific trappings. The process of erasure characteristic of colonialist texts, however, does reappear in the narratives of polar exploration and discovery, reducing the vital participation of Inuit men and women to subordinate "native bearers" imagined as either "primitive" or "unspoiled" figures.

Expeditions to the North Pole, far from being innocent of the tensions of empire, represented a peculiar stage of colonialism specific to polar discourses that integrated the desire for empire with a presumably disinterested moral and scientific imagination. Dependent upon foot travel and the hard work of "Eskimos," as the Inuit were called, North Polar expeditions were icons of the whole enterprise of colonialism. The complexity of the relation between master and servant in the pursuit of science, however, was consistently written out of the script. Polar explorers with their established network of publications and clubs identified polar exploration as an intrinsically pure field of knowledge, effacing effectively the political dealings with entire Eskimo villages, and the gender and race relations that informed the writings of their texts.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward the successful penetration into "darkest Africa" had left the polar regions as the only large empty spaces on the world map. These last spaces on earth, which still remained invisible and therefore inscrutable, excited a consuming passion on the part of white men of various Western countries to "conquer" and make "visible" these sites. In the narratives of early twentieth-century U.S. and British nationalism, the poles occupy a peculiar position and are a rich source for an analysis of particular imaginary definitions of U.S. and British culture. For England during the years of Pax Britannica, the poles were considered a principal discursive space in which intrepid British naval officers could parade the flag of Britain at the extremes of the planet. Moreover, the literal emptiness of these places served a British imperial fantasy that celebrated empire without the mediating disfigurations associated with the actualities of a colonial state.

The United States was also eager to connect its self-image to the site of the poles. As a tabula rasa, the poles offered an ideal place for the country to establish itself as a great imperial power. In 1903 American explorer Robert Peary tried to convince potential private

and governmental backers of the significance of the poles as a mythologized image of U.S. empire:

> Six years ago we were sleeping content within our borders, drowsy of our strength and possibilities. Since then we have embraced the earth, and now right hand clasps left in the far East in a grasp never to be loosened. What a splendid feat for this great and wealthy country if, having girdled the earth, we might reach north and south and plant "Old Glory" on each pole.[4]

Peary's interest in planting Old Glory on each pole occurred at a historical moment when the United States had begun to compete with Europe's empire-building activities.[5] With its success in the Spanish-American War in 1898, the fledgling U.S. empire's boundaries were extended to include new territories—Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines. The nation's interest in conquering the poles so shortly afterward could be seen as a projection of its expansionist enterprise into an extraterritorial space. Located literally on the boundaries of the world, the poles were thought of as a symbol of the growing strength of the United States. To define and literally to mark the periphery of the world would be a suitable way to reveal the control befitting a nation that aspired to be at the world's center.

Another reason that Peary, who was a civil engineer by profession, placed so much emphasis on the polar conquest was the particular weight such a discovery had in an early-twentieth-century scientific discourse. What it meant to be American at that historical moment was tied into a belief in technology and science. *National Geographic* magazine, a new publication that linked itself to a national image of the United States in the 1890s, seized the poles as a metaphor for modernity and progress. The *National Geographic* presented itself as a new type of geographical literature that utilized photographic representations and advocated exploits that would celebrate the nation's technological achievements. The poles evoked particular interest for the *Geographic* because they provided an example by which new technologies could make what was previously unknown visible to a U.S. readership through a discourse of science. Within the discourse of the *Geographic* the rise of modern science could be called, in Evelyn Fox Keller's words, "the triumph of the visible, its principal goal being clarity, education, the elimination of opacity and the vanquishing of darkness."[6] The *Geographic* affirmed

a discourse that authorized the Victorian view that the West was a superior civilization and that although there might be many stages of social evolution and many seemingly bizarre customs and superstitions in the world, there was only one civilization, one path of progress. As a product of that ideology, blank spaces such as Africa and the North Pole were thought of as places of obscurity until explorers and scientists flooded them with light. The *National Geographic* utilized the photographic record as a means to reveal to a wider public the latest developments in this drama between light and dark, a story being reenacted at the ever-receding boundaries of the earth's periphery. In *National Geographic*, positivist science was understood to be effective at the level of perception itself. Photography possessed a universally effective revelatory essence. It was the strategic key that would offer the ordinary reader total disclosure of the world and its mysteries.

The *National Geographic*'s belief that it can somehow fully explain what is beyond the horizon of actual vision was used repeatedly as a motivation for discovering the poles. The ability to make a faithful record out of what was previously considered imaginary was regarded as a great modern achievement in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet the "faithful record" made at the North Pole was from the start contested and unstable. In 1909, two U.S. explorers—Frederick Cook and Robert E. Peary—on different expeditions just days apart each claimed to have discovered the North Pole. The expedition accounts were purported to contain "information" and were written in a style of scientific precision. On the trek led by Commander Peary photographs were taken of Peary and his men at the pole.

At this moment of positivist ascendancy, however, when science had distinguished itself from fable as the discourse of truth, its findings were open to criticism. Part of the difficulty was that there could only be one rightful discoverer, and therefore a decision had to be made to determine which of the two white men deserved the honor. Paradoxically, the importance given to science alone could not provide a means to determine justly who the winner might be. Calculations were not foolproof, and a photograph of almost any spot could be made to signify the North Pole by following certain pictorial conventions of the period. To further exacerbate matters exploration accounts by both Peary and Cook that appeared in the *Geographic*

tended to repeat each other in a sort of plagiarizing intertextuality. As a result, determining the true discoverer of the North Pole transformed the conquest of the pole into a spectacle of male rivalry. In the popular press, center stage was occupied not by the pole or by the nonwhite men who did most of the work on the expeditions, but by Peary and Cook, U.S. white men battling for rights of discovery over the most remote region on earth.

Ideologies of gender were central to polar "discovery," and exploration narratives are a rich source for the analysis of stereotypes of white masculinity during this era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, polar exploration narratives played a prominent part in defining the social construction of masculinity and legitimized the exclusion of women from many public domains of discourse. As all-male activities, the explorations symbolically enacted the men's own battle to become men. The difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions provided the ideal mythic site where men could show themselves as heroes capable of superhuman feats. They could demonstrate, in a clichéd phrase of polar exploration narratives, "the boundlessness of the individual spirit." Such claims were hardly likely to accrue to women living within the bounded spaces of everyday life, marriage, and the workplace. The polar explorer represented the epitome of manliness. Men such as these, according to U.S. writer Frank Norris, were destined to rise to power and glory. They could not be held back. A woman might on occasion have dreamed of a life of heroism—as did the female character Lloyd Searight in Norris's *A Man's Woman*—but she would have abandoned her dreams by conforming to the role expected of her sex. Lloyd Searight lives the ideology of her inferiority by sacrificing her work for that of her husband, a polar explorer:

> Was not this her career, after all, to be his inspiration, his incentive, to urge him to the accomplishment of a great work?[7]

Even the achievements of women who were Arctic explorers in their own right, such as Josephine Diebitsch-Peary, wife of Robert Peary, were feminized in male accounts to conform more closely to ideals of feminine duty. There was not much of a defined female tradition of exploration, and as a result, many disapproved of Diebitsch-Peary's presence on an Arctic expedition. In part to deflect criticism, Robert

Peary, in his preface to Josephine Diebitsch-Peary's *My Arctic Journal: A Year among Ice Fields and Eskimos*, drew unnecessary attention to her wifely "self-sacrifice" in the Arctic. As he repeatedly put it, her main motivation was to "be by my side" and play a secondary supportive role to him. Accordingly, her status as a woman dependent on her husband is emphasized, ensuring little room for independent action. She would achieve fame as Peary's "nurturing woman" whose presence provided an important source of moral support in *his* effort "to throw more light on the great Arctic mystery."

As white women did not publicly play a role in the Arctic outside traditionally feminine positions, the high regard in which polar exploration was held by male writers such as Frank Norris and Joseph Conrad was not shared by women authors.[8] During this period of polar explorations, Virginia Woolf undercut the unappetizing romanticization of the male polar explorer as a myth naturalizing masculinist supremacy. Her novel *To the Lighthouse* is a critique of a masculinist analytical and objective approach favored by the philosopher Mr. Ramsay, a fictional character she compares to a polar explorer in his pursuit of truth in a straight and orderly course:[9]

> For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reached Q. . . .
>
> He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q—R—Here he knocked his pipe out, with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. "Then R. . . . " He braced himself. He clenched himself. . . .
>
> What is R? . . .
>
> Qualities that in a desolate expedition across icy solitudes of the Polar region, would have made him the leader, the guide, the counselor, whose temper, neither sanguine nor despondent, surveys with equanimity what is to be and faces it, came to his help again. R—[10]

The spatial importance of the alphabet for Woolf is closely allied to its temporal function: Mr. Ramsay climbs tortuously, step by step, toward the truth, whereas Woolf's female characters arrive there in a

flash. Mr. Ramsay's slowness and Mrs. Ramsay's more intuitive responses differ greatly, and Woolf couches the difference in explicitly alphabetical terms, as she reflects on

> that old, that obvious distinction between the two classes; on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, 26 letters in all, from start to finish; on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash—the way of genius.[11]

Woolf is not seduced by an approach to truth such as Mr. Ramsay's or that practiced by polar explorers that favors masculinist modes of rationality. Indeed, she criticizes such a single-minded attention to truth and finds that women's more intuitive and less goal-oriented manner of "lump[ing] all the letters together in one flash" provides a more inspiring example. For Woolf, women did not have to ascend doggedly to the dizzying heights of masculinity in order to prove their genius or heroism.

While Woolf regards women's more intuitive manner of reasoning and men's analytical logic as qualities that are part of the nature of the male and the female, in this book I deal with such attributes as part of a social construction of gender. An extensive literature by feminist theorists has shown that gender identity and ideologies of gender are constructed rather than innate and that these constructions have shifted with changing historical situations.[12] In the early stages of the women's movement, feminist writers were impeded by the ideological assumptions they inherited from nineteenth-century evolutionary biology and anthropology. Feminists naturalized a cultural division that assigned women and human reproduction to the sphere of the natural and the emotive, and men and other human activities to the sphere of the social and the rational.

One of the distinguishing objectives of contemporary feminist criticism has been to de-essentialize constructions of gender, in the process exposing how the biologizing interpretation of history naturalizes women's oppression and makes change impossible.[13] According to Monique Wittig, in order for women to gain control of their lives "women will have to abstract themselves from the definition 'woman' which is imposed upon them."[14] Feminists such as Gayle Rubin have argued that the biological facts—that men have penises

and women do not, that women bear children and men do not—have no absolute determinate meanings in themselves but are invested with various symbolic meanings by different cultures. Rubin explains how this process occurs in terms of a sex-gender system—"that set of arrangements by which biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human social intervention."[15]

My project, which deals with questions of race, class, and nationalism as well as gender, has been particularly informed by the shift in feminist consciousness that has taken place within the past ten years prompted by recent writings by women of color on race and lesbianism. Since the beginnings of the current feminist movement, and with particular insistence since the early 1980s, women finding themselves outside the frame of dominant feminism—lesbians, black women, other women of color, third-world women—have contested the terms of its discourse, pointing out the limits of gender as the sole emphasis and the need for feminists to recognize the claims of other forms of oppression besides sexual difference. For example, writers such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa[16] have pointed not only to the inadequacies of the prevailing concept of "woman" as heterosexual and white but also to white feminism's own consolidation of Western, middle-class interests. In "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," an essay appearing in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks says:

> The vision of sisterhood evoked by women's liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression. Needless to say, it was primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective, who professed belief in the notion of common oppression. The idea of "common oppression" was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the nature of women's varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices.[17]

Not only can one not simply add black women to feminist categories, but also according to hooks one must develop a theory that takes into account the complicity of constructions of gender with ideologies of race and class. The discourse of polar exploration provides an example of these complex relations, particularly through the hierarchical positioning of white women explorers over "native" women. Josephine Diebitsch-Peary achieved power over large num-

bers of Inuit peoples in the Arctic from the exaggeration and exploitation of differences of race and nation over differences of gender. Although Josephine may have broken many of the accepted limits of white feminine behavior, she did not confront and challenge any of these restrictions: whatever she achieved outside the traditionally feminine she achieved in part because she was able to benefit from her racial, marital, and national status. Similarly, the discourse of the *Geographic* constructs a narrative drama of masculinity and femininity along lines of race, ethnicity, and nation. In its particular definition of "America," being "American" elevates the status of female readers, for it enables white women to claim superiority over their so-called primitive counterparts and thus to develop a colonial temperament to match their colonial status.

The ways of thinking that inform this book have only been able to surface because of the feminist discussion and scholarship both inside and outside of the university. Particularly valuable to this project has also been the work of feminist critics on masculinities and nationalisms, such as the writing of Susan Jeffords, Cynthia Enloe, Eve Sedgwick, and Donna Haraway,[18] as well as the writings on male sexuality by male activists and by theorists who were influenced by the gay liberation movement.[19] Since the early seventies, questioning and debating masculinity and male sexuality have been integral to the gay movement. The gay perspective has a way of seeing through the rhetoric of masculinity and exposing the emptiness of its images. In part this is because such a perspective threw into relief the ways heterosexual men backed away from the heterogeneous meanings surrounding the sexual domain. Gay male activists and theorists critiqued monolithic definitions in which male sexuality was defined as timeless and unchanging. Theorists such as Arthur Brittan devised terms such as *masculinism* in order not to confuse masculinity with the ideology. Brittan's definition of masculinism is worth quoting at length:

> Those people who speak of masculinity as an essence, as an inborn characteristic, are confusing masculinity with masculinism, the masculine ideology. . . . Masculinism takes it for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, it assumes that heterosexuality is normal, it accepts without question the sexual division of labor, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private spheres. . . . In general, masculinism gives primacy to the belief that gender is not negotiable—it does not accept evidence from feminist and other sources that the relationships between men and women are political and constructed nor, for that matter, does it allow for the possibility that lesbianism and homosexuality are not forms of deviance or abnormality, but are alternative forms of gender commitment.[20]

The story of polar exploration raises inescapably the issue of the relation between *masculinism* and *nationalism* in the popular media. As modern nationalism became defined through polar exploration in the early twentieth century, important norms emerged that demarcated ideals of manliness. Theorists of nationalism, such as Benedict Anderson, Paul Gilroy, and George Mosse,[21] illuminate how popular discourses of print and visual media were key features in defining masculinist and nationalist ideologies. Drawing on their writings, I examine homosocial relations as well as the broad process of gender exclusion and racial discrimination that occurs within the domains of discourse and institutional practices that sanction nationalism.

Gender on Ice consists of an introduction and four chapters that compare invidious constructions of gender, race, and class that occur in the United States and England when national ideology is instilled through the mass media. The first chapter examines the story of polar explorer Robert Peary to analyze the workings of a narrative that popularizes U.S. national identity as essentially a white masculine one.

The life of Robert Peary is the stuff of which potent cultural fantasies of science and masculinity were made in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Preeminently the myth is associated with Peary's ability to use purportedly scientific methods to map an unknown and forbidding site beyond the limits of a coherent rationality and to make it accessible as an object of science. In the myth of Peary the man and national hero, we are presented with a narrative that heroicized Peary both as the epitome of manliness and as an ordinary practitioner of science who could accomplish the impossible in an age in which recent technological innovations—telephone, cinema, bicycle, automobile, photograph, and airplane—made even the most outlandish scientific exploits seem possible.

In chapter 2 I examine the beginnings of *National Geographic* magazine, an institution that achieved an unparalleled power by, on the one hand, its promotion of a democratic science that it made available to a mass public through the latest advances in photographic technology, and, on the other, partially financing Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole and legitimizing the venture in terms of a national ideology of scientific progress. *National Geographic* was instrumental in creating Robert Peary as a biographical subject in keeping with the exigencies of a secular hagiography concerned with a certain inscription of the explorer as scientific hero. In my examination of what is missing or repressed from the *Geographic*'s discursive presentation, I reveal how Peary's purportedly scientific methods allowed him to dissociate himself from an old colonial discourse of power and knowledge, including the participation of the expedition's mostly Eskimo work force and single black American, under the guise of a discourse of science. Thus, Robert Peary's expedition promotes a form of nationalism that was fundamentally colonialist in conception but rationalist in expression, representing the Eskimo peoples and an African American man, Matthew Henson, not as exploited workers but as "cogs" that are instrumental in the workings of what Peary termed his well-managed "traveling machine."

A section of the chapter on gender and race relations in the *National Geographic* examines one of the more disturbing "traditions" that the *National Geographic* has upheld—the objectification of the figure of the third-world woman through her eroticization. Photographs of bare-breasted "natives" was one of the ways that the magazine constituted American's national experience as exclusively white and male. The magazine cites native traditions and photographic accuracy as rationales for imposing its gender and race-based concept of the national experience as the dominant one. I align feminism with a critique of positivism in order to analyze the *Geographic*'s colonial discourse of women and development.

The first part of chapter 3 addresses the 1988 National Geographic video special *The Explorers: A Century of Discovery*, which celebrates the National Geographic Society's hundredth anniversary. I focus on how a particular U.S. ideology of science as signified by new photographic techniques that gained its fullest legitimacy in Victorian times still legitimizes the operational protocols of the *Geographic*. I give

specific emphasis to the following issues: how the construction of Western vision and point of view intersects with the fashioning of the white, U.S. explorer as universal humanist subject; the role of ahistorical aesthetic concepts such as genius and creativity and how they function as exclusionary terms within a scientific discourse; the persistence of nineteenth-century discourses on white male heroism and science into the present. I examine what happens to white male heroism when the last remaining unexplored regions have vanished and all possible technological means of exploration have been tested and exhausted. I also analyze the major changes that occur when white women and men of color are now included in its contemporary segments as active agents of the institution's discourse.

The second part of the chapter examines past and present contestations and rearrangements of the North Pole story. Focusing on what the *Geographic*'s video narration and its terms omit by repressing social relations, this section examines an account of polar exploration by Matthew Henson, the African American man who accompanied Peary on his polar trek. Henson's account provides a different voice and history than the *Geographic*'s account, which relies for its image on a single white hero playing the active dominant role.

In the fourth chapter on masculinist heroics and myths of empire at the South Pole, I focus on the story of the British polar expedition of Captain Robert Falcon Scott to provide important contrasts and parallels with U.S. polar exploration narratives. I explain how Peary's enterprise of science contrasts with Scott's account, which followed literary conventions and valorized the inner qualities of fortitude and diginity. Drawing on the letters and diaries of those members of Scott's expedition who were denied power by their social position, I activate other sorts of readings of this event. The offscreen disagreements between Scott and his men reported in Roland Huntford's 1979 book *Scott and Amundsen* will be the subject of the second half of this chapter.

I conclude chapter 4 by examining the current reworkings of the Scott and Peary myths. Recent revelations have confirmed my fundamental thesis that both Scott and Peary fabricated the events of their expeditions to suit the particular imperial and masculinist ideologies that each characterized. According to Huntford's revelations, Scott's diaries and letters were altered to turn the official versions of events into something worthy of public reverence. Huntford's reexamina-

tion of Scott's diaries reveals that Scott's death was not as orderly and respectable as the heroized version of Scott's journey suggests.

Instead, in the United States Peary is still celebrated as a great man and a hero in the 1988 centennial issue of *National Geographic*, even though one of the articles establishes that he missed the pole by 30 to 60 miles. The continuing anxiety about Peary's credibility manifested itself in findings published in January 1990, which include a 230-page report commissioned by the National Geographic Society that tries to overturn the 1988 admission of Peary's failure and to secure Peary's place once again among the heroes of exploration.[22] Indeed, the *Geographic*'s vested interest in Peary's success does not seem to extend to Henson, who, in this recent report, is still omitted as the co-discoverer of the North Pole. He appears as Peary's "black companion," whose account and participation remain of marginal interest to the *Geographic*'s protocols of national heroism.

1

Nationalism on Ice: Technology and Masculinity at the North Pole

"What sort of a man is Peary?" young Bartlett asked his uncle.
"He's like a T-square, Bob. He thinks in a straight line. And you can't bend him any more than you can bend steel."

—Robert Bartlett, captain of the *Roosevelt*

On his return from the North Pole in 1909, explorer Robert Peary at his first opportunity sent messages to announce his success. Peary's cables went to the *New York Times*, to the Associated Press, to the secretary of the Peary Arctic Club, and the following to President William Howard Taft:

> HAVE HONOR TO PLACE NORTH POLE AT YOUR DISPOSAL.[1]

The president wired Peary in reply:

> THANKS FOR YOUR GENEROUS OFFER. I DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I COULD DO WITH IT. I CONGRATULATE YOU SINCERELY ON HAVING ACHIEVED, AFTER THE GREATEST EFFORT, THE OBJECT OF YOUR TRIP, AND I SINCERELY HOPE THAT YOUR OBSERVATIONS WILL CONTRIBUTE SUBSTANTIALLY TO SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE. YOU HAVE ADDED LUSTRE TO THE NAME "AMERICAN." (65)

According to historian C. D. B. Bryan, President Taft's response was somewhat muted because four days earlier he had received a telegram from Frederick Cook announcing his own attainment of the pole. Taft did not want to commit himself yet to Peary. Moreover, when he writes, "I do not know exactly what I could do with it," he ambivalently refuses to accept Peary's offer of the pole as if it were a trophy delivered to a sovereign. Taft sensed, perhaps, that the pole's discovery was a much mediated process involving forms of power and authority no president could command, forms linked to modern