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What does it mean for a woman artist to follow the trails of so-called heroes, fearless male explorers in the service of their nation and backed by supportive men's clubs? Would it be possible to maintain a critical distance and reflect on these issues while being surrounded by the Arctic's beautiful and extraordinary landscape?

**Stefanie Hessler**, "Katja Aglert: *Winter Event—Antifreeze*," 2014

To my mind, there is this idea of a "contaminated sublime." Working with beautiful pictorial images, and at the same time trying to portray a kind of trauma within these types of so-called beautiful scenes, that perhaps unsettles the idea of the pleasure that we derive in beauty; that it can have a more disturbing resonance.

**Isaac Julien**, "A Contaminated Sublime: An Interview with Isaac Julien," 2012

In this chapter I discuss Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004) and Katja Aglert's *Winter Event—Antifreeze* (2009–2018). Initially, I was interested in the way these artists' twenty-first-century artistic practices intersect with and depart from themes addressed in my first book, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, since both artists were influenced by my earlier writing. Here I add the following questions: What new stories and works of art are being produced in more recent attempts to reintroduce subjectivities that were not allowed during the Heroic Age? And how does critical polar aesthetics contribute to revisualizing an Arctic that continues

to be seen in a colonialist frame as pristine and empty in the age of accelerated climate change?<sup>1</sup> The main topic is the exploration of white male failure both in the past, during the heroic era when polar explorers fabricated the events of their expeditions to suit the particular flag-planting heroism and imperial entitlement of their day, and in the present, when conquest of the North Pole has resulted not in taming nature but in unwittingly claiming ownership of an earth system beyond our ability to control. Clearly, polar exploration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains integral to the social construction of a distinctive nexus of white manhood and nationalism, reified as a particular form of white masculinity as dominating over extreme nature.<sup>2</sup> In the early twentieth century, the North and South Poles represented one of the few remaining masculine testing grounds where adventure and hardship could still be faced. As I wrote, “As all-male activities, the explorations symbolically enacted the men’s own battle to become men. The difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions provided the ideal mythic site where men could show themselves as heroes capable of superhuman feats. . . . Such claims were hardly likely to accrue to women living within the bounded spaces of everyday life, marriage and the workplace.”<sup>3</sup>

At that historical moment, women and people of color had no protagonist role in nation and culture building and the advance of scientific knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The Greenland Arctic Inuit men and unpaid women helpers, companions, and guides were erased from their roles as travelers and explorers by the historical preference for heroic masculinist narratives. So was Matthew Henson, the Black American explorer who had a central role in an expedition accompanying Robert Peary on his trek to the North Pole in 1909. The official public discourse allowed Henson to participate in the expedition but not to receive equal credit for his central place in this national story as it was told by Peary and by institutions such as the National Geographic Society.

Over one hundred years later, as climate change melts the ice, we are seeing a reemergence of interest in polar narratives marketing an imperial masculinity that consistently continues to deny the failures that were critiqued in *Gender on Ice*. This surge of interest since the late 1990s is exemplified by recent reprintings of original accounts, new biographies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century explorers, and even reality TV simulated reenactments of their journeys.<sup>5</sup> The polar regions remain a perfect backdrop for a heroic masculinity that seems to endure. “The heroes are still arriving. But today they do not leave the kind of footprints that once indexed heroic geography,” as Elena Glasberg writes.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I develop further my analysis of masculinist, nationalist, and racial politics from *Gender on Ice* while setting out in a new direction to include the study of environmental art in the age of the Anthropocene. I examine how both Aglert and Julien use a variety of media and aesthetic techniques to unsettle older colonial scientific representations and to undercut the authority of the Heroic Age and its colonialist and nationalist masculinist history as the major mode of engagement in the Arctic to this day. At the same time, the chapter engages with contemporary environmental questions connected to the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, as well as with the persistence of the narrative of white male failure and purposeful inequalities at a moment when the climate crisis in the Arctic is accelerating, matching what used to be considered worst-case scenarios, while governments, nation-states, and corporations fail to take action. While Inuit communities continue to live within the limits imposed by Arctic environments, European and other colonizers remain determined to colonize, exploit, and settle lands and seas, often with disastrous results, whether industrial pollution or forced resettlement of northern communities in the name of sovereignty projects, as I discuss in chapter 3.

### **When Ice Is Just Ice: Gender and the Everyday in the Arctic Work of Katja Aglert**

Katja Aglert is a well-known Swedish feminist artist and professor whose piece *Winter Event—Antifreeze* started with an artistic residency research trip in 2009 to Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. The ongoing project that began in 2009 was realized as a complex conceptual artwork that has been exhibited as a solo exhibition at the art and performance space Weld in Stockholm, Sweden (2012); Marabouparken in Stockholm (2014); the MAC Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago, Chile (2015); FLORA ars+natura in Bogotá, Colombia (2015); and Polar-museet in Tromsø, Norway (2017–2018).<sup>7</sup> Her work develops from, and is influenced by, feminist artists such as Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, and Martha Rosler in the way her artistic research similarly transforms object-oriented artwork formats into discourse-oriented exhibitions that include performance, photography, and video. Aglert's artistic research focuses on the idea of the North Pole as a perfect backdrop for enduring myths of heroic masculinity and success. Her work addresses the continued fixation on the grand all-white male heroic tradition of modern polar exploration culture situated in the Heroic Age (1897–1922); the Arctic's popular image as a sublime wilderness or unspoiled tabula rasa outside

of history; and, finally, its more recent visualization as the ground zero of catastrophic climate change.

In *Gender on Ice*, I asked somewhat ironically what types of white men the Arctic and Antarctic made, and I analyzed how the quest of reaching the North Pole and the South Pole functioned as a male testing ground, where national shame was attached to losing and thus failing to demonstrate one's manhood. Much of the creative challenge of Aglert's work is her examination of gender, in particular, her exploration of how we should see the region given that the explorer mythology continues to play a role in accounts of the modern Arctic.<sup>8</sup>

In calling viewers' attention to the recuperation and rehabilitation today of a historical colonial white masculinity in the Arctic, her video *Winter Event—Antifreeze* (2009) addresses white male polar heroism not as a reason for admiration or esteem but as a questionable act, especially when failure is deliberately hidden. The denial of failure at each pole by the British and the Americans establishes continuity between these two national events. In *Gender on Ice*, I focus on the tragedy of the failed British Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole, led by Robert Falcon Scott, to provide important contrasts to and parallels with the US claim of reaching the geographic North Pole. I explain how Robert 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 became a discursive space where a nationalist myth was established through Scott's letters as a means of mythologizing an ideology of British white masculinity that paradoxically ignores references to frozen bodies or to death in Antarctica.<sup>9</sup> As I wrote in *Gender on Ice*, "Antarctica is textualized; it becomes a discursive space in which intrepid British naval officers can prove that they can still die as gentlemen. Never deviating from their routine, they face death as they did life—unruffled, certain of themselves, and dignified."<sup>10</sup>

Besides being a site for polar exploration culture, the Arctic was also used periodically as a base for whaling and walrus trapping starting in the eighteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, interest shifted to include other extraction industries such as fossil fuels.<sup>11</sup> In imagining a modern Arctic, Aglert's artwork brings in unexpected images of an industrial coal mining that do not conform to the Arctic's otherwise popular image as a space of strict wilderness. These images include

commercial activities on the islands, using photographs of a mining town from Barentsburg (1920) and of Camp Mansfield, located on Blomstrand Island, which was briefly the setting, at the beginning of the twentieth century, for a factory where marble was processed; due to the effects of frost weathering, the marble disintegrated and was useless, an outcome Aglert presents as yet another heroic failure (figure 2.1).

In the exhibition, the cover of the book *Gender on Ice* is set against photographs of such sites (figures 2.2 and 2.4). The book's cover incorporates the artwork of the feminist and postcolonial Australian artist Narelle Jubelin. The image is a close-up in petit point of what freezing to death in such extreme temperatures does to a polar explorer's face, which is reminiscent of a 1914 photograph of an ice mask taken by Frank Hurley in Antarctica (figure 2.3). Jubelin, the artist whose image is on the cover of *Gender on Ice*, reworks that disturbing image and places hers 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 that was at once psychically and physically undisturbing and worthy of public reverence. The book critiques how failure (or even possible fraud in the case of Peary) can be recuperated as a heroic example of character, scientific achievement, or even honor. In the context of Aglert's exhibition, the *Gender on Ice* book cover is set against other failures in the region, including photographs of industry that was short-lived and abandoned abruptly.

Within the same group of images (figure 2.4), Aglert is also trying to expand the notion of Svalbard as a heritage site and think about preservation when the ice is in constant transition, frozen but already moving. Along with including the "Code of Conduct for Arctic tourists" formulated by the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act of 2001, she also brings together in her work both industrial ruins on the Arctic islands and wilderness. For her, ice itself is regarded as part of a global heritage that is crucial both for future survival and for the growing tourist industry in Svalbard.<sup>12</sup> But for Aglert, protecting the ruins more than nature would erase the anthropogenic, natural-cultural entangled histories of this place. Thus, Aglert suggests ironically that layers of ice provide stability to both nature and the ruins. In other words, she highlights how frozen nature is part of heritage but can also act as a resource and even a commodity. Moreover, she highlights how ice is alive and never static and in some cases has created all kinds of problems for Svalbard, both as a territory for conservation and as the home of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, which was built to maintain the earth's genetic diversity in the face of future calami-



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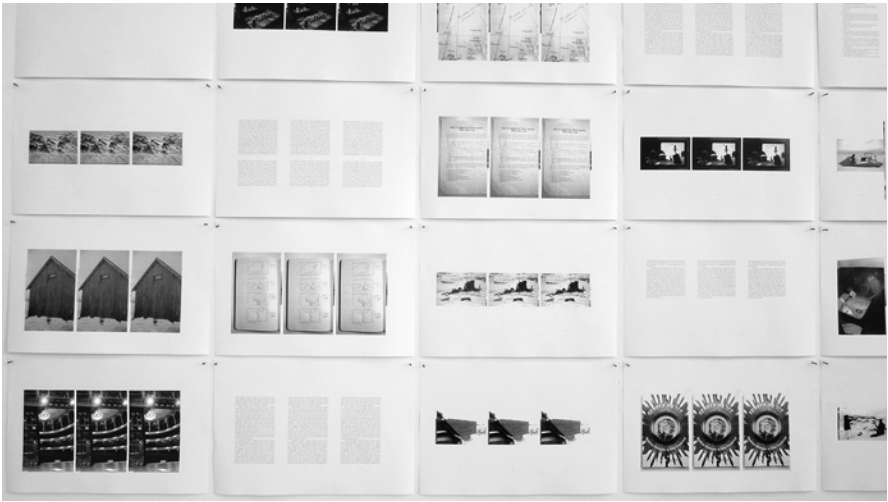
**Figure 2.1** • Katja Aglert, untitled photograph of the industrial remains of a factory in the Arctic, at Camp Mansfield, Blomstrand Island, Svalbard, Norway, from the artist's book *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.





**Figure 2.2** • (top) Narelle Jubelin, untitled single-thread petit point sculpture, 1990. Jubelin's work (shown here as part of Brad Norr's book cover design) illustrates what freezing to death in extreme temperatures could do to a polar explorer's face. Source: Bloom, *Gender on Ice*, 1993.

**Figure 2.3** • (bottom) Frank Hurley, *The Meteorologist, Cecil Thomas Madigan*, photograph, ca. 1911–1914. Hurley's image of an ice mask was captured in Antarctica. Courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.



**Figure 2.4** • Katja Aglert and contributors, installation view of pages from their 2009 book of the same name as the exhibition *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, curated by Stefanie Hessler at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Santiago, Chile, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

ties.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, what was meant to save life itself needed saving when it was inundated in 2017 owing to melting permafrost.

Aglert’s dark humor is not limited to her choice of images but encompasses the totality of her thinking about what it means for a woman artist to follow in the footsteps of these failed male fortune seekers who have been traveling to the Arctic since the eighteenth century in the hope of returning home with fame and fortune. She uses the Fluxus artist George Brecht’s ingeniously simple score titled *Winter Event—Antifreeze* as a basis for her own radical feminist critique of white male failure. Brecht’s score was a way for art to “ensure that the details of everyday life, the random constellations of objects that surround us, stop going unnoticed.”<sup>14</sup> But she expands on the effect of Brecht’s work beyond the context of 1960s art to transform how we see the Arctic today through clichés of romanticism and the traditional sublime.<sup>15</sup>

For Aglert, as the environment becomes more dangerous, it embodies a different kind

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of contemporary sublime that is dangerous to humans.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as the ground zero of catastrophic climate change, the Arctic is no longer seen as the most extreme and inhospitable environment for humans. In her work we see how the modern Arctic is warming in marked contrast to most of its earlier history. Climate change influences the issue of more-than-human belonging in such a precarious part of the world, and this perspective is at odds with the way Svalbard was mostly conceived as a space of conservation and a repository of the past where nostalgia for an earlier Arctic could live on in perpetuity. Both Aglert's video and the wide range of photos of the Arctic that she collected in her book *Winter Event—Antifreeze* and displayed in her exhibitions exemplify this struggle between her own lack of belonging, structured by masculinist power relations, and the mechanisms

**Figure 2.5** • Artist Katja Aglert facing the camera with broken Arctic sea ice in the background, in a video still from her exhibition *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, curated by Stefanie Hessler at Weld in Stockholm, 2012. Photograph by Mattias Wremland. Courtesy of the artist.

of authority that construct the conditions of that Arctic imaginary and its images.<sup>17</sup>

The reintroduction of subjectivities that were forbidden from joining expeditions as equals in the Heroic Age is an aesthetic issue for Aglert as she rids her work of the visual references that would allow the viewer to focus on the sublime landscape of extreme nature alone, unattached from context. She does this by highlighting the banality of some of the conversation behind the scenes drawn from her video, which appears as a paper script installed on a wall for the audience to read, and through an LED display of running red letters above her video that resembles the signs above the opera stage on which translated subtitles are presented (figure 2.5). Through these strategies she deliberately sidelines images of the region's beauty, with the result that the scenery often seems more modest. This is also evident in Aglert's video in which she stands in front of various Arctic landscapes, always near a shore, holding melting ice in her bare hand (figure 2.6).

Like Anne Noble's and Connie Samaras's work on Antarctica discussed in chapter 1, Aglert's work is deliberately antiheroic in her use of and commentary on documentary. The conventional male omniscient narrator used in such videos is replaced with mostly female voices and background noises that center the experience of the viewer. In some scenes, when the panoramic landscape appears, it often seems diminished: the emphasis is not on Aglert's isolation in this vast and desolate landscape, or her singular artistic genius, or her leading role in the expedition but rather on her participation as a member of a larger artistic residency research group that is working and traveling together. Her work mimics the documentary genre, but here the artist appears as the actor and her performance plays down the romantically charged landscape of the transcendent Arctic Ocean. Her self-presentation is deliberately modest and self-conscious, in contrast to the narrative of the lonely white male hero or artist, and recalls instead the modesty and melting of the ice sculptures in Ursula K. Le Guin's "Sur" as described in chapter 1 of this volume. She privileges the banal types of actions that are happening behind the scenes—the sounds and things around her, the directions she is being given by the camerawoman on where to stand, and warnings from fellow travelers telling her the location of a polar bear in the vicinity or a gunshot heard nearby.

The disruptions and the quotidian conversation with the camerawoman redirect the viewer's attention away from the Arctic landscape, which appears commonplace. This is deliberately done to highlight the perceived connections between the everyday and Aglert's art. For Aglert, her



feminist project is also about the processual in relation to performance (plate 11). Performance for her is “an artistic expression (and documentation of the behind the scenes of the performance act) as a means to explore forms of criticality of the traditional sublime of the arctic, through modes of ongoing transformation (through performance), rather than the static representation claiming some truth (grand narrative).”<sup>18</sup> The repetition of ice melting in her hands is also to represent ice in her work, at times as just ice, and it suggests the importance of bringing the issues associated with it down to a literally graspable and deliberately absurdist small scale. We get glimpses of the extraordinary landscape of the Arctic through Aglert’s deliberately laughable images, especially the close-ups of her melting ice in her bare hands, which are much more tightly framed, thereby robbing the setting of any epic character. In this sense, her work is asking us also to rethink the way we understand the sublime in the present.

Aglert writes, “The repetitive act of melting ice, for me, is an artistic method to perform

**Figure 2.6** • Close-up of the artist Katja Aglert melting ice in her bare hand. Source: *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

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modes of transformation together with the ice's own 'iciness' (ice performing ice)."<sup>19</sup> Ice no longer references an inhospitable and dangerous landscape that is "frozen in time." Rather, for Aglert, "the melting is an act of performing the entangled bodily porous relationships that also are at the core of the 'climate issue' — we are all connected in this together."<sup>20</sup> She means that not only did she transform the ice from frozen matter to liquid, but the ice in turn transformed her body temperature from cooler to warmer. She writes about how this was integrated into the performance, the timing of which was dictated by the duration of the ice's transformation from frozen to fluid.<sup>21</sup>

The way the North Pole had served as a testing ground of an exclusive heroic masculinity is referenced further in her choice of the historic Arctic images she includes in her book (coedited with Hessler) *Winter Event—Antifreeze*. The selected images include the gravestone of the Arctic explorer Roald Amundsen, a key Norwegian figure of the Heroic Age of Arctic and Antarctic exploration who led the first expedition to the North Pole by dirigible in 1926 but later died while taking part in a rescue mission of the airship *Italia* in the Arctic in 1928. She also has the famous photographs of the Swede Salomon August Andrée's balloon expedition of 1897 to the Arctic that were recovered in 1930. That journey to the North Pole failed when the balloon started to lose hydrogen and crashed into the pack ice. On their march back south, the explorers died on the island Kvitøya in Svalbard. The photograph of Andrée, taken by the third expedition member, Nils Strindberg, was recovered in 1930 and has become one of the most famous visual representations of the failed Arctic exploration in Sweden. This image, included in her book *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, depicts Andrée posing with his rifle over a dead polar bear that he had presumably shot (figure 2.7). Her rereading of the heroic pose, one of the more iconic images of imperialism in the Arctic, alters the meaning from "hunting trophy/triumph" to the paradox that this leads to the explorers' death: years later, the parasites in the uncooked polar bear flesh were proven to have killed them.

Aglert's artwork throws these heroic myths of desperation and failure back at the audience and, in doing so, suggests how misguided were such projects serving the purposes of nationalism and imperialism, especially in light of the reverence with which they were treated. Using deadpan humor and repetition as a means of taking us beyond conventional points of seeing, she strikes a lighter and even absurdist note in the context of these more serious historical discourses about the difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions, substituting the banal details of everyday life in the



**Figure 2.7** • Nils Strindberg, *Andrée Standing by a Polar Bear He Shot*, photograph, 1897. The negative from this photograph of the famous Swedish polar explorer Salomon August Andrée, along with the bodies of the explorers who accompanied his failed 1897 balloon expedition to the North Pole, was not recovered until 1930. Courtesy of Tekniska Museet, Stockholm.



**Figure 2.8** • Katja Aglert, bust of Vladimir Lenin in Barentsburg's main square, Svalbard, Norway. Photograph from Aglert's book *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Arctic for the grand heroic images of the past. By including the image of Andrée in her book and exhibition, she underscores the contrast between the polar bear as trophy, a proud prop of conquest, and the polar bear as an unexpected deadly threat that brings about the explorers' demise. Additionally, some of the photographic images she includes as still images in her exhibition and book seek flatness by including a small portion not of a pristine landscape but of a more industrial one, such as her documentation of containers from a port in Longyearbyen (Svalbard's most populous town, with around two thousand residents), or unlikely signs of human habitation in the forlorn Arctic islands, where there is block-style Soviet housing and a bust of Vladimir Lenin (the world's northernmost statue of the communist revolutionary) in Barentsburg's main square (figure 2.8). Such photographic examples that interweave natural

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and political-industrial history effectively demonstrate the trouble with clear-cut nature/culture distinctions.

Aglert also calls the viewer's attention to the question of how paintings and photographs of a traditional Arctic landscape create an experience of cultural numbing, as discussed with regard to Anne Noble's work in chapter 1. Aglert is transfixed by the commercialization of the Arctic and its subsequent romanticization in the contemporary imagination. She includes a photograph of the 1823–1824 Romantic painting *The Sea of Ice*, by Caspar David Friedrich, to underscore the paradoxical fact that Friedrich had never been to the Arctic (plate 10). He created the work in Elbstrand, near Hamburg, Germany, and yet he painted what became and continues to be the quintessential image of the Arctic that conveys a subjective, emotional response to its extreme nature. The grandiosity and spectacular destructiveness of sublime nature in Friedrich's painting offer a mortality glimpsed but not actualized that still shapes our perceptions of the region today. Aglert's sense of humor also applies to the more recent images of polar bears and walruses in which animals are the stars, not the humans. Her book *Winter Event—Antifreeze* includes banal images of the sleeping walruses who appear behind the scenes, as if we're waiting for the polar bears, which increasingly have become part of mass culture and media spectacle, to perform as the main act (figure 2.9).<sup>22</sup> In these newer images, we are no longer dealing with the inhuman scale of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paintings and photographs. These landscapes do not overwhelm our categories of understanding. They are decidedly antisublime, if not unsublime—just snapshots of walruses asleep.

Roland Barthes, the French cultural critic, has claimed that photography can actually block memory.<sup>23</sup> The images that Aglert implicitly critiques—such as that of Andrée posing with his rifle over a dead polar bear—are reimagined and can become a countermemory. For Barthes, memory is not so much image as sensation. For Aglert, the challenge in this project is to approach these older representations anew and to think about *how* to see the Arctic differently by creating new memories. In an age of environmental disaster, what new forms of art, feeling, and sociality does the melting polar region allow to come into being? Aglert is interested in a kind of art that pierces the complacency of the polar imaginary of the past to affect us right now. She uses repetition in her work in an unexpected and even jarring way to get us to retrieve the Arctic in new ways that implicitly question the heroic and ask what it means to resurrect it a hundred years later, when global warming and the return of the older



**Figure 2.9** • Katja Aglert, photograph of walrus  
asleep on Mofen Island,  
Svalbard, Norway. Source:  
Aglert's book *Winter  
Event—Antifreeze*, 2014.  
Courtesy of the artist.

moments of colonialism and its singular white male hero have brought renewed attention to this region. In this way, Aglert's viewpoint makes us think differently about how post-colonial feminist environmental perspectives have contributed to changing contemporary art and Arctic discourses.

### **Renarrativizing the Arctic: Isaac Julien's *True North***

Isaac Julien is an internationally known British installation artist, filmmaker, and professor whose multiscreen film installations and photographs incorporate different artistic disciplines to create a poetic and unique visual language. He has had solo exhibitions in most major cities around the world, has taught extensively internationally, and has won numerous prizes. Julien was awarded the title of Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in the Queen's birthday honors

in 2017. Most recently, he received the British Charles Wollaston Award (2017) from the Royal Academy in London, where in 2018 he was made a royal academician. He is currently distinguished professor of the arts and leads the Isaac Julien Lab at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

*True North*, like most works in Julien's thirty years of art and film practice, articulates how issues of colonialism, nationalism, gender, and sexuality have shaped the economic structures and human labor that underwrite Black experiences and imaginations in diasporic locations, including, in this case, the unlikely setting of the Arctic during the earlier days of polar exploration.<sup>24</sup> In recent years, *True North* has been shown in many international venues, including at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada (2017); in a retrospective of his work at the Associação Cultural Videobrasil, in São Paulo, Brazil (2012); and at the Milwaukee Art Museum's exhibition *Expeditions* in Wisconsin (2012).

The issue of white male failure at the North Pole takes on another meaning in Julien's work, since here failure is connected to the ways late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century polar expeditions were exclusively white and male undertakings, forging what I called in *Gender on Ice* "a discourse of nationalism, empire, and white male heroism."<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the British, the Americans tried to produce a narrative of masculinity that was part of a scientific tradition, which worked discursively to exclude the significant presence of Inuit people and the participation of Matthew Henson from the account. In the American narrative, there is a larger emphasis on the actions of flesh-and-blood heroic men. Successful performance, athleticism, and scientific 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 and athletic performance that framed the discourses of Robert Peary's expedition.<sup>26</sup> That is why the fact that Henson was obliged literally to carry Peary back on his sledge from the North Pole (because Peary had lost nine of his toes, which made it an ordeal for him to wear snowshoes) was not made public by Henson until 1966, over forty years after Peary died.<sup>27</sup>

Even though Peary's expedition was supposed to be scientific, his "faithful record" at the North Pole was from the start contested and unstable and remains to this day highly disputed and controversial.<sup>28</sup> This inability to acknowledge outright the failure of the expedition, I argue, explains the significance of Henson as the major corroborating witness and the narrow focus of the critique of Peary, which has centered on establishing or disputing the accuracy of his claim to have reached the Pole.

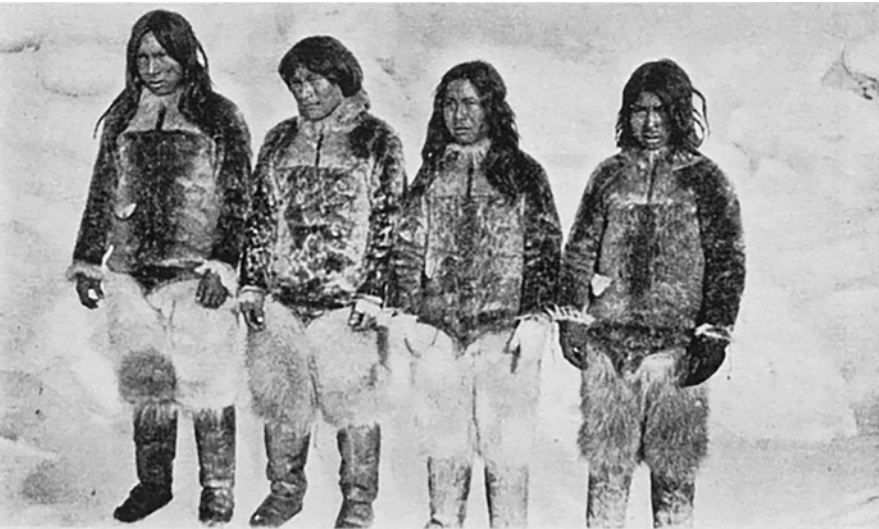
Therefore, the narrative of Scott's failed expedition to the South Pole resonated more widely than that of the Peary expedition's claim. Inspired by the events of the 1909 expedition to the North Pole, Julien's *True North* (2004–2008) revisualizes the Arctic, taking on the competing stories of Peary's controversial expedition, which radically altered the lives of his longtime African American exploration partner Matthew Henson and the Inuit men and women of Ellesmere Island and northern Greenland (figures 2.10 and 2.11).<sup>29</sup> The title, *True North*, references how polar exploration might have had a different meaning for Henson than for white polar explorers at that time. Robert Stepto has argued that "the seminal journey in Afro-American narrative literature is unquestionably north," and one can see that Henson's autobiography, *A Black Explorer at the North Pole*, extends the geography of freedom mapped so often in the African American literary tradition that dates back to the antebellum slave narratives.<sup>30</sup> Though Henson was born to freed slaves, his family was persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan, and he and his family subsequently ended up in Washington, DC, to escape terror and discrimination. But the long and dark history of slavery was not entirely a matter of the past in the age of Jim Crow, even in the nation's capital. Henson himself became an orphan by the age of twelve, and before he started to work for Peary, he survived by going to sea as a cabin boy; he traveled to ports as far away as China, Japan, Africa, and the Russian Arctic seas to escape persecution.

The film and installation *True North* (2004–2008) is usually shown as a large-scale multiple-screen audiovisual installation and offers one of the boldest examples of the new departure in the artistic and scholarly discourse on polar expedition narratives. Like Aglert's work, *True North* brings us back to the Heroic Age of exploration. During that period, many of the Arctic regions had not yet achieved independent Indigenous self-governance systems. That did not come until a century later, as did Nunavut's independence in 1999 and Greenland's in 2008; both continue to remain part of larger countries (Canada and Denmark, respectively).<sup>31</sup> In Euro-American histories of the Arctic, the heroic era is often seen as distinct and is often contrasted with the current era, although, as I have argued, the earlier colonial viewpoint persists and contributes to the crisis in the present. Drawing in part from *Gender on Ice* and Henson's later writings, Julien's work critiques earlier Arctic representations such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), a signature film in which invidious portraits of the Inuit community as backward and disappearing highlight the Native's inability to adapt to Western progress.<sup>32</sup> Julien's film resonates with its audiences because it responds to a larger visual culture



**Figure 2.10** • (top) Photographic portrait of Matthew Henson taken immediately after the sledge journey to the North Pole and back. Source: Henson's 1912 autobiography, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*.

**Figure 2.11** • (bottom) The four Inuit men who accompanied Robert Peary and Matthew Henson on their voyage to the North Pole, ca. 1909. From left to right: Egingwah, Ootah, Ooqueah, and Seegloo. Source: Henson's 1912 autobiography, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. Photograph by Matthew Henson.



of the Arctic by exploring the relation between aesthetics and politics as well as the Peary expedition's complex politics of exclusion.<sup>33</sup>

Delving deeply into Henson's primary role in Peary's expedition, Julien is attracted to the inescapable rawness and violence of the relationship between Henson and his employer. The film situates Henson front and center, drawing the tensions between Peary and Henson to the fore of the historical narrative, to question the veracity of Peary's account of Henson's role. One of the most powerful scenes in Julien's film retells the story of the expedition from Henson's point of view, based on Henson's own account that he was the first in Peary's party to reach the North Pole.<sup>34</sup> Henson decided to make it to the pole ahead of Peary after learning that Peary had intended to exclude him from the final march to the pole. In *Gender on Ice*, I point out how Henson's retelling of this incident disturbs the colonial discourse of that era, which portrays Blacks as irrational and violent and whites as rational and well-tempered. Fearing that Peary might kill him to keep this secret,<sup>35</sup> Julien's film uses Henson's own account written in 1966 as a voiceover to explain how he ensured his own safety following Peary's initial violent outburst to prevent it from escalating. The consequences for Henson of Peary's betrayal were grave. According to his biographers, Henson did not receive the national and international recognition he deserved, and at the time of his death in 1955, he subsisted off a meager pension while also working as a parking attendant in a Brooklyn warehouse.<sup>36</sup>

*True North* takes poetic license and restructures Henson's story in unexpected ways. It is a film about the North Pole but was filmed in Iceland and northern Sweden, which is made evident to the viewer through shots of Iceland's ice caves. It focuses on descriptive reenactments but draws from the documentary genre, historical documents, and nonfiction material and, like most of Julien's films, is heavily research based. Significantly, in Julien's film, we do not see Peary or his rival, Frederick Cook, or evidence of the bitter controversy that ensued between the two American men who were both competing to be the first to attain the North Pole at that historical moment. In lieu of the driving anxiety and the competition in these white male exploration narratives, Julien's film foregrounds the sheer physical attraction of the North Pole, as well as the significance of the four Inuit men—Egingwah, Utah, Ooqeth, and Seegloo—who accompanied Peary and Henson (plate 12 and figures 2.12 and 2.15).<sup>37</sup> Julien rewrites these older stories representing the four Inuit men and Henson as witnesses to Peary's North Pole trek; in Julien's film, they ultimately replace Peary as the narrative's focus.





**Figure 2.12 •**  
Isaac Julien, un-  
titled photograph  
from *True North*  
series, digital print  
on Epson Premium  
Photo Glossy 250g  
paper (102.9 ×  
102.9 cm), 2004.  
Actress Vanessa  
Myrie is dressed as  
Matthew Henson.  
Courtesy of the  
artist.

Julien rethinks the relation among cinema, aesthetics, and the racism endemic to earlier well-known representations of Arctic exploration by highlighting the aesthetic drive and imperial ambitions that powered the early exploration narratives, which unfolded in sublime landscapes. In contrast to Aglert, who relies on the discourse of the everyday, the mundane, and the banal, Julien pushes and celebrates the aesthetic (as he does in all his work), challenging the foundational assumptions of the sublime as overwhelming, humbling, and invigorating. He takes aim at the notion of polar sacrifice and the way polar exploration was seen as a moral touchstone and an artistic device. The suffering that Henson endured was due less to the privations of the Arctic than to the racial hierarchies that Peary reproduced. Rather than offer us an unmediated vision of the Arctic that encapsulates the spiritual investment in power over a realm inimical to habitation, he presents it instead as highly technologized and artificial. Presented across multiple screens, with lush production values, rather than as a single-channel video, the film and photographs immerse the viewer in their technological beauty.<sup>38</sup> But Julien's use of multiscreen immersion makes the viewer's coherent overview of a single image impossible, invoking desires for possession that cannot be exhaustively explained by nationalisms or ownership. However, he does not give

up politics to focus on beauty. Instead, he politicizes the aesthetic as an ironic critique of Heroic Age polar exploration photography's tendency to erase the political dimensions of this activity. Asked why he combines beautiful, compelling images with marginalized voices in his work, Julien writes:

We tend to think that [for] images to be posing certain political questions, or to be intellectually interesting, they need to somehow not be too aesthetically oriented. In a sense, anti-aesthetic image-making is the normative view made for politically "authentic" content. So, of course, I want to oppose that. And I want to oppose that because I think perhaps it's too easy to exist in this binary; and I want to think about the possibility of making images that can exist aesthetically in a culture that poses difficult questions. I think those images are connected to trying to reclaim desire politically, or reclaim images that are more poetic and more associated with the lyrical, or "queering" of the image."<sup>39</sup>

Though his work is in dialogue with the tradition of the sublime, he goes on to write how these beautiful pictorial images at the same time try to present a kind of trauma within these scenes and create a disturbing resonance, what he calls in the epigraph a "contaminated sublime."

Moreover, Julien seduces the audience visually when he rewrites the narrative of the subservient Henson (as concocted by Peary) in a visual register far different from what one would expect. In this way, Julien's film insists that an alternative North Polar heroism exists both in spite of and against Peary, and it is different from the masculinist white nationalist heroism of the polar exploration era. As Monica Miller, a feminist scholar of English and African studies who documents and theorizes the emergence of Blackness in places that have no well-developed colonial or imperial history, explains, "*True North* does not merely insert blackness into the landscape and 'claim' the poles for black or colored people, but rather the film naturalizes racialized and gendered experience in the polar environment. . . . Henson is not an exotic presence, but one that belongs. Blackness in *True North* is literally and figuratively a mobile concept."<sup>40</sup>

But Julien reformulates this alternative narrative of Blackness and belonging as articulated by Miller with a different aesthetic, one that is modern, ironic, artificial, and detached. In this way, he subverts an older pseudoscientific history known as *climate determinism*, which argues that Black people could not belong in the North because it is racially impossible. Such a theory would further exclude Henson from the official narrative of the pole's discovery, according to historian Anthony S. Foy:

“The pseudoscientific notion of climate determinism functioned as an ideological corollary to the strict controls of Jim Crow segregation, explaining why black people must stay in their place, the tropical South. If Henson embodied the race’s contribution to an American triumph, then this ability to weather the extreme physical demands of the Arctic frontier also symbolized the race’s mobility as it excelled despite the political, economic, and social limitations placed on it at home.”<sup>41</sup> Henson himself at a 1909 banquet in his honor claimed that he could not only survive but flourish in the dangerous and freezing regions of the Arctic and thus that his achievements fully disproved pervasive popular notions of climate determinism: “When I went to Greenland they said I would never come back. They told me that I could not stand the cold—and no black man could. I said I would die if necessary to show them. I survived all right and here I am.”<sup>42</sup>

For this reason and others, Peary drew criticism from contemporaries for even having an African American man as the sole US companion to accompany him to the pole. To appease the fear of these critics, in his 1909 official account, Peary minimized the significance of Henson’s talents by emphasizing his role as a handyman capable of performing the tasks of several people: “Henson was part of the traveling machine. . . . [T]he taking of Henson was in the interest of economy of weight.”<sup>43</sup> To explain why he chose Henson over a white man for the final party, Peary suggested that Henson “lacked as a racial inheritance the ability to lead. . . . He would not find his way back to land and it would be unfair to send him back alone.”<sup>44</sup> Whether these statements were a tactic of Peary’s or reflected a fundamental belief is less important than the discursive fact that this was how Peary constructed Henson’s role. According to Booker T. Washington, who wrote the preface to Henson’s own 1912 book, *A Black Explorer at the North Pole*, Henson’s role extended beyond the narrowly defined place assigned to him by Peary, as Henson not only was skilled enough to write his own book but served as a navigator, spoke fluent Inuit (he does not mention that Peary himself was never able to learn the Inuit language), and functioned in many other capacities, including as a blacksmith, carpenter, cook, and translator.

In his film *Julien* shifts registers to mock such older racial notions as climate determinism and other baseless pseudoscientific accusations that Peary hurled against Henson. To do this, the film radically departs from Henson’s story by including a Black female fashion model, Vanessa Myrie, scantily dressed in high fashion to impersonate Henson in the Arctic (plate 13). *Julien*’s use of the commercial aesthetics of fashion photography,



**Plate 1** • (top) Lisa E. Bloom, *Smoky Skies* from *Wildfires, Berkeley, California, Morning of September 9, 2020*. Source: author photograph.

**Plate 2** • (bottom) Still of an orange landscape from Denis Villeneuve's 2017 science fiction film *Blade Runner 2049*. Cinematographer: Roger Deakins.

**Plate 3** • (top) Anne Noble, *Hot Lips*, from *Bitch in Slippers* series, photograph, 2008. The image is a close-up of painted red lips on a transport vehicle at the US base at the South Pole. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 4** • (bottom) Anne Noble, set of nine thumbnail photographs of beaten-up transport vehicles at the US base at the South Pole—many named for “old girls” and absent women—from *Bitch in Slippers* series, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

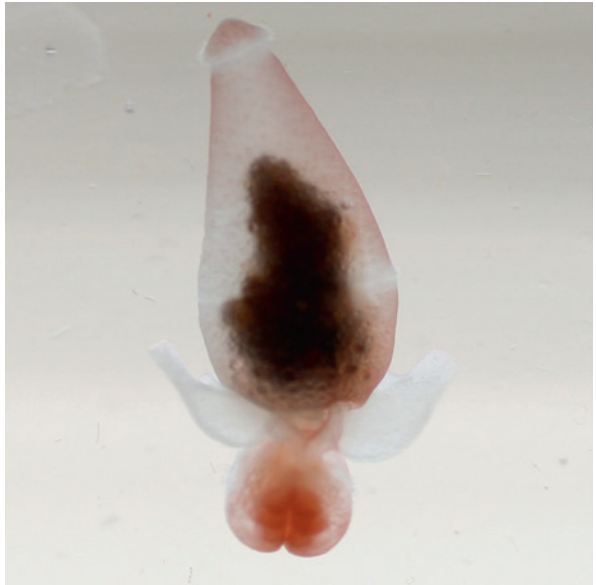




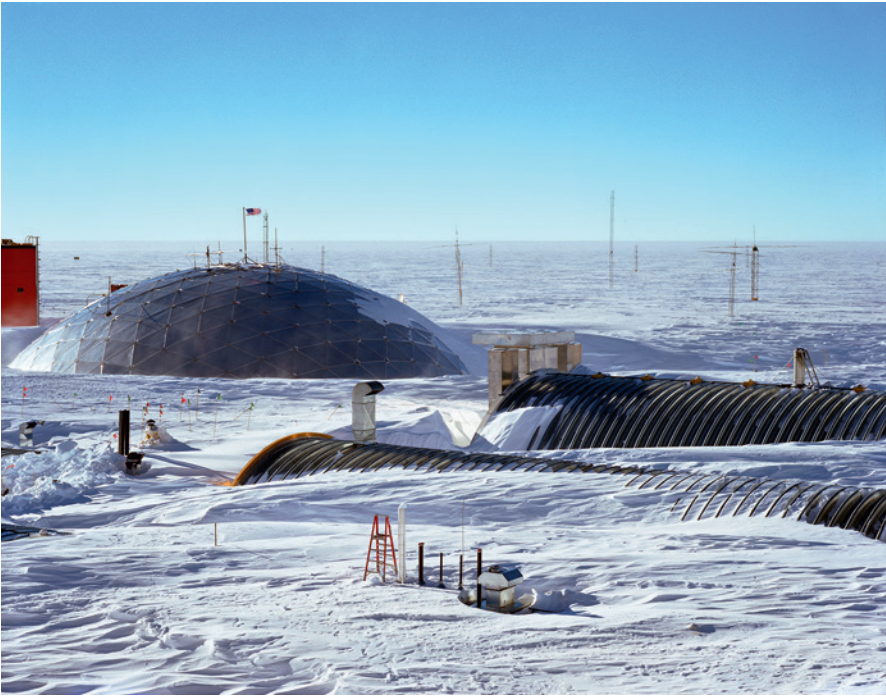


**Plate 5 • (top)** Anne Noble, *Antarctic Storm*, photograph, 2002. Tourists “experience” extreme Antarctic weather inside a diorama at the Antarctic Center in Christchurch, New Zealand. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 6 • (bottom)** Judit Hersko, *Clione Antarctica—Sea Angel*, photograph, 2009. The microscopic gelatinous sea snail in Antarctica is threatened with extinction from climate change. Courtesy of the artist.







**Plate 7** • (top) Connie Samaras, *Dome and Tunnels*, from the series *V.A.L.I.S.*, photograph, 2005. Exterior view of the Buckminster Fuller Dome at the South Pole sinking into the permafrost. Courtesy of the artist.

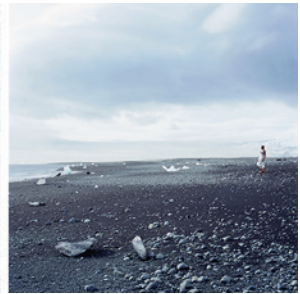
**Plate 8** • (bottom) Connie Samaras, *V.A.L.I.S. Dome Interior*, digital print, 2005. Interior view of the Buckminster Fuller Dome at the South Pole, altered by the photographer by flipping the negative. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 9** • Joyce Campbell, *Ice Ghoul #1*, from the series *Last Light*, Becquerel daguerrotype, 2006. This image captured in Antarctica records a face, with deep eye sockets and a screaming mouth, carved by wind in the ice of a glacier. Courtesy of the artist.









**Plate 10** • (opposite top) Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice*, aka *The Polar Sea* or *The Wreck of Hope* (38 x 50 in.), ca. 1823–24. Nineteenth-century German oil painting, inspired by William Edward Parry’s Northwest Passage expedition of 1819–1820, which depicts a shipwreck in the Arctic. Courtesy of Kunsthalle Hamburg.

**Plate 11** • (opposite bottom) Katja Aglert in front of the camera (documentation of the artist’s performance in Svalbard), 2009. From *Winter Event—Antifreeze*, 2014. Photograph by Amy Wiita. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 12** • (top) Isaac Julien, Inuit and Black faces in *Fantôme Créole* (four-screen projection combining *True North* and *Fantôme Afrique*), installation view from Kunsternes Hus, Oslo, 16 mm color film transferred to DVD, 2005. The projection includes close-up portrait images of actress Vanessa Myrie, representing Black explorer Matthew Henson, and three Inuit actors, representing the four Inuit men who accompanied Robert Peary and Matthew Henson on their voyage to the North Pole. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 13** • (bottom) Isaac Julien, installation view of triptych from *True North* series, digital photo prints (each 100 x 100 cm) on Epson Premium Photo Glossy, 2004. In the triptych, actress Vanessa Myrie, wearing high fashion, represents Matthew Henson in the Arctic. Courtesy of the artist.



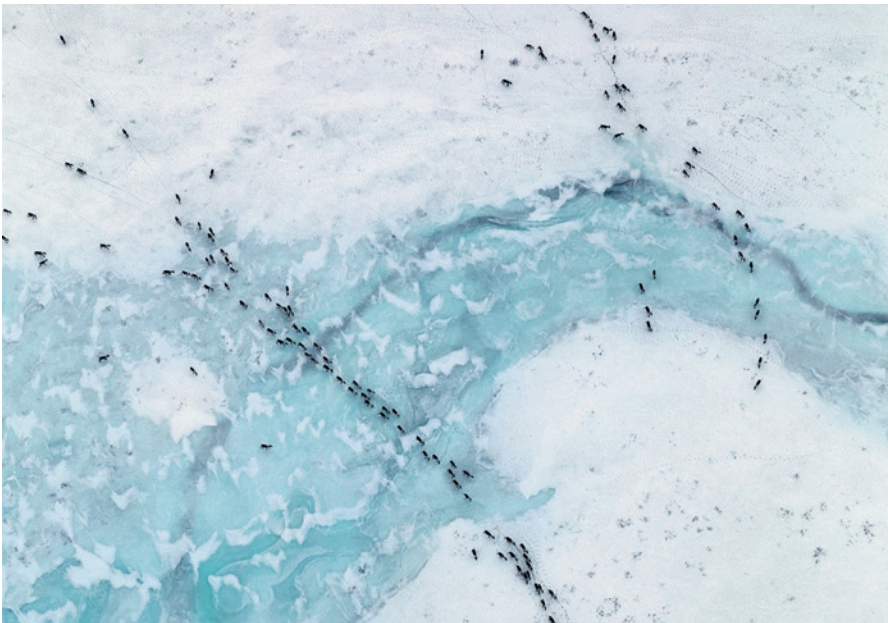
**Plate 14** • (top) Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro, film still of a melting iceberg in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, from *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, 2010.

**Plate 15** • (bottom) Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro, film still of a flock of birds in the Canadian Arctic, from *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, 2010.

**Plate 16** • (opposite top) Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Migration I* (from the series *Oil and the Caribou*), photograph (86 × 68 in.), 2002. Banerjee's aerial-view large-format photograph tracks with great precision the caribou migration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Courtesy of the artist.

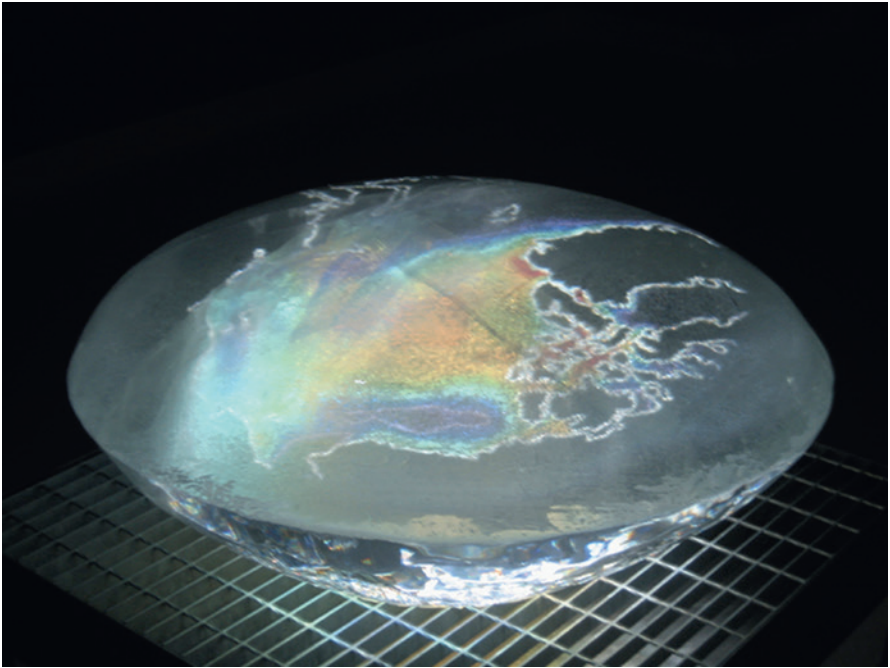
**Plate 17** • (opposite bottom) Subhankar Banerjee, *Brant and Snow Geese with Chicks*, from the series *Oil and the Geese*, photograph (68 × 86 in.), 2006. Banerjee's large-format aerial photograph shows migrating birds and snow geese with chicks, living in and moving through the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Courtesy of the artist.











Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues.

**Plate 18** • (opposite top) Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, oil painting (33 × 44 in.), 1857. Nineteenth-century French oil painting that depicts farmers removing the grain left in the fields following the harvest. Courtesy of Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

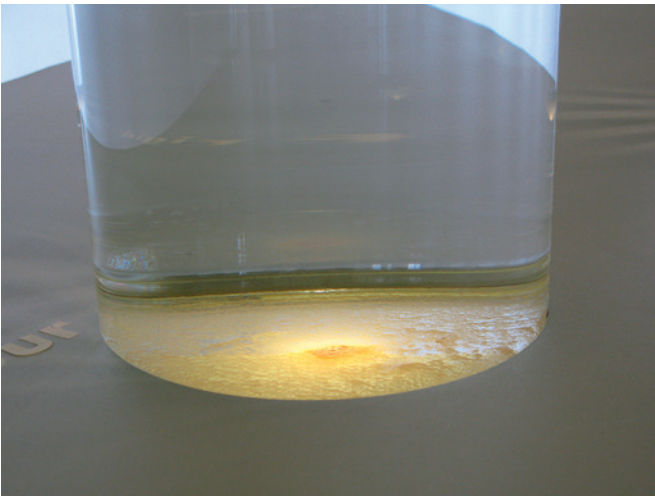
**Plate 19** • (opposite bottom) Subhankar Banerjee, *Gwich'in and the Caribou*, photograph (18 × 24 in.), 2007. Banerjee's image depicts a Gwich'in male hunter, Jimmy John, and his companion carving the meat of a recently hunted caribou in the snow. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 20** • (top) Lillian Ball, *66 Degrees, 32 North, 50 Years*, video animation of Arctic ice-melt maps projected onto ice sculpture, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 21** • (bottom) Andrea Bowers, Julie Anderson, Syndee Crice, SnoCat, Karen E. Palmer, C. M. Pico, and Michele Rowe, *Ken Saro-Wiwa's Last Words*, installation view of beadwork (8½ × 78 in.). Photograph taken at the Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 22** • (top) Annie Pootoogook, *(Untitled)* (35/36) *Red Bra*, colored pencil and ink on paper (51 × 66 cm), 2006. Courtesy of Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto.

**Plate 23** • (bottom) Roni Horn, close-up view of sediment on the bottom of a large glass column containing melted ice removed from an Icelandic glacier, from the installation *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, Stykkisholmur, Iceland, 2007. Photograph courtesy of Elena Glasberg.

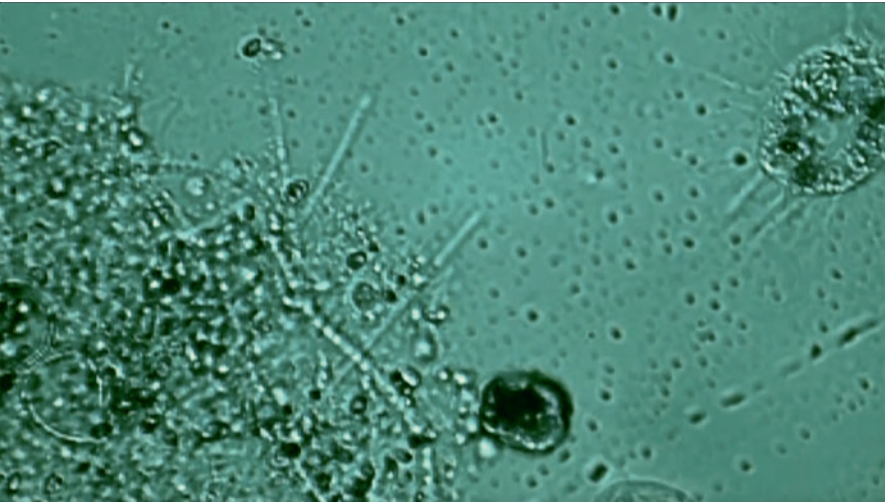




**Plate 24** • (top) Ursula Biemann, aerial view of the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, a film still from *Deep Weather*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 25** • (bottom) Ursula Biemann, split-screen film still of a Bangladeshi woman standing on sandbags juxtaposed with an eroding shoreline, from *Deep Weather*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.





**Plate 26** • (top) Ursula Biemann, aerial view of birds' nests on the Shetland Islands coast, film still from *Subatlantic*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 27** • (bottom) Ursula Biemann, close-up of microbes in seawater, film still from *Subatlantic*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 28** • (opposite top) Brenda Longfellow, close-up of an animated duck against a snowy mountain background in the Candian Arctic, film still from *Dead Ducks*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

**Plate 29** • (opposite bottom) Brenda Longfellow, close-up of an animated duck flying over the tar sands extraction zone in Alberta, Canada, film still from *Dead Ducks*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.







**Plate 30** • (top) Activist Debby Dahl-Edwardson's image of cut-up whale meat displayed outdoors in Barrow, Alaska. Film still from Brenda Longfellow, *Offshore Global*, 2015.

**Plate 31** • (bottom) Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailing #34*, photograph (40 × 60 in.), 1997. A river in Sudbury, Ontario, appears to be a lava flow but is discolored orange by nickel tailings, a waste product of metal extraction and oil activities. Courtesy of Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco/Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.



**Figure 2.13** • Isaac Julien, installation view of a three-screen projection from the series *True North* (2004) at the Akron Art Museum, 16 mm color film to DVD transfer, 2010. In the image, actress Vanessa Myrie is in the foreground of a melted Arctic set alongside two images of waterfalls. Courtesy of the artist and Akron Art Museum, Ohio.

casting Myrie wearing a white summer dress, also makes the Arctic appear almost like a runway, now transformed into an inviting place with sunny skies and warmer weather, all as a consequence of global warming. This brazen and incongruous strategy queers and parodies not only an older anti-Black discourse of climate determinism and racial notions of leadership but also the era's regressive gender politics—especially a highly simplified and formulaic narrative of white masculinist heterosexual agency prevailing over a feminized space where Native women are equated with nature.

In Julien's film, Myrie is cold and iconic, as she is made both very visible and radically unavailable sexually, unlike Peary's youthful Inuit mistress, Allakasingwah, a nude photograph of whom is included in his 1898 autobiography *Northward over the "Great Ice."* In Peary's pho-



tograph, titled *Mother of the Seals (an Eskimo Legend)* (figure 2.14), Allakasingwah is cast as occupying an uncertain position between the human and the animal, lying nude on a rock and rendered passive as a natural resource or sexual object for Peary's use. In comparison, Myrie in Julien's film is presented as a Black sovereign subject who surveys the landscape and appears self-possessed and sexually unavailable. She might be subject to a male gaze through an older politics of representation but is not controlled and subjugated by it like Allakasingwah. Indeed, both Henson and Peary had Inuit mistresses and illegitimate children in the Arctic and maintained relationships with these women and children over multiple expeditions.<sup>45</sup> This very fact complicates the Arctic explorer myth that assumes that Blacks do not belong there, as generations of descendants of Henson's and Peary's mixed offspring

**Figure 2.14** • Robert E. Peary, *Mother of the Seals (an Eskimo Legend)*, photograph of Allakasingwah, Peary's youthful Inuit mistress, in the nude. Source: Robert Peary, *Northward over the "Great Ice,"* 1898.

remain in the more livable parts of the Arctic.<sup>46</sup> But the inclusion of Myrie impersonating Henson is ironic since it also signals that Peary sanctioned Inuit mistresses on his expedition to protect against what was seen as the potential but more dangerous carnal relations between men on his expedition.<sup>47</sup> Julien's film, in response, camps up the homosocial and racial relations between Peary and Henson. Julien may queer the homosocial relationship between the two men, but by substituting Myrie, he alludes to their relationships with Inuit women only indirectly.

The incongruous and self-possessed presence of Myrie, shown washing her hands and fondling the ice, turns the landscape of dangerous ice flows into just ice, not a theater of life or death, and in this respect recalls Aglert's images of her hands melting the ice. However, in the case of Julien, the contrast between the stunningly spectacular landscape and Myrie's banal gesture underscores his ambition to remind us of how fetishized the ice and the Black female model are. Julien emphasizes this visually since there is nothing more incongruous than putting a Black fashion model on the ice and having her wear white clothing to aesthetically mark her off from the landscape and further highlight its sublimity.

But Julien's highly artificial and ironic relationship to beauty is also a response to Peary's older colonialist discourse, which 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 smooth and well-managed "traveling machine."<sup>48</sup> Julien draws on Henson's 1912 book, which foregrounds the ways in which the white men were materially and emotionally dependent on his and the Inuits' participation. For example, Henson frequently emphasizes his own position and that of the Inuit men.<sup>49</sup> We learn from his account that he saved Peary's life twice and that his own life was saved by one of the Inuit men who accompanied them to the pole. Indeed, Henson's insistence on the presence of the Inuit men is important in its perception and construction of the expedition, which is also important to Julien's film. The film refuses to promote the racism evidenced in Peary's supposedly scientific text, and it disturbs the equilibrium established by Peary's rationalist discourse that forces African men and Inuit men to stay in their place. In this sense, the film differs from Henson's own autobiography, which introduces a version of scientific evolutionism in which there is the idea of a path of progress, which is slightly different from Peary's unchanging and static racialized order. According to Henson, African Americans need only develop their full cultural potential. By demonstrating their capabilities, they eventu-

ally can be accepted as equals to whites, and the belief in this possibility underpins Henson's view of racial achievement.

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 post-colonial mimicry, to use Homi K. Bhabha's well-known term.<sup>50</sup> As in 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 also to a whole discourse of earlier colonialist artistic, literary, and cinematic representations of the Arctic to restage and in some sense disrupt the aesthetics and politics that those original representations are drawn from.

In his own exploration narrative of 1910, Peary presented the Inuit as incapable of fending for themselves in such a harsh environment because of their supposed inability to fully embrace Western technology. In this sense, Peary's writings anticipated Robert Flaherty's 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*, mentioned previously as a film that consigned Native people to the past and positioned them as exotic and timeless anachronisms. However, what is often not represented in media and polar exploration narratives is how skilled the Inuit were as drivers of the dogsleds and as hunters—in other words, as experts clearly in possession of traditional and modern knowledges.<sup>51</sup>

Julien's choice to include footage of Inuit men in *True North* (plate 12 and figure 2.13) also references the Inuit men in Peary's actual expedition and serves to remind us of the important participation of these men in Peary's expedition; it also differs from Henson's own response in his 1912 memoir.<sup>52</sup> Julien's use of close-ups of the Inuit faces on multiple screens destabilizes Peary's racialized hierarchy and presents the Inuit as legitimate subjects rather than as the laboring bodies and exotic props of Peary's photograph of Henson and the four Inuit men at the North Pole in 1909 (figure 2.15). The image is in keeping with existing Euro-American photographic conventions of the period, which tended to represent distant and remote places through photographs of local "Native inhabitants"; but in this case all the men's identities are subordinated to that of the American flag.



**Figure 2.15 •**  
Robert E. Peary,  
photograph of  
Matthew Henson  
(center) and four  
Inuit guides (Oo-  
qeah, Ootah, Eging-  
wah, and Seegloo)  
at the North Pole,  
1909. Source:  
Robert Peary, *The  
North Pole: Its  
Discovery in 1909  
Under the Auspices  
of the Peary Arctic  
Club*, 1910.



Julien's close-up images also transform how we look at the mirage-like contemporary footage of the Arctic landscape and its ice. At first it seems completely desolate, but once we get closer and observe the Inuit going about their daily lives, using dogsleds, we see that the Arctic landscape is grounded in the history of Inuit culture and the sounds of mammals and birds. Julien creates space for effective listening and compels us to pay attention to sounds that situate human and nonhuman subjects as part of the environment. This is conveyed pointedly through the detailed natural soundscape and the projection of Inuit voices through the music of throat singing outside the frame as we view the landscape through their eyes. By making the Inuit key here, Julien also presents an alternative view of the nature/human relationship in which the interdependency of organisms takes the place of the mapped, commodified, and aestheticized landscapes of the heroic era.

Thus, Julien's aesthetics of the pole cannot be simply folded back into a discussion of the sublime, science, or politics. Instead, he attends to it in a



way that critically engages and impacts an entire tradition of photographic and cinematic art and sound representations of African Americans and Indigenous people. He does this not only by inserting Henson and the Inuit into a central role but by creating an entirely new parodic counterdiscourse, enabled by a different deployment of new technologies, that underscores the coexistence between humans and nature that he represents.

### Changing Physical and Psychic Realities of the Arctic

Katja Aglert's work comments more directly than Isaac Julien's on climate change and the melting ice. Still, it is possible to think of both of their works as environmental performance pieces that deal with the past history of images from the earlier era of exploration and that at the same time comment on the way climate change interferes with how we view the Arctic today. We cannot help but notice how the Arctic is made more accessible by the melting in some of its scenes. The Arctic is more easily reached (including the industrial town Barentsburg, where Russian miners today continue to work on the site shown in Aglert's work), and it is important to connect this to the strong political and economic interests of different nation-states in the Arctic at this time, especially with regard to new shipping routes and claims to oil and coal in places that were inaccessible in the past. Thus, these works of art traverse not just the human imperialism of the colonial era but also the newer imperialism in the age of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, both artists make the older sublime associated with Arctic landscapes appear less threatening even though the region is actually more dangerous than ever. This shift decenters the mythic and exotic qualities of the expedition narratives. Both Aglert and Julien reframe the landscape in terms of an everyday context and as an agent in a more-than-human social life and as what Julien calls a "contaminated sublime" and reconfigured history. This is underscored in both their works in fairly outrageous ways. Aglert repeatedly melts ice in her hand to suggest that ice can also just be ice, not death and suffering. She also recalls that "it was rarely humans, but arctic gulls or walrus that were the audience of my *Winter Event—Antifreeze* performances when I first performed them in different sites of the Svalbard archipelago."<sup>54</sup> Julien puts a Black fashion model and actress on ice, using the Arctic as a runway, and films her interacting with the melting ice. He does this not simply to aestheticize the melting Arctic but to show us how these landscapes are radically transformed by late industrial modernity.

Both works challenge human relationships to natural landscapes, which have typically been a relation of domination in which the landscape is conquered, transformed, or turned into human advantage. Not only do Julien and Aglert address the conquest-based relationship to nature in itself, they also critique its universality and reveal the racialized and gendered nature of it. Consequently, their work insists on representing landscapes and the sublime at the cross section of multiple fields of social, political, and material determinations, which includes, in Julien's work, Indigenous and Black relations to nature and the environment.

Both use the melting ice to ultimately speak back to these older colonial scientific and artistic representations, undercutting the authenticity of the Heroic Age and its colonial history as the "natural" mode of engagement in the Arctic. As a consequence of this move, Julien's work is retrieving the Arctic in new ways that implicitly question the heroic and what it means to resurrect it at this historical moment when global warming and the return of the older moments of colonialism have brought renewed attention to the Arctic. Whereas Julien's aesthetic deals with reimagining polar imperial fantasies, which he parodies and critiques, Aglert's artwork rethinks the way the natural and cultural landscape of Svalbard are represented and, like Julien's work, complicates the region as a bastion for the discursive construction of heteronormative masculinities ruling over nature. Aglert draws on Svalbard's relatively short history of European occupation and its lack of Indigenous populations, representing it as a region largely visualized through the prism of narratives of heroic polar exploration, maritime exploration, commercial fishing and hunting, and industrial mining. These are never separate from politics or socially inscribed power structures, even though these spaces are often visualized as pristine and empty. Julien, in contrast, is interested in the question of survival on the ice from the days of polar expeditions to the North Pole in the earlier twentieth century. In the era of accelerated global warming, it is clear that the so-called conquest of the North Pole did not result in the defeat of the environment at all, as if that was indeed ever even possible. There was no final conquest, no dominion established. And if global warming continues on anything like its present accelerated track, this tendency will only continue to intensify greatly and shape everything we do on the planet, transforming our relationship to not just nature, politics, and history but life itself.