

REDISCOVERING W.H.G. KINGSTON'S ARCTIC NARRATIVE Ethnocultural Encounters and Generic Experimentation

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Abstract – This article examines a forgotten nineteenth-century boys' adventure novel, *Peter the Whaler* (1851), written by William Henry Giles Kingston. After briefly introducing the author and his changing fortune, the article focuses on two specific aspects of *Peter the Whaler*, namely, its generic complexity and its thought-provoking representation of Inuit characters. A first aspect taken into account is the remarkable generic hybridity of Kingston's novel, which sheds light on the complex narrative experimentation conducted by Victorian writers and, especially, on their development and commercialisation of popular forms, such as the juvenile adventure novel. Besides merging realism with romance, Kingston makes an interesting use of gothic paraphernalia, and he combines elements of adventure fiction with a religious discourse that marks the distinction of his whole oeuvre. Worthy of attention are also the novel's pictures of Inuit people and culture. These pictures contrast with the racial assumptions endorsed by Victorian anthropologists and writers, including Charles Dickens, who famously disparaged Inuit testimonies in his 1854 articles to defend John Franklin and his men from allegations of cannibalism. The comparison between Kingston and Dickens offered in the article confirms the innovativeness of the ethnocultural encounters narrated in *Peter the Whaler*, suggesting further reasons why this novel deserves to be rediscovered and reinterpreted in our age.

Keywords: Arctic; Victorian literature; adventure novel; Inuit; William Henry Giles Kingston

1. Introduction

This article analyses a forgotten nineteenth-century boys' adventure novel, *Peter the Whaler. His Early Life and Adventures in the Arctic Regions*, written by William Henry Giles Kingston (1814-1880). Published in 1851, the novel became immediately successful; it had several editions until 1948 but, as is often the case with Victorian popular texts, it almost faded into oblivion in the late twentieth century. After introducing the author and his changing fortune, the article focuses on two specific aspects of *Peter the Whaler*, namely, its generic complexity and its thought-provoking representation of the Inuit characters with whom the eponymous British protagonist interacts. As will be shown, Kingston describes indigenous people and culture in ways that raise the reader's interest. Most evident in *Peter the Whaler*, but also present in later Arctic works composed by Kingston, this innovative approach marks the author's difference from Charles Dickens, whose racialisation of the Inuit is examined in the third part of the article. The comparison with Dickens confirms the innovativeness of the ethnocultural encounters narrated in *Peter the Whaler*, offering further reasons why this mid-Victorian novel deserves to be rediscovered and reinterpreted in our age.

Kingston was born in a family of the English gentry in 1814. He was raised as an ideal Victorian Englishman, who combined wealth with gentlemanly values and evangelical earnestness. He spent his childhood between England and Portugal, where his family had trading interests, and he later visited other European countries and North America. In his thirties, he chose to pursue a literary career. At first, he wrote romances for adult readers and non-fiction; but, after the success of *Peter the Whaler*, he devoted himself mostly to

juvenile literature. Between 1850 and 1880, Kingston composed over a hundred books for boys, which were highly popular in the UK and the US. In the following century, his fame faded and his works are now ranked as “ephemeral” in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Hamilton 2011). In addition to this rich narrative production, Kingston published travelogues, fictional biographies and historical tales. His prodigious output includes translations of adventure fiction, including novels by Jules Verne, which were published in his name, even though they were translated by his wife, Agnes.

Kingston also edited periodicals, such as the *Kingston's Magazine for Boys* (1859-1863), and was involved in philanthropic activities. He was honorary secretary for the Colonisation Society that promoted the immigration of lower- and middle-class Britons to the colonies; and he later worked for the Mission to Seamen, which aimed to improve the condition of sailors. The experiences made with both societies had an impact on his middle-career production, which bears evidence of his admiration for the explorers and colonisers who contributed to establishing Britain's dominion over land and sea. Whereas his early narratives display more curiosity for unknown regions and ethnocultural diversity, works written in the late 1850s and early 1860s are more centred on the goals of British expansionism, which they tend to justify also in racial terms, as the responsibility of a superior race destined to control inferior populations.

Kingston's enthusiasm for the imperial venture was not long-lasting, however. In his late career, he developed an increasing awareness of the contradictions between his Christian and imperialist beliefs. As a result, he adopted a more critical approach to racism, colonial abuse and slavery in his 1870s works. J. S. Bratton highlights how “[i]n fact in all the books of his last years, [...] the tone was increasingly religious, suggesting the collapse of certainties and worldly optimism, and retreat to the safety of evangelical Christianity from his outward-looking, idealistic imperialism” (1981, p. 131). Such an approach marks his difference from authors of boys' adventure novels like G. A. Henty, who instead made a consistent use of racial generalisations, championed slavery and never hesitated to legitimise imperialist violence.

Kingston's wavering faith in imperial values was most probably increased by some disappointments he faced in his later years. As Bratton suggests, the editorial failure of *Kingston's Magazine for Boys* and the consequent loss of money were “disheartening” experiences for Kingston, who lost “confidence, in some degree, in himself and his message” (1981, p. 129). A different opinion is held by his biographer, Maurice Rooke Kingsford, who minimises the ideological impact of these failures. Even though he refers to a financial distress – a “domestic tragedy” – that made Kingston a “recluse” in his later life, the biographer claims that “to the reading public, there was no failure or sign of fatigue to be observed” (Kingsford 1947, p. 200). This statement is hardly surprising. What Kingsford aspires to offer is in fact a consistent picture of Kingston as “a maker and prophet of Empire”, “a great imperial schoolmaster” who made “a gigantic effort” to combine nationalistic with religious ideals and strove to educate the Victorians to build their empire “upon service and sacrifice rather than domination and achievement” (Kingsford 1947, pp. 186, 179). These celebratory words not only smack of hagiography; they also betray a deep nostalgia for an empire that, in 1947, was on the verge of collapse, an empire that Kingsford idealises in terms of service and sacrifice, giving proof of what postcolonial theorists would later criticise as the West's self-positioning as a superior culture legitimised to dominate others (Said 1994).

Unlike Kingsford, I do not view Kingston as an unswerving champion of British imperialism. In my opinion, his celebration of British heroism is inextricably intertwined with doubts about the righteousness of the imperial mission which are not only expressed in his late works as a result of personal troubles, as Bratton intimates. What this article aims to

demonstrate is that the author's doubts emerge in different phases of his production and are already voiced in an early novel like *Peter the Whaler* which, in subtle ways, shows curiosity and respect for the ethnocultural diversity of Inuit people. These heterodox aspects have received little critical attention. Bratton himself classifies *Peter the Whaler* as a typical juvenile adventure narrative imbued with evangelicalism. Religious elements are certainly at the core of this novel's bildungsroman plot, which revolves around the eponymous Peter Lefroy, an Irish scapegrace boy who becomes a mariner and travels to remote regions, learning from his experiences and evolving into a responsible Christian gentleman. In my view, however, Christianity is also the trigger for the novel's innovative approach to indigenous populations. This approach contrasts with the imperial ideology espoused by most Victorian novelists, and especially with the mistrust of the Inuit voiced by Dickens. Unlike these writers, Kingston draws intriguing portrayals of Inuit people, thereby aligning himself with the few Victorians who questioned some of the racial assumptions on which the institutionalised discourse of their age was founded.

2. Elements of novelty in *Peter the Whaler*

Kingston is often mentioned in literary histories, but his relevance is generally overlooked by scholars. Ranked among the authors of nineteenth-century juvenile literature, he tends to be compared with popular writers like Henty, Robert Michael Ballantyne or Frederick Marryat, while little attention is paid to the literary and cultural specificities of his works. These specificities are instead worth examining, especially in *Peter the Whaler*. As will be shown, this novel is not only remarkable for its generic experimentation; it also tackles racial issues in unorthodox ways, showing that mid-Victorian attitudes to otherness were far from being monolithic.

On a formal level, *Peter the Whaler* exhibits a remarkable generic hybridity that sheds light on the age's experimentation with narrative forms. The novel narrates thrilling experiences of navigation, exploration and survival that target a young male audience craving for sensations. In ways similar to other juvenile fiction writers, Kingston merges elements of the bildungsroman and travel literature with romance and gothic paraphernalia; he combines adventure with teachings that aim to offer moral and social guidance; and he uses sensational devices like cliff-hangers to attract his young readers, thereby confirming the fast-growing commercialisation of Victorian boys' fiction. This hybridisation is manifest, for example, in Kingston's ability to interweave romance with realism. *Peter the Whaler* bears ample evidence of the author's efforts to convey realistic pictures of nautical life and the Arctic. Drawn upon the accounts of Victorian sailors, the details of navigation, whaling and survival on ice are carefully reproduced in the novel, as evidenced by the following scene of whale dissection:

With their blubber-knives the men then cut it into oblong pieces, just as fish is cut across at table: and with their spades they lifted it from the flesh and bones, performing the same work on a larger scale than the fish-knife does. To the end thus first lifted a strap and tackle is fastened, called the "speck-tackle", by which those on deck haul it up. This operation is called "flensing".

As the huge mass is turned round and round by the kent-tackle, the harpooners continue cutting off the slips, till the whole coat of fat is removed. (Kingston n.d., p. 154)

The familiar simile of fish cutting, the use of specialised terms and the visual precision with which the "flensing" operation is rendered are all devices that lend verisimilitude to the scene which, like many other passages of *Peter the Whaler*, seems to have been drawn from the maritime travel literature of the age.

As hinted above, however, realism is hybridised with elements of romance, which add mystery and sensation to Peter's adventures. The Arctic, in particular, is connoted as a gothic place by Kingston, who imaginatively reshapes the details drawn from polar travel accounts. This gothic reshaping is in line with the age's idea of spectrality associated with the Arctic, which "nineteenth-century audiences saw [...] as a dreamlike zone that overflowed the cartographic and literary space in which it was traditionally bounded by that tiny group of men who promoted and handled polar exploration" (McCorristine 2018, p. 5). The exoticism and uncanniness of this zone is manifest in the ghastly connotations Kingston attaches to many polar animals hunted by Peter. A telling example is the use of the epithet "white monster" to describe a creature that is later recognised to be "a large, white, shaggy polar bear" (Kingston n.d., p. 189). Other examples are the hallucinations Peter experiences while stranded on an iceberg, when he has the impression of perceiving supernatural creatures both visually and aurally:

all sorts of strange fancies came to my head. I remembered all I had read or heard of mermen and mermaids, of ocean monsters and sea-spirits, and I could scarcely persuade myself that I did not see some gliding before me. Certainly I could hear them: now there was a distant roar, now a loud snorting noise near me; there were voices wandering through the air, and strains of sweet music seemed to come up from the deep. (Kingston n.d., pp. 131-132)

The written and oral tradition mentioned in the passage is the centuries-long, heterogeneous bulk of polar travellers' reports, stories and myths. Since the sixteenth century, western voyagers had depicted the Arctic as "a place of wonder and supernatural beings" – a place of encounters with mermaids and spirits, of contact with Inuit superstitions, and of mirages provoked by particular light reflections on ice (McCorristine 2018, pp. 23-24, 13). This tradition was still appealing to nineteenth-century writers who, despite their growing faith in rationality, merged supernatural elements with realism to intensify the idea of polar space as "a testing ground for British masculinity and patriotism" (McCorristine 2018, p. 33).

The gothic quality of many descriptive passages is confirmed by the four illustrations of the Blackie & Son edition of the novel, three of which represent terrible dangers faced by Peter and his mates while travelling in the Arctic. The risk of shipwreck is the object of the first and third illustrations, which respectively depict a Dutch whaler trapped in the ice and two surviving sailors stranded on the iceberg into which their ship crashed before foundering. The fourth illustration is instead centred on the "shaggy polar bear" mentioned above, which is going to be shot "full in his face" by Peter (Kingston n.d., p. 190).

This generic mixture of realism and romance, appropriately interspersed with didactic elements, is something that Kingston shares with a genealogy of writers ranging from Marryat and Ballantyne, in the early century, to Henty, Rider Haggard and Robert Louis Stevenson, at the fin de siècle. Unlike most of them, however, Kingston betrays a stronger tendency to graft moralising discourses into his plots. Such a tendency not only reflects the mid-century spread of religious publishing in the British literary market; it is also a peculiarity of Kingston's own evangelical formation, based on Christian values that he strove, and often failed, to reconcile with the British imperial mission. These values also come to influence the structure of *Peter the Whaler* which, though written in the first person as an autobiography or confession, becomes a vehicle for the author's direct sermonising. In the opening pages, for instance, the distance between narrator and author is blurred by Peter's direct warning of Kingston's target readers: "I must warn my young friends, that although the adventures I went through may be found very interesting to read about, they would discover the reality to be very full of pain and wretchedness were they subjected to it" (Kingston n.d., p. 7). In the last paragraph, Kingston conveys a moral message through Peter's father, using small caps to refer to his own novel as a text to be read: "I trust others

may take a needful lesson from the adventures of PETER THE WHALER” (Kingston n.d., p. 252).

The blurring of levels is also evident in the original preface to the novel. Here Kingston adopts an effective paratextual strategy, combining fiction with (auto)biography to give more verisimilitude to the adventures narrated in the text: “The incidents were narrated to me by a young gentleman, the original of Peter Lefroy, who is, in every respect, a real character” (qtd. in Kingsford 1947, p. 175). These few examples suggest that studying a novel like *Peter the Whaler* could illuminate important elements of the narrative experimentation conducted in the mid-nineteenth century and help us re-centre aspects of the popular in today’s study of Victorian literature. As a specimen of juvenile literature, moreover, Kingston’s novel substantiates recent scholarly attempts to revalue books traditionally marginalised by academia. Complex in style and form, and appealing to a composite audience,¹ *Peter the Whaler* proves the importance of studying boys’ (and children’s) literature, which is “one of the liveliest and most original of the arts” but also “the site of the crudest commercial exploitation” – a literature that sheds light on the sociocultural and historical transformations of its age as it tends to “break down barriers between disciplines, and between types of readers” and is permeated by ideologies that had an influence on the development of its young readers (Hunt 1999, pp. 1-2).

On a thematic level, *Peter the Whaler* includes a variety of motifs that are relevant to understand Victorian popular fiction and, especially, a juvenile literature that aimed to educate the young citizens of an imperial nation. One of its themes is whaling, a dangerous and strenuous activity that reached its peak in the 1850s. Tales of whalemens nourished the imagination of Victorian writers who, on both sides of the Atlantic, reshaped them into sensational narratives of endurance and heroism. Often tragic in their unfolding, these tales featured men struggling with creatures that embodied “the unforgiving nature of nature itself” (Dolin 2007, p. 12). Anticipated in the novel’s title, whaling is described in compelling details in *Peter the Whaler*, which establishes an intriguing dialogue with contemporary narratives like Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, published in the same year. What Kingston shares with other authors is the tendency to represent whaling in Manichean terms as an epic fight between heroic men and their evil antagonists. Insistently called “monster[s]” (Kingston n.d., pp. 149, 151, 165, 178), the mighty cetaceans are never described as victims to be pitied in the novel which, instead, highlights their enormous size, strength and fury, exalting by comparison the skills and courage of their smaller human hunters.

Similar strategies are adopted in later Arctic narratives written by Kingston, such as *Archibald Hughson: An Arctic Story* (1873) and *Arctic Adventures* (1882). In *Archibald Hughson*, for example, epithets like “the monsters of the deep” (Kingston 1873, p. 30) are recurrently employed with reference to whales, whose hunt and killing is validated by their connotation as monstrous antagonists of valiant whalemens like the eponymous Archibald. Gothic imagery is used even in a scene of hunting that involves a female whale and her calf. Despite some textual hints at the whale’s “mother’s instinct”, which makes her risk her life to protect “her young one”, the whale is depicted as a she-“monster” (Kingston 1873, p. 51)

¹ Thanks to the mid-Victorian rise in literacy, an adventure novel like *Peter the Whaler* was likely to attract a cross-class and cross-generational readership of boys and (prevalently male) adult readers. This wide-ranging attraction is explained by the genesis and development of Victorian juvenile literature. As Dennis Butts observes, boys’ adventure tales originated from the adventure narratives for adults which, quite popular in the 1840s, divided into two separate subgenres in subsequent decades (2002, p. 454). Such ramification implies that, although it was conceived as a text for boys, Kingston’s novel was probably read by different age-groups. Something similar had happened to authors like J. Fenimore Cooper, whose *Leatherstocking Tales*, “written with an adult audience in mind” between the 1820s and 1840s, came to be “read by younger readers” “from a relatively early date” (Mazi-Leskovar 2007, p. 76).

and the episode is couched in the imperialistic and gendered language of Victorian adventure literature, which heroises the deeds of British men against feral opponents. By attaching ghastly connotations to (animal and human) creatures living in the remote and wild regions of the earth, this literature politicises the relations between conquered and conquerors, representing the former as rightless savage beings deserving to be chased, subjugated, enslaved and even killed by the former. Gaia Giuliani observes that: “Monsters as well as nature are differentially acknowledged within the space of *the political*: they are not subjects, let alone subjects of rights” (2021, p. 3). This power ideology is, in my view, partly shared by Kingston who, in addition to whales, attaches monstrous connotations to polar bears and walrus. Together with the fury of the elements and the adverse polar temperatures, these Arctic animals come to embody the hostility of a nature that British male heroes struggle to tame – a nature that, often feminised, becomes part of the “array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” on which European hegemony was constructed (Said 1994, p. 52). What differs in Kingston’s oeuvre, however, is the sympathetic portrayal of Arctic people who, neither described as monsters nor persecuted by white men, escape the aforementioned binary oppositions, revealing an approach to ethnocultural diversity based on curiosity rather than arrogance.

This sympathetic approach to indigenous people is examined in the following pages of my article, which focus on Kingston’s portrayal of Inuit people (called “Esquimaux” in his texts). In *Peter the Whaler*, Inuit characters take centre stage in the last five chapters, in which the shipwrecked Peter narrates his and his companions’ life in an indigenous settlement. The narrator’s praise of Inuit skills, tolerance and generosity contrasts with some dominant racial views of the age, including those held by anthropologists. It is worth noticing, for example, that one year before the appearance of *Peter the Whaler*, Robert Knox had published his monumental *The Races of Man* (1850), a pseudoscientific text that upholds the superiority of Europeans, primarily of English people as distinct from the Celtic inhabitants of Britain. Knox validates his ethnocultural assumptions by classifying all the world’s populations into rigid taxonomies based on sociological generalisations, biased aesthetic categories and selected anatomical details. A fundamental tenet of his racial differentiation is the “darkness” of people’s skin – a physical feature which, in his view, is widely found among the indigenous populations living on the American continent, “the last discovered by the civilized European, where we find the strong hold of the coloured race: from the land of fire to the ice-bound polar sea, nature had darkened every race unmistakably” (Knox 1850, p. 148). The stress Knox lays on phenotypes that substantiate racial binaries is confirmed by his insistence on the dark complexion of the “Esquimaux”, whom he physically assimilates to the majority of the other dark “races” of the earth – from the “Negro” to the “Hottentot”, from the “Tasmanian” to the “Australian” (Knox 1850, p. 152) – as opposed to white Europeans.

Unlike Knox, Kingston minimises the ethnocultural relevance of Inuit phenotypes which, though described in his fiction, are not used to corroborate the assumed superiority of British characters. This is the case of his aesthetic reservations about indigenous women. As we will see in the third section, Peter’s comments on the unattractiveness of Inuit women are tempered by relativising comments and exceptions to the rule, which contribute to softening the idea of ugliness and create space for negotiating alternative views of indigenous people’s endowments. Kingston’s approach to otherness is remarkable considering that he drew information from the same sources used by anthropologists like Knox to develop racial taxonomies. These sources were primarily the journals and travelogues written by polar explorers, whose expeditions to Arctic regions increased in the late 1840s, after the disappearance of Franklin and his men. Often published in “expensive quarto narratives”, these travel accounts became largely available in print at the mid-

century,² even though they were unaffordable to many readers, whose knowledge of the Arctic was “mediated through newspapers, periodicals, poetry or ballads” (McCorrister 2018, pp. 11-12).

Mediated by the other publications listed above, the information conveyed by polar travelogues not only introduced the Victorian readership to the marvels and dangers of Arctic regions; it also contributed to circulating portrayals of indigenous people marked by racial discrimination. In *An Arctic Voyage to Baffin's Bay and Lancaster Sound, in Search of Friends with Sir John Franklin* (1850), for example, Robert Goodsir lays stress on “the large head, with narrow retreating forehead, strong coarse black hair, flat nose, and full lips, with almost beardless chin” of the Inuit met on his voyage (1850, p. 27). Unattractive by Victorian aesthetic standards, the indigenous phenotypes on which Goodsir focuses convey an idea of physical inferiority that creates distancing effects in his British readers. Similar effects are produced by the travelogues' frequent remarks on the filthiness of indigenous populations. A case in point is George Frederick McDougall's description of the Inuit as “the most disgustingly filthy race of human beings it has been my lot to encounter” (1857, p. 72).³ Even though it is based on McDougall's olfactory sensations at meeting a small group of five indigenous people, this description has a linguistic structure that generalises the Inuit inclination to live in dirt, suggesting their cultural inferiority to allegedly clean, good-smelling British voyagers.

It is most likely that Kingston derived his knowledge of Inuit people from the various sources mentioned above. Yet, he might have also drawn further information from his philanthropic activities, as well as from the conversations he had with settlers on his 1853 travel to Canada.⁴ In any case, the author was unable to verify second-hand ethnographic data in person. This inability accounts for the presence of some ethnocultural stereotypes in his fiction which, however, also evidences his efforts to temper such stereotypes with hints at indigenous qualities. An interesting example of this counterbalancing strategy is found in *Arctic Adventures*, a novel appeared posthumously, which narrates the polar misadventures of an unnamed Scottish whaler. After losing their ship in the Arctic ice, the protagonist and his mates are rescued by Inuit hunters and hosted in their settlement, where they are offered comfortable shelter and abundant food. Although they enjoy Inuit hospitality, the British men are upset by something “[un]pleasant” that is later revealed to be the “horrible odour” pervading indigenous huts (Kingston 2015, pp. 82, 86). The emphasis laid on this displeasing detail could be interpreted as an attempt to give verisimilitude to the narration, as it evokes the first-hand, and supposedly reliable, references to stinking Inuit found in Victorian travelogues. What is noteworthy, however, are Kingston's efforts to counterbalance this negative element with several hints at Inuit generosity, friendliness and dexterity, which appear in the same pages that include the olfactory details. Similar strategies are adopted in *Peter the Whaler*. Notwithstanding a few prejudiced comments on the look of Inuit people, this novel questions widely-shared racial stereotypes by insisting

² The commercial success of these travelogues is testified, among others, by the circulation of Francis McClintock's *The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas* (1859) which, published in the same year of the *Origin of Species*, outsold Charles Darwin's ground-breaking study. See Craciun (2014, pp. 1-2).

³ For more examples and a wider reflection on these reports, see O'Dochartaigh (2022, pp. 99-105).

⁴ Kingston and his wife Agnes spent their honeymoon in North America, visiting Canada and the United States in 1853-54. While in Canada, the couple visited cities like Toronto and Montreal. Kingston reported his impressions in the two-volume travelogue *Western Wanderings, or, a Pleasure Tour in the Canadas* (1856). Although it is highly improbable that he met Inuit people on his journey, *Western Wanderings* mentions various contacts with indigenous cultures. Most of the times he refers to Native Americans, but the travelogue also includes one reference to Inuit (“Esquimaux”) culture in relation to an exhibition. For details, see Kingsford (1947, pp. 75-102) and Kingston (1856, I, p. 236).

on indigenous generosity and warm-heartedness at a time of growing popular anxieties over the Arctic and its inhabitants.

3. Kingston, Dickens and the Inuit: A Comparison

When *Peter the Whaler* appeared, the Victorian cultural scene was animated by discussions on John Franklin and Francis Crozier's ill-fated polar expedition. In 1845, the two captains and their crew had left Britain on board the *Erebus* and the *Terror* in search for the Northwest Passage and had gone missing in 1848.⁵ After their disappearance, rescue expeditions had been sent to the Arctic, while a wave of anxiety over their fate had spread among the Victorian public. These events had an impact on mid-century writers. In *Peter the Whaler*, for example, Kingston mentions the loss of the two ships and the rescue attempts, expressing communal feelings of hope "in the happy return of the long-missed ones" (Kingston n.d., p. 182). Three years later, John Rae would put an end to this hope by announcing the death of Franklin, Crozier and their men. As is well known, the report that Rae published in *The Times* in 1854 became an object of controversy owing to its allegations of cannibalism among Franklin's party, based on evidence given by Inuit people. In December 1854, Dickens responded to Rae's allegations in two polemical articles appeared in *Household Words*, both entitled "The Lost Arctic Voyagers". The opening paragraph of the first article firmly declares that it is "in the highest degree improbable" that valorous, well educated, well-disciplined and religious British officers and sailors could have resorted to the "horrible means" of cannibalism, which Rae calls "the last resource" (Dickens 1854a, p. 161).

Even though it was occasionally practiced by shipwrecked sailors and travellers in distress, cannibalism was considered a taboo by Victorians. Cases of anthropophagy involving British people tended to be silenced by official culture which, instead, used the cannibal trope to racialise other populations. The association of indigenous customs to food abomination was an essential part of imperial propaganda: it connoted the exploration and conquest of remote territories as a civilising mission that was meant to abolish the alleged abject practices of savage populations. It is no coincidence that the British interest in anthropophagy rose in parallel with the imperial expansion. Around the mid-century, cannibalism became an ingredient of sensational representations of far-off regions that the British aimed to penetrate and annex, especially of the African continent (Brantlinger 1988, pp. 185-186). Cannibal tropes are also ubiquitous in polar travelogues and fiction. Initially associated to Inuit customs, especially in sixteenth-century reports, anthropophagy later became a spectre against which British seamen had to fight when trapped on ice. In the Victorian age increasing contact with Inuit confirmed that they were not habitual consumers of human flesh. Yet, the old prejudices tended to resurface when ice-trapped polar travellers were put to test and their honour had to be protected against accuses of adopting indigenous ways of living. On these occasions, the endurance of British heroes was exalted by contrast with the wilder nature of indigenous people, who were represented as more inclined to consume people's flesh if driven by necessity.

Like many Victorians, Dickens racialised the customs and attitudes of populations perceived as primitive or hostile to the British imperial venture, as evidenced by his outraged responses to the Indian Mutiny in 1857. A few years before calling for the extermination of

⁵ Even though both captains were experienced polar explorers, the one in command of the expedition was Franklin, while Crozier was second-in-command. It is also worth noticing that, like Kingston, Franklin was a devout Christian with a strong evangelical inclination who served the British imperial mission.

the “wretched Hindoo[s]” (Fielding 1960, p. 284), he had given proof of a similar prejudice in his replies to Rae, which betray his efforts to discredit Inuit witnesses. In an insightful “contrapuntal” reading of the dialogue between Dickens and Rae, Claudia Capancioni draws upon Edward Said’s theories to demonstrate that Dickens based his defense of Franklin’s reputation on ethnocultural prejudices that “relegated the Inuit’s story to the margins” (Capancioni 2021, p. 88). In agreement with Capancioni, I would like to examine the racially biased language Dickens adopts in relation to the Inuit, who are introduced as individuals “loose and unreliable” by nature in the first *Household Words* article (Dickens 1854a, p. 161). This same article asserts the “improbabilities and inconsistencies” of the Inuit evidence on the Franklin case, which is firmly rejected on the basis of these people’s classification among the world’s “savages”, who are said to be all “covetous, treacherous, and cruel” in their heart (Dickens 1854a, pp. 161, 162). Dickens’s arguments are reinforced by allegations about the Inuit’s inability to communicate trustworthy information through their language, degraded to the rank of “dialect”, and by intimations that the explorers might have been “slain by the Esquimaux themselves” (Dickens 1854a, pp. 161, 162).

Similar expedients are used in the second article published one week later, which opposes the “noble conduct and example” of Franklin and his men to the vulgarity of Inuit, depicted as “a gross handful of uncivilised people, with domesticity of blood and blubber” (Dickens 1854b, p. 392). After listing several episodes of distressed British explorers and colonisers who had overcome the temptation of devouring their mates, Dickens resorts to a cannibal trope to question the reliability of the Inuit witnesses mentioned in Rae’s report:

The word of a savage is not to be taken by it; firstly, because he is a liar; secondly, because he is a boaster; thirdly, because he often talks figuratively; fourthly, because he is given to a superstitious notion that when he tells you *he has his enemy in his stomach*, you will logically give him credit for having his enemy’s valour in his heart. (Dickens 1854b, p. 392, my emphases)

Equated to all the other “savages” of the earth, the Inuit are not only said to be “liar[s]”, “boaster[s]”, “superstitious” and deceitful in their use of metaphors; they are also ambiguously associated with man-eating customs by the phrase “his enemy in his stomach”, which configures them as potential cannibals, shifting the focus away from Franklin and his men.

Dickens’s use of imperial rhetoric to delegitimise Inuit testimonies is at variance with the ethnocultural observations Kingston makes in *Peter the Whaler* which, despite a few derogatory remarks, tends to highlight Inuit endowments. On his first encounter with indigenous people, Peter is struck by the ugliness of some individuals, especially of elder women whom he describes as “the most hideous-looking of the human race I ever beheld” (Kingston n.d., p. 164). A mixture of racial, gender and age bias, this discriminating comment is in line with the physiognomic prejudices of many British travellers, who employed their own aesthetic standards to stigmatise the look of other populations. When he is rescued by an Inuit community, however, Peter mollifies his aesthetic perception, using less offensive terms, praising the “clear complexion” of young women, and conceding that canons of beauty vary in different cultures:

Most of the ladies had their faces tattooed, and some of their hands; and I certainly did not think it improved their beauty, though I supposed they did. [...] The complexion of young women was very clear, and by no means dark; their eyes were bright and piercing, and their teeth of pearly whiteness, though their lips were thicker and their noses flatter than people in England consider requisite for beauty. (Kingston n.d., p. 219)

This aesthetic relativism, which implies Peter's cultural maturation, is coupled with a plethora of comments that valorise his hosts' skills and moral endowments. A telling example is a quotation that praises Inuit peacefulness, honesty, good humour and perseverance:

I never met with people, in any part of the world, who possessed a more peaceable friendly disposition – such perfect honesty and constant good-humour, with a very fair amount of intelligence. Their courage and perseverance are expended in overcoming the beasts which form their subsistence, and there are few opportunities of developing their intellectual qualities; but in many respects they are, in my opinion, far more civilized than a large proportion of their brethren in the south, who claim to be the most enlightened nations in the world. (Kingston n.d., p. 217)

The last provocative sentence invites us to make a comparison with Dickens, who would vilify the Inuit to defend the honour of Franklin and his men. Unlike Dickens, Kingston questions the superiority of his own country fellows, suggesting that, in many respects, the Inuit are “far more civilized” than many people living in “the most enlightened nations in the world”. It is interesting to notice that Kingston uses his Irish protagonist – someone belonging, in Knox's view, to the lower Celtic races – to convey this unconventional message. Labelled as Peter's personal “opinion”, the message might have sounded less iconoclastic to English readers, even though Kingston's frequent identification with the novel's protagonist complicates his own ideological stance. Quite effective, in the passage, is also the use of the term “brethren” which, couched in evangelical doctrine, implies an idea of equality that was unconceivable for most Victorians who supported the imperial mission.

Religion is a motif frequently mentioned by Peter to connote the Inuit as people well positioned in Victorian racial taxonomies. Besides noticing that his hosts' minds are “well prepared to receive the truths of Christianity”, the protagonist reinforces such conviction by observing: “They are people of enquiring minds, very capable of receiving instruction; and from their habits and dispositions, I feel assured that were the great light of the gospel be placed before them, they would gladly receive its truths, and be brought into Christ's flock of true believers” (Kingston n.d., pp. 228, 240-241). Peter goes so far as to see his mates and himself as forerunners of the future conversion of Arctic populations to Christianity as, by surviving “the rigours of an Arctic winter”, they might pave the way to missionaries' residence “among the northern [...] tribes of Esquimaux” (Kingston n.d., p. 241). From a postcolonial perspective, such comments undoubtedly evoke the danger of cultural assimilation posed by the combined forces of imperialism and Christianity, whose disruptive effects are denounced by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In light of Kingston's genuine evangelicalism, however, the prospect of a potential conversion of Inuit to Christianity amounts to a recognition of the gentle manners, the learning capabilities and the “enquiring minds” of indigenous people, all qualities that reduce their cultural and spiritual differences from British people.

From a sociological viewpoint, the novel traces notable comparisons between Inuit and British customs, encouraging readers to perceive indigenous people as fellow beings rather than savages. Consider, for example, the endearing effects produced by the following description of Inuit children:

The children, from their pleasing manners, took our fancy very much. They never cry for trifling accidents, and seldom even for severe hurts. They are as fond of play as other children; and while an English child draws a cart, an Esquimaux has a sledge of whale-bone, and instead of a baby-house it builds a miniature snow-hut, and begs a lighted wick from its mother's lamp to illuminate the little dwelling. (Kingston n.d., p. 228)

Preceded by the affective remark on their “pleasing manners”, the playfulness and creativity of Inuit children are further valorised by their comparison with British children, which is meant to generate fellow feelings in Victorian readers. Worthy of notice is also the reference to the children’s good manners, implied by their infrequent crying. Together with a later observation on their disposition to learn the “habits of industry” (Kingston n.d., p. 229) from a very early age, the virtuous habits displayed by young Inuit not only evoke some basic values of Victorian educational models; they are also in line with the ideals of hard work, thrift and self-discipline exalted a few years later in Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* (1859), the ‘bible’ of middle-class liberalism.

Another equalising strategy adopted by Kingston is the insistence on Peter’s use of the Inuktitut proper name of his host and friend Ickmallick – a strategy that, unlike the imperialistic renaming of Friday in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), creates a culture of respect and recognition. The same respect, mixed with affection, is shown in one of the concluding scenes, in which Peter and his mates are rescued by a French ship and need to part from their hosts. After a moment of excitement at seeing the approaching ship, the protagonist feels that he cannot “quit those who have treated them so hospitably without a word of farewell” (Kingston n.d., p. 246). The rescued sailors therefore say goodbye to their “Esquimaux friends” in tears and, in the same moving scene, they perform a symbolic act of imperial restitution, informing their hosts that “if we did not return, all the property we left behind was to be theirs” (Kingston n.d., p. 246). This farewell episode confirms Kingston’s intention to describe the interaction between British and Inuit people in terms of mutual respect, as opposed to the hierarchisation of the two ethnic groups upheld by most Victorians and publicly corroborated by Dickens in his 1854 articles.

4. Conclusion

Twenty years after *Peter the Whaler*, Kingston wrote other novels set in polar regions, thereby confirming his enduring interest in voyages to extreme latitudes. If the Antarctic is central in the whaling novel *At the South Pole* (1870), the Arctic reappears as a main stage of adventure in the aforementioned *Archibald Hughes* and *Arctic Adventures*. What these two Arctic narratives share with *Peter the Whaler* is a set of sensational images of whaling and survival on ice, connoted as important tests of masculine prowess. In all the texts, however, the imperial rhetoric that prevails in the whaling and hunting scenes is counterbalanced by the spiritual meanings attached to the British heroes’ sufferings, which are mostly described from an evangelical perspective. Another element worthy of notice is the three novels’ unorthodox characterisation of Inuit people, who are rehumanised against contemporary allegations of savagery. Most widely expressed in *Peter the Whaler*, which offers compelling details of indigenous customs and endowments, Kingston’s admiration for the Inuit also emerges in some passages of *Archibald Hughes* and *Arctic Adventures*. If it is true that these late novels offer more sketchy pictures of inter-ethnic encounters and Inuit figures, it is also true that the attention they both give to indigenous people and culture suggests an ideological continuity with *Peter the Whaler*.

This continuity is proved, for example, by a scene of prayer narrated in *Archibald Hughes*. After being rescued and fed by an unnamed Inuit hunter, Archibald and his shipmates decide to thank God for their survival and are joined by their rescuer, who kneels down with them:

The Esquimaux seemed fully to understand what they were about, and knelt down with them. Though they did not understand each other's language, yet their hearts were lifted up together to the same merciful being, the God alike of the dark-skinned Esquimaux and the civilized Englishman. (Kingston 1873, p. 110)

Despite the two prejudiced hints at the “dark[ness]” of the indigenous man's skin and the Englishman's “civilized” status, the passage conveys a positive idea of Inuit tolerance and spirituality. This unconventional message is strengthened by the assertion that the “merciful being” to whom all pay respect is “the God alike” of Inuit and British people, an assertion that contributes to levelling up the ethnic differences upheld by most Victorians.

Nourished by his Christian beliefs, Kingston's openness to indigenous diversity marks thus his distinction from nineteenth-century anthropologists and writers like Dickens, who endorsed racialising views of the Inuit as physically, intellectually and morally inferior to British polar travellers. *Peter the Whaler*, in particular, bears witness to its author's depiction of the Arctic as a place of positive interaction between British and Inuit people. In contrast with Mary Louise Pratt's view of the “contact zone” as a space where “two cultures meet and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination produced by colonialism and slavery” (Pratt 1991, p. 34), the Arctic regions where Peter meets the Inuit are marked by reversed power relations, as indigenous people appear more skilful and resilient than British imperialists. This reversal is well exemplified by the following quotation in which Peter, rescued from death by the Inuit hunters, describes his arrival at their settlement:

I thought to myself, suppose a civilized man, or indeed, a whole army of civilized men, were to be placed in this region, not having been accustomed to whaling and sealing, as my companions were, every one of them would perish within a few hours, or days at the utmost; and these people, who are called savages, have contrived to supply themselves with all the conveniences and necessaries of life. (Kingston n.d., p. 218)

After demonstrating that trained British whalers like himself still need Inuit assistance to survive on ice, the protagonist ironises those self-conceited Victorians – “a whole army of civilized men” – who lack the skills possessed by allegedly inferior “savages” and are therefore doomed to perish quickly in Arctic regions.

Kingston's representation of Inuit people and culture is undoubtedly an element of novelty of his Arctic fiction and especially of *Peter the Whaler*, the novel that established his success in the Victorian literary market. Another interesting aspect of this 1851 novel is its generic hybridity. A specimen of juvenile adventure literature that was likely to attract also adult readers, *Peter the Whaler* betrays an intriguing combination of realism and romance, sensation and moral teachings. Worthy of attention are also its gothic paraphernalia, which substantiate the idea of spectrality associated with the Arctic during the nineteenth century. Rediscovering this forgotten novel means, therefore, shedding light on the complex narrative experimentation conducted by Victorians and, especially, on the mid-nineteenth-century development of popular fiction, which ramified into a variety of commercialised forms and subgenres. From a thematic viewpoint, finally, *Peter the Whaler* conveys a message of inter-ethnic collaboration and solidarity that questions some basic tenets of Victorian imperial ideology, a message made of ironies and complexities that acquire more significance if examined in light of twentieth-century postcolonial theorisation.

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