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Matthew Henson And The Antinomies Of Racial Uplift

Anthony S. Foy

Swarthmore College, afoy1@swarthmore.edu

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Matthew Henson and

Anthony S. Foy

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M A T T H E W H E N S O N A N D

the Antinomies of Racial Uplift

A N T H O N Y S . F O Y

Matthew Henson's 1912 memoir, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, seems to adopt a vindicationist discourse of work, merit, and recognition that accords with Booker T. Washington's vision for racial progress, but Henson's narrative actually demonstrates how such a discourse inadequately resolves the complex tangle of race, masculinity, and citizenship during the Jim Crow era.

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When Matthew Henson returned to the United States after reaching the North Pole with Commander Robert Peary in 1909, he responded wearily to one reporter's question: "How did I feel when I reached the Pole? Well, I didn't notice any particular difference. I was very tired, as I had been working more and sleeping less on the last four days. The thing I wanted most at the Pole was a smoke" ("Tells"). Three years later, however, Henson would characterize the attainment of the Pole in significantly different terms, describing this moment in his memoir as a profound experience of "savage joy and exultation" (136). More importantly, this moment in *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* situates him within an historical discourse of racial vindication as he expresses his pride that "it was I, a lowly member of my race, who had been chosen by fate to represent it, at this, almost the last of the world's great work" (136). The contrast between these two accounts is certainly stark. In the immediate aftermath of Peary's final expedition, Henson treats his journey to the top of the world as a joyless anticlimax, whereas the memoir he would publish in 1912 treats it as a joyful culmination for this "lowly" black worker, an occasion that induces a racially synecdochic self in narrative. This contrast between journalistic account and autobiographical narration encapsulates the cultural work that attends Henson's production of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, and his transformation from explorer to autobiographer refracts, I argue, the racial uplift ideologies of his era.

Indeed, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* bears the weight of racial uplift in the form of an introduction by no less a personage than Booker T. Washington, who, beyond his own abiding commitment to the rhetorical uses of autobiography, institutionalized a broad range of autobiographical practices at his school, Tuskegee Institute. Whether among his students, his instructors, or the supporters who attended Tuskegee's annual conferences for black farmers and businesspeople, Washington consistently promoted spoken and transcribed testimonials, anthologized personal essays, and formal autobiographies. In effect, Washington established a culture of autobiography at Tuskegee that coincided with his elevation as a race leader in the 1890s and continued after his death in 1915. Within this culture, autobiographical acts themselves became fundamental to the

interpellating processes of racial uplift. The result, he hoped, would be the formation of a new black middle class of teachers, entrepreneurs, artisans, and land-owning farmers devoted to his conception of racial progress. Despite Washington's prominent introduction, Henson himself refuses to offer the conventional testimonial narrative of conversion and consent that was vital to Tuskegee's reproduction as an ideological institution; likewise, Henson fails to configure himself as an acquisitive Negro for whom the accumulation of property and the achievement of bourgeois domesticity qualify him to stand as a symbol of black progress. Washington's imprimatur thus raises a poignant question: How do discourses of racial uplift determine the self-presentation of black figures who existed on the edges of an emerging social formation, one that established limits and exerted pressures upon the production of black autobiography prior to World War I?¹ As I argue, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*—an ambivalent narrative that stands outside of the selective tradition of black autobiography—demonstrates how uplift discourses of work, merit, and masculine recognition inadequately resolve the complex tangle of race and citizenship that marked Jim Crow America, even beyond the nation's borders.

Henson's narrative of his role in Peary's celebrated polar expedition registers a range of competing discourses of race and citizenship that can be traced to the bitter North Pole controversy that greeted him once he returned. When Peary made his final dash to the North Pole in 1909, he famously chose Matthew Henson and four Inuit men, rather than any of his fellow white members of the expedition, to accompany him. Peary's expedition to the North Pole symbolized the ascendancy of the United States, whose technological superiority enabled it to lead the march of civilization to the top of the world, according to the nationalist discourses that attended Peary's success. Given his role in this historic achievement, Henson returned from the Arctic as the pride of black America, and the *Colored American Magazine* (then aligned closely with Washington) dubbed him the "Negro of the Hour."² He was fêted by well-to-do members of New York's African American community, including black businessmen, professionals, and public servants sympathetic to the Tuskegee ideal. Charles W. Anderson, Collector of Internal Revenue and Washington's most important lieutenant in New York, organized a banquet through the Colored Republican Club that convened "two hundred representative men and women" to salute "that intrepid Negro companion to Commander Peary, who has honored the race and whose fame will remain imperishable so long as men value the exploits of

discovery and feats of bravery. Here is the grand opportunity of the race to take the glory which rightly comes to it through its representative" ("Negroes"; "All").³

Born in Maryland in 1866 and orphaned as a boy, Henson spent much of his peripatetic youth aboard the *Katie Hines*, learning the seaman's craft while sailing throughout the world. After the ship's captain died, he eventually returned to Washington, D. C. (Robinson 26–48; Miller 15–18; Angell 37–38). In 1887, he met Peary while working as a clerk in a haberdashery, and the young naval engineer hired Henson to serve as his valet in Nicaragua, where he had been assigned to survey the country for a potential canal route. Soon thereafter, Peary became obsessed with reaching the North Pole, and Henson accompanied the Arctic explorer on each of his seven northern expeditions after 1890 (Angell 27).⁴ For three years between 1895 and 1898, Henson worked at the American Museum of Natural History as a taxidermist for their Arctic dioramas, and from 1902 to 1905, he portered on a Pullman car, working Midwestern routes out of Chicago and, later, Southern routes between Washington, D. C. and Florida (Robinson 114–21, 159–63; Miller 115; Angell 150, 194). Still, he dedicated his working life to Peary's intermittent Arctic excursions for nearly twenty years until they finally reached the North Pole. Because Henson's long Arctic career with Peary illustrated how hard work, determination, and loyalty led to the sort of success that reflected the race's potency and promise, the black public sphere embraced him as a vindicationist symbol of racial uplift.

Particularly salient in Henson's appearance as a black hero was the curious anomaly, captured in the title of his memoir, of a *Negro* at the North Pole. At the time, the pseudoscientific notion of climatic determinism functioned as an ideological corollary to the strict controls of Jim Crow segregation, explaining why black people must stay in their place, the tropical South. If Henson embodied the race's contribution to an American triumph, then his ability to weather the extreme physical demands of the Arctic frontier also symbolized the race's mobility as it excelled despite the political, economic, and social limitations placed on it at home. Contemporary commentators in both the white and black presses underscored this point. For example, *The Independent* pointedly reminded its readers of the history of fugitive slaves fleeing north to freedom, noting that "[o]f all creatures only man could endure either extreme of cold or heat, and no matter what his race. It has been said that the negro [sic] must be confined to the hot climates, but the case of the negro [sic], Henson, proves what has needed no proof since the race fled from our

Southern States to Canada” (“Editorial” 720). A black newsweekly, the *Seattle Republican*, also noted that

a few days ago there appeared in public print in Seattle an article to the effect that “the home of the Negro was in the South where he should remain,” and before the type got cold the news flashed over the wires that a white man and a black man had captured the north pole, the furthest point to the North a human being could go. It would thus seem that the Negro’s home is wherever he can exist and from Henson’s experience he can exist any place on the face of the earth. The Negro is just as capable of expansion as the Caucasian and the sooner both of them accept that theory in toto[,] the better for all concerned. (“Negro Captures”)⁵

Significantly, the *New York Age* reprinted both of these editorial comments from *The Independent* and the *Seattle Republican* in October 1909, thus demonstrating how Henson’s ability to withstand the Arctic’s frigid conditions inspired a counter-discourse of geography, mobility, and freedom (“Three Races”; “What the Negro Press”). At his banquet, Henson himself claimed that his achievements fully disproved pervasive popular notions of climatic determinism, remarking, “When I went to Greenland they said I would never come back. They told me that I could not stand the cold—that no black man could. I said I would die if necessary to show them. I survived all right, and here I am” (“Negroes Banquet”).

As the contested story of Peary’s Arctic expedition emerged in the American press, however, the ensuing controversy quickly overshadowed Henson. Indeed, anti-black discourses of climate and competence effectively excluded him from the official narrative of the Pole’s discovery. As the Peary expedition returned from the Arctic, it faced a competing claim on the discovery of the North Pole by Dr. Frederick Cook, who contended that he had already reached the Pole in 1908. Amid the subsequent scandal, the mainstream press treated Henson with a mix of curiosity and derision; he was also the subject of racist caricature.⁶ Furthermore, Cook’s supporters often scorned Peary’s decision to make the final dash to the Pole without another credible white man to corroborate his discovery. As a result, Henson’s skills as an adventurer were widely disdained, and he was dismissed as little more than “a Negro tool” who, whether due to his own ignorance or Peary’s intimidation, was merely an accessory to the white explorer’s falsehoods (McAfee 407). In his own memoir

of his final expedition, the embattled Peary conceded that “Henson was the best man I had with me for this kind of work” because of his skill at handling the dogs and sledges, but he also assumed paternalistic responsibility for Henson’s safety, since the black explorer, Peary insisted, was racially unfit to return across the ice without a white man to lead him (despite his decades of experience on Arctic expeditions) (*North* 272). According to Peary, Henson

would not have been so competent as the white members of the expedition in getting himself and his party back to land. . . . While faithful to me, and when *with me* more effective in covering distance with a sledge than any of the others, he had not, as a racial inheritance, the daring and initiative of Bartlett [the ship’s captain], or Marvin, MacMillan, or Borup [assistants to the expedition]. I owed it to him not to subject him to dangers and responsibilities which he was temperamentally unfit to face. (273)

To the extent that the viability of Peary’s successful claim to the Pole largely hinged on Henson’s place at the Pole, the black explorer quickly became invisible. In fact, as early as December 1909, the *New York Age* sought to restore Henson’s visibility to the history of the Pole’s discovery, commenting that “[w]ith the complete victory of Commander Peary over Dr. Cook and the latter’s flight from the wrath to come, we are hearing mighty few things of Matthew A. Henson these days, even though his name must be writ indelibly in the history of the world. But we seldom hear of the man behind the throne” (“Editorial Afterthoughts”).

By the time Henson published *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* in 1912, Peary had sufficiently defended himself against his rival Cook and had achieved international fame as the recognized discoverer of the Pole. In contrast, Henson had been nearly forgotten, resigned to working as a parking attendant in a Brooklyn warehouse, according to his biographers (Robinson 225; Angell 271). With his own narrative of his polar excursions, Henson aimed to clarify the “vague understanding . . . 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” (2). He thus produced his memoir in order to vindicate both himself and his race. As a result, Henson focuses his memoir on his central role in Peary’s final expedition to the Pole, often quoting directly from his own journal of the expedition. He does not discuss in any detail the hardships he faced as an orphan at

the end of Reconstruction, and his brief first chapter mostly describes his long working relationship with Peary between 1887 and 1908; the remainder of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* describes the final expedition at length. By defending his own substantial contributions to the attainment of the Pole, Henson sought in part to counter the paternalism of the white explorer's official account and redeem his own place in history against the racist disregard that he had faced upon his return to the United States in 1909.

Still, Henson likely anticipated some resistance from Peary and shaped his memoir accordingly. When the two men had returned from the 1909 expedition, Henson had sought to tell his own story of the polar conquest against Peary's angry opposition.⁷ Despite their estrangement, Henson hoped nonetheless that the white explorer would contribute a foreword to *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, an authenticating endorsement that would undoubtedly boost the book's marketability. Concerned over the content of Henson's book, Peary agreed to provide the foreword, but he also insisted on the option to review—and presumably “correct”—the manuscript prior to its publication. In addition, Peary brokered the relationship between his own publisher, Frederick A. Stokes, and his former assistant. This move allowed Peary to exercise additional editorial control over Henson's manuscript, and his publisher advised him, “it seems to me best not to attempt to polish the work much, but merely to omit anything that is too strong” (Weems 303–04; Miller 201–02). If Henson's ambivalent narrative involves the drama of black work, merit, and masculine recognition, then the threat of Peary's editorial intrusion most likely requires the black explorer to mask his critique of the politics of race that shaped both his Arctic experiences and their representation in the public sphere. As I discuss below, Henson does so with cunning indirection, sounding this critique on the lower frequencies.

If Peary's foreword reinforces Henson's burden of representation as a “son of the tropics,” then the black explorer's memoir must contend with the racial notions that had framed him (Foreword vii). At the same time, however, Henson's narrative must be read, I argue, both alongside and against the ideological notions of his black sponsor as well. Booker T. Washington's introduction to *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* framed the narrative in terms of his own brand of racial uplift. In fact, Washington had acted quickly to incorporate the black explorer into a public discourse of racial progress upon Henson's return from the North Pole in 1909. Unable to attend Henson's banquet in New York, he sent a telegram commending the black explorer as “our distinguished and deserving fellow citizen who

has by his achievement lifted the race to a higher level" ("Negroes"). Moreover, Washington was then completing his two-volume history, *The Story of the Negro*, for publication, and he hastily added Henson to his final chapter on black contributions to America, noting that "[j]ust now, as I am writing this, I learn from the newspapers that Peary claims he has reached the North Pole and that Matt Henson was his companion on this last and most famous journey" (2: 386). He also submitted a brief article to *The Independent*, "Achievements of Negroes," that expanded upon his account of Henson in *The Story of the Negro*. Including a portrait of Henson in his polar furs, this article chronicled "to what an extent negroes [sic] have taken part in nearly every important event connected with the history and development of this country" (731–32). Washington's article focused on two areas: the forgotten contributions of black people to the discovery, exploration, and settlement of the New World and the role of black men in all of the nation's major wars, including the most recent one against Spain. When *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* appeared in 1912, this article, revised and expanded, became the book's introduction, one of only three such introductions that Tuskegee's principal contributed to black autobiographies during his day.⁸

Conforming to the heroic narrative that arose in the black public sphere, Washington's introduction first situates Henson within a long history of racial achievement. "Matthew Henson is not the first colored man who by his fidelity and devotion has made himself the trusty companion of the men who have explored and opened up the western continent," he writes. "There are few great adventures in which the American white man has engaged where he has not been accompanied by a colored man" (Introduction xviii). Washington then alludes to his own popular autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, arguing that the achievements of such idols as Henson offer necessary encouragement to "a race which has come up from slavery . . . a race which is doing all the fundamental things for the first time" (xix). Washington's introduction also uses the black explorer to promote one of the cornerstones of his program at Tuskegee, the importance of practical skills rather than impractical, abstract knowledge. Over the course of Henson's two decades with Peary, "he acquired a good practical knowledge of everything that was a necessary part of the daily life in the ice-bound wilderness of polar exploration," and with his skills as blacksmith, carpenter, cook, translator, sledge-builder, dog-team driver, and navigator, "Mr. Henson made himself not only the most trusted but the most useful member of the expedition" (xvii–xviii). Finally, Washington insists that Henson's polar achievements

exemplify the racially transcendent law of merit, which ultimately redeems black labor. “During twenty-three years of faithful service,” Washington writes, Henson “made himself indispensable. From the position of a servant he rose to that of companion and assistant in one of the most dangerous and difficult tasks that was ever undertaken by men” (xvi). He also asserts that Henson “has not only honored the race of which he is a member, but has proven again that courage, fidelity, and ability are honored and rewarded under a black skin as well as a white” (xx). With this introduction, Washington presents Henson in his own image, so that the black explorer validates his pronouncements in *Up from Slavery* that “merit, no matter under what skin found, is, in the long run, recognized and rewarded” (24) and that “[t]he individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of race” (72). In this respect, Washington’s introduction portrays Henson as an exemplar of Tuskegee’s tenets, thus annexing the black explorer’s narrative to Tuskegee’s culture of autobiography.⁹

Admittedly, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* does not posit the converted, acquisitive self of the conventional uplift autobiography, and in this respect Henson does not present himself as an emblem of an emergent formation of middle-class Negroes. However, his autobiography profoundly engages the equation between work, merit, and recognition that Washington espoused. Throughout his memoir, Henson emphasizes his productive labor by cataloging his various tasks during Peary’s expedition: “I have busied myself in putting my cabin in order, and making myself useful in overhauling provisions in the afterhold” (20); “I have been walrus-hunting and taxidermizing. . . . This job has been very carefully, and I think successfully, done” (31); “I have a steady job carpentering, also interpreting, barbering, tailoring, dog-training, and chasing Esquimos out of my quarters” (37–38); “while at headquarters, I shaped and built over two dozen sledges, besides doing lots of other work” (47); and “[w]orked all day soldering the tins of alcohol, and a very tiring job it was” (56). The centrality of his physical labor to his memoir attests to his valuable role in the expedition’s success. Henson asserts this point explicitly, as when he describes building the expedition’s sledges, “sledges of a different pattern from those used heretofore, and it is expected that they will answer better than the Eskimo type. . . . These sledges have been designed by Commander Peary and I have done the work” (40). He also notes that “[t]he Commander has told me that it is imperative that fresh meat be secured, and now that I have done all that it is positively necessary for me to do here at the ship . . . it

is off on the hunt” (41). After describing the challenges of sledging over the Arctic ice, Henson underscores his exceptional capacity for hard work, writing that “[i]t should be understood that while I was pioneering, I was carrying the full-loaded sledges with about 550 pounds, while the other parties that were in the lead never carried but half of the regular load, which made our progress much slower” (98). Significantly, only once does he clearly express any dissatisfaction with his position. Quoting from his diary of the expedition, he writes, “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” (42). Adhering closely to the notion that labor rather than color determines a man’s merit, Henson’s memoir attempts to depict the North Pole as a frontier where work, rather than race, determines the black explorer’s worth. However, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* actually hinges on a crisis of recognition that challenges the premises of Washingtonian uplift. At first glance, Henson seems devoted to these meritocratic premises, which motivate the text itself, and he seems to clutch these premises to the very end of his narrative. Nevertheless, embedded in *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* are contrary strains that betray the tensions that arise in discourses of racial uplift.

There can be little doubt that Henson’s memoir presents its readers with a black life, given his book’s title and his early expression of pride in being the “Colored Man” who accompanied Peary. Still, while Henson presents himself at the outset of his memoir according to the cultural politics of racial synecdoche that dominated postbellum black autobiography, he rarely mentions his blackness before the narrative reaches its climax at the moment of polar conquest. When he does, his references to race are indirect, implicit, or ironic, suggesting a playful circumspection that accords with a Washingtonian ideology of colorblind merit. Comparing himself to one of his white colleagues, for instance, Henson writes that “[t]he effect of the long period of darkness had been to give his complexion a greenish-yellow tinge. My complexion reminded him of a ginger cake with too much saleratus in it” (63). He compares himself to another colleague by writing that “we all had our faces frosted, and my short flat nose, which does not readily succumb to the cold, suffered as much as did MacMillan’s” (59). Here Henson slyly confronts the climatic determinism of the era’s raciological thought, according to which a “son of the tropics” would surely perish in the Arctic. After noting that “we had plenty of work” at one camp, Henson describes the scene with dry humor: “though the tumpa, tumpa, plunk of the banjo was

not heard, and our camp-fires were not scenes of revelry and joy, I frequently did the double-shuffle and an Old Virginia break-down, to keep my blood circulating" (65). Given the era's blackface minstrelsy, with its troubling nostalgia for the plantation life of the Old South, this ambiguous reference to black performance might evoke for some readers the figure of the shuffling ducky. However, if Henson portrays himself as a comical figure, he does so by absurdly inserting the representational mode of plantation nostalgia into the far, far north. After all, his dancing does not express "revelry and joy," just as the brutal "journey to the Pole and back is not to be regarded as a pleasure outing, and our so-called jaunt was by no means a cake-walk," as he insists elsewhere (144). Like his references to his complexion or his nose, Henson's double-voiced "double-shuffle" acts as a strategic racial allusion. In each of these cases, he acknowledges his blackness with a touch of wry, signifying humor while attempting to elude the meaning that this difference may hold for his readers.

More importantly, Henson's cunning indirection allows him to critique the racialization of servile labor that marked Peary's expedition, a critique that he had to obscure, perhaps, because of Peary's control over the memoir's publication. Henson embeds this critique in his memoir by evoking Caliban, that dispossessed, enslaved figure from Shakespeare's final play, *The Tempest*. Describing the interaction between Bartlett, the ship's captain, and the Inuit hired to serve the expedition, Henson writes, "Captain Bartlett . . . knew perfectly well where he wanted to land, but the group of excited Eskimos were in his way . . . In a very short while the Captain lost patience and commenced to talk loudly and with excitement; immediately Sipsoo took up his language and parrot-like started to repeat the Captain's exact words: 'Get back there, get back—how in —— do you expect me to make a landing?'" (22). Sardonicly, Henson provides the moral of this story—"And thus does the innocent lamb of the North acquire a civilized tongue"—before adding, "[i]t is amusing to hear Kudlooktoo in the most charming manner give Charley [Percy, the ship's steward] a cussing that from anyone else would cause Charley to break his head open" (22–23). Having learned to curse, the Inuit then curse their civilized teachers, echoing Caliban's famous sentiments, "You taught me language and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse! The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (1.2.364–66). Thus echoing *The Tempest*, Henson mocks the presumed authority of "civilization" over "the innocent lamb of the North," but he extends the expressive power of this allusion through a subtle juxtaposition between the Inuit and himself.

Once Henson indicates how the northern natives have learned to curse, his narrative shifts abruptly, describing how *he* has been called upon to serve Peary's expedition: "For the last week I have been busy, with 'Matt! The Commander wants you,' 'Matt do this,' and 'Matt do that,' and going ashore and trading for skins, dogs, lines, and other things; and also walrus-hunting. I have been up to my neck in work, and have had small opportunity to keep my diary up to date" (23). The narrative shifts curiously between the cursing Inuit and the working Negro, but the shadowy form of Prospero's cursing, dusky worker enables Henson to bridge these nonwhite figures serving Peary's polar expedition. In effect, these linkages configure Henson himself as a discontented Caliban.

While Henson's recourse to Shakespeare in his memoir allows him to express his self-consciousness as a racialized worker in the service of American imperialism, it simultaneously presents him as a refined reader and writer. Elsewhere in Henson's memoir, he mentions that "a small set of Shakespeare," belonging to one of his colleagues, was with the expedition at Cape Columbia, and he directly quotes from two of Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest* and *Othello* (66, 166, 188). For much of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's plays had been accessible to workers and elites alike, particularly through staged performances; however, by the time Henson published *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, knowledge of Shakespeare had become cultural capital reflecting one's access to "high" culture, according to Lawrence Levine. In this respect, Henson's racially strategic references to Shakespeare serve him doubly by providing him with a respectable vehicle for representing his difference; that is, with these references Henson identifies with the famous Others of Shakespeare's plays, but the references themselves, as class signifiers, mark his elevation. He clearly expects his readers to appreciate his familiarity with literature, and he reports in his memoir that "[d]uring the long dreary midnights of the Arctic winter, I spent many a pleasant hour with my books," including *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, the poetry of Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Hood, two of Peary's early exploration accounts, and the Bible (39). He also points out, however, that "mostly I had rougher things than reading to do," suggesting the clash between his work and the word, as does the reference to his diary-writing that accompanies his evocation of Caliban ("I have been up to my neck in work, and have had small opportunity to keep my diary up to date" [39]).

While Henson stresses his labor on behalf of Peary's expedition, he does not want to be disregarded as a mere laborer. By emphasizing the pleasure he derives from his reading and writing, he attempts to

subvert one of the hierarchized antitheses upon which Peary based his authority—namely, the dichotomy between mental and manual work, between culture and labor—a Manichean dichotomy aligned with “a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object” (JanMohamad 82). If Henson employs Shakespeare’s plays to express his critical consciousness as a racialized worker, he also employs them to undercut the Manichean assumptions that bind him further to this status by denying his intellect. Caliban’s spectral appearance might represent Henson’s status on the expedition, but his assorted references to Shakespeare signify his cultural refinement, proof that his circumscribed position as racialized labor degrades him unjustly.

As a result, Henson’s identification with Caliban does not translate into an identification with the Inuit. Although Henson claims at the beginning of his memoir that “for periods covering more than twelve months, I have been to all intents an Esquimo,” his knowledge of the Inuit establishes both his ethnographic expertise and his managerial authority over them (6). Henson occupies a mediating position between the Inuit and Peary, and his work for the expedition requires him to manage the Inuit, as when he describes “the disagreeable job of putting the undesirable [Inuit] ashore, and it was like handling a lot of sulky school Children” (24–25), or when he writes that he “had the Devil’s own time in making my boys and some of the others see it the way the Commander wants us to look at it” (90), or when he commends Ootah for “his strong character and the fact that he was more easily managed by me than by any of the others” (137). Like Washington, Henson embraces the stark evolutionary opposition between civilization and savagery, and he enacts his own uplift by civilizing, not simply handling, the Native. During an earlier expedition, Henson writes, he cared for an orphaned Inuit boy. Describing the exact meaning of this adoption, he writes, “[a]fter this boy was washed and scrubbed by me, his long hair cut short, and his greasy, dirty clothes of skins and furs burned, a new suit made of odds and ends collected from different wardrobes on the ship made him a presentable Young American. I was proud of him, and he of me. He learned to speak English and slept underneath my bunk” (8). Resonating with Washington’s work as head of Hampton’s “Wigwam,” the school’s dormitory for Native American boys, Henson’s own experiences with the Inuit in the service of Peary’s imperial endeavor suggest how civilizationist assumptions of control and domination underwrite projects of racial

uplift. Just as Henson's apparent familiarity with Shakespeare mitigates his racialization as a worker, his mediating role as an agent of civilization elevates him into the ranks of racial management, raising him above the status of a mere manual laborer.

Though Henson's blackness is veiled throughout *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, it nonetheless emerges from the shadows at the narrative's climax. In the narrative's pivotal chapter, Henson chronicles the expedition's culminating dash to the North Pole, but he frames a sequence of events that uncovers the tangle of race, masculinity, citizenship, and imperialism at the heart of his memoir. This chapter opens at that moment on April 2, 1909, when the last supporting party has turned back to the ship, leaving only Peary, Henson, and four Inuit men—Ootah, Egingwah, Seegloo, and Ooqueah—to travel the final 133 miles to the Pole. At this point, Henson becomes "Peary's sole companion from the realm of civilization" (2), and he writes that "Commander Peary and I were alone (save for the four Esquimos), the same as we had been so often in the past years, and *as we looked at each other we realized our position and we knew without speaking* that the time had come for us to demonstrate that we were the men who, it had been ordained, should unlock the door which held the mystery of the Arctic" (127–28; emphasis added). At the edge of history, Henson imagines himself as more than merely Peary's assistant. First, he aligns himself with Peary by distancing himself from the Inuit; that is, the parenthetical reference to the "four Esquimos" may reserve a place for the Inuit in the discovery, but it also removes them from the realm of *men* whose exploits constitute history. Assuming the authority of omniscience, his narrative then isolates the black man and the white man in a moment of intersubjectivity that needs no articulation between them. As Henson first describes their approach to the Pole, he represents their common destiny through this look of mutual recognition that binds the two silent men together as agents of civilization and as undifferentiated equals.

Once the expedition has completed its final dash, Peary raises the United States flag twice—first to establish camp, then to claim the Pole as a symbol of American supremacy. In *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, the first ritual of conquest allows Henson to assert his nationality, sharing with Peary his status as an American. As Henson worked to build the igloos, unload the sledges, and secure the dogs, Peary planted an "old silk flag" that had traveled with him on his previous expeditions, and "[f]or a few minutes it hung limp and lifeless in the dead calm of the haze, and then a slight breeze, increasing in strength, caused the folds to straighten out, and soon it was rippling

out in sparkling color” (132–33). In response, Henson writes, “a thrill of patriotism ran through me and I raised my voice to cheer the starry emblem of my native land. The Esquimos gathered around and, taking the time from Commander Peary, three hearty cheers rang out on the still, frosty air. . . . [W]e turned in and slept, leaving the flag proudly floating above us” (133). The flag transforms the camp into an outpost representing America’s claim on foreign territory, even though the imperial benefits of the North Pole were largely symbolic. Peary’s expeditions coincided with America’s attempts to become a world power by possessing extranational lands, usually taken from Old World powers. According to Lisa Bloom, the discursive logic framing Peary’s successful assault on the Pole “suggests that because the United States has won the prize in competition with a great power—England—it too must now be a power of world significance. Peary’s discovery thus becomes emblematic of a reversal of global power relations” (22). With the flag’s appearance, Henson thus emphasizes his work on behalf of his “native land” in extending the borders of the United States into the uncharted terrain of the far north.

Nonetheless, the American flag is a multivalent symbol in *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. Henson writes that Peary’s flag “was as glorious and as inspiring a banner as any battle-scarred, blood-stained standard of the world—and this badge of honor and courage was also blood-stained and battle-scarred” (133). Although he represents the flag as a survivor of the warlike ravages of Arctic exploration, he also reveals that Peary himself has inflicted many of its scars. According to Henson, “at several places there were blank squares marking the spots where pieces had been cut out at each of the ‘Farthest’ of its brave bearer, and [these had been] left . . . as mute but eloquent witnesses of his achievements. At the North Pole a diagonal strip running from the upper left to the lower right corner was cut and this precious strip, together with a brief record, was placed in an empty tin, sealed up and buried in the ice, as a record for all time” (133–34).¹⁰ By cutting away the flag along its diagonal at the top of the world, Peary splits it completely; in order to substantiate America’s claim on the Pole, he sacrifices its material integrity.

In addition to Peary’s “battle-scarred flag,” he also raises a number of others at the Pole. Henson writes that he “had another American flag, sewn on a white ground, and it was the emblem of the ‘Daughters of the Revolution Peace Society’ [sic]; he also had and flew the emblem of the Navy League, and the emblems of a couple of college fraternities of which he was a member” (134). Peary’s second American flag belongs to the Daughters of the American Revolution,

one of the many genealogical societies to arise in the 1890s that “enabled the consolidation of a seemingly stable, embodied, and racialized national identity, one that conflated American borders with Anglo-Saxon bloodlines” (Smith 136). Specifying the limits of Peary’s America, these flags project a community of elite whites into the far north.¹¹ While Henson idealizes the American flag as an inclusionary symbol, Peary’s flags of conquest, divided and divisive, thus designate this polar expedition as an exclusionary project. The ironic symbolism of Peary’s rent flag is compelling, since it signals, with his other flags, the anti-democratic nature of imperial conquest.

In *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, the evocation of a racially circumscribed nation immediately precedes, and thus informs, Henson’s own racialization in the narrative when the expedition finally arrives at the top of the world, disrupting the meritocratic logic of the narrative. Once Peary raises his various flags to establish his northernmost camp, he plans, with Henson’s assistance, to make the observations that will verify their exact position in relation to the Pole. Henson depicts this moment as the culmination of his relationship with Peary:

[W]ith the resolute squaring of his jaws, I was sure that [Peary] was satisfied, and I was confident that the journey had ended. Feeling the time had come, I ungloved my right hand and went forward to congratulate him on the success of our eighteen years of effort, *but* a gust of wind blew something into his eye, *or else* the burning pain caused by his prolonged look at the reflection of the limb of the sun forced him to turn aside; and with both hands covering his eyes, he gave us orders to not let him sleep for more than four hours. . . . I unloaded a sledge, and reloaded it with a couple of skins, the instruments, and a cooker with enough alcohol and food for one meal for three, and then I turned in to the igloo where my boys were already sound asleep. The thermometer registered 29° below zero. (135–36; emphasis added)

Henson’s dramatic, barehanded gesture at the Pole is doubly meaningful for his memoir: while it certainly undercuts racialized notions of climatic determinism (to which Peary himself was committed), it also underscores the import of the handshake as a sincere gesture of recognition that demands mutual sacrifice. Henson removes his glove anticipating, perhaps, that Peary will also remove his for a genuine handclasp between men and equals, but Peary fails to acknowledge his

bare, black hand; by “covering his eyes,” Peary effectively refuses both the gesture and the look of recognition that would satisfy the logic of Henson’s narrative up to this climactic moment. Although Henson attempts to account for Peary’s neglect, the uncertain explanation (“but . . . or else . . .”) written into his narrative is an unconvincing alibi that cannot disguise his own disappointment. Perhaps Peary *was* blinded by the whiteness of the snow rather than the whiteness of his skin, but this crisis of recognition freezes the political momentum of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. Henson’s account thus suggests that which the narrator himself cannot openly admit (given, perhaps, Peary’s control over the book’s publication): with this unfulfilled handshake at the North Pole, Peary draws the color line.

Once Peary turns aside from Henson, he “gave *us* orders,” asserting his authority at the head of a racial hierarchy that identifies the black explorer with the four Inuit men, all nonwhite workers under his control, and even as the others sleep, Henson continues to work. This narrative sequence—the failed handshake, the crisis of recognition, Henson’s return to work—produces a moment of racialization that subverts the meritocratic ideology of racial uplift driving the narrative to this point. Although Washington’s introduction to *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* tries to reassure readers that Henson’s hard work was recognized and rewarded, this crisis of recognition at the Pole contradicts his statement that Peary was “generous enough to acknowledge” the black explorer’s worth (Washington, Introduction xvi). In fact, Peary refuses any form of racially transcendent recognition precisely because the black explorer has proven himself to be so useful. Rather than elevate him into the world of civilized men, Henson’s utility reinforces his position as a mere instrument of American imperialism. In this sense, his narrative suggests a critique of Washingtonian uplift that resonates with the later ideas of Frantz Fanon. Revising the Hegelian dialectic between master and slave, Fanon argues that “[f]or Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work” (220, not. 8). According to Henson’s memoir, his indispensability fixes him ever more tightly, despite his best efforts to free himself from his racialization. Robert Stepto has argued that “the seminal journey in Afro-American narrative literature is unquestionably north,” but Henson’s “narrative of ascent” fails because this North cannot extend the geography of freedom mapped so often in the African American literary tradition that dates back to the antebellum slave narratives (67–68). Indeed, even this barren North cannot exist as a space of freedom beyond America’s racialized hierarchy of power.

Reacting to the appearance of the color line, Henson not only asserts his blackness conspicuously; he assumes the role of an emblematic Race Man whose historical achievements vindicate all black people. In order to resolve the central crisis of recognition that occurs at the Pole, Henson immediately registers an alternative discourse of history that has no counterpart elsewhere within his own narrative. Curiously, this anomalous discourse appears when the American flag reappears, this time at the Pole itself. Henson writes,

The Commander gave the word, "We will plant the stars and stripes—at *the North Pole!*" and it was done; on the peak of a huge paleocrycstic floeberg the glorious banner was unfurled to the breeze, and as it snapped and crackled in the wind, I felt a savage joy and exultation. Another world's accomplishment was done and finished, and 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. From the building of the pyramids and the journey to the Cross, to the discovery of the new world and the discovery of the North Pole, the Negro had been the faithful and constant companion of the Caucasian, and I felt all that it was possible for me to feel, that it was I, a lowly member of my race, who had been chosen by fate to represent it, at this, almost the last of the world's great *work*. (136)

When Peary raises the American flag for the second time, Henson thus completes his narrative transformation from man to American man to colored man. Rather than inspiring in him the "thrill of patriotism" that marks him as an American, the flag now positions Henson as a representative Negro striving, as Du Bois had put it a few years earlier, "to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation" (11).

Within Henson's narrative, this strategic invocation of the synecdochic black self occurs nowhere else, since he gives no explicit indication that he understands himself to be working within a discourse of racial achievement. However, this discourse resonates with the book's paratexts, Washington's introduction and Peary's foreword, both of which reinforce Henson's burden of representation. In his foreword, Peary himself writes the history of the world in terms of the accomplishments of men who belong to, and thus represent, races: "in the final conquest of the 'prize of centuries,' not alone individuals, but *races* were represented. . . . [W]hen the Stars and Stripes floated

at the North Pole, Caucasian, Ethiopian, and Mongolian stood side by side at the apex of the earth, in the harmonious companionship resulting from hard work, exposure, danger, and a common object" (Foreword vii–viii). Peary's rhetoric demonstrates that this mode of history has resounded throughout the bourgeois—and not merely the black—public sphere, but it has provided an especially instrumental "politics of fulfillment" for black people facing entrenched resistance to their demands for equality.¹² Nonetheless, contemporary reviews of Henson's memoir in the mainstream press never questioned the racialized vision of history in Peary's foreword, but they dismissed the uplift version that reserved a place for black people—or rather, black men—within a civilizationist discourse of Western progress.¹³ Once Peary renders him invisible, Henson attempts to resolve this crisis by rendering black men visible as workers who have contributed to the history of Western civilization. Still, even as he concludes his narrative he remains troubled by his own invisibility. As a result, Henson's anxieties haunt his memoir to the very end.

Just as Peary's "blood-stained and battle-scarred" flag serves Henson as an omen of injustice once he and Peary approach the Pole, the American flag also augurs another, final resolution to the crisis at the core of his narrative. In the memoir's final chapter, entitled "Home!," Henson writes that as Peary's ship returned to the United States, "I was busily engaged in making a strip to sew upon a large American flag. This was a broad white bar which was to extend from the upper right to the lower left corner of the flag, with the words 'North Pole' sewed on it" (186). The diagonal that Henson adds to the flag mirrors symbolically the one that Peary has removed from it in order to establish the nation's imperial claim. Although the flag that Henson stitches here is not literally Peary's "old silk flag," this moment in the narrative suggests the responsibility he assumes for mending the rupture between the two men, thereby resolving the crisis of recognition that threatens the integrity of the nation. While the flag that Peary splits immediately precedes an earlier moment of Henson's racialization, the flag that Henson stitches here immediately precedes an expression of racial self-consciousness. After describing the ship's triumphant approach to New York City in a "great naval parade," Henson formally ends this account of his polar adventure with another Shakespearean reference that underscores the profound significance of race to his memoir: "And now my story is ended; it is a tale that is told. 'Now is Othello's occupation gone'" (188).¹⁴ Like the figure of Caliban, Shakespeare's tragic Moor allows Henson to insert blackness into the text without directly addressing the racial

dimensions of his narrative; this reference also suggests that the “tale that is told” has been informed by Henson’s self-consciousness as a racialized worker in the service of the nation, as Othello was.

Although Henson writes that “my story is ended,” his narrative continues with a final, concluding passage, one in which he envisions an unlikely reunion with Peary. He writes, “I long to see them all again! the brave, cheery companions of the trail of 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’” (188). After invoking Othello as a racial sign, Henson then follows with an *imagined* instance of homosociality with which race does not seem to interfere. He thus *creates* the recognition that his work never actually elicits from Peary in the narrative (and even this recognition renders him an anonymous “boy”). Because Peary’s assault on the North Pole does not ultimately fulfill the egalitarian ideals of the black explorer, Henson must fabricate the solidarity between black and white men that uplift discourses of work, merit, and masculine recognition demand; the fact of this fabrication itself calls attention to the real failure of Washington’s great law of merit.

Consistent with his strategic use of intertexts, Henson finally writes that “the lure of the Arctic is tugging at my heart, to me the trail is calling,” at which point he leaves his readers with his last words, two lines of poetry that end his narrative: “The Old Trail! / The Trail that is always New!” (188). Henson quotes these lines from Rudyard Kipling’s “L’Envoi,” a poem from *Barrack Room Ballads and Other Verses*, which Henson kept with him in his cabin on the *Roosevelt* (39). Remarkably, Kipling, an ideologue of British imperialism, has the last word in this black explorer’s memoir, and just as the poem “L’Envoi” concludes Kipling’s collection, Henson chooses these two lines to conclude *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. His affinity for Kipling at this moment may have something to do with the populist dimension of the *Ballads*, which relates the imperial soldier’s “service and suffering, and allows him to protest against his exploitation,” in keeping with themes of exploitation evoked in his allusions to Othello, the black soldier, and Caliban, the black worker (MacDonald 150). At the same time, however, Kipling’s appearance here, in the form of the *Other Verses*, underscores the extent to which Henson’s idealized moment of homosocial reconciliation has been structured by the power of imperial projects to mystify the hierarchized differences between men who are bound together in a patriotic cause.¹⁵ Henson leaves his readers, then, with

a contradiction: on the one hand, his strategic allusions seem to present his readers with a masked critique of his exploitation; on the other, he still seems to long for an elusive interracial fraternity that, under strenuous conditions, arises to dispatch the differences between men. That this endless longing must be fabricated and imagined carries, again, its own critique—a critique of its real impossibility, given the polar experiences Henson narrates in *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*.

Notwithstanding the title of his final chapter, Henson never actually returns “home” at the end of his memoir—that is, he narrates neither his landfall in New York City nor his reunion with Lucy Ross, the woman he had married less than a year before the final polar expedition.¹⁶ Fueled by his anxieties over recognition, Henson’s narrative suggests that even at the North Pole Peary’s final expedition, as a symbolic ritual of American domination, cannot escape the hierarchical relations of power that reproduce the color line beyond the nation’s borders on the Arctic frontier. Indeed, the full success of Peary’s expedition depends on the racialization of servile labor that casts Henson as a mere shadow in the heart of whiteness. The tragic crisis at the core of this memoir calls into question the elevating potential of meritocracy, exposing the racial fissures that disrupt the Washingtonian discourse of synecdochic recognition through work. However, Henson’s narrative responds to its central crisis with the sorts of resolutions—the vindicationist discourse of racial achievement, the imagined moment of homosocial resolution—that cannot completely resist the discursive pull of racial uplift. Ultimately, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* ends with Henson suspended in an ambivalent homosocial fantasy, an unstable fantasy that betrays both the power and the pitfalls of racial uplift ideologies to structure black self-presentation in the Jim Crow era.

Swarthmore College

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Notes

1. Here I follow Raymond Williams’s concept of “determination”: “For in practice determination is never only the setting of

limits; it is also the exertion of pressures,” which “are by no means only pressures against limits, though these are crucially important. They are at least as often pressures derived from the formation and momentum of a given social mode: in effect a compulsion to act in ways that maintain and renew it. They are also, and vitally, pressures exerted by new formations, with their as yet unrealized intentions and demands” (87).

2. In October, 1909, the penultimate issue of the *Colored American Magazine* included a frontispiece of a smiling Henson in white shirt and bow tie, holding a drink; the caption for this photograph was “Matthew Henson: The Negro of the Hour.” On Washington’s control of the monthly magazine, see Meier (228–29).

3. Other Bookerites attending the banquet included Gilchrist Stewart (a Tuskegee graduate), prominent Harlem realtor Philip A. Payton, and Boston’s Reverend James H. McMullen; while not in attendance, Emmett J. Scott, Robert H. Terrell, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, John C. Dancy, and Ralph W. Tyler all sent tributes to the banquet applauding Henson’s accomplishments.

4. These expeditions occurred from June 1891 to August 1892, from June 1893 to July 1895, in the summer of 1896, in the summer of 1897, from July 1898 to August 1902, from July 1905 to December 1906, and from July 1908 to September 1909.

5. The same issue of the *Seattle Republican* contained an editorial that reinforced this point, arguing that “[t]o prescribe the black man to live in any particular section of this country is saying that he is not a free citizen.” Moreover, this editorial concluded that black people should migrate out of the “dead” South (“The Negro’s Home”).

6. For example, as the final Peary expedition was returning to the US, a front-page cartoon in the *Boston Daily Globe* featured Henson enjoying his fame at the North Pole while boxers Sam Langford and Jack Johnson look on in surprise. Titled “Lost—One Limelight,” Wallace Goldsmith’s cartoon suggested that Henson’s accomplishment had outshined the exploits of these two well-known black athletes. Despite the implicit contrast drawn between Henson and Johnson, both of them are depicted here with the conventional bulging eyes and exaggerated white lips of the minstrel stage.

7. As Henson told the *New York Age* in 1910, he had not received much pay from Peary during his years of polar work, nor had Peary compensated him for the dozens of photographs Henson took during the 1909 expedition (“Henson and Peary”). While Peary sought to control the official story of his expedition amid the polar controversy, Henson embarked on a short-lived speaking tour in 1909 in order to

earn an income, ignoring Peary's demand that he refrain (Robinson 219–24; Miller 193–98).

8. Washington's other introductions appear in Mifflin Winstar Gibbs's *Shadow and Light* and William H. Holtzclaw's *The Black Man's Burden*.

9. Although *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* fails to discuss any of the typical hardships associated with black life after the Civil War, Frederick A. Stokes likewise publicized Henson's memoir in its catalog as an account "of the noteworthy achievements of a negro [sic] rising from great handicaps," attempting thereby to capitalize on the popularity of Washington's *Up from Slavery* and other such narratives of racial uplift ("Descriptive").

10. In Peary's own narrative of the polar conquest, the historical record he buries with the strip of flag declares, "I have with me 5 men, Matthew Henson, *colored*, Ootah, Egingwah, Seegloo, and [Ooqueah] *Eskimos*; 5 sledges and 38 dogs" (Peary 295–96; emphasis added). His imperial claim thus inscribes his companions as non-white men.

11. As Henson also points out, Peary named the camp at the pole after Morris K. Jesup, the prominent banker, philanthropist, and president of the American Museum of Natural History who was also a member of the Sons of the American Revolution. In 1899, Jesup founded the Peary Arctic Club to underwrite Peary's northern expeditions. The club, which "included magnates of the Colgate Soap Company, the US Steel Corporation, the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company, and the Bankers Trust Company," raised \$350,000 for Peary's final expedition alone (Bloom 28). Like Peary's flags, the naming of Camp Jesup establishes his imperial claims on behalf of this coterie of white capitalists.

12. According to Paul Gilroy, the "politics of fulfillment, practised by the descendants of slaves demands . . . that bourgeois civil society live up to the promises of its own rhetoric" (37).

13. The reviewer of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* writing for *The Dial* noted the "introduction by Dr. Booker T. Washington, dwelling with justifiable pride on the part played by those of his race, and particularly Mr. Henson, in enlarging the bounds of our geographical knowledge" (325); before quoting from the pivotal "world's great *work*" passage, however, the reviewer dismissed Henson's "pardonable hyperbole" ("Briefs on Books" 325). Quoting from the same passage, a contributor to *The Nation* connected Washington's introduction to Henson's passage, though unkindly: "There was no particular necessity for the brief introduction by

Booker T. Washington, in which is pointed out with almost Teutonic scholarship how the negro [sic] has been the white man's companion in the history of discovery since the earliest voyages of the sixteenth century. We could have spared the elaboration of the same truth in the author's own words" ("Notes" 369).

14. The line in Shakespeare's play reads, "Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone." See *Othello* 3.3.357.

15. Ann Parry examines the tension between the populism of Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads*, which "clearly infringed the barrier of respectability which was one of the effective lines of demarcation between the working and middle classes" (36), and the "high diction more acceptable in the Victorian drawing-room" (52) of *Other Verses*, which "played a key role in mediating the shocking impact of the earlier *Ballads* and stirring national sentiment" (37).

16. When Henson met Lucy Ross before Peary's 1905 expedition, she was herself a pioneer, "a clerk in a large [New York] bank, one of the first Negro girls to break through the racial barriers in the banking system"; they were married 5 September 1907 (Miller 129).

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