TRUE NORTH: ISAAC JULIEN'S AESTHETIC WAGER

BY LISA BLOOM

Isaac Julien's True North *is a cinematic rewriting of the North Pole exploration narratives of the early 20th century. However, Julien does not emphasize just the imperial ambitions from that period but also focuses on the aesthetic drive. This comes through in the way the intensity of his film moves from the rawness of the arctic landscape to its beauty. The beauty in the film is not decorative, however. It is much more compelling than that. Julien is drawing out our fascinations with the North Pole and the way that the drive to possess it was not simply about ownership or nationalism but also about the landscape. His film emphasizes the fact 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 doesn't trade off beauty in the name of politics to do so.*

As the author of a book on polar exploration narratives, I was interested in the way that his film intersects and departs from themes addressed in my book, Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions. *Significantly, in Julien's film, we don't see Peary or Cook, or the bitter controversy that ensued between the two men. Through his emphasis on the figure of Matthew Henson and the Inuits, Julien's film* True North *also makes the narrative of discovery into a more involved subjectivity than the American-written versions suggest. Matthew Henson (the African-American man who accompanied Peary to the North Pole in 1909 and who wrote the 1912 book* A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*) and the Inuit serve as witnesses in Julien's film and substitute for Peary. By underscoring Henson and the Inuit as a subject, Julien's film draws out what Peary and Henson share. How does the absence of Peary and Cook change the overall story? What is the tradeoff in the narrative? The sheer compelling attraction of the North Pole is fore-*

grounded instead of the driving anxiety and the competition you get in the white male narratives from the period. Also absent is the discourse of science except in the title True North which refers to the relation between the site of the North Pole and the compass.

For the polar explorers, the North Pole is perceivable only through scientific instruments. Nothing can be observed. The redundancy of the eye with a sighting of the pole can only be technological, not personal. Yet, only white explorers such as Peary can embody the impersonal nature of science. Julien's film instead opens up a kind of critique of science that asserts a black and Inuit presence with a space primarily associated with white explorers, white science, and white photography. Yet, the sheer aesthetic beauty of Isaac Julien's film is also a technological product, and as a result Julien does not come across simply as antitechnological. His position is more nuanced than that since both Peary and Julien are processing the North Pole technologically, but producing very different products. Both are open to the beauty of the landscape, and Julien is acknowledging common ground with Peary and other white explorers by highlighting the aesthetic side of exploration, which gets us away from a more straightforward critique of Peary and white science.

One of the reasons that Peary placed so much emphasis on the polar conquest was the particular weight such a discovery had in an early 20th century scientific discourse. That is, what it meant to be American at that historical moment was tied into a belief in technology and science. The poles evoked particular interest in the early part of the 20th century because they provided an example by which new technologies could make what was previously unknown visible to a U.S. readership through a discourse of science. In my book Gender on Ice, I reveal how Peary's purportedly scientific methods allowed him to dissociate himself from a colonial discourse of power and knowledge. Thus, Robert Peary's expedition promotes a form of nationalism that was fundamentally colonialist in conception but rationalist in expression. It also minimized 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 well-managed "traveling machine."

In Henson's narrative, science and its instrumentality is not as significant. Unlike Peary's official account, Henson's 1912 book foregrounds the ways in which the white men were materially and emotionally dependent on his and the Inuit's participation. Henson frequently emphasizes his own position and that of the Inuit. From his account we learn that he saved Peary's life twice and that his own life was saved by one of the Inuit men that accompanied them to the North Pole. Perhaps the major difference between Peary and Henson's accounts is that Henson's narrative refuses to promote the racism evidenced in Peary's supposedly scientific text. It disturbs the equilibrium established by Peary's discourse that forces African-American men and Inuit men to stay in their place. Instead, it reintroduces another version of scientific evolutionism slightly different from Peary's unchanging one, in which there is the idea of a path of progress. According to this position, African-Americans need only develop their full cultural potential. By demonstrating their capabilities, they eventually can be accepted as equals to whites, and it is the belief in this possibility that underpins Henson's view.

By revealing that he can not only survive but flourish in the dangerous and freezing regions of the arctic, he establishes his mental and physical capabilities as equivalent to those of any white man, or greater. Henson's story was appropriated by mainstream blacks but trivialized by National Geographic in 1988 when Allan Counter, the Harvard academic, celebrated Henson by revealing the "secret" arctic pasts of Henson and Peary. In certain ways it is not surprising that Counter was determined to change the outcome of Henson's story so that he would receive both the national and international recognition he deserved. Up until that point, the way Henson was handled was something of an embarrassment in the U.S., since he ended up abandoned by Peary and at the time of his death in 1955, was working as a parking attendant in Brooklyn and living off a meager pension of $1000 a year. The only art work that I know to represent Henson besides Isaac Julien's is by the Bay Area artist Larry Andrews. Andrews' installation tries to capture the psychological state of Henson before his death. To evoke what he imagined to be Henson's resentment toward society's refusal to grant him the recognition he deserved for his accomplishments as an African-American North Pole explorer, Andrews bestows on Henson's supernatural qualities – and turns him metaphorically into a defiant and indignant werewolf. Perhaps the purpose of using this figure from folklore and superstition that takes the outer appearance of a wolf but retains human intelligence, is to displace Henson's identity to a monstrous unreality very much in keeping with the unreality of Henson's later life.

Julien is also attracted to the rawness of the African-American experience evoked by Andrews, but what comes out in Julien's film is not just the roughness. In Julien's version you can't separate out questions of beauty and the raw lust for power and domination since the sheer beauty of the film calls attention to itself as a lavishly produced technological product. Peary's brutality in the narrative erases what is also driving him and what he is staking his ambition on. Indeed, Julien's film made me think, How do you represent the literal violence and in-

tensity of such a subject? How do you make the unstable and volatile combination of elements more palpable in his film? In certain ways the sophistication and elegance take over from the raw intensity in True North.
In Julien's film which is presented as a triptych, we have an American story told from the point of view of a black British female subject, a figure not in the original exploration narratives that the film draws on. The female protagonist's presence embodies the transnational audiences his film addresses and dignifies Julien's fantasized re-enactment of Peary and Henson's trek. The presence of the black British woman makes the fact that this is a re-enactment as aesthetic critique more overt. Her presence also makes the film more touching and sensuous, and gives it a more playful twist when she is shown washing her hands and fondling the ice. The presence of this woman turns these serious issues in polar exploration narratives and makes them more playful. She turns the landscape of dangerous ice flows into just ice – not life or death – and enables us to see the story in a way that doesn't reduce it to merely the overwrought masculine heroics of that era and the traditional feminine positions that women tended to occupy in these narratives.
I was also struck by the way the black woman watches herself disappear in the film. Julien is playing with the possibility of disappearance into the ice or into another and the relation between oneself and Otherness, which is also the subject of Larry Andrew's installation piece on Henson. Her black body also wears the darkest of all the clothing which works to aesthetically mark her off from the landscape and further highlights the sublimity of the landscape. The beauty of her body and the landscape makes them belong together suggesting that aesthetics cannot simply be folded back into whiteness or politics.

Her presence also made me think about what Julien could have done with the female subject that he chose not to do, and certain choices I made in my book and how I used an artwork by the Australian artist Narelle Jubelin to highlight the sheer preposterousness of the whole enterprise and its rigid gender and racial discourse. This cover image is an ironic critique of the myth of white male heroics as represented in images such as Robert Baden Powell's London, A White Man and a Man (1922). Jubelin's image then is meant to be a bust portrait of a white explorer in this case Robert Peary, yet the face is so ruined from his trek to the North Pole that it is impossible to make out any precise features. It recalls not the National Geographic images of Peary that built him up as a hero, but the portraits of Inuit workers shown physically debilitated from the trek. Unlike the previous National Geographic images that displaced the hardships of the exhibitions onto the representations of the Inuit workers, Narelle Jubelin's image suggests what the others tried to repress – that he did not return fully intact, that he was 53 years old at the time, had 9 of his toes amputated, and was literally a dead weight going to and from the North Pole, according to Henson. The playfulness of Jubelin's work is suggested by the way it ironizes stock conventions of portraiture and framing in the contrasting relationship it sets up between the portrait done in the small embroidered stitches of 'petit-point'-a medium that has a tradition connoting women's work – and the aggressively heroic Louis XIV sunburst frame. My book, Gender on Ice, like the Jubelin cover, was written with a slightly pop and campy feminist sensibility. Instead, the figures in Julien's films are mute, statuesque, and strike silent stylized poses. There is a silent posing of the female subject. The voice-over is intermittent. Julien's True North is a very visual film but there is a significant tension between the verbal and

visual tracks at times. The verbal track can get quite violent at times depending on who is speaking or simply breathing. The visuals by contrast can be quite serene but they also represent the landscape as sublime – as both dangerous and beautiful at the same time in the way he focuses on the whiteness of the landscape that foregrounds how easy it is to vanish.

Julien's film reminds us that what draws writers and artists to this landscape is also what draws explorers. It also recalls from a different perspective historical representations of the polar regions that present it as a wild and mysterious space that is unknowable. In 19th-century paintings, the Arctic was represented as a fantastic space that belongs neither to the future or the present but to another time. Represented as marvels or "natural masterpieces", to use Barbara Stafford's term, nature seemed awe-inspiring and larger than life to western artists. An example from this period of the anguish and suffering associated with battling against the sublimely dangerous depths is Caspar David Friedrich's 1824 painting The Arctic Shipwreck of the Hope. In American polar representations there was a general tendency to emphasize the natural wonders of the landscape over any human presence as in Frederic Church's famous painting The Icebergs (1861) or Bradford's 1882 seascape entitled Polar Seas. It is worth noting that 19th-century seascape paintings such as these by Church and Bradford served as precursors of modern photographic postcards in their depictions of the seascape and landscape as unchanging scenic wonders.

By the end of the 19th century, photography became an essential tool for explorers. So essential that sometimes it was all that was noteworthy and one of the only things that remained of an expedition. In 1897 a Scandinavian group of three men led by Salomon Andree attempted to reach the North Pole by balloon. Andree's expedition failed and for 33 years no hint of their fate was revealed, despite a series of relief expeditions. Then, in the summer of 1930, a whaling ship discovered Andree's diaries. Later his camera was found, which contained negatives of the photographs he took before his death. These haunting images attested to the destabilizing effect of this cold and dangerous space, and provided a testimony to what an ambiguous ally western science and technology proved to be. In these representations, the North Pole seemingly exceeds categories of thought and experience yet became a privileged object of scientific scrutiny. Once discovered, its infinite spaces will no longer prove astonishing and the sublime will become a moribund aesthetic.

Julien's film on one level takes us back to the wonder of these earlier representations but the aesthetics of the North Pole can not be simply folded back into a discussion of the sublime, whiteness, or politics. Instead, he is attending to it in a direct way that critically engages and reverses a tradition of photographic and painted representations of non-white people, and suggests some important new directions in contemporary art and cinematic practices.

A direction in which the white middle and upper classes, instead of being the avatars of meaning production, now find their traditions and beliefs to be the objects of scrutiny from positions rarely acknowledged. What distinguishes his work, though, is not merely a question of who is doing the producing, but how that production relates to both contemporary art culture, politics, a history of aesthetics, and culture at large.

LISA BLOOM WRITES AND LECTURES ON THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN GENDER, RACE, TECHNOLOGY, AND VISUAL CULTURE. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF GENDER ON ICE: AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES OF POLAR EXPEDITIONS (UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1993), EDITOR OF WITH OTHER EYES: LOOKING AT RACE AND GENDER IN VISUAL CULTURE (UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1999) WHICH WAS ALSO TRANSLATED INTO JAPANESE. HER MOST RECENT BOOK IS TITLED: JEWISH IDENTITIES IN AMERICAN FEMINIST ART: GHOSTS OF ETHNICITY (ROUTLEDGE, LONDON, 2006).