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Gender, Popular Science and *National Geographic* in the Age of Multiculturalism

Lisa Bloom

In some arenas of mainstream science studies, all too often questions that explore the relation between scientific practices, gender, everyday life, popular culture, technology, economic relations, ideologies, and distributions of power continue to be deemed of little immediate relevance to activities of scientists and are thus deferred, or even dismissed for methodological reasons. Take, for example, the following quote by Bruno Latour:

After three chapters there has not been a word yet on social classes, on capitalism, on economic infrastructure, on big business, on gender, not a single discussion of culture, not even an allusion to the social impact of technology. This is not my fault ... It is because [scientists] know about neither [society or nature] that they are so busy trying out new associations, creating an inside

world in which to work, displacing interests, negotiating facts, reshuffling groups and recruiting new allies.¹

Most of these issues never return as full-fledged objects of study in Latour's work. Recently people have begun to recognize that what is involved here is not simply adding a new angle to the study of scientific practices but rather viewing these practices as an interlocking dynamic, such that one cannot properly theorize, say, the production of knowledge within scientific practices, without reference to a range of critical issues, such as cultural discourses of sexuality and race.

In what follows I examine the specific example of the intersection between science and popular culture in order to consider how science and its photographic as well as cinematic record makes its objects within its own discourse, and the positions—national, racial, sexual—from which these discourses are spoken. I draw on various documents from the *National Geographic*, an institution through which American science and popular culture became identified together.²

There is a whole subfield in cultural studies, an area called colonial discourse studies in which I am situated that has also only recently taken into account the workings of gender.³ Although earlier texts in this interdisciplinary field such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Homi Bhabha's collection

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Nation and Narration have widened the field of colonial discourse in the past decade, what is absent from their theory is an understanding of the way that the politics of imperialism and nationalism are tied to broader questions of gender.⁴ This essay makes an intervention by foregrounding these connections in the way that it links recent scholarship on gender and ties these issues to those of nationalism, colonialism and popular culture within specifically the U.S. context. It takes its departure in feminist scholarship's interest in analyzing gendered and racial constructions of science, but in so doing broadens the question of gender to include racialized models of masculinity and nationalism. I will argue that while recent work in mainstream science studies is challenging the entrenched view that science and visual representations are produced somehow 'beyond' or 'above' the social world,⁵ it is also important to extend such recent analysis to include scholarship that takes into account differences of gender, sexuality, nationalism, and so on.

Now, in confronting the legitimacy of other grand narratives, such as that of 'science,' which have often silenced women and minorities, feminist scholarship has put emphasis on the issue of the 'location' of the critic, as a pragmatic way to retain some grounding as the older more universalizing narratives come under scrutiny. Adrienne Rich, for example, uses the term 'the politics of location' to insist on the situated nature of experience.⁶ Others, such as Caren Kaplan, use the concept of 'de-territorialization' as a description of identity which is understood in relation to a territory from which one is displaced and continues to negotiate with if only to dismantle.⁷ Writing more directly about the field of science studies, Donna Haraway recommends to feminists to work from their own embodied perspectives in order to produce what she refers to as 'situated knowledges.'⁸ These three women's located analysis of the current workings of discourse has put emphasis on two important things: first, that what needs to be problematized is

the center that obscures its own hegemonic dominance; and secondly, that the criticism has come from the margins, the periphery, the spaces that are often excluded from the discourse.

Such scholarship on situated knowledges has not been limited solely to the ideological gendering of location, but also takes into account the geography of colonialism and the complex workings of how power/knowledge is racialized. In dealing with the intersection between these terms, an analysis of the concept of 'whiteness' has seemed crucial, even if it has proven difficult to ground in an analysis. Much current scholarship on colonial discourse argues that race is hard to define because it lacks cultural specificity since it is not a marker of actual skin color.⁹ Thus, for example, the problem with the ethnic category 'white' is that it is constantly shifting. As Donna Haraway explains:

The point makes it easier to remember how the Irish moved from being perceived as colored in the early nineteenth century in the United States to quite white in Boston's school busing struggles in the 1970s, or how U.S. Jews have been ascribed white status more or less stably after WWII, while Arabs continue to be written as colored in the daily news.¹⁰

Haraway's point of how whiteness is constructed differently at various historical moments is an important insight to take into account when trying to theorize a truly located knowledge of science in the context of popular scientific representations such as *National Geographic*.

In what follows I examine representations from the National Geographic Society and Magazine to illustrate how the trope of science and technology works in tandem with the trope of racial otherness to keep a static and homogeneous notion of whiteness preserved across what appears to be important shifts in the *National Geographic's* own discourse. This, I argue, strategically permits within the *Geographic's* construction of a U.S. national imaginary a disavowal of internal ethnic differences. In the *Geographic's* nationalist

discourse, external 'otherness' provides a rather simple unifying model whereby American identity becomes aware of itself as a self by perceiving its difference from non-American, non-white 'others,' and this difference turns on the figure of science. In this manner the *National Geographic* not only constructs a national identity that is white and male through the mass circulation of images of the colonial 'other' (brown bodies) but, oddly enough, this identity still remains unproblematically white even as American women and men of color are now incorporated into its narrative of Western heroism.

In the first part of this paper I will begin with a quote that appeared in 1913 in the *Boston Herald* which celebrates *National Geographic* as a great contribution to the promotion of American nationalism. What the quote exemplifies is how race, gender, and science come together in the articulation of an American national identity which is equated with modernity as signified by American science and technology in the early part of the century.

In the second part of the paper, my point of departure will be an examination of a 1988 television special that celebrates the *National Geographic's* 100th anniversary.¹¹ This tape provides an excellent example of how a homogenous notion of whiteness is preserved through the trope of 'science' when its narrative must adapt to the changes of a post-colonial situation and Geographic exploration and heroism can no longer be maintained as an all-white, or an all-male preserve. As new social subjects who were excluded during the early twentieth century appear on the scene as contemporary heroes (for example, white women scientists and biologists such as Carol Jenkins), I examine how they serve a key role as mediating a white science and technology and maintaining the rigid racial binarism that separates the so-called 'modern' West from the 'backward' and 'irrational' non-West.

Finally, I conclude by providing an example of how a monocultural organization like the National

Geographic Society makes gestures towards adopting a superficially multicultural identity through paying homage during its centennial celebration to a token black explorer, Matthew Henson, the black American man who accompanied Robert Peary in 1909 to the North Pole.

Hatching Whiteness: Modern Incubators of Citizens

Richard Dyer in his 1988 article in the British film journal *Screen* entitled 'White' elaborates on how whiteness is often embedded in an everyday discourse of common sense, thus obscuring its location within a discourse of colonialism.¹² Whiteness and its connotations of safety have been embedded in *National Geographic's* colonialist project which rhetorically consisted of 'dispelling the patches of darkness' which prevented the full visibility of things, men, women, and truths in the world. In its pages the *National Geographic* reiterated throughout its history its belief in the objectivity and impartiality of scientific techniques, especially new photographic technologies, and thus was able to present itself 'as a great beacon of light in the world,' and a particular effective means to promote American nationalism. In this connection I quote from an editorial in the *Boston Herald* that was reprinted in the February 1913 issue of *National Geographic*. Referring to the *National Geographic*, it proclaimed,

Here is an agency the force of which cannot be overstated. Indeed, the modern innovation of hatching chickens by incubators instead of hens is simply nowhere compared with the system of hatching patriots of the stamp of William Tell by geological geography, as exemplified in the faith and works of the National Geographic Society of Washington, D.C.

This is no wild paradox. In truth, have not the greatest historians insisted that the reason why there is no such thing as the existence of patriotic sentiment in China is solely due to the fact that the human heart is incapable of loving 400

million fellow creatures one knows nothing about?

They are a pure numerical abstraction to a man. Of their lives, languages, aspirations, joys, and sorrows he is ignorant of every concrete item, unless that they all wear the national pigtail; and so, even this dangling appendage is not potent enough to bind the people together in the chords of universal love.

Just the same used to be asserted of the United States of America. The States were too big, too broadly dispersed, too divergent in interests, for anyone to be capable of loving their multitudinous populations as fellow countrymen. All this, however, at any rate in the eyes of the National Geographic Society of Washington, is now rapidly being done away with. It is getting effected through a vivid appeal to the visual imagination which is enabling us all to see, in the mind's eye, our whole country at once and as a whole. The stupendous national enterprises already completed, or about to be inaugurated are fast annihilating all lines of geographical division, and enlisting the minds and hearts of the scattered millions in vast undertakings in which all share a common interest and common pride.¹³

In this passage the *Geographic* is fantasized as the latest in modern technologies—a machine that reproduces identical ‘patriots of the stamp of William Tell.’ From such a pre-Benjaminian perspective, machines that mechanically reproduce imaginary images of ‘a nation as a whole’ have an evolutionary significance for the formation of modern nations. The implication is that if machines and new technologies have radically improved the breeding of chickens and hens, then they should be equally decisive for the manufacture of human communities. What is empowering this passage is the metaphor of reproduction (human and animal) and its very broad application to include the processes of mechanical reproduction to celebrate the new print technologies of the *National Geographic*. According to this discourse, mechanical reproduction is glorified because it offers an improvement over biological reproduction, for it assures the elimination of

internal ethnic differences and diversity amongst its manufactured ‘patriots.’ As in many masculinist texts, structuring the editorial is an underlying envy of female procreative power. It is implied that men and their technologies can produce their own superior means of reproduction. It is worth noting that not only are women written out of this text (in this case women’s bodies are supplanted altogether in the service of ‘hatching patriots’ for the nation), but so are other non-Western national traditions, which are troped as exclusively male but feminized in terms of the editorial’s logic. This thinking is hinted at by inscribing the national pigtail of the Chinese (‘a dangling appendage’) as the impotent signifier of Chinese masculinity and nationalism.

Embedded in an insult to the Chinese’s gender, is a myth of the magazine’s own masculinist origin and function. The writer sets up an unconscious pattern of relation between Self and Other by comparing the phallic power of an idealized fantasy image of U.S. patriots ‘hatched by geological geography’ to its monstrous negation, 400 million Chinese patriots bonded together by ‘a national pigtail.’ Finally, myth and fantasy continually reverse into one another. The Chinese and Americans are both shown as lacking until the arrival of the *National Geographic*, which assures U.S. national superiority through its new visual technologies. U.S. national identity gets expressed in terms of sexual difference: the U.S. patriot with real phallic power (the *National Geographic*) is opposed to his Chinese counterpart, who has merely a feminized substitute, ‘a national pigtail.’ The comparison metaphorically affirms the superiority of U.S. white masculinity, now marked by technological powers that make it infallible.

By means of the intervention of print technologies a sense of American identity is established not only through internal imaginary unity, but in relation to external differences that get circulated within. According to cultural theorist Philip Fisher, there were difficulties in establishing a common American identity as undifferentiated and white at this historical moment:

Americans were not a Volk. They had no

common racial origin and no common history.

Open to immigration and flooded by immigrants in the century between 1820 and 1920, they were a patchwork of peoples. In addition, with no shared religion, no deep relation to a common language, no shared customary way of life with its ceremonies and manners, no single style of humor or common inherited maxims and unspoken rules, the continental nation also lacked just those features that any romantic theory of the nation-state required.¹⁴

Without a single racial origin, history, religion, or common language, the national fact of America meant that somehow the problem of identity must be solved by other, unprecedented means. Now, the *Boston Herald* editorial suggests that this was evidently an urgent task at the turn of the century in what was fast becoming a world power. Since Americans did not have any single human feature in common, not even a 'national pigtail,' something else would have to be invented in order to posit a 'community in anonymity,' to use Benedict Anderson's words.¹⁵

According to the editorial that I quoted the concept of a nation is regarded as both natural and universal. However, theorists of nationalism such as Anderson would argue against such attempts at universalizing it. In offering a working definition for the concept of 'nation' Anderson sees the nation as an imaginary concept.

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.¹⁶

Anderson goes on to point out that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.'¹⁷ For Anderson, nationalist consciousness in modern societies was dependent on the emergence of newspapers and novels. Through new print technologies a nationalist identity became mechanically reproducible. The

National Geographic is a perfect example of what Anderson refers to when he explains that print media became the dominant means for particularizing the social and cultural field of a nation in the modern era.

I want to argue that what is peculiar to the *Geographic* until this day is the way the idea of an imagined U.S. nation as being both American, white, and male is built on both the circulation of white U.S. explorers in the so-called 'Third World' and the circulation of photographs of brown bodies in the so-called First World. Now, in my more contemporary example, the 1988 *National Geographic* videotape that provides a 100 year history of the National Geographic Society, I will argue that though the videotape desires to 'correct' its blatantly colonialist rhetoric from the past to one that has adopted the rhetoric of multiculturalism as a strategy, it also displays a fixation with ethnicity as something that belongs to the 'other' alone, thus white ethnicity is not under question and retains its 'centered' position as the reference point in the power ploys of a multicultural policy.

The Heroic Eye

The Explorers: A Century of Discovery is a characteristic product of the *National Geographic* video series which presents itself through mixed genres. It is both an entertainment film and a documentary that purports to be educational while dealing with supposedly serious real-world historical events with all the bravado and dash of Hollywood adventure films.¹⁸ It is also a celebration-cum-advertisement of the 100 year old institution, as well as an American colonial adventure film, offering the standard narrative pleasures of adventure through the spectator's identification with the various *Geographic* heroes represented. A sound-track that seems to be extracted from the film *Ben-Hur* along with the authoritative voice-over of the narrator E.G. Marshall provides an account of famous clips which include images of men and women explorers—Robert Peary, Osa and Martin Johnson,

Robert Leakey, Jane Goodall, and others—that became household names through their affiliation in part with the National Geographic Society. The ideal viewer, a member of the National Geographic (the tape is only available to members), is interpolated into the tape's narrative of American nationalism through identification with the changing figures of American heroes, whose adventures and personal growth are occasioned, even made possible through the process of adventures in the so-called 'Third World.'

The Explorers: A Century of Discovery includes various scenes in which the shutter of the camera exactly corresponds with the eyes of the explorer looking at a landscape, persons, or city. In each case, after a quick flash to the intensely fixed expression of a white male explorer, the scene dissolves into a long take which documents the remote landscape, the lost city or non-Western person never before seen by Western eyes.

The use of cinematic dissolve in this instance performs important work in the video's narrative. The explorer's gaze is the sign of an explorer's genius. Within the narrative it transforms the unknown into a new reality. Often the camera and the eye of the explorer are conflated not only through the use of dissolves but by the voice-over of the narrative itself: 'At the turn of the century the eye of the camera was capable of wondrous revelations.' The camera serves a significant function, and I would argue is the actual hero of the video, as its mediating function serves to make the explorer *capable* of the act of creation itself. Once legitimized in terms of his particular relation to photographic technology, the explorer can claim complete authoritativeness for his vision. The tape's voice-over tells us that the project of *Geographic* explorers and photographers is to document 'the world and all that is in it.' Yet, the idea that there might be constraints on the explorer's interpretive capacities is never hinted at. Instead, the camera as an observation site works as a validating and naturalizing scaffold in the video that confers upon the figure of the explorer an invisibility and all-seeing knowledge that makes

him or her appear outside of society and history; without nationality, gender, and so forth. The camera, while being itself everywhere and nowhere, established the videotape's universalist white character and its transcendental white vision.¹⁹

One of the more notorious traditions that the *National Geographic* has always upheld is the objectification of the figure of the 'Third World woman' through her eroticization.²⁰ Images of partially naked 'third world women' are presented in the pages of the *National Geographic* as sexual objects to be penetrated and conquered. The presence of these images thus serves to underline the masculine features of the white man's testing of his 'virility' and demonstrate how the magazine constituted national American sexual experiences through photographs. Of course, the pleasures of this community were enjoyed almost exclusively by a fraternity of white men. The tape's voice-over makes reference to this magazine's policy of coding the 'Third World woman' as having primitive sexuality, referred to as 'a famous *Geographic* tradition.' The celebrated 1896 photograph is reproduced in the videotape with the explanation that "Grosvener stoutly defended the policy of showing people dressed or undressed according to the customs of their land." Native traditions and photographic accuracy are given as a rationale to support a particular definition of nation, ethnicity, and sexuality in which being 'American' is being one of 'us'—white and male—as opposed to one of 'them,' non-white and female.

The next part of the tape's narrative focuses on the properly equipped early twentieth century Western explorer who is packed with both guns and cameras to remote places on the planet to claim previously unknown sights for Western civilization. Two such figures in the tape 'typifying a new breed of showmen explorers ... equally famous and equally skilled with guns and their many cameras' are a couple, Osa and Martin Johnson, who attempt to 'enlighten' American audiences by photographing the so-called 'dark

Continent.²¹ In this video we see the Johnson's encounter with Africa from the original black and white newsreels of the Johnson's films as an encounter with the body of the black African native.

Once this initial scene is recorded on film, the explorers literally replace the people that they find there. In the narrative Africa is no longer the continent belonging to its indigenous population but 'the natural habitat of the great explorers.' A Eurocentric paradigm of modernization and progress is projected onto Africa which legitimizes the American presence by showing how savage and underdeveloped its peoples are in comparison with the Americans. In the black and white footage Osa and Martin Johnson arrive on the 'dark continent' by airplane as the voice of Martin Johnson explains:

I decided this time to do the dark continent in a real modern way—inside two big airplanes capable of landing on either water or land. Pygmies appeared from behind every tree and tuft of grass. A surging, jumping multitude of tiny savages. The happiest people in the world doing their best to show us how overjoyed they were to find us once more in their country after three years absence.

Johnson's rhetoric is paternalistic and suggests a certain kind of invulnerability. However, his physical distance from the natives and his reliance on modern technologies such as the airplane, camera, and the gun indicate his underlying insecurities. These anxieties are abated at a later point when Martin and Osa Johnson are seen dancing to 'modern' jazz with the so-called 'boy and girl savages.' Johnson comments on the scene:

I said to Osa lets give the boys and girls some modern jazz. Most savages are greatly puzzled by the phonograph but the child-like pygmies accept it without curiosity as just another wonder of the white man.

The Johnsons' image of the Africans as child-like and in awe of the White man and his machines is

an old strategy, signified by the phonograph and modern music, that Westerners have had for interpreting the other as living in a quaint but irrelevant past, actually in need of the West's intervention to bring them culturally up-to-date.²²

The Role of White Women in Mediating Western Technology

It is significant that in this segment Osa Johnson, a white woman explorer, is represented as bringing black American music via 'white' technology to civilize 'savage' Africans. The figure of the white woman also presents a domestic image and indicates a shift in the project of the *National Geographic* signaling that wild Africa has now been tamed and is thus safe for white women to play a role. The image of Osa Johnson dancing with black African men suggests a different form of inequality that emphasizes gender and is reminiscent of other colonial images of white femininity surrounded by male servants of color. In this allegory of empire, the surface gaiety masks the sober meaning behind the image: the U.S. wife's 'duty' to teach the 'Africans' for their own good the white culture of the West. The gender difference, however, does not make Osa appear less complicitous than her husband is with the ideology of racism. Indeed, here she is even more shameless than her husband as she freely appropriates other cultural traditions than her own—such as the music of African Americans—and presents them under the guise of a white tradition—white because it is made available through U.S. technology. It must be admitted that this is a strange kind of inadvertent indictment of the white woman as colonizer, one bound up, too, with the *National Geographic's* own sexism.

In more contemporary episodes of *Geographic* history, external otherness continues to bind an ethnically undifferentiated U.S. identity. The evolving discourses that have historically defined the 'Other' as underdeveloped also remains compatible with a current shift in which the figure of the white woman is now authorized to administer scientific 'aid.' Such an example is

illustrated in the tape's focus on the 'primitive' Hogahai, a group of people living in the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea. The tape's voice-over explains how the colonialist 'come and help us' mentality seems to justify a more feminized U.S. interventionist policy now:

Until a few years ago no outsiders knew of their existence, and they have been so isolated that they have not developed antibodies to protect them against common diseases. Not long ago the Hogahai realized that they were dying out, so they forsook their isolation and sent five men to the outside world to ask for help.

This voice-over is an example of ventriloquism in which the other is made to speak the speech of the colonizer. Thus, indirect discourse is used to present the figure of Carol Jenkins, a medical anthropologist brought in by the *Geographic* as a savior rather than an intrusive presence. The protection of the Hogahai becomes a signifier for the continuation of *Geographic's* imperialist project in the present. Even as the white woman is figured as establishing and maintaining order, she is presented in a feminized role. Placed in the position of a mother protecting her children, she by her presence brings white women to cultural power not as autonomous agents but by virtue of their biological sex. By representing Dr. Jenkins primarily as nursing Hogahai infants, the visuals project back into the past the features of the present, replacing a woman's function as doctor with an image of maternal femininity in order to insist that historically produced social roles are timeless and still biologically determined.²³

Significantly, this is the only contemporary segment of the tape that focuses strictly on people, rather than on nature or (as in the search for 'man's origins' by Dr. Leaky) skeletons. These other areas of scientific interest tend to efface the native inhabitants in order to display uninhabited nature. Throughout the contemporary segments, Western anthropologists and biologists are depicted as heroes and heroines, yet this time they no longer have to fight off hostile natives to survive but are

now welcomed messengers of Western science. One of the changes that has taken place is that the function of science has shifted from a discourse of conquest to that of social welfare and 'health' designed to help the globe's so-called neediest. The other major change is that, unlike earlier *Geographic* stories, contemporary white women are now included as active agents of its discourse. *Geographic* heroism remains a white concept, though it is no longer an all-male preserve. Given the *Geographic's* tradition of excluding white women, however, it is understandable that one might be suspicious of the frequency of representations of white women in the more contemporary segments. The *Geographic* might want to distinguish its past from its present by way of using white women in its contemporary segments as transmitters of U.S. science. Also, adding women to exploration enables the society to appear as if it had shifted the paradigm of exploration and science away from the structural sexism of its past.

Whitewashing Colonialism

As time passes in the cinematic narrative, what remains constant is the National Geographic Society's ability to deny the relations of violence and domination that provide its historic and its psychic armature. This thus enables it to whitewash its colonial past to perpetuate a continuous discourse in the present under a more benevolent either feminine or aesthetic gaze. Also, past tensions and disagreements are omitted which works to recognize retrospectively its previous explorers as great men who will survive the test of time. This might not otherwise be assured since the claims of some of the early explorers were controversial. Such was the case of Robert Peary, the first explorer in this videotape's evolutionary line of *Geographic* heroes. However, the tape's voice-over washes out the more explicit references to colonial exploitation and racism in the early *Geographic* accounts of the expedition in which the Eskimo peoples and a black American man, Matthew Henson, are represented in Peary's 1909

book entitled *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 Under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* as ‘technology’ that fuel his ‘traveling machine.’²⁴ Peary wrote of his expedition as something of a model of uniformed mass production, a perfectly efficient factory that standardizes the making of workers. He refers to the indigenous members of his expedition either as ‘cogs,’ ‘hyperborean aborigines,’ or ‘savages.’ He refers to Matthew Henson as his ‘Negro body servant.’²⁵ Often he mentions the Eskimo dogs in relation to their function of providing the ‘tractive force’ for the sleds.²⁶ In this revised version, Matthew Henson is no longer a ‘body servant’ but ‘a pioneering black explorer who was Peary’s closest associate.’ Peary’s bald exploitation of the Eskimos also disappears in this account. Instead we learn that ‘he lived with the Eskimos and became accepted as one of them.’

However, a completely different perspective on Peary is provided by an elderly man in Siorapaluk who gave the following account of Peary’s encounter with the Inuit people. The following quotation appeared in Ken Harper’s book entitled *Give Me My Father’s Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo* published in 1986 and resulted from an interview Harper had with an Inuit man in 1967:

People were afraid of him ... really afraid.... His big ship ... it made a big impression on us. He was a great leader. You always had the feeling that if you didn’t do what he wanted, he would condemn you to death ... I was very young, but I will never forget how he treated the Inuit ... His big ship arrives in the bay. He is hardly visible from the shore, but he shouts: “Kiiha Tikequihunga!—I’m arriving, for a fact!” The Inuit go aboard. Peary has a barrel of biscuits brought up on deck. The two or three hunters who have gone out to the ship in their kayaks bend over the barrel and begin to eat with both hands. Later, the barrel is taken ashore, and the contents thrown on the beach. Men, women and children hurl themselves on the biscuits like dogs, which amuses Peary a lot. My heart still turns cold to think of it. That scene tells very

well how he considered this people—my people—who were, for all of that, devoted to him.²⁷

This account of Peary by an Inuit man returns Peary to a world where there is no possible innocent reading of Peary and his ‘accomplishments.’ Within Peary’s 1909 narrative, the Inuits—Uutaaq, Ukkujaaq, Iggianguaq and Sigluk—are altogether denied a subject position. Matthew Henson, the U.S.-born, educated African-American man, appears a step above, yet as a man of color his accomplishments are kept clearly distinct from Peary’s, and he is thus forbidden to occupy the slot of ‘co-discoverer.’

Reconstructing the North Pole Myth

In the most recent phase of reconstruction of the North Pole myth one of the leading characters in the story is S. Allen Counter, the director of the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations, who studied Henson as part of a project at Harvard University to trace the influence of blacks in world history. Counter established that both Peary and Henson fathered Inuit children in the Arctic and arranged through Harvard for the Henson and Peary descendants to come to the U.S. to meet with some of their North American relatives.

Counter’s article on this reunion is the first attention the *Geographic* has ever given to Henson, yet the framing of the ‘reporting’ puts emphasis on Henson not as ‘co-discoverer’ (now, neither of them made it to the Pole) but as ‘loyal and trusted companion.’²⁸ As Counter put it,

Henson shared many of his most intimate secrets. He knew all about Peary’s sexual liaison and the children he fathered with Aleqasin.... But Henson never breathed a word of this in public.²⁹

Counter’s emphasis on Henson’s ability to keep Peary’s secret takes on a lot of weight in his narrative. What is unsettling about this is that Counter relies on the mythos of masculine bonding as a means to define interracial solidarity. Any

homosocial tension between the men is displaced onto female sexuality.³⁰

In addition, I would like to draw attention to how Counter's narrative hesitates to emphasize race as a factor and instead privileges gender exclusively as a way to formulate Henson's national identity. This move suggests the difficulties in negotiating another discourse, tradition or place for blacks. Counter plays down race in favor of Henson's heterosexual masculinity and his male bonding with Peary to accommodate the white readership of the *Geographic* and this works to mask the differences between the two men and the unequal power relations involved. The fact that both Peary and Henson had Inuit families makes Henson retrospectively acceptable as a participant within a *Geographic* male tradition, and of course, no question arose of 'recognizing' either the Inuit mistresses of these men or their children. Startlingly, Counter is willing to include Henson even on such problematic terms to show Peary and Henson's essential commonality. Counter's premise is that the homosocial bond between Peary and Henson eradicates whatever racial difference might have otherwise kept them apart. This move also works to reinforce an older colonialist discourse which sets up an opposition between the U.S. and the non-West. The only difference is now black men are asked to share in the responsibility of U.S. colonial and sexual exploitation. Henson is retrospectively seen as an active participant in this tradition. Another way that Counter's attempt to

reintroduce Henson falls short is in part because he defines him as dependent on Peary, rather than autonomous. There is no such thing as reciprocal dependency in the *Geographic*'s discourse on heroism which relies for its image on a single hero playing the active dominant role.

Significantly, new scientific evidence brought forward in 1990 used to restore Peary as a representative figure of *Geographic* heroism does not extend to Henson, and thus reinforces a unitary notion of U.S. heroism as white and male.³¹ For in the recent report, Henson is still not mentioned as the co-discoverer of the North Pole. Rather, he appears as Peary's 'companion' whose account and participation remain of marginal interest to the *Geographic* writer's endorsement and validation of the figure of the white hero and his accomplishments.

* Passages from this essay are excerpted from Lisa Bloom's *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), and are reprinted with permission from the University of Minnesota Press. The article originally appeared in the present version under the title "Constructing Whiteness: Popular Science and *National Geographic* in the Age of Multiculturalism" in the U.S. journal, *Configurations* eds, Roddey Reid, Mario Biagioli, Sharon Traweek, (Winter, 1994) 2(1): 15-32

Notes

1. Bruno Latour (1987) *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 142.
2. A substantial critical analysis of the emergence of the National Geographic Society and its magazine is given by Philip Pauley (1979) 'The World and All That Is in It: The National Geographic Society, 1888-1918,' in *American Quarterly* 31(4): 517-532. Also see: Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993) *Reading National Geographic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. For a further elaboration of my approach see my book: Lisa Bloom (1993) *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Much of my

approach comes out of the critical studies of gender and colonial discourse studies. Some key texts are: Deborah Gordon (1988) 'Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse,' in *Inscriptions* 3/4: 1-26; Donna Haraway (1989) *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge; Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press and (1992) *Social Text* 31/32; Cynthia Enloe (1989) *Making Feminist Sense of International Politics: Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (eds) (1992) *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, New York: Routledge;

- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (eds) (1991) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Ann McClintock (1991) 'No Longer in a Future Heaven: Women and Nationalism in South Africa,' in *Transition* 51; Marianna Torgovnick (1990) *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. For a discussion on various approaches to the concept of 'postcoloniality,' and the limitations of emphasizing the 'post' when the term is used in the U.S. context, see: Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani (1993) 'Crosscurrents, crosstalk: race, "postcoloniality" and the politics of location,' in *Cultural Studies* 7(2): 292-310. For examples of how colonial and postcolonial discourse studies have been applied to popular visual discourses of nationalism, travel, and art, without incorporating a feminist approach see: James Clifford (1988, 1989) *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; Vicente L. Rafael (1990) 'Nationalism, Imagery and Filipino Intelligentsia in the 19th Century,' *Critical Inquiry* 16(3): 591-610; Mary Pratt (1992) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge; Edward Said and Jean Mohr (1986) *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, New York: Pantheon; Sally Price (1989) *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Susan Mullin Vogel (ed.) (1991) *Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art*, New York, Center for African Art.
 5. See among others: Karin Knorr-Cetina (1983) *Science Observed: Perspectives in the Social Study of Science*, London: Sage; Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1985) *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press; Michael Lynch (1985) *Art and Artifact in Laboratory Science: A Study of shop work and shop talk in a Research Library*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (eds) (1990) *Representation in Scientific Practice*, Cambridge MIT.
 6. Adrienne Rich, (1986) 'Notes Towards a Politics of Location (1984),' in *Blood, Bread and Poetry, Selected Prose 1979-1985*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
 7. Caren Kaplan (1987) 'Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse,' in *Cultural Critique* 6.
 8. Donna Haraway (1991) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York : Routledge, pp. 183-202.
 9. See: Ruth Frankenberg (1993) *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Richard Dyer (1988) 'White,' in *Screen* 29(4).
 10. Donna Haraway,(1989) *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, pp. 401-2.
 11. It is significant that the National Geographic Society is the largest producer of documentary films in the United States. The 90-minute 1988 video, *The Explorers: A Century of Discovery*, is a *National Geographic* Centennial Special that aired on PBS. All references in the text are from the script of this videotape.
 12. Richard Dyer, p. 45.
 13. Gilbert Grosvener (1913) 'Progress of the National Geographic Society: The Reports for the Year 1912,' *National Geographic*, pp. 253-55.
 14. Philip Fisher (1988) 'Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency,' in *Representations* 24: 60.
 15. Benedict Anderson (1985) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, p. 30.
 16. *ibid.* p. 14.
 17. *ibid.* p. 15.
 18. Bill Nichols would link the documentary strategies and modes deployed in this tape (the direct-address style of the Griersonian tradition and its successor, cinema vérité) to an outdated documentary tradition of filmmaking used now for ads, television news, and documentary specials, but not for films. See Bill Nichols (1983) 'The Voice of Documentary,' in *Film Quarterly* 36(3): 17-30.
 19. Critical theorists, including the following, reveal how the scientists and photographer are interested agents in the production of knowledge to which they contribute: Victor Burgin (1986) 'Seeing Sense,' in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, pp. 51-70; Jonathan Crary (1988) 'Modernizing Vision,' in Hal Foster (ed) *Vision and*

- Visuality: Discussion in Contemporary Culture*, Seattle: Dia Art Foundation # 2 Bay Press: pp. 29-50; Donna Haraway (1989) 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-136,' in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, pp. 26-58; Allan Sekula (1984) 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),' in *Photography against the Grain*, Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, pp. 53-76.
20. For other critiques of how feminism, critical theory, and post-colonial discourse are aligned with a critique of positivism see: Lata Mani (1993) *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, 1780-1833*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; Gayatri Spivak (1985) 'Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculation on Widow Sacrifice,' in *Wedge* no. 7/8: 120-130.
 21. For further background on Martin and Osa Johnson see: Donna Haraway (1989) *Primate Visions*, pp. 44-45.
 22. For a systematic critique of this temporal relationship see: Johannes Fabian (1983) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.
 23. For a trenchant critique of the figure of the scientific woman in *National Geographic* see: Donna Haraway,(1989) 'Women's Place is in the Jungle,' in *Primate Visions*, pp. 279-384.
 24. Robert Peary (1910) *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 Under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club*, New York: Stokes; Mineola, N.Y. : Dover, (1986) pp. 5-6.
 25. Peary, p. 272.
 26. Peary, p. 8.
 27. Kenn Harper (1986) *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo*, Frobisher Bay, Canada: Blacklead Books, pp. 10-12.
 28. S. Allen Counter (1988) 'The Henson Family,' *National Geographic*, September, p. 428.
 29. Counter, pp. 428-9.
 30. For the concept of homosociality as social bonding between men see: Eve Kosofsky-Sedewick (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press.
 31. Thomas Davies (1990) 'New Evidence Places Peary at the Pole,' in *National Geographic*, January.