

John Woolman's Aesthetics of the Stranger

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Abstract

Language about strangers, including 'the heart of a stranger' specifically, appears with frequency throughout the writings of John Woolman. This article argues that the stranger, inspired to a great extent by passages from the Bible, was a central philosophical and theological concept around which Woolman's thought was gathered. For Woolman the stranger also functioned as a literary figure that united various parts of his work in what I refer to comprehensively as an aesthetics of the stranger. Ultimately, Woolman writing about strangers reflected his understanding of Jesus Christ as a stranger, which was the ground from which all his thinking originated.

Keywords

John Woolman, stranger, sympathy, moral philosophy, Christology, aesthetics

Introduction

Across his writings, John Woolman regularly relied on the figure of the stranger. From his first antislavery work *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (1754) to the *Journal* (1774) and the late essay *A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich* (1793), Woolman used language about strangers in order to elaborate his ideas. Furthermore, Woolman came to identify with strangers himself, especially as they were represented in the Bible, and used the experience of feeling like a stranger as a way of trying to understand others. When addressing issues of exploitation he often referenced Exodus 23:9, which enjoins its audience that 'Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.'¹ During his travels as an itinerant minister he prayed to God using the language of Psalm 119:19 – 'I am a stranger in the earth; hide not thy face from me.'² On a final journey in England, where he was to die,

1 All biblical quotations are from the Authorised (King James) Version.

2 Woolman, J., *The Journal of John Woolman in The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Moulton, P. (ed.); New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 61.

one Quaker observer is said to have referred to Woolman as a ‘stranger Friend’.³ For Woolman, the figure of the stranger was crucial to both becoming aware of how others suffered and comprehending his own experience. The ‘heart of a stranger’, therefore, can be said to lie at the centre of Woolman’s imagination. In this article, I explicate what knowing the ‘heart of a stranger’ came to mean for Woolman over the course of his life and writing, demonstrating that a comprehensive aesthetics of the stranger served to gather and shape much of his thought, including his metaphysics, Christology and moral philosophy.⁴

Drawing on language about strangers from the Pentateuch in the Hebrew Bible, Woolman developed a broader understanding of humanity as, in my own gloss on his words, a ‘brotherhood of sojourners’. This understanding was rooted in a metaphysics and an attendant theology of creation that used the traditional Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to underscore the fundamental difference between God the creator and all of creation. In this metaphysical picture, humans are equalised through their shared creaturely condition and, furthermore, this condition is one of being strangers, given that no human can ultimately lay claim to any part of creation. Christ’s role in this situation is paradoxical, because while Christ has legitimate authority over creation – Woolman affirms, for example, that ‘by the Son all things were created’ – he is also aligned with strangers. In the Gospels Christ’s strangerhood is reflected in both Matthew 25:35, ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’, and John 1:11, ‘He came unto his own, and his own received him not.’ While Woolman does not make explicit connections to these texts, I argue that this understanding of Christ as both divine lord and human alien is implicit in his life and writing. This paradoxical or, more theologically, incarnational character of Christ manifests itself in a famous passage from the culminating chapter of the *Journal*. While lying on what he thought to be his deathbed, Woolman would recall uttering the words of Galatians 2:20:

I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ that liveth in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the divine Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.⁵

By identifying with Christ as both the Son of God and the human being alienated on the cross, Woolman sought to fully inhabit the position of the stranger and, in another paradox, unify with all of humanity, especially the oppressed, in a ‘brotherhood of sojourners’. Thus, for Woolman the aesthetics of the stranger

3 Woolman, J., *The Journal of John Woolman*, Whittier, J. G. (ed.); Boston, 1871, p. 257n.

4 My decision to use the term ‘moral philosophy’ rather than ‘ethics’ is based on Theodor Adorno’s critique that ‘to reduce the problem of morality to ethics is to perform a sort of conjuring trick by means of which the decisive problem of moral philosophy, namely the relationship of the individual to the general, is made to disappear’. *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 10.

5 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 186.

was full of deep biblical, theological and metaphysical resonances. This aesthetics formed the background for his well-known and better-studied social positions.

Closer attention to the aesthetics of the stranger in Woolman's writings – which appears at significant moments in his most significant works – clarifies his place in broader traditions of thinking about strangers. Rather than making anachronistic appropriations of Woolman's thinking directly into contemporary discourse, in my approach Woolman emerges as a prescient interlocutor with intellectual movements that would follow him, such as romanticism and abolitionism. While it is not particularly novel to associate Woolman with these movements, especially the latter, doing so with an emphasis on strangers points up what was distinctive about Woolman's thought and what would be shared by others.⁶ Whether it be the heightened 'question of the stranger' that animated romantic thought or the 'stranger humanism' developed by Black abolitionist writers, putting Woolman in dialogue with these traditions demonstrates the foresight of his understanding of strangerhood.⁷ Taking this approach is not meant to entirely eschew contemporary questions about how Woolman's thought might be relevant for today, but rather to ground such discussions more thoroughly in an understanding of Woolman's writing, including aspects of literary representation, and its relationship to the discourses to which it was more immediate. For Woolman, recognising and embracing one's own nature as a stranger through identification with Christ was a crucial prerequisite to approaching the strangerhood of others, and this distinctively Christian understanding and representation of strangerhood was the very ground from which Woolman's moral vision was generated.

Critical Perspectives on Woolman's Approach to Strangers

Woolman's writings about strangers – and on how to relate to the marginalised more generally – have been admired but questioned. In the only previous extended treatment of the stranger in Woolman's work, Anne G. Myles voices 'uneasiness with Woolman's rhetoric of identification between [Christian] dissenters and the oppressed', given the unequivocal difference between whatever he might have suffered as a Quaker minister and the sufferings of those experiencing exploitation. Myles speculates that Woolman himself had a 'semiconscious recognition that ... the fact that he speaks the language of Christianity means that he can never transcend all difference'.⁸ Elaborating on why the 'language of Christianity'

6 For one example of associating Woolman with both abolitionist activists and Romantic writers see Moulton, P., 'The Influence of the Writings of John Woolman', *Quaker History* 60/1 (1971).

7 Simpson, D., *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013; Lloyd Pratt, *The Strangers Book: The human of African American literature*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

8 Myles, A. G., "'Stranger Friend': John Woolman and Quaker dissent", in Heller,

might be problematic, Myles commends Woolman's 'politics of empathy' while arguing that

we may be called to go even further than Woolman in letting go of all our 'precious names' – whether they are the name of Christ or any other categories of identification and meaning that feel essential to us – when these concepts evoke pain in the people to whose experiences we are trying to attend.⁹

While the possibility of overidentifying with others makes Myles uneasy, so do the perceived limitations to overcoming difference presented by Woolman's thoroughly Christian language.

Construing Woolman's understanding of strangers as a 'politics of empathy', however, comes with its own dilemmas, not the least of them being the anachronistic use of the word *empathy* – coined by a psychologist in 1895 – when *sympathy* is more appropriate when discussing the eighteenth century.¹⁰ While Margaret E. Stewart, for example, also applies this anachronism by claiming that 'empathy was the core' of Woolman's project, she does put Woolman's moral vision in conversation with the broader moral philosophy of sympathy in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world.¹¹ Sympathy, along with sentiment more broadly, was a key term in British moral philosophy during this period, which emphasised the individual's inherent capacity to connect with others through feeling and encouraged the development of this capacity for broader moral purposes. As Stewart points out, this valorisation of feeling could potentially veer into 'hypocritical sentimentality' that saw sympathy, rather than action, as an end unto itself, an issue similar to that which concerns Myles.¹² Yet, despite recognising the relevance of eighteenth-century discourse about sympathy, Stewart opts for the more abstract language of 'collective identity' when discussing Woolman, which to some extent obscures his distinctively Christian language. Michael Meranze sees Woolman's use of sympathy as more fraught, suggesting that his 'sympathetic

M. (ed.), *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2003, p. 60.

9 Myles, "'Stranger Friend'", pp. 61–62.

10 See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 'empathy, n.', accessed 25 January 2023, <http://www.oed.com>. While there is some overlap between the eighteenth-century philosophical understanding of 'sympathy' and the more contemporary psychological concept of 'empathy', here I opt to use the former term in order to both avoid anachronism and stress the broader moral dimensions of sympathy for Woolman rather than the interpersonal dimensions associated with empathy today.

11 Stewart, M. E., 'John Woolman's "Kindness Beyond Expression": collective identity vs. individualism and white supremacy', *Early American Literature* 26/3 (1991), p. 268.

12 Stewart, 'John Woolman's "Kindness Beyond Expression"', pp. 269–71. The scholarship on sympathy and the related term, sensibility, in the eighteenth-century Anglosphere is substantial. For a recent summary of critical discussions about the influence of the British moral philosophy of sympathy on American literature, with a particular emphasis on religious contexts, see Van Engen, A. C., *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist fellow feeling in early New England*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 8–10.

humanitarianism' took the form of 'masochistic identification', ultimately leading to an 'evacuation of his self' that, in a dark irony, 'incorporated and modeled, while resisting, the logic of capital'.¹³ Going beyond the frame of empathy, Meranze takes issue not with Woolman's possible overidentification with others but with the personal consequences of his acts of sympathy.

In sum, these critics all sense the salience of Woolman's approach to strangers while either registering their reservations about how he identified with others or translating his faith and practice into a contemporary idiom – 'politics of empathy', 'collective identity', 'masochistic identification' – significantly different from his own. Revisiting the figure of the stranger in Woolman's writing while paying greater attention to its philosophical and theological character yields greater insight into his moral imagination. While the importance of sympathy to Woolman's thinking about the marginalised has been noted, the centrality of the figure of the stranger to Woolman remains underexamined. Clarifying this issue requires a deeper engagement with the Christocentric and biblical theology that informed his ideas about strangers. 'Taking John Woolman's Christianity seriously', to borrow the title of an apposite essay, has been an animating characteristic of Woolman studies in recent years, but in the area of his moral thought it arguably remains too easy to recognise its attractiveness only to universalise his principles into more accessible, but also less potent terms.¹⁴

Analyzing Woolman's moral philosophy in relationship to his Christianity dovetails with another critical need: developing a better understanding of Woolman's literary practice. While Geoffrey Plank has observed that 'Woolman distinguished himself among the reformers ... by discussing his decision[s]' – that is, by *writing* – 'in the way that he did', literary analysis of Woolman's prose has been limited.¹⁵ One contribution of this article, therefore, will be to demonstrate that Woolman's philosophical and theological uses of the stranger were fundamentally literary.¹⁶ By this I mean that Woolman's conceptual work was inextricably

13 Meranze, M., 'Materializing Conscience: embodiment, speech, and the experience of sympathetic identification', *Early American Literature* 37/1 (2002), pp. 74, 84, 86.

14 Fritz Oehschlaeger, 'Taking John Woolman's Christianity Seriously', *Renascence* 48/3 (1996). For recent studies that make Woolman's Christocentrism central to their analysis, see Plank, Geoffrey, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012; and Kershner, Jon R., *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A colonial Quaker's vision for the British Atlantic world*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

15 Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, 81. For a basic account of the *Journal* as part of the literary genre of 'spiritual autobiography' see Shea, Daniel B., 'The Journal of John Woolman', in *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968, pp. 45–84. For a recent, sustained analysis of Woolman's prose style see Douglas Anderson, 'Reading John Woolman', *Early American Literature* 51/3 (2016), pp. 547–70.

16 While Woolman's writings have received significant scholarly attention, to my knowledge no one has proposed reading his work in terms of a central concept or figure. This is perhaps a result of research primarily on Woolman's social thought and his *Journal*,

aesthetic. Drawing on Jon Kershner's insight that Woolman as an itinerant minister 'used the aesthetics of travel to model a spiritually integrated social vision', I argue that Woolman in fact developed an even broader aesthetics of the stranger, which, because of its paradoxical nature and biblical resonances, served to integrate his wide-ranging social and spiritual concerns.¹⁷ The particularly Quaker relationship to itinerancy as a form of becoming a stranger has been remarked upon by Hilary Hinds in the work of George Fox himself.¹⁸ Woolman's aesthetics of the stranger continues and expands this tradition by using the figure of the stranger as a touchstone for exploring experiences of estrangement, alienation and separation, experiences he would return to again and again across the course of his writings.

Some Considerations and the Brotherhood of Sojourners

Woolman first used the figure of the stranger in his writings at a pivotal point in his vocation as a Quaker minister and writer: the aftermath of a journey from his home in New Jersey to the southern colonies of Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. He made this trip with a fellow Quaker named Isaac Andrews in 1746, and it was his first encounter with large-scale plantation slavery. He writes of how,

When I eat [sic], drank, and lodged free-cost with people who lived in ease on the hard labor of their slaves, I felt uneasy; ... I found, from place to place, this uneasiness return upon me at times through the whole visit.¹⁹

This 'uneasiness' inspired him to begin his first antislavery essay once he returned home. *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* would be published eight years

rather than on literary themes that can be traced across his corpus. The 'idea of wilderness' as 'a pervasive cosmic paradigm' for Woolman has been suggested, but I would argue that Woolman's embrace of wilderness might be seen in terms of his valorisation of strangers. Miller, J. D., "'Nature Hath a Voice": John Woolman's wilderness *habitus*', *Religion and Literature* 45/2 (2013), p. 29. Given Kershner's argument that Woolman's eschatological understanding of 'the government of Christ' is the proper theological framework for interpreting his writings, my argument about the figure of the stranger might be seen as an elaboration of Woolman's specific conception of Christ. See Kershner, *Government of Christ*, 1–2.

17 Kershner, J. R., "'A More Lively Feeling": The correspondence and integration of mystical and spatial dynamics in John Woolman's travels', *Quaker Studies* 20/1 (2015), p. 104. While 'aesthetics' can refer to a subfield of philosophy, literary scholars often use the term in a broad way similar to Kershner. See, for example, Cahill, E. and Larkin, E., 'Introduction: Aesthetics, feeling, and form in early American literary studies', *Early American Literature* 51/2 (2016), pp. 235–43.

18 Hinds, H., 'Going Nowhere: The stranger and the pilgrim in the journal of George Fox', *Quaker Studies* 20/1 (2015), pp. 84–102.

19 Woolman, J., *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Moulton, P. (ed.); New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 38.

later in 1754, in a sign that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was beginning to shift towards taking an antislavery position.²⁰ Strangers were central to the argument Woolman made in his first publication.

Woolman lays the groundwork for developing an aesthetics of the stranger in *Some Considerations* by first questioning what he calls 'natural affection': that is, love for those of an immediate biological relationship, such as family, and especially children. For Woolman, this natural affection, while appropriate within 'proper limitations', is ultimately grounded in love of self.²¹ In contrast to natural affection, Woolman quotes Jesus's words in Matthew 12:50 that 'whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother'. This kind of affection, which Woolman calls 'the more noble part of true relationship', is not based on love of self, but love of God. Alluding to Jesus's injunction in Matthew 6:33 to 'seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness', Woolman asserts that 'the business of mankind in this life is to first seek another'.²² By positing that love is at its highest when it is directed to 'another' rather than originating in love for oneself, Woolman prepares the reader for his subsequent shift in emphasis to the importance of loving strangers as a more specific form of love as 'first seek[ing] another'.

It may seem that Woolman is pitting natural affection and the love of self against love of God and love directed at others, but as the essay continues he makes clear that he is expanding the paradigm of familial affinity rather than dismissing it. Writing more directly about the racial dimension of African enslavement, Woolman contends,

When we remember that all nations are of one blood ... that in this world we are but *sojourners*; that we are subject to the like afflictions and infirmities of body, the like disorders and frailties in mind ... and that the All-wise Being is judge and Lord over us all, it seems to raise an idea of a general *brotherhood* and a disposition easy to be touched with a feeling of each other's afflictions.²³

The underlying idea here that I summarise as, using Woolman's terms, the 'brotherhood of sojourners', illustrates his paradoxical use of figures of sojourners or strangers: it is through a common experience of transience that all mortal human beings might find grounds for compassion.

Woolman's most extended reliance on the figure of the stranger in *Some Considerations* comes in a sequence that considers biblical discussions of strangers. Like many antislavery Quaker writers in the eighteenth century, Woolman

20 On the composition and publication history of *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, see Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, pp. 105–06; and Sassi, J. D., 'With a Little Help from the Friends: The Quaker and tactical contexts of Anthony Benezet's abolitionist publishing', *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135/1 (2011), p. 40.

21 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 198.

22 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 199.

23 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 200, emphasis added.

looked to the Golden Rule found in Matthew 7:12 – ‘whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them’ – to make the moral case against enslavement, but he understood this Gospel teaching to be rooted in the Pentateuch’s emphasis on hospitality owed to hypothetical strangers.²⁴ After citing the Golden Rule, Woolman turns to the injunction from Leviticus 19:33–34 that ‘If a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him; but the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.’ Applying these verses to the context of the Atlantic slave trade, Woolman argues that ‘had these people come voluntarily and dwelt among us, to have called them strangers would be proper. And their being brought by force, with regret and a languishing mind, may well raise compassion in a heart rightly disposed.’ Enslaved Africans, therefore, have a ‘right of being treated as strangers.’²⁵

Woolman continues to elaborate on the significance of strangers as a central part of his argument against enslavement. He notes how ‘Abraham was called of God to leave his country and kindred, to sojourn amongst strangers.’ Likewise, Jacob was ‘in a low estate’, Joseph experienced ‘numerous afflictions’ and David underwent ‘a series of troubles.’²⁶ The Israelites, Woolman summarises, ‘were well acquainted with grievous sufferings and rigorous servitude’, and, though he acknowledges that ‘they were chose as a peculiar people for a time, yet the Most High acquaints them that his love is not confined, but extends to the stranger.’²⁷ The section concludes with a quotation from Exodus 23:9 that seals Woolman’s understanding of biblical strangerhood as an experience of alienation and suffering that merits compassionate response: ‘Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of the stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.’

Woolman seeks to apply this biblical vision to his contemporary situation, this time looking at the Quaker movement, emphasising its own history of marginalisation and estrangement. ‘If we call to mind our beginning, some of us may find a time wherein our fathers were under afflictions, reproaches, and manifold sufferings.’ Because of this history of ‘sufferings’, Quakers should, in Woolman’s words, show ‘Christian benevolence towards our inferiors.’²⁸ As other passages of

24 On the role of the Golden Rule in Quaker antislavery writing see Carey, B., *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker rhetoric and the birth of American antislavery, 1657–1761*, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2012, pp. 30–31.

25 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 203.

26 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 206.

27 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 207.

28 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 207. Being a suffering people has been central to the self-understanding of the Quaker movement for much of its history. While the *locus classicus* of these sufferings was the experience of early Friends in seventeenth-century England, suffering continued to be an important feature of Quaker memory, supported by sufferings literature, into the eighteenth century. See Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, pp. 20–21; Beecher Field, J., ‘Suffering and Subscribing: Configurations of authorship in the Quaker Atlantic’, in *Errands into the Metropolis: New England dissidents in revolutionary London*, Hanover, NH:

Some Considerations make clear, Woolman does not use the term 'inferior' here to indicate innate racial or ethnic inequality, but in reference to a social process of enslavement that has arbitrarily put some in positions of inferiority with respect to others.²⁹ This, Woolman strongly states, is 'stupid indolence [to] conceive views of interest separate from the general good of the great brotherhood'.³⁰ The final phrase of this quotation aligns more broadly with the brotherhood of sojourners, the most striking aspect of Woolman's aesthetics of the stranger developed in *Some Considerations*.

'A Stranger in the Earth'

In terms of chronology, Woolman's next recorded meditation on the figure of the stranger came in 1757, three years following the publication of *Some Considerations*. Woolman had started composing a journal in 1756 at the age of 36, and after recounting the first three decades of his life he began to write more contemporaneously about his experiences, such as a second journey to the Southern colonies.³¹ Like his first journey a decade earlier, Woolman wanted to observe the conditions of plantation slavery and attend the Yearly Meeting in Virginia where they would be considering queries about enslavement he had helped to author.³² This time, however, he was to be joined by his younger brother Uriah, who, 'having some business in North Carolina, proposed going with me part of the way'. John had been planning on travelling alone and, given that Uriah 'had a view of some outward affairs, to accept him as a companion seemed some difficulty'.³³ Keeping in mind Woolman's reflections in *Some Considerations* on how the natural affection of family relations could work against higher forms of affection characteristic of the brotherhood of sojourners, it seems likely that he viewed Uriah's accompaniment as something that could be at cross-purposes to his ministry.

Woolman had already expected the journey south to be difficult because of how he intended to make himself a stranger. He writes of how, upon crossing

Dartmouth College Press, 2009; and Herbert, Amanda E., 'Companions in Preaching and Suffering: Itinerant Female Quakers in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World', *Early American Studies* 9/1 (2011).

29 For one statement of Woolman's belief in the social origins of inequality see *Some Considerations*, p. 202.

30 Woolman, *Some Considerations*, p. 207.

31 On shifts in Woolman's business practices see Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, pp. 79–81. Woolman, interestingly, does not open the *Journal* with details about his birth in 1720 (these come in the second sentence), but dedicates the first words of the book to foregrounding the act of writing: 'I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God, and now, in the thirty-sixth year of my age, I begin this work.' From this we can infer that he began composing the *Journal* in 1736. *Journal*, p. 23.

32 Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, pp. 112–13.

33 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 58.

into Maryland, 'a deep and painful exercise came upon me, which I often had some feeling of since my mind was drawn to these parts and with which I had acquainted my brother.'³⁴ In particular, Woolman was anticipating the discomfort of receiving hospitality from Quakers who were also enslavers that he had experienced on his first visit. Having directly reflected on the figure of the stranger and the brotherhood of sojourners in *Some Considerations* since then, Woolman undertook new practices while he travelled in ministry. Recognising that 'receiving a gift ... brings the receiver under obligations to the benefactor and has a natural tendency to draw the obliged into a party with the giver', Woolman planned to pay his fellow Quakers and those they enslaved as a way of recognising the labour that hosting him entailed. Furthermore, this would theoretically keep him clear of being 'under obligations' to a culture he felt was carrying out a grievous form of oppression.³⁵ 'The prospect of so weighty a work, and being so distinguished from many', filled Woolman with dread. Following this dread was 'a near sympathy with the prophet' Moses, who, when weary from dealing with the obstinate Israelites in the desert, at one point asks God in Numbers 11:15 to have mercy and simply strike him dead.³⁶ Like other figures in the Hebrew Bible, Woolman resonated with the experience of prophetic alienation from society articulated by Moses, who also identified as a stranger, referring to himself at another place in the Pentateuch as 'a stranger in a strange land' (Exodus 2:22). Thus, in ways both explicit and implicit, Woolman aligned himself with biblical strangers.

While Woolman's journey was difficult, he writes that 'the fear of the Lord so covered me at times that the way was made easier than I expected, and few if any manifested resentment at the offer, and most of them after some talk accepted of them.'³⁷ Still, given Uriah's presence with him for completely different ends, Woolman must have felt his own singularity acutely.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, this experience prompted new reflections on the figure of the stranger from Woolman. Rather than looking to others as strangers, as he had done in *Some Considerations*, Woolman now began to understand himself as an alien within his own family, religious community and broader society. 'In my traveling on the road', he writes, 'I often felt language arise from the center of my mind thus: "Oh Lord, I am a stranger in the earth; hide not thy face from me."³⁹ This verse from Psalm 119:19, arising, for Woolman, 'from the center of my mind', indicates the extent to which the experience of being a stranger that he

34 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 59.

35 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 59.

36 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 60.

37 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 61.

38 On the interactions between John and Uriah on this trip see Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, pp. 94–95, 115.

39 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 61. This passage is also referenced in Fox's *Journal*. See Hinds, 'Going Nowhere', p. 89.

was witnessing around him in the form of enslavement was being internalised so that he himself was becoming strange to those around him, and even to himself. While he may have felt distanced from his fellow Quakers socially, it seems Woolman also felt a sense of spiritual distance from God as he began the process of understanding his own experience as a stranger. Significantly, Woolman sees himself as ‘a stranger *in the earth*’⁴⁰: that is, a man estranged not only from society but perhaps from creation itself as he traversed the roads of colonial America. Thus his only remaining recourse is to God the Creator as his sole source of help. Woolman’s theology of creation would become central to his understanding of what it meant to be a stranger and his development of an aesthetics of the stranger.

A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich

Woolman would add new theological layers to his aesthetics of the stranger in what is arguably his most comprehensive essay, the late work alternatively titled *A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich* or *A Plea for the Poor*. Woolman began writing this piece after returning from a significant journey to visit an Indigenous community led by the Munsee prophet Papunhank in 1763, and continued to revise it until 1769; it was posthumously published in 1793.⁴¹ In the essay Woolman ‘reflect[s] on the condition of a poor, innocent man, who by his own labor contributes to supporting one of his own species more wealthy than himself’. One senses from this example how Woolman had moved from thinking about enslavement to thinking about labour more broadly. Again he looks to Exodus 23:9 – ‘Ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt’ – to establish a biblical precedent for his argument. He then offers his own gloss on the verse:

He who hath been a stranger amongst unkind people or under their government who were hard-hearted, knows how it feels; but a person who hath never felt the weight of misapplied power comes not to this knowledge but by an inward tenderness, in which the heart is prepared to sympathy [sic] with others.⁴²

This elaboration on Exodus 23:9, developing the verse’s terse logic so that it might be more fully understood, illustrates the extent to which Woolman had meditated

40 Emphasis added.

41 On the dating of the primary holograph for ‘A Plea for the Poor’ see the discussion in appendices to *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Moulton, P. (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 285–86. On Woolman’s journey to the Indigenous town of Wyalusing and its significance, see Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, pp. 158–67; and Miller, J. D., ‘Environmental Aesthetics and Environmental Justice in Jonathan Edwards’s *Personal Narrative* and John Woolman’s *Journal*’, *Early American Literature* 58/1 (2023), pp. 86–88.

42 Woolman, J., *A Plea for the Poor* in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Moulton, P. (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 243.

on, internalised and developed his own representation of the biblical ‘heart of a stranger’.

For Woolman, to have ‘felt the weight of misapplied power’ is to understand what it means to be a stranger, regardless of whether one is technically unknown or alien within a community. Thus, ‘he who toils one year after another to furnish others with wealth and superfluities, who labours and thinks, and thinks and labours, till by overmuch labour he is wearied and oppressed, such an one [*sic*] understands the meaning of’ verses such as Exodus 23:9, which Woolman repeats again: ‘Ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.’⁴³ For those who do not know weariness and oppression by experience, Woolman speculates:

were these to change circumstances a while with some who labour for them, were they to pass regularly through the means of knowing the heart of a stranger, and come to a feeling knowledge of the straits and hardships which many poor innocent people pass through in a hidden obscure life ... I believe many of them would embrace a way of life less expensive and lighten the heavy burdens of some.⁴⁴

Woolman is not writing of mere sympathy or fellow feeling here, but an actual ‘change [of] circumstances’ as ‘*the* means of knowing the heart of a stranger’.⁴⁵ Knowing the heart of a stranger by experiencing the circumstances of the stranger, and thus living into an aesthetics of the stranger, becomes central to the work of conforming to this biblical vision.

Later in *A Word of Remembrance* Woolman develops another line of thinking for why heavy burdens of oppressions should be lightened by connecting the figure of the stranger to ideas regarding the Year of Jubilee as described in Leviticus. Woolman summarises the concept of Jubilee as the direction ‘that such of the Israelites who sold their inheritance should sell it for a term only, and that they or their children should again enjoy it in the Year of Jubilee, settled on every fiftieth year’.⁴⁶ He then quotes Leviticus 25:23: ‘The land shall not be sold forever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me.’ Because the land, and all of the earth, ultimately belongs to God, the Israelites – and, by extension, all people – should properly be seen as ‘strangers and sojourners’ in the world, relativising any idea of ownership and distinction.

Underlying this biblical idea of Jubilee is a particular theology of creation and a parallel metaphysical picture alluded to by Woolman several times throughout *A Word of Remembrance*. At the end of the section on Jubilee just discussed, Woolman concludes,

43 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 243.

44 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 244.

45 Emphasis added.

46 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 256.

as he who first formed the earth out of nothing was then the true proprietor of it, so still he remains; and though he hath given it to the children of men, so that multitudes of people have had sustenance from it while they continued here, yet he hath never aliened it; but his right to give is as good as at first.⁴⁷

By writing of the earth being created ‘out of nothing’ Woolman is drawing on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which affirms a fundamental difference and distinction between the Creator and creation. This doctrine is brought up in order to underscore the ‘true proprietor[ship]’ of God: that is, God’s ultimate sovereignty over all things, as opposed to the relative or conditional sovereignty humans experience as recipients and stewards of creation. Crucially, in giving this gift God does not renounce God’s own sovereignty. Indeed, in Woolman’s striking phrasing, ‘he hath never *aliened* it’.⁴⁸ Given the preceding consideration of the figure of the stranger in Woolman’s writings, this use of the word ‘alien’ is notable. The immediate denotation of Woolman’s usage is that of a now rare verb form with the legal meaning of ‘transfer[ing] or surrender[ing] ownership of (property rights)’. But it also carries the broader connotation of another rare and related meaning of the verb that is ‘to make averse, hostile, or unsympathetic to someone or something; to alienate, estrange, put at a remove’.⁴⁹ His point, therefore, may be paraphrased in this way: God has never been estranged or unsympathetic from creation, even after it was given as a gift. Rather, it is human beings who are ultimately strangers in the world God has given as a gift.

This point can be elaborated by referencing a statement made a few pages earlier in *A Word of Remembrance*. ‘What we equitably possess’, Woolman writes,

is a gift from God to us; but by the Son all things were created. Now he who forms things out of nothing – who creates and, having created, doth possess – is more truly rich than he who possesseth by receiving gifts from another.⁵⁰

The invocation of *creatio ex nihilo* appears again here, but with the Christological emphasis drawn from Colossians 1:16’s claims that ‘by the Son all things were created’. Even with the mediation of Christ, the distinction between the one who has created the gift and those who have received the gift is absolute. It is against the metaphysical background that Woolman develops his understanding of all human beings as a brotherhood of sojourners.

The centrality of the figure of the stranger for Woolman is reaffirmed in the final section of *A Word of Remembrance*, in which he returns to the topic that had long preoccupied him, enslavement. Woolman writes that ‘these poor Africans were people of a strange language and not easy to converse with, and their situation as slaves too generally destroyed that brotherly freedom which frequently subsists

47 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 257.

48 Emphasis added.

49 *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘alien, v.’ 3 and ‘alien, v.’ 1, accessed 16 November 2023, <http://www.oed.com>.

50 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 251.

between us and inoffensive strangers.' He observes that the proper rights owed to 'inoffensive strangers' were denied to Africans in the British colonies because of their 'strange language' and the oppression they experienced as slaves. This 'long oppression', Woolman writes, 'hath not made oppression consistent with brotherly love, not length of time through several ages made recompense to the posterity of those injured strangers.'⁵¹ Rather than trying to ignore or overcome differences, Woolman's goal here is to treat enslaved Africans and their descendants as strangers who have been wronged. This serves to make his audience recognise the common human condition in the brotherhood of sojourners, of which the enslaved are an 'injured' party. It is on the basis of this that *A Word of Remembrance* ends with a proposal for monetary reparations to children of enslaved Africans as a way of recognising the wrong done to them, though, as Woolman acknowledges, 'no sum may properly be mentioned as an equal reward for the total deprivation of liberty.'⁵² In this way, it is only by recognising difference, not by transcending it, that justice can be undertaken.

'John Woolman is Dead'

In 1770, Woolman would have another experience of feeling estranged from society to such an extent that the only recourse remaining was to turn completely to God. While Woolman does not explicitly evoke strangers in the following passage, what he relays is a story of extreme alienation characteristic of his aesthetics of the stranger. In a section of his *Journal* written just over a month before he would die of smallpox in England, he recalled how 'in a time of sickness with the pleurisy a little upward of two years and a half ago, I was brought so near to the gates of death that I forgot my name.'⁵³ Given Woolman's forgetting of his own name, one might read this well-known passage from the *Journal* as his ultimate experience of becoming a stranger. In this sickbed vision Woolman recounts how he saw

a mass of a dull gloomy colour ... and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed in with them and henceforth might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.⁵⁴

Hours later he heard what sounded like an angel saying, 'John Woolman is dead', causing him to remember 'I was once John Woolman, and being assured that I was alive in body, I greatly wondered what that heavenly voice could mean.' He was then 'carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians'. This hypocrisy and the

51 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 271.

52 Woolman, *Plea*, p. 271.

53 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 186.

54 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 185.

suffering it caused troubled Woolman deeply.⁵⁵ Contemplating the angel's words, Woolman 'felt divine power prepare my mouth that I could speak', and the words of Galatians 2:20 came to his lips:

I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ that liveth in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Coming to an understanding of the mystery he had been experiencing, he realised that 'John Woolman is dead meant no more than the death of my own will.'⁵⁶

Beyond the social consequences of Woolman's vision – he understood it to confirm the injustice of the silver mining industry – what is perhaps most significant is his passing through alienation from the world into a state of deep identification with Christ through the mortification of his own will. Through this identification with Christ he finds unity with others, not through transcendence but from being 'mixed in with them'. In this experience of estrangement and identification Woolman becomes one with God by being joined to Christ in his own strangerhood. And, paradoxically, it is through identification with Christ as the stranger that Woolman can most fully identify with the suffering of others. It is not that Woolman has transcended difference by being universalised through Christ. Rather, by experiencing the particularity of Christ's own experience of becoming a stranger – as in John 1:11, 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not' – Woolman is able to connect with the alienation experienced by of all of humankind.

'Stranger Friend'

Along with writing about the figure of the stranger, Woolman's aesthetics of the stranger also entailed an embodiment of strangerhood. During the 1760s, the decade in which he wrote *A Word of Remembrance* and that culminated in his experience of the death of his own will, Woolman was steadily intensifying the practices of asceticism and self-denial that he had begun during the mid-1750s, when he began refusing to receive free hospitality from Quakers who enslaved Africans. This had the effect of heightening his own sense of feeling like a stranger from society and even his fellow Quakers. For example, for three consecutive years from 1766 to 1768 Woolman followed a leading to visit Quakers in Maryland and

walk on foot amongst them, that by so travelling I might have a more lively feeling of the condition of the oppressed slaves, set an example of lowliness before the eyes of their masters, and be more out of the way of temptation to unprofitable familiarities.⁵⁷

55 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 186.

56 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 186.

57 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 145.

In travelling on foot, Woolman was attempting to put into practice the injunction he was making at the time in *A Word of Remembrance* that true sympathy came from taking on the circumstances of others.⁵⁸ While obviously not enslaved himself, by travelling on foot Woolman hoped in some way to approximate the physical suffering of enslaved people. He also sought to estrange himself from enslavers by avoiding ‘unprofitable familiarities’ with them.⁵⁹ Woolman does not invoke the figure of the stranger explicitly, but the language he uses to describe his walks through Maryland – ‘alone’, ‘this lonesome walk’, ‘this lonely walk’ – implicitly develops, out of his experience of loneliness, a feeling of being a stranger. Importantly, Woolman connects this experience of estrangement to Christ, writing that ‘the sufferings of Christ and his tasting death for every man ... was livingly revived in me.’⁶⁰

Another important ascetic practice Woolman undertook during this time had to do with his clothes, which also worked to set him apart from others. Having grown convinced that colorful dyes were a sign of vanity that only served to draw attention to oneself and weakened the fabrics used for clothing, Woolman transitioned to wearing only undyed, off-white clothing. According to one description:

His shoes were of uncurried [i.e. uncured] leather, tied with leather strings, his stockings of white yarn, his coat, waistcoat, and breeches of a strong kind of cloth undyed, the natural color of the wool, the buttons wood with brass shanks; his shirt of cotton unbleached ... fastened at the neck with three large buttons of the same stuff, without either cravat or handkerchief about his neck; his hat a very good one was white.⁶¹

Woolman’s costume was supposed to serve as a witness against ostentation. Ironically, it drew significant attention from Friends in the British colonies and in England.

While Friends in the colonies were used to Woolman’s scruples towards the end of his life, Quakers in England, where Woolman felt led to travel during what became the last months of his life, had stronger reactions.⁶² Friends in the colonies seemed to anticipate this, as Woolman’s letter of introduction, penned by John Pemberton, noted that Woolman ‘walks in a straiter [sic] path than some other good folks are led, or do travel in’.⁶³ Indeed, according to a ‘well authenticated’

58 For more on walking and Woolman’s ‘aesthetics of travel’ see Kershner, “‘A More Lively Feeling’”, pp. 110–14.

59 Less clear in this passage is Woolman’s meaning in trying to ‘set an example of lowliness before the eyes of their masters’. Did Woolman intend to serve as an ‘example of lowliness’ for the enslaved, or for the enslavers who he was trying to humble with his actions?

60 Woolman, *Journal*, pp. 149–50.

61 Quoted in Cadbury, H. J., *John Woolman in England: A documentary supplement*, London: Friends Historical Society, 1971, p. 95.

62 Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, p. 210.

63 Quoted in Cadbury, *John Woolman in England*, p. 52.

but probably apocryphal story relayed by John Greenleaf Whittier in his 1871 edition of Woolman's journal, one Friend at London Yearly Meeting remarked upon seeing Woolman: 'perhaps the stranger Friend might feel that his dedication of himself to this apprehended service was accepted, without further labor, and that he might now feel free to return to his home.'⁶⁴ Whether or not this story is true, it shows the extent to which Woolman's identification with the aesthetics of the stranger was not just an artifact of his imagination; his interpreters associated him with it as well. Apocryphal or not, the phrase 'stranger Friend' perfectly captures the arc of Woolman's own journey in knowing the heart of a stranger, and the alienation this caused him within his own Quaker community – albeit an alienation that was for the sake of identifying with Christ and through him with all of humanity.

Conclusion

Woolman's reflections on the heart of the stranger and development of a broader aesthetics of the stranger anticipated a growing preoccupation with strangers in other intellectual traditions after his death. The rapid population growth of the British colonies during Woolman's lifetime intensified concerns with identifying who strangers were and what they were owed by society.⁶⁵ Furthermore, David Simpson has argued that 'the age of romanticism witnessed a distinct ramping up of the depth and scope' of such questions.⁶⁶ This occurred in the aftermath of the French Revolution in 1789 and the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in the United States in 1798, and led to a situation where many representations of strangers (both positive and negative) 'coexist[ed] without being resolved'.⁶⁷ Woolman similarly explored multiple representations of strangers in his writings over the course of his life, but his theological understanding of strangers resulted in a moral resolve and resolution not found in Simpson's study of Romanticism. In some ways Woolman is more similar to the 'stranger humanism' Lloyd Pratt has described in his study of nineteenth-century Black male writers such as Frederick Douglass, who sought to decouple white understandings of strangerhood from race. A key aspect of this stranger humanism was that 'people discover their differences from one another' while being 'barred from trying to appropriate or penetrate those differences'.⁶⁸ Thus, in stranger humanism the inability to transcend difference is not a problem, as in the reading of Woolman offered by Myles, but a feature of a more robust moral philosophy, one which Woolman himself anticipated.

64 Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman*, Whittier (ed.), p. 257n.

65 Dayton, C. H. and Salinger, S. V., *Robert Love's Warnings: Searching for strangers in colonial Boston*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

66 Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*, p. 10.

67 Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*, p. 11.

68 Pratt, *The Stranger's Book*, 2.

Woolman's understanding of the stranger was fundamentally literary and aesthetic. This is perhaps unsurprising given the longstanding homology between the defamiliarisation characteristic of both language and strangers. As Aristotle writes in *Rhetoric*,

People do not feel towards strangers as they do towards their own countrymen, and the same thing is true of their feeling for language. It is therefore well to give to everyday speech an unfamiliar air: people like what strikes them, and are struck by what is out of the way.⁶⁹

In Aristotelian fashion, Woolman made an effort to understand those seen as strangers in colonial America by using an array of striking words and images to develop a compelling, if challenging, aesthetics of the stranger. This accords partially with Simpson's contention that 'the encounter with the stranger produces the figure [of the stranger] as a first response Poetry comes before prose, imagination before reason, because of the primal experience of fear of the stranger.'⁷⁰ Woolman, of course, was concerned to develop a primal response to the stranger based not in fear but in Christian love.

Woolman's thoroughly Christian understanding of the stranger as a manifestation of Jesus Christ – who, to reprise the language of John 1:11, 'came unto his own, and his own received him not' – was the source of his prescience on questions regarding the figure of the stranger. This observation on the Christological nature of Woolman's moral philosophy accords with a growing tendency in not just the study of Woolman but in Quaker studies more generally. Given that the field has for some time been shaped by 'an eschatological turn', it is appropriate that scholars might now be pursuing 'a Christological turn'.⁷¹ This essay has argued that Woolman's Christology was particularly informed by the figure and aesthetics of the stranger, and in conclusion suggests understanding Christ as a stranger as a fruitful ground for contemporary Quaker moral philosophy and theology.

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69 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Rhys Roberts, W. (trans.), in *The Rhetoric and The Poetics of Aristotle*, New York: Modern Library, 1954, p. 167 (1404b).

70 Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*, p. 51.

71 For a foundational statement of the eschatological turn in Quaker studies see Ben Pink Dandelion, Douglas Gwyn and Timothy Peat, *Heaven on Earth: Quakers and the Second Coming*, Birmingham: Woodbrooke College, 1998. For recent Christologically focussed works in Quaker studies see Kershner, *John Woolman and the Government of Christ*, and Madeleine Pennington, *Quakers, Christ, and the Enlightenment*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

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