

# ARCTIC SPACES

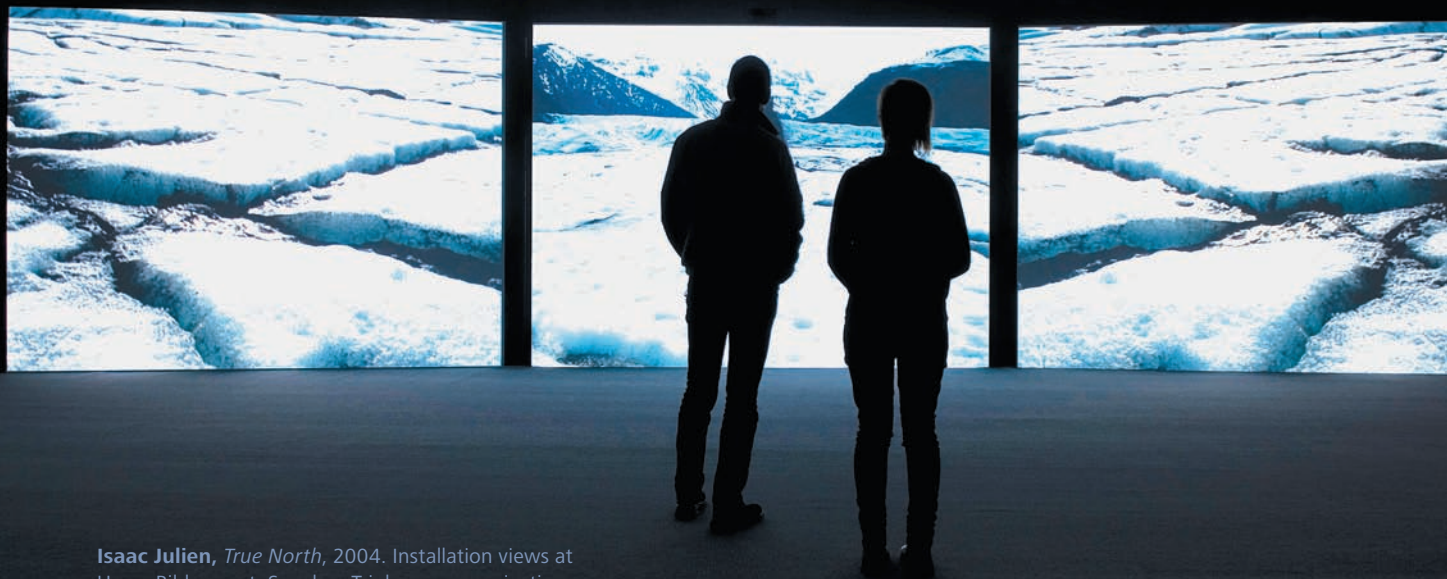


Climate change has brought renewed attention to the Arctic, as scientists and the media report almost daily on its shrinking ice masses. Recently, there has been a shift from an image of the polar region as a representation of physical terror and the sublime to its visualization as the ground zero of catastrophic climate change. The spectacle of climate change's effects is drawing more people to the Arctic than ever before. No longer seen as a forbidden place, the Arctic has become a site for the new international rush for territory and scarce natural resources.

With the exception of the last international geophysical year in 1957–58, the Arctic has not received this kind of popular attention since the heyday of colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The race to the poles during that era was seen as an important vehicle for nation building and the advance of scientific knowledge. In what follows, I reconsider my book *Gender on Ice* (1993) in relation to Isaac Julien's movie *True North* (2004) to examine how twentieth-century discourses are reworked one hundred years later in the context of twenty-first-century artistic practices. As I wrote

# Politics and Aesthetics in *True North* and *Gender on Ice*

Lisa E. Bloom



Isaac Julien, *True North*, 2004. Installation views at Umea Bildmuseet, Sweden. Triple-screen projection, 16mm black-and-white and color film, DVD transfer with sound, duration 0:14:20. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

in *Gender on Ice*, polar exploration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was integral to the social construction of a distinctive nexus of white manhood and nationalism and at that time was crucial to reifying a particular form of white masculinity.<sup>1</sup> In the early twentieth century, both the North and South Poles represented one of the few remaining masculine testing grounds where “adventure and hardship could still be faced.”<sup>2</sup> Significantly, women and people of color had no role in this vehicle for nation and culture building and the advance of scientific knowledge at this historical moment.

Almost one hundred years later, the Arctic is no longer the site of a privileged white masculinity, and the region is understood not just as a remote area but, rather, as a space closely if complexly connected to globalized and political forces. Focusing on the work of Isaac Julien, this article asks, “What new stories and images are being produced through recent attempts to revisualize the Arctic?” In what follows I examine how Julien’s work plays off or is in dialogue with issues raised in *Gender on Ice* about the heroic age of polar exploration, as well as the ways in which his video takes the critical scholarship

of the book's gender and race politics in new artistic directions, beyond the bounds of my original inquiry.

### ***Gender on Ice Revisited***

*Gender on Ice* was the first critical book in the United States on both North and South Pole exploration narratives to reengage the legacy of the heroic age (1895–1914) of Arctic and Antarctic exploration. It articulates a highly critical, revisionist attitude toward explorers and their writings by examining which narratives, lives, and sacrifices counted and which did not. It is significant that the book emphasizes visual culture and specifically evaluates these heroic narratives through the way they were represented in *National Geographic*, a then-new publication of visual culture that linked itself to a national image of the United States in the 1890s and seized on the poles as a metaphor for modernity and progress. *Gender on Ice* also offers a revisionist account of white explorers such as Robert Edwin Peary and Captain Robert Falcon Scott, who were deemed heroes of their national cultures in the early twentieth century despite the evidence that they led failed expeditions: both Scott and Peary fabricated the events of their expeditions to suit the particular imperial and masculinist ideologies that each characterized. The book also highlights the exclusion of Matthew Henson, the black American explorer who accompanied Peary in his trek to the North Pole, and the ways that he was not given equal credit for his central place in this story as it was told by Peary and institutions such as *National Geographic*. *Gender on Ice* discusses how the Inuit men and women helpers, companions, and guides were erased in their role as travelers and explorers because of their perceived “primitive” status. Thus the book helps document the ways that polar exploration had not always been the exclusive preserve of “white” male explorers. By showing alternative narratives of polar exploration “told” in the words and through the lives of native, non-Western, and female subjects, the study challenges the dominant historical discourse of travel, in which white Western men figure as the sole aesthetic interpreters or scientific authorities.

Though the book is about gender and its connection to nationhood and the politics of imperialism and science, much of the interest generated



*True North Series*, 2004. Digital print on Epson Premium Photo Glossy paper, 100 × 100 cm (39.37 × 39.37 in).  
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

by *Gender on Ice* stems from how it was written, particularly how its style plays off the epic quality of these male heroic narratives set in regions that overwhelm the senses with their dangerous weather, extreme cold, blinding light, and whiteness. The book's playfulness is announced by its cover, which displays artwork by the Australian artist Narelle Jubelin to foreground the book's antiheroic emphasis. The image is a close-up in petit point of the disintegrating face of a polar explorer. This disturbing image is placed within a bombastic gilt frame to explicitly underline the book's overriding thesis: how the traumatic experience of failure in both the British and the American expeditions was reworked to turn the official version of events into something worthy of public reverence.<sup>3</sup>

A case study rather than a highly theoretical work, *Gender on Ice* broke new ground by bringing colonial discourses of exploration, science, and adventure not only under the consideration of gender studies but also into conversation with cultural studies of race and ethnicity. In this project, the parameters of gender studies were stretched to include its historically “other” subjects, marking a shift in feminist practice at that time. Thus *Gender on Ice* is not a book about women per se — though the history I tell bears directly on the condition of

women and relations of gendered power during this period — but a feminist critique of a gendered concept of heroism associated with the new importance granted to turn-of-the-century polar exploration as a source of national virility and toughness. By asking somewhat ironically what types of white men the Arctic and Antarctic make, the book analyzes how the quest of reaching the North Pole and the South Pole functioned as a male testing ground where there was shame attached to losing and thus failing to demonstrate one's manhood.

The denial of failure at each pole by the British and the Americans establishes continuity between these two national events. I focus on the tragedy of the failed British expeditions of Scott to provide important contrasts to and parallels with U.S. polar exploration narratives. I explain how Peary's very American scientific enterprise, which stressed tangible results, contrasts with Scott's account, which followed British literary and military traditions that valorized the inner qualities of tragic self-sacrifice rather than performance and achievement. Drawing on the letters and diaries of members of Scott's expedition who were denied power by their social position, I examine how Antarctica becomes a discursive space where, through the act of writing, a nationalist myth is established in which writing itself becomes a means of mythologizing an ideology of British white masculinity that paradoxically ignores the male body. Thus examples of the men sleeping together in tents or on a ship, which emphasize the closeness of their gendered, physical bodies, are ignored and replaced by descriptions of moral character. Scott claims that he exposed himself and his men to additional dangers and personal sacrifices and connects his actions to a higher national mission as defined by the metaphor of tragic self-sacrifice, which provides the foundation on which a kind of white heteronormative masculinity becomes heroicized.

In contrast to the British, the Americans try to produce a narrative of masculinity that is part of a scientific tradition, which worked discursively to exclude the significant presence of Inuit people and the participation of Henson from the account. There is a larger emphasis on exteriority. Successful performance and achievement matter most. While the tragedy of Scott's failed expedition to the South

Pole is acceptable within the parameters of the literary, there is no place for failure within the ideological narrative of scientific progress that framed the discourses of the Peary expedition.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Peary's achievement at the time has never been scientifically disputed officially.<sup>5</sup> This inability to acknowledge outright the failure of the Peary expedition, I argue, explains why the critique of Peary has remained narrowly focused on establishing or disputing the accuracy of his claim to the North Pole and has not resonated more widely, as was the case with Scott's expedition.<sup>6</sup>

These questions, in the context of my book, are meaningful in terms of the unacknowledged failure enacted not only at the North Pole, early in the twentieth century, but also late in the century — during the Vietnam War and, at the time of the book's writing, during the first Persian Gulf War. *Gender on Ice* has been my attempt to explain the interconnections between the multiple narratives of national identity, scientific progress, modernity,



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*True North Series*, 2004. Triptych of digital prints on Epson Premium Photo Glossy paper. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

and masculinity across the national cultures of the United States and the United Kingdom. In what follows, I return to how these discourses are invoked and renarrativized in Julien's work.

#### **Renarrativizing the Arctic: *True North***

Isaac Julien's film *True North* is a strong example of a fascinating new departure in the artistic and scholarly discourse on polar expedition narratives.<sup>7</sup> Drawing in part from *Gender on Ice*, as well as the problematics of earlier Arctic representations such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and the 1999 documentary *Nanook Revisited*, made by a Canadian collective, Julien responds to a larger visual culture of the Arctic by focusing on the relation between aesthetics and politics as well as the Peary expedition's complex politics of exclusion. Emphasizing the significant role of Henson, Julien is attracted to the rawness and violence of the relationship between Henson and his employer, Peary, in the inhospitable male space of the Arctic,

a testing ground in which isolation and physical danger combine with overwhelming beauty. Significantly, in Julien's film, we do not see Peary or Cook or any evidence of the bitter controversy that ensued between the two men. Instead of the driving anxiety and the competition you get in these white male narratives, Julien's film foregrounds the sheer physical, natural attraction of the North Pole. Henson and the Inuits who accompanied Peary to the Pole serve as witnesses in Julien's film and substitute for Peary. By underscoring Henson and the Inuits as subjects, Julien's film actually draws out what Peary and Henson share through an unusually audacious strategy of postcolonial mimicry of the most over-the-top kind that challenges the viewer's relationship to these older Arctic narratives and to the Arctic itself.

In his attempt to rethink the relations among cinema, aesthetics, and racism endemic to earlier well-known representations of the Arctic, Julien emphasizes not only the imperial ambitions in those



*True North Series*, 2004. Triptych of digital prints on Epson Premium Photo Glossy paper, each 100 × 100 cm (39.37 × 39.37 in).  
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

earlier works but also their aesthetic drive — something that was critical to the exploration narratives of the heroic age. However, Julien's use of the aesthetic provides a very different approach, challenging some foundational assumptions of the sublime as overwhelming and humbling, since he offers us a vision of the Arctic that is not unmediated but highly technologized and artificial, as evidenced by his lush production values and his use of three screens rather than one. This technological beauty in the film is compelling in that it is used to draw out our fascinations with the North Pole and show how the drive to possess it was not simply about ownership or nationalism. His film emphasizes that the representation of polar exploration exceeds both purposeful activity and the instrumentality of the earlier colonial narrative of exploration, science, and discovery. However, he does not give up politics to focus on beauty. The two are presented as inextricably entangled with each other.

The film provocatively rewrites the narrative of a subservient Henson concocted by Peary in a visual register far different than one would expect from an account of a historical moment when the official script excluded blacks. In this way, Julien's film insists that North Pole heroism exists both in spite of and against Peary. Julien reformulates the narrative with a different aesthetic — modern, ironic, artificial, and detached in a deliberately unsettling way. For example, Peary sanctioned Inuit mistresses on his expedition to protect against what was seen

as more dangerous carnal relations between white men.<sup>8</sup> Julien's film subversively plays up the homosocial and racial relations between Peary and Henson, though in unexpected ways. This comes through in Julien's focus on a black female fashion model, Vanessa Myrie, dressed in high style, and his use of the commercial aesthetics of fashion photography, which makes the Arctic look almost like a runway. This brazen strategy queers a discourse that otherwise inscribes and validates a highly simplified and formulaic narrative of white, masculinist heterosexual agency prevailing over a feminized space. The incongruous presence of Vanessa Myrie, shown washing her hands and fondling the ice, turns the landscape of dangerous ice floes into just ice — as opposed to life or death. However, it is the contrast between the stunningly spectacular landscape and Myrie's banal gesture that underscores Julien's intention to point out how fetishized the ice and the black female model are. Her presence is part of an extended joke to remind us that nobody belongs there, and Julien emphasizes this visually: there is nothing more incongruous than putting a black fashion model on the ice and having her wear the darkest clothing to aesthetically mark her off from the landscape and further highlight its sublimity.

In a sense, both Peary and Julien are processing the North Pole technologically, but they are producing very different products. Both are open to the beauty of the landscape, and Julien acknowledges common ground with Peary and other white



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explorers by highlighting and ironizing the aesthetic side of exploration. This gets us away from a more straightforward critique of Peary and white scientific practices. Julien reminds us that scientific exploratory projects have an aesthetic dimension that may not be apparent in official accounts. Peary might see beauty for its own sake beyond his brutal so-called scientific practices, but Julien’s highly artificial and more ironic relationship to beauty is also a response to Peary’s older colonialist discourse of technology, which minimizes the significance of Henson and the Inuit workforce by representing them not as exploited workers but as “cogs” that are instrumental in the workings of what Peary termed his smooth and well-managed “traveling machine.”

Julien, by contrast, is interested in foregrounding Henson’s subjectivity and using the figure of Henson/Myrie to bring back the beauty of the Arctic. However much he is affirming a recovery of black subjectivity, he does it in a mockingly counterheroic way, and the heroism he maintains is deliberately exaggerated and could be understood as a form of postcolonial mimicry, to use Homi K. Bhabha’s well-known term.<sup>9</sup> As with the process of mimicry more generally, Julien’s film highlights the fashioned and performed nature of the original authoritative discourse of exploration narratives that he draws from and spotlights what happens when the colonialist enterprise is threatened by the displacing gaze of its double — in this case, Henson/Myrie. Julien is taking us back not only to these original heroic polar

exploration narratives but to a whole discourse of earlier colonialist artistic and cinematic representations of the Arctic, to restage and in some sense disrupt and mock the aesthetics and politics from which those original representations are drawn.

Thus his aesthetics of the pole cannot be simply folded back into a conventional discussion of science, the sublime, whiteness, blackness, fashion, or politics. Rather, he is attending to it in a way that critically engages and impacts an entire tradition of photographic, cinematic, and art representations of nonwhite people, not only by inserting Henson and the Inuits into a central role but also by creating an entirely new parodic counterdiscourse, enabled by a different deployment of new technologies, that underscores the nature of the human relations he represents. Julien does not simply retrieve the North Pole as an arena of black male, queer, and Inuit experience; he also reminds us forcefully of the complex political, colonial, scientific, sexual, and aesthetic dimensions of polar exploration.

Reflecting on my book's reception in relation to Julien's recent artwork has revealed encouraging new perspectives from an artist who is restaging the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and science in the Arctic from a queer perspective. Julien brings us back to the earlier days of polar explorers and the epic in his fantasized reenactment of the Peary and Henson trek, where he playfully and provocatively transforms the Arctic into a fashion-runway event. By camping up the extraordinary spectacle of the North Pole, his film creates a black-diasporic aesthetic in which he brings back the beauty of the Arctic and the heroism of Henson. In the process, he queers both by juxtaposing the culturally constructed beauty of a fashion model with the natural beauty of the landscape. Thus his work retrieves the Arctic in new ways that implicitly question the heroic and ask what it means to resurrect it at this historical moment, when climate change and the return of the older moments of colonialism have brought renewed attention to both these regions. Julien's viewpoint suggests some important new directions in contemporary art, and in the process his work makes us think differently about how post-colonial and black queer perspectives have contributed to changing the discussion of art history, Arctic discourses, and a history of aesthetics.

**Lisa E. Bloom** teaches visual culture at the University of California, San Diego. Her previous publications include *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (1993), *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (1999), and *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (2006).

#### Notes

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1. On the crisis of manhood at the turn of the century in the U.S. context, see Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 26–58; Cynthia Enloe, *Making Feminist Sense of International Politics: Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and Gail Bederman, "Theodore Roosevelt: Manhood, Nation, and 'Civilization,'" in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 170–216.
2. Lisa E. Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 32.
3. The British lost the race to the South Pole to Norway's Roald Amundsen, who reached the pole in 1911, one month ahead of Scott. After completing nearly seven-eighths of the journey back, Scott and his team of four men encountered a blizzard and, unable to reach their food depot just eleven miles away, died in their tent from frostbite, sickness, and starvation. Whereas Scott's narrative of failure was straightforward, Peary's claim to have been the first person, on April 6, 1909, to reach the geographic North Pole—a claim that subsequently attracted much criticism and controversy—is today widely doubted for a number of reasons.
4. See Bloom, *Gender on Ice*, pp. 127–29.
5. In the end, there was enough doubt about his claims that he was recognized by a congressional committee as "attainer," not "discoverer," of the pole, although he was awarded a rear admiral's pension by a special act of Congress in 1911.
6. See Bloom, *Gender on Ice*, pp. 130–31.
7. See my article "True North: Isaac Julien's Aesthetic Wager," in *Isaac Julien: True North* (Los Angeles: Mak Center for Art and Architecture; North Miami: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), pp. 9–16, republished in German and English in *Isaac Julien: True North; Fantôme Afrique*, ed. Veit Görner and Eveline Bernasconi (Hannover: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), pp. 37–45.
8. See Gísli Pálsson, "Hot Bodies in Cold Zones: Arctic Exploration," *Scholar and Feminist Online* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2008), [www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ice/palsson\\_01.htm](http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ice/palsson_01.htm).
9. See Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 86.