HAUNTING: THE GHOST OF COLONIALISM IN ANTARCTICA

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It's a windy spring evening when Elizabeth Rush is offered a place on a research expedition to Antarctica—the opportunity of a lifetime. A continent shrouded in snow and uncertainty, Antarctica and its glaciers are kingpins in the conversation on climate change, and Rush takes seriously this opportunity to better understand its complexities, detailing her experiences before, during, and after the expedition in her narrative essay "Searching for Women's Voices in the Harshest Landscape on Earth." The title suggests that this essay will be concerned with a gender-specific approach to the icy continent.

However, as Rush delves into the history of Antarctic exploration in an effort to prepare for her upcoming trip, the words on the page puzzle together like an optical illusion revealing itself to faintly spell out another: colonialism. Yet nowhere in the text does the word or any of its variants appear explicitly. In fact, the only mention of a "colony" refers to a group of emperor penguins, who—despite their name—have nothing to do with human political or economic systems. Why, then, does Rush employ language and imagery associated with colonialism to describe Antarctic exploration without ever naming it? The answer lies in the driving factors behind the initial Antarctic expeditions that she investigates.

Upon initial reading, it appears that Rush characterizes historical Antarctic expeditions and the dated perspectives that frame them in two main ways: through violence and through the urge to conquer. The latter comes through explicitly—shortly before embarking on her own expedition, Rush reads a *New York Times* article that describes two men, Colin O'Brady and Louis Rudd, as "[hoping] to conquer a continent that has become the new Everest for extreme athletes." Pushing back against this narrative of conquest, Rush writes that

> [t]o pit O'Brady and Rudd against the elements is to continue to drive a wedge between man and nature, to make of this place that we know so very little about, into a hurdle, a hindrance, a problem. . . . a poetic metaphor, a thing that must be overcome in order for the singular human being to rise up. . . . a place to be conquered. . . .

In her critique of the traditional lens of understanding Antarctic exploration, Rush evokes language reminiscent of the rhetoric justifying Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century through the fantasy of a region unfamiliar to humans and instead run only by nature. Unsubdued and untamed, this land is meant to be subdued, to be tamed. The use of the verbs "overcome" and "conquer" in particular fuels this

allusion, as nature becomes a wild thing to subjugate, to domesticate, to assert superiority over. The verb "must" is also vital, evoking the inevitability that defined Manifest Destiny; just as Manifest Destiny was framed as a pressing duty, so too does this perspective on Antarctic exploration push for domination as an act of human triumph.

Consequently, it is also a perspective that is underlined by violence. Rush quotes Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita*, which makes the declaration that "[m]en have been quarrelling over Antarctica since it emerged from the southern mists, perceiving it as another trophy, a particularly meaty beast to be clubbed to death outside the cave." Not only is the exploration of Antarctica compared to the killing of an animal, but this killing is described viscerally and brutally through the specificity and vividity of "clubbed to death" as opposed to "killed." So too is the attitude of these men toward female explorers entering Antarctica shadowed by violence; Rush writes that "[w]hen *New York Times* journalist Walter Sullivan wrote of the first all-women scientific expedition to the South Pole . . . he described the undertaking as 'an incursion of females' into 'the largest male sanctuary remaining on this planet.'" In this framework, the first all-women expedition is an "incursion" on the existing "sanctuary"—language that echoes aggressive warfare and military campaigns. The men of the time viewed Antarctic expeditions through the lens of violence and accordingly framed an all-women expedition through that same violence, unable to conceive of it as different from another instance of invasive violence. The echoes of invasion, in turn, call to mind colonialism, which haunts readings of early Antarctic explorations.

The ghost of colonialism makes the time that Rush spends with Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "Sur"—a fictional account of an all-female Antarctic expedition—even more striking; the characters are not only all women but also all Latin-American, an ancestry influenced by Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonization. It is this stark inversion of the identities of traditional and historical Antarctic explorers that renders "Sur" so revolutionary. Men from the Global North, bearing legacies as colonizers, are instead reimagined as women from Latin America, bearing legacies as colonized. The contrast between these fictional characters and their historically accurate counterparts is what allows the piece not only to stray from but fully break and abandon the chains of accuracy that other texts, such as biographies and historical accounts, are necessarily bound to by the nature of their genres. Instead, as a work of fiction, Le Guin's work is able to reimagine not only the characters' identities but Antarctic exploration as a whole, informed by these new identities. This kind of reimagination is what fundamentally shifts Rush's own understanding of Antarctic expeditions, as "boundaries long built between two gendered ways of inhabiting the world blur a little." However, Rush only speaks explicitly on the axis of gender. The juxtaposition of "a relic of exploration" amidst "domestic bobbles" is what she names as striking, while the juxtaposition of "Rosita's christening dress and Juanito's silver rattle," prized mementos belonging to children with names that reflect their ethnic

background and culture, against the Norwegian "finneskos" remains unmentioned. Again, Rush shies away from the axis of colonized versus colonizer.

More thorough examination of Rush's investigation of these expeditions, however, complicates this reading. In her mention of the "Heroic Age of Antarctica Exploration," Rush remarks that the explorations were "undeniably driven and largely dominated by countries from the global north." The mention of the Global North here and its domination calls to mind colonization—nations that gained wealth through such conquest again seeking more land to exert control over. The complication arises only a few words later, as Rush explains that this domination occurred because "such folly was affordable" to the Global North. The word "folly" here stands out. It is not a practical endeavor but, rather, an instance of imprudence. The Antarctic explorations are not an effort to gain capital but, instead, are a drain on disposable resources, a waste that wealthier nations can take on without so much as a dent in their infrastructure. Further, the South Pole is notably barren of life—the continent is unfriendly and devoid of "indigenous history," as "[f]or the majority of human history no one glimpsed, let alone set foot, on Antarctica." Definitions of colonization naturally vary from source to source. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines it as "the action or process of establishing a colony or colonies in a place, esp. as part of an effort (typically by a foreign state) to appropriate the area settled and to assert political control over any Indigenous inhabitants" ("Colonization, N."), while the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* defines it as "the combination of territorial, juridical, cultural, linguistic, political, mental/epistemic, and/or economic domination of one group of people or groups of people by another (external) group of people" (Murrey 315). But the existence of a people to colonize is necessary—notably, a people who cannot be found in the harsh Antarctic landscape. Can the conquest of Antarctica, then, be called colonization if there is no population to colonize? If there is no capital to be gained, as has historically driven colonization? Or is this movement—despite its framework of violence and conquest and triumph over nature—not an instance of colonization but, rather, a symptom of it? Through prior colonization, countries in the Global North acquired capital, enabling them to pursue the "folly" of Antarctic expeditions. Combined with the values of individual triumph that defined colonialism and the violence that framed it, though without that same capital to gain, such expeditions are not a direct continuation of colonization but are still inherently tainted by its legacy. Colonization is driven by greed; early exploration of Antarctica was driven by pride.

To invoke colonization explicitly would be to bring alongside it the desire for economic and/or political gain that drives and is thus associated with colonization, a desire that does not align with the phenomenon that Rush details. Rush's avoidance may also have roots in her identity. Rather than theorizing on the Latin-American perspective of the women of "Sur," for example, Rush is able to make more confident assertions from the female lens. By not explicitly addressing colonization, so too does

Rush avoid overstepping or extrapolating. She instead grounds her argument in what she knows. Identifying her avoidance allows for greater insight on the impetus behind the dominant narrative of Antarctic exploration. Further, it points to the pervasive nature of colonization. Hints of colonization come through in spite of Rush shying away from it; the themes of conquest, superiority over nature, individuality, and even the patriarchy are inextricably tied to colonial structures. The text is consequently haunted by colonization, just as the expeditions it addresses are. Thus, it is ever the more crucial to grapple with its inescapable ghost.

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