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BOOK REVIEW: Christopher P. Heuer, Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image

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BOOK:

Christopher P. Heuer  
*Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the  
Image.*

Brooklyn: Zone Books (2019), 256 pp. 69 b/w ill.  
\$32.95

Book review by Hannah Kagan-Moore

Christopher Heuer's *Into the White* attends to phenomena that so often mark conclusions or dead ends in art history rather than beginnings: absence, loss, disintegration, the unseen, and the unknown. Opening with Martin Frobisher's ill-fated 1578 voyage from England in search of a northwest passage to Asia, Heuer introduces readers to chronicler Thomas Ellis' attempts to illustrate an iceberg. The resulting images of this "great and monstrous peece of yce" near abstraction, and deftly exemplify the core concerns that thread through the rest of the book. As Europeans explored, documented, weathered and succumbed to the Arctic, the resulting images and texts spoke back to European crises of the day: Protestant iconoclasm, the epistemological limits of the image, and the relationship between the unseen and the unknown. The project of visualizing the non- or poorly-visible, Heuer argues, resonated with Protestant arguments about the dangers of the image, the reification of "whiteness" as purity, and open questions about how and what objects mean.

Chapters one and two situate the project within the larger scope of Arctic and environmental studies, and subsequently within antique and early modern European climatic thought. The third chapter of the book addresses questions of scale and distortion, exploring the limitations and slippages that the Mercator projection necessarily produces in depicting the North. Chapter four turns to the question of European understandings of Inuit and other Indigenous peoples, and the ways in which depictions of abducted Inuit peoples disrupt neat boundaries of selfhood and Otherness from the perspective of the European viewer. Heuer provides a brief interlude in chapter five, examining the works of the Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus. This short chapter briefly but incisively connects Arctic "ethnography" directly to debates about the value and use of images. Chapters six and seven connect early modern objects and artifacts with a longer *durée* of art and object making in relationship to Arctic environments. Here, Heuer contrasts fragmented visions of the Arctic with literally fragmentary prints recovered from the Barents expedition with nineteenth-century colonial visions and utilitarian images of Soviet settlement. This long view illuminates the central role of instability, uncertainty, and the unknown in European thought and art about the Arctic.

Despite the firm location of the bulk of the material in the early modern period, Heuer's theoretical departure offers a new and critical turn with wide applicability across disciplines and time periods. For instance, his examination of the environment and the image beyond the visible resonates deeply with Grace Kuipers' discussion of Diego Rivera's *Song of the Earth* published in this volume of *react/review*. Both works take as a core question what it means to depict the unseen or unseeable (in Kuipers' case, the subterranean, rather than the Arctic), and what it means to render such a site legible. These works mark a critical turn in the scholarship: approaching the seen and unseen, absence and presence, gain and loss, rather than self/other as a primary dialectic through which images communicate meaning and power relationships. For Heuer, Europeans viewed the Arctic itself and the Inuit peoples who lived there as "refus[ing] to submit to a clear category of alterity."

Despite the specificity of his topic, Heuer certainly cannot be accused of an overly-narrow focus. *Into the White* draws comparisons and analogies that cross hundreds of years and a vast range of topics. Like the cache of congealed, frozen, and subsequently re-separated prints that form the main subject of chapter six, "Arctic Ink," *Into the White* brings together a body of objects ranging from ships' logs to ruined Mannerist prints, Caspar David Friedrich paintings, and Soviet pamphlets. This material forms the basis for a comprehensive and dispassionate examination of three hundred-odd years of expansion and loss alongside accretion and accumulation.

The book wisely steers clear of invoking contemporary polemics of climate change, instead making a decidedly historical case that the visual and sensory, as much as other phenomena, drive human relationships to environmental sites. There is a particular dimension in which that exploration of the visual and sensory is limited. Although chapter four, "The Savage Episteme," thoroughly addresses European images of and interactions with Indigenous peoples, Heuer's sources almost exclusively come from the perspective of European explorers. The lack of Indigenous voices is a conspicuous void in a text otherwise conscious of and attentive to questions of absence. A future study engaging Indigenous epistemologies and narratives of the period in greater depth could provide a critical future corollary to this richly-written, robustly-researched, and innovative text.