

***The Black Body in Arctic Space:
Revisioning Racialised Landscapes in
the Films of John Akomfrah and Isaac Julien***

by

Jessica Carden

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Abstract

This thesis explores constructions of the Arctic as a literal and symbolic white space through an investigation of two films: John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010) and Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004). Framed within the context of Euro-American constructions of the territory through 19th and 20th century imperial masculine exploration narratives, my aim is to challenge dominant representations of the territory as a 'blank', 'silent' and 'stainless' racialised landscape by examining the political and aesthetic strategies at play in the respective films. This research argues that these artworks simultaneously reclaim the Arctic from an exclusively white history and renegotiate the territory's position within postcolonial discourse. Taking into consideration fresh global focus on the region in line with political ecologies and neocolonial collusions for ownership, this thesis is anchored by my aim to scrutinise how the Arctic territories are visualised, positing that this ultimately dictates how the space is navigated and interacted with on an international scale.

If we understand the Arctic to have been constructed as a white history about white men in a white space, then the non-white figure is an anomaly, eradicated and obscured from visual, literal and political representations. This research discusses the significance of Akomfrah and Julien's films for the development of critical whiteness studies and is driven by the following key questions: what do the films reveal for ideas of northernness, remote landscapes of exclusion and constructed hierarchies of racial whiteness through the colonial encounter; is the placement of the black body within what Jen Hill terms the 'heart of whiteness' (2008: 1) playing with the notion of what appears incongruous in a landscape? Does the visual and conceptual black-white binary – a prominent feature in both films – function as Marc Black terms 'multilateral double consciousness' (2007: 393) wherein, in place of one side dominating the other in the traditional sense of the postcolonial understanding of binarism, each side operates to reveal something for the other, blackness revealing whiteness and whiteness revealing blackness? Drawing all of these seemingly disparate threads together, this thesis presents an exploration of the interrelation of whiteness, aesthetics, futurism and the emergent field of critical Arctic studies.

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Introduction

In 2010, the cultural critic Sukhdev Sandhu wrote within a review of John Akomfrah's latest film installation *Mnemosyne* (which later developed into the cinematic feature-length film *The Nine Muses*), that it was 'part of a small but noticeable trend for black artists – among them Isaac Julien in *True North* (2004) and Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) in *Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica* (2009) – to mine the creative potential of spaces seen as literally and symbolically white' (Sandhu, 2010). Whilst Sandhu acutely identified the filmic trend, there were no suggestions made as to where it emerged from, why it came into existence or its wider cultural significance. My research was therefore incentivised and continues to be propelled by the overarching questions: what is the significance of black filmmakers using the Arctic landscape as a space to describe racial whiteness and to discuss black histories; what does this reveal about the Arctic as a racialised landscape; do the films mark the concept of whiteness and make it visible through their meditations of black histories in a space intricately connected to the construction of white imperial identities; does the black body in the white landscape appear incongruous, and if so, why; and finally, do the films' individual scrutiny of colonial histories function to bring the Arctic into postcolonial discourse, a region that has been largely neglected from postcolonial debate, and is in the current grip of neo-colonial global collusions for ownership? Focusing solely on John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010) and Isaac Julien's *True North*, I endeavour to answer the questions above through a sustained analysis of the artworks, illustrating that my seemingly narrow focus has led to an expansive study that develops understandings of racial whiteness, the geopolitics of the Arctic, identities and notions of belonging as they relate to remote northern landscapes.

My proposal to undertake this research was conceptualised in 2011 following a period of research for an exhibition I was co-curating for the Centre for Contemporary Art Glasgow with my collaborative curatorial partner Tiffany Boyle and our project *Mother Tongue*. The curatorial premise of the exhibition was an investigation of migration issues as they related to the concept of *heimat*. Born from a reaction to modernity following the First World War and the perceived loss of meaningful community, the German concept of *heimat* is a largely indefinable and untranslatable idea which describes the notion of *home*. Attempts to translate the concept into English, such as motherland, birthplace, homeland and hometown, fail to encapsulate the entirety of the term and its multitude of meanings (Mother Tongue, 2012). Employing a curatorial methodology, we focused on a number of

artworks which spanned mediums, geographies and concepts in order to develop an exhibition which began to explore heimat from differing vantage points. Brought together within one conceptual frame, and physical exhibition space, we presented the work of six artists, which combined, offered a nuanced perspective of the term heimat. Each work was selected to interrogate an element of the concept, such as nationalisms, language, and heritage through artefacts. One of these six works was Akomfrah's *Mnemosyne* (2010), the shorter gallery version of *The Nine Muses* which the artist kindly permitted us to exhibit. Within the context of the exhibition, Akomfrah's work illuminated the personal notions of loss, trauma, memory and belonging associated with mobility, whether forced or voluntary.

While researching heimat during the early developmental stage of the exhibition, I was taking part on a curatorial residency in Finland. My residency spanned four weeks of February and was based on the island of Suomenlinna, a small sea fortress off the coast of Helsinki. Enveloped in a snow blizzard for at least half of my stay, I spent the first week indoors reading Richard Dyer's seminal *White* (1997) cover to cover. Whiteness studies was a discipline I had been interested in for some time, however it was not until reading Dyer's *White* in Helsinki that it became formalised. I first became conscious of the concept while writing my undergraduate thesis which examined contemporary Inuit artworks as forms of political activism. I was aware of the deep irony embedded in the construction of the high north as a key ideological space for white European identities when the Arctic indigenous population was non-white. My interest was further intensified when undertaking a year-long curating programme in Stockholm, where I began to read around the concept in an effort to grapple with the cultural specificities of living in Sweden and the wider context of Scandinavia. Again, I found myself turning to artists and writers such as Oivvio Polite who contributed to the Anthology *African Swedish Voices*, and Ylva Habel who I reference in chapter four in relation to her study on whiteness, milk and identity, to better understand the complexities of Swedish national identities.

Under the umbrella of my collaborative curatorial project *Mother Tongue*, we curated a series of discursive events inspired by Habel and Oivvio's works for the *Curators in Conversation* programme at *Konsthall C.* art gallery, Stockholm. The first edition was titled *Exhibiting Ethnicities* and was focused on questions of curatorial strategies in curating exhibitions around race and identity conflicts. American artist and theorist Erika Dayla Massaquoi discussed her thesis *Electroculture: Vanguard Documentary, Cut-and-Mix, and Futurist Diasporic Media*, referencing her curatorial project *Race in Digital Space*, and

Greenlandic writer and theorist Erik Gant discussed his writings, *Arctic Diagnoses* and *Good and Bad Eskimos*, in relation his role as the co-founder of *The Society for Bad Ethnographic Film*¹. At the time, Gant was also serving as the Executive Secretary of the Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples Secretariat and invited me to visit the Council's Danish office in Copenhagen where I met with the Critical Arctic Studies academic Kirsten Thisted. Thisted examines minority/majority postcolonial relations in Greenland and Scandinavia and edited the book *Arctic Discourses* (2010) which this thesis draws from and was inspired by.

The second instalment of the *Curators in Conversation* discussion series was titled *Investigating a Curatorial Position within the Paradoxes of Multiculturalism: Parallels Between the UK and Sweden* and focused on the contradictions and failures inherent in multiculturalism and their implications for curatorial practice. Yugoslavian sociologist, artist and writer Sezgin Boynik presented a re-reading of the Black Audio Film Collective's 1986 debut *Handsworth Songs* in line with the thematic focus of the concept of multiculturalism. The second speaker was curator and writer Carol Tulloch, my Director of Studies for this thesis, who discussed her essay, *Picture This: The Black Curator* referencing her role as curator of the Archives and Museum of Black Heritage project in the early 2000s. Both presentations were followed by an open discussion moderated by the local artist Jeuno JE Kim who contextualised the discussion to its Swedish location (*Mother Tongue*, 2012).

Shortly after this discussion series, and during my formative residency in Finland which was, in part, spent researching Akomfrah's film *Mnemosyne* for the exhibition around heimat, I discovered the previously mentioned film review, *Family Photos* by Sandhu, which identified what the author termed a trend in black artists 'mining the creative potential of spaces seen as literally and symbolically white' (Sandhu, 2010). Reading Sandhu's identification of the *trend* was a defining moment as it represented the juncture where my interests aligned and were visualised in filmic form through Akomfrah and Julien's works. The timing of my discovery of Sandhu's article struck me as serendipitous; I was located on a sea fortress in Helsinki looking out over frozen sea and surrounded by snow and ice, researching Akomfrah's Arctic film and grappling again with the subject of whiteness as it related to northern identities. Over the following days I researched the

¹ Of which the late artist and sister of Erik, Pia Arke, was a member. I discuss the importance of Arke's work for situating the Arctic within the field of postcolonial discourse in chapter three.

films Sandhu had identified as part of the trend and formed my research proposal for this thesis.

I have laid out the research journey which led me to this thesis for two reasons: firstly, the path to forming my proposal was not linear, it was convoluted and led me in many directions, however, upon locating Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic works, all of the concepts I had been curating around for years, such as whiteness, the Arctic, black British histories and identity politics, were united and distilled within their respective films. *The Nine Muses* and *True North* therefore provided an axis around which I could construct my thesis. Viewing both artworks, I was suddenly presented with two filmic vehicles through which I could analyse and build earlier curatorial investigations around. For example, the films enabled me to unite my undergraduate thesis interests of indigenoussness and postcolonialism in the Arctic, with themes of futurism and digital filmic spaces which Masaquoi introduced in the *Curators in Conversation* series. I could revisit my discussions on black British histories and the role of archives with Boynik and Tulloch, and apply them to a reading of Akomfrah's employment of the Arctic as a backdrop to rearticulate diasporic histories. *The Nine Muses* and *True North* harboured the possibility for me to draw from all of my previous projects and expand them into a sustained body of research. My second reason for outlining my personal connection to the research is to underscore that first and foremost I am a curator. The practice of curating has enabled me to bridge seemingly disparate disciplines and engage with a wide variety of artists, writers, academics, and arts professionals who have each informed key areas of this interdisciplinary thesis.

Case Studies

In order to answer my main research questions outlined at the beginning of this introduction, my thesis takes the form of an analysis of two of what I propose are the most significant and symbolically loaded films in the trend identified by Sandhu: Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010) and Julien's *True North* (2004). Led by the respective films rich subject matter in addition to my own research and curatorial experience of *Mnemosyne*, frame by frame I use the cinematic artworks as vehicles to investigate complex and interrelated concepts such as racialised landscapes, diasporic identities, constructions of identities in relation to landscapes, reclamation, official histories, counter narratives, and futurist meditations. Levelling my view at how these concepts are contemplated and

visualised in the respective films, I am able to create a sustained reading of the artworks, demonstrating how the seemingly disparate themes intersect and unite to provide new, nuanced understandings of the connections between identities and landscapes. Reading the films in relation to whiteness theory, critical Arctic studies, postcolonial theory and cultural studies has allowed me to construct an interdisciplinary framework which advances the films as seminal contributions to diasporic histories, whiteness and the political ecologies of the Arctic.



Fig. 0.1 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation] UK: Isaac Julien Studios.

The first case study, Julien's *True North* (2004) is a three-screen film installation inspired by the African American explorer Matthew Alexander Henson (1866–1955) who accompanied famed American Explorer Robert Peary (1856–1920) on the 1909 expedition to the North Pole. Drawing from official exploration histories and Henson's own accounts of the 1909 expedition, Julien unearths Henson's story and rescues his memory from the invisibility which has shrouded his key role in American exploration history for centuries. Through a series of narrations, fractured narratives, sonic compositions and abstracted frames, Julien describes the tension and fear which came to define the explorer's relationship after discovering Henson had overshot his mark and arrived at the pole first. Henson's character is channelled through the actor Vanessa Myrie, a longstanding muse for Julien who features in a number of his other productions. Julien's casting of a black female to play Henson imbues the film with questions of gender in addition to race and challenges the imperial masculinity so highly associated with explorer figures who traversed polar space. Retracing Henson's epic journey across the frozen sea, images of Myrie's spectral figure meandering the landscape summon notions of ghostings and temporal disjunctures, transporting the film between past, present and future. *True North's* intervention into the history of discovery reveals the racialisation of the landscape which has operated as a principal location for the performance of white heroic imperial masculinities, the legacies of which continue to reverberate into the Arctic's identity as a key ideological space for racial whiteness.

Julien, the artist, filmmaker, director and writer was born in East London in 1960 to parents who migrated to Britain from the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. Julien co-founded the Sankofa Film and Video Collective in 1983, making a commitment to the development of independent black filmmaking culture and its related areas of production and exhibition. Julien went on to achieve prominence in the film world with his 1989 drama-documentary *Looking for Langston*, which is a meditation on the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes and explores notions of black masculinity and sexuality as well as the politics of desire. I trace these themes within my reading of *True North* as they relate to Julien's meditations on the imperial masculinity of explorer figures in addition to notions of desire which reside within the conceptual and aesthetic foregrounding of the black/white racial binary. Producing films since the 1980s, Julien is regarded as a leading international film and video artist, celebrated for his commitment to critical thinking in the fields of race, identity, sexuality and the reconfiguring of black political histories, of which I position *True North* as a further addition. Complex and multi-layered in concepts, his films are marked by rich and highly aestheticised high-end production values.

The second case study is Akomfrah's feature-length film *The Nine Muses* (2010), which focuses on the histories of mass migration of the African diaspora to post-war Britain. A poignant testament to the experience of migrant labourers across the industrial landscapes of England, the film is a meditation on memory, identity, journeying and home. Described as a 'sorrow song' (Icarus Films, 2010), *The Nine Muses* comprises archival footage of Birmingham from 1960–1981, a moment that marked the initial arrival of South Asian and Caribbean settlers when, as in so many urban centres across the UK, as identified by Sandhu, it witnessed a wave of rioting, 'much of it the result of decades of second-generation anguish and frustration' (Sandhu, 2011). The black-and-white grainy archival footage is spliced with crisp, clear digital film of white Arctic panoramas shot on-location in Alaska. The Arctic landscape is employed as a symbolic space, Akomfrah uses it to suggest the experience of migrants' arrival into a new nation; the coldness, the lack of colour, the emptiness. Akomfrah conveys the isolation associated with the landscape and creates parallels with the complexities of loneliness experienced by diasporic subjects, visualised through recurrent images of a solitary figure wandering the terrain. Uniting soundscapes, image and literary narration, Akomfrah presents a poetic cine-essay that serves as a testament to the migrant experience.



Fig. 0.2 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film] UK: John Akomfrah.

Born in Accra, Ghana in 1957, Akomfrah came to London in 1961, aged four, following the death of his father during the political struggle which eventually led to the 1966 coup of Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party. Akomfrah is an artist, filmmaker, director and writer who began his career co-founding the hugely influential Black Audio Film Collective in 1982. Recognised as one of the UK's pioneering filmmakers, his work – spanning four decades – challenges issues of race, class, identity and foregrounds diverse narratives from marginalised and underrepresented communities. Akomfrah has produced several television documentaries and has written extensively around politics and African cinema, an area I examine in chapter five in relation to his writing on the democratic possibilities for self-representation inherent in digital image-making technologies. An instrumental figure in the advancement of black-British filmmaking, Akomfrah's works are often deeply imbued with a sense of affect, melancholy and profound reflection, of which *The Nine Muses* is no exception.

It is at this juncture that I want to explicate my reasoning for reading the work of Akomfrah and Julien without engaging in their own, personal biographies. In the early stages of this research I thought it necessary to include extensive biographical information of the artists, believing that their individual experiences may shed light on aspects of the films, furthering my understanding of the artworks. However, as my study progressed, this form of speculation on the influences of their own life experiences began to sit uncomfortably with me. To emphasise their biographical information was not only conjecture, but it diminished the content of the works, as everything that needs to be engaged with is either contained in the films themselves, or the literature that has been produced as a result. I have included a brief summary of Akomfrah and Julien's artistic practices in the case studies section above, however extended personal biographical information and questions around the artists individual agency are purposefully omitted. I found recent justification for this exclusion upon reading Kobena Mercer's publication *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (2016). Contained in the first two pages of the introduction, Mercer asserts his dissatisfaction 'with the biographical and sociological reductionisms that pervade the literature on black visual arts', continuing to emphasise that in black visual art discourses, 'we find a repeated emphasis on the artist's biographical identity or on problems of minority access' (Mercer, 2016: 2). Mercer argues that the focus on the biographical detracts attention from 'the aesthetic intelligence embodied in the actual works of art as objects of experience in their own right' (Mercer, 2016: 1-2).

I want to make a distinction here between the artists' personal biographies, such as their upbringing and family heritage, and their professional biographies which detail their filmographies, professional associations and previous achievements. While I concede with Mercer's assertion that a focus on the artists' personal biography detracts from the conceptual and aesthetic strategies of the work, and I enthusiastically agree that works of art embody these experiences in their own right, I think there is space to consider the professional biographies and associations of the artists. As I have summarized above, both Akomfrah and Julien are established and highly celebrated figures in the field of filmmaking. Their respective works are characterized by deep, poetic and often reflective investigations of colonial histories, migration, identity and issues of social justice. Their bodies of work in these areas have, since the 1980's, continued to inform both academic and non-academic discourse surrounding post-colonialism, particularly as it intersects with visual culture.

With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge the relevance of Akomfrah and Julien's previous achievements for my reading of *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. At this study's point of origin in 2012, I arrived at these two case studies with a knowledge of Akomfrah and Julien's seismic filmic and written contributions to the critical field of postcolonialism. On viewing the polar case studies for the first time, I carried with me existing reference points which greatly informed my initial reading; with regards to Akomfrah, I recalled his 1987 breakthrough title with the Black Audio Film Collective *Handsworth Songs*, and the space that the film subsequently carved out for black British histories. In Julien's case, I recalled his early work *Looking for Langston* (1989) and was struck by the artist's continued preoccupation with the visual and conceptual strategies at play in the monochromatic frame, and what that may suggest for notions of identity, desire and the history of the gaze. Thus, a knowledge of the artist's previous investigations provided me with a critical lens through which I could begin to read *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. I started to create an analysis of the works within a framework of Akomfrah and Julien's wider anti-imperialist practices, pulling thematic threads from previous works and relating them to the polar case studies, using a comparative analysis to substantiate my claims. The professional biographies and previous achievements of the artists therefore undoubtedly informed my initial reading of *True North* and *The Nine Muses*.

A further example of considering the relevance of professional biographies is the matter of affiliations; upon learning that both Akomfrah and Julien accepted the awards of Officer of the British Empire (OBE) and Commander of the British Empire (CBE) respectively, in

addition to Julien being a member of the British Royal Academy (RA), I questioned if this altered my reading of the works as visual testaments to the resistance of British imperial agendas. What does it mean when black artists who have demonstrated a passionate and long-standing commitment to rejecting imperial histories accept awards such as these, becoming members of the institutions they critique? What does it mean to hold such a title and produce artworks which strive to address postcolonial traumas imposed by British imperial agendas? My initial response to these questions is that in order to meaningfully critique systems of oppression, the artists must engage with the structures that support it. Perhaps without the affiliations and credence that the awards provide, the artists would not have access to resources such as archives and funds they require in order to continue making works which can meaningfully engage audiences and affect social change. I'm thinking here specifically of Akomfrah and the various accesses he has been granted to vast BBC archives and the subversion of official histories he goes on to present. Perhaps the awards provide an aspect of equality which has been systematically fought for by generations of black artists, and that, in order to subvert structures of power, they must attack the beast from the belly. Although there is not enough space to adequately deal with this issue in the thesis, I wanted to indicate here that it raises a set of pertinent questions, which, alongside Mercer's arguments, shaped my approach to the issue of personal and professional biographical information contained in this research and my wider curatorial practice.

Framing

Using *The Nine Muses* and *True North* as the linchpin, this thesis is concerned with the geopolitics of the Arctic pre-production of the films (2004) and the geopolitics of the Arctic post-production (2010). Since the films emerged, there has been increased focus on the Arctic region owing to two main factors: firstly, the political ecologies of the Arctic have rendered it a primary site for measurements of climate change and its effects. Secondly, there is thought to be a wealth of natural resources lying in waiting under the ice. As a new focal point of ecological and commercial futures, the Arctic's current identity sits in direct opposition to its previous colonial identity as a 'blank' 'empty' space. As I will examine in the following chapters, *The Nine Muses* and *True North* emerged within the same timeframe as the Arctic's identity began to transition from a 'peripheral and detached' space, to a landscape intricately connected to global futures.

According to the United Nations, no country owns the geographic North Pole or the region of the frozen Arctic Ocean that surrounds it. A contested territory throughout history, modern Arctic exploration² took place alongside Britain's imperial century,³ and the documentation collected during these expeditions, such as memoirs, manuscripts, scientific data, photographs, and illustrations, were fundamental to the construction of the northernmost region as a key imaginary landscape in the British public imagination (Hill, 2008). The documents that were sent back to home territories by expedition parties were often sensationalised and redistributed to the public through the press in a highly romanticised manner. In his book *White* (1997), Richard Dyer discusses the constructions of white identity and its symmetries with northern exploration, stating that the Arctic was thought to possess a number of virtues, 'the clarity and cleanliness of the air, the vigour demanded by the cold, the enterprise required by the harshness of the terrain and climate, and the presence of the whitest thing on earth, snow' (Dyer, 1997: 21). Informed by the prevalent theory of environmental determinism⁴ which was widely used to support colonial endeavours during Britain's imperial century, the 'virtues' ascribed to the Arctic were also constructed as white racial characteristics.

The Arctic's cultural, political and visual histories are as rich and diverse as the terrain itself, yet they remain neglected areas of study. Understandings of the territory have been subsumed into enduring colonial representations of the region constructed through Euro-American exploration narratives, thereby reinforcing illusions of the Arctic as a 'desolate, sterile, and blank space' with a history dependent on the people and nations that enter it. Within this investigation of the Arctic as a literal and symbolic white space, as termed by Sandhu above, it is essential to consider Jen Hill's assertion that the Arctic was as much ideological as physical terrain which provided a 'blank' space on which to stage constructions of domestic and imperial identities at a safe distance from British shores (Hill, 2008: 3). Hill expands on this and suggests the region therefore existed, and continues to exist, as a morally 'stainless' and 'empty' space, free from the racial threats of slavery and miscegenation present in traditional colonial and imperial encounters such as India and Africa, the lack of a clear and strong economic motive at that time further reaffirming the 'purity' of Euro-American colonial endeavours (Hill, 2008: 3). The centuries of sensationalised visual and literary representations being fed back to Britain

² Modern exploration constitutes efforts to reach the North Pole in the first half of the 19th century.

³ 1815–1914: Britain's imperial century.

⁴ Environmental determinism is a highly contentious field of study which attempts to define how physical environments predispose societies to development trajectories.

and distributed through the press established the Arctic as an imaginary, detached landscape and continued to define the region as what Robert McGhee terms 'the ultimate otherworld' (McGhee, 2004: 9).

Since the emergence of *The Nine Muses* in 2010, and Julien's *True North* in 2004, the political ecology of the Arctic has encountered a momentous shift, transforming from a detached and imagined landscape, to an increasingly crucial location for global futures. Accelerated global warming has led to the Arctic functioning as an international barometer for environmental degradation, the effects of which have rendered the territory a space which is no longer culturally and politically isolated, but one that is inextricable from worldwide political ecologies. According to a host of international and state geological surveys, there is thought to be at least one third of the world's untapped oil and gas reserves beneath the ice (Devyatkin, 2018). This revelation has led to rapidly increased political and commercial interest in the region by states such as Denmark, Canada, the US, Russia and China, which in turn has led to heightened militarisation of the territory. As the first chapter in this thesis will discuss, despite the territory's Inuit population, the global north continues to control Arctic futures through a programme of economically determined policies, while voices from inside the Arctic and the global south are reduced to peripheral opinion.

As historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos indicates in his political ecologies study *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2016), eighty percent of fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground if we are to continue to exist under the critical warming limit of two degrees Celsius (Demos, 2016). The consequences for Arctic life should resource extractions go ahead would be disastrous; fragile ecosystems would be irrevocably disrupted inviting new invasive species, damaging food chains and further displacing the Arctic's Inuit communities and animals, in addition to the physical transformations which would take place across the earth by rising sea levels (Herrmann, 2018). Despite this evidence, political leaders in the global north justify resource extraction in what Demos terms 'self-serving politics of erasure' by employing colonial constructions of the territory as a desolate wasteland in order to support their proposals. Demos evidences this by citing US politician's justifications, such as the George Bush administration who argued the Arctic was empty of wildlife and therefore oil drilling posed no risks, and the US secretary of state who described the Arctic as 'flat, white, nothingness' (Demos, 2016: 93). Furthermore, Demos describes how Alaska senator Frank Murkowski supposedly held up a sheet of blank white paper and claimed it depicted an

accurate illustration of the High North in an effort to garner support for mass resource extraction (Demos, 2016: 93).

This accelerated and unprecedented shift in the Arctic's identity as a space which on one hand continues to be represented in line with its colonial constructions of 'silent, blank and empty', and on the other, a prime site for diverging global futures, is the disconnection which this study seeks to address. I have chosen to follow Demos's proposition that 'environmental matters of concern are inextricable from social, political and economic forces' also being led by his hypothesis that 'environmental stresses can be both a driver and consequence of injustice and inequality – including poverty, racism and neo-colonial violence' (Demos, 2016: 7–8). I am proposing in the following chapters that Akomfrah and Julien's films illuminate the interconnection of these themes and allow me to demonstrate the complexities of race, nationalism and dislocation which are entangled in the history of the Arctic and its current identity. Demos also proposes that ecologies – particularly the political dimensions – receive limited academic attention within the realm of the visual, therefore I position this study as a contribution to the field (Demos, 2016). I also aim for this thesis to be considered as a contribution to the similarly underdeveloped academic field of critical Arctic studies, an emerging discipline which, thus far, is based in the Arctic states of Scandinavia, Canada and the US. The field creates critical analysis of contemporary discourses of the region and Arctic phenomena focusing on the manner in which issues of political agency, development, race, gender and indigeneity are conceptualised and constructed within those discourses. I employ these academic disciplines and discourses in order to underpin my conviction that visual representations of the Arctic undoubtedly impact how the region continues to be interacted with and politically manoeuvred on a global scale.

Enduring colonial representations of the Arctic as a white history, about white men in a white space has irrefutably influenced international relations in the region, eliding the indigenous populations' self-determination while bolstering Euro-American strives for possession. Through this research and its engagement with *The Nine Muses* and *True North*, I am proposing the films harbour possibilities to disrupt dominant white narratives which continue to reside in Arctic discourses and reclaim the territory by revising black polar histories that have been obscured by official white chronologies. Operating around the axis of black and white, Akomfrah and Julien's films conceptually and aesthetically foreground racial binaries through their employment of black bodies in Arctic space in conjunction with their review of black histories on the white landscape. An aim of this

research is to create an analysis of this binary and question if the artists' respective meditations alter the operation of the binary so that it ceases to function in the traditional sense of one side dominating the other, and rather, operates to *reveal* something for the other. Perhaps whiteness cannot be seen without blackness, and blackness without whiteness. The two categories have been constructed in relation to what the other is not, and therefore by residing explicitly within one frame, do the artists enable the invisibility of whiteness to be marked and defined, visualising the Deleuzian concept of *undoing*, using 'blackness' to expose 'whiteness' and whiteness to describe black experiences. In this sense I apply a post-structuralist lens, reading the two categories of the binary as interdependent rather than oppositional (Lentricchia and McLaughlins, 1990).

I was led to this set of questions which focus on the black/white binary when reading around whiteness studies and locating a recurring theme of *invisibility*. Of the academics I drew from, many commented on the difficulty in marking whiteness as a construct, simply because it has been constructed as a position of normality, therefore becoming naturalised and omnipresent (Lundstrom and Teitelbaum, 2017; Alcoff, 2015; Painter, 2011; Garner, 2007; Dyer: 1997). Indeed, in his introduction to *White* (1997), Dyer suggests that whiteness is a slippery concept, one which has become a default and normative position therefore becoming difficult to define, and therein lies its power (Dyer, 1997). In the following chapters I aim to illustrate the conceptual and aesthetic strategies present in *The Nine Muses* and *True North* that mark whiteness and create visualisations of its presence, thereby disabling its control. Following the principle of whiteness studies which operates within the larger field of anti-racism, until whiteness itself is undermined and disabled as a normative position, it will continue to dominate and suppress all that it is not.

In line with my aim to instigate further inclusion of the Arctic region within postcolonial discourse, and underscore its associations with the constructs of racial whiteness, I would like to acknowledge the significance of the genre of 'Third Cinema' as an historical reference point I am using to frame my analysis of *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. Third Cinema - occasionally referred to as *Third World Cinema* - emerged as its name suggests in the supposed 'third-world' nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The writer Kim Dodge defines Third Cinema films as works that can reflect and deliver a revolutionary atmosphere, convey disillusionment or 'express frustration with class, racial or gender oppression as continued colonial impulses from First World nations' (Dodge, 2007). Third Cinema began in Latin America in the late 1960's by the Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanes and Octavio Getino with their production of *La hora de los hornos* (1968; The Hour

of the Furnaces) and their accompanying manifesto *Hacia un tercer cine* (1969; Towards a Third Cinema). The works were radical revisions of Argentine political history and commented upon issues of colonial legacies, nationalism, corruption, class, and poverty. As the term suggests, Third Cinema can be considered as a separation from *First Cinema*, which refers to the dominant, commercial films predominantly produced by large-scale American studios, and *Second Cinema*, a movement that emerged from European art practices which rejects Hollywood conventions of filmic narrative and works towards a new conceptual cinematic language. In response to first and second cinema, *Third Cinema* rejects these commercial and aesthetic cinematic codes that encourage passive watching and subverts them to focus on the political, encouraging social consciousness and empowering the viewer through knowledge to affect social change (Dodge, 2007).

Third Cinema is known for its innovative production values and distribution methods, born from the movement's general lack of resources. Films working towards the movement of *Third Cinema* often employ a variety of materials and modes of composition such as documentary clips, news reels, found footage, archival film, expert and opinion interviews, statistics and often non-professional actors. Using modes of arrangement such as montage, Third Cinema films are constructed in an innovative manner in order to communicate a specific body of knowledge which will incite cultural and political critique. In this sense, both *The Nine Muses* and *True North* can be considered as works of Third Cinema. *The Nine Muses* works within two main principles of the genre; its thematic focus on marginalised histories through the effects of British colonialism, and through its production values. *The Nine Muses* is composed of archival film, news reel, poetic recollection, and new footage. These visual elements are spliced together with a primary aim to reveal marginalised histories and engage with questions of identity and belonging. Julien's *True North* also holds these Third Cinema principles at its core by staging a revision of Henson's journey, and by doing so exposes the personal and collective effects of racial oppression which ripple through generations. *True North* opens a dialogue surrounding the racial dimensions of polar exploration and rearticulates historical narratives in order to make space for oppressed, alternative accounts. Both films call upon viewers not as passive spectators, but as agents with the ability to question, reflect and act upon injustices, upholding the central principles of Third Cinema filmmaking as a political and aesthetic practice in anti-imperialism, with a view towards decolonisation.

My objective is for this thesis to serve as a timely contribution to the field of critical whiteness studies, revealing the Arctic as a racialised, postcolonial landscape. Working

within a tradition of anti-imperialist thought, this research takes what appears to be a localised subject and reveals its significance for wider debates surrounding race, identities, masculinities, landscape, unofficial histories, futurisms and notions of belonging. I draw from a number of academic scholarships including areas of representational theory, theories of nationalisms, issues of travel, colonialism and gender, and feminist approaches to technology in order to create an interdisciplinary body of research.

Terminology

I apply a number of key terms throughout the thesis, some of which are contested and others which are more routinely referred to. The first term, and one that is of central significance to this research and its many informants is the concept of *Race*.

‘Whether race is or is not a “fact of nature,” whether it is or is not a “mental reality”, it is a legal, political and historical reality which plays a real and constraining role in a number of societies...That is why simply rejecting the notion of race is not enough. Denying its existence as an empirically valid category, as the human, social and ultimately, natural sciences are trying to do, can never, however correct the intention, take away that category’s reality within society or the state, or change the fact that, while it may not be valid empirically, it certainly exerts an empirical effect...while the reality of “race” is indeed neither natural and biological, nor psychological (some innate tendency of the human mind to designate the other as a natural entity), it does nevertheless exist.’

- (Guillaumin, 1995: 106)

As the sociologist Collette Guillaumin strongly argues above, although the construct of race is a deeply flawed and widely discredited one, it would be reductive to reject and ignore its prevailing manifestations in present day society. Referring to the term from a critical position, I consider the concept and its deep roots in imperialist racist thought to

be central to my investigation of Akomfrah and Julien's respective films. I consider the concept to have no validity in terms of its own definition: the classification of human beings into physically, biologically and genetically distinct groups, further implying that behaviour, moral qualities and intelligence capacities can be related to racial origin (race, n.d). Racial thinking was employed as an influential justification in European imperialist expansionism; the concept has therefore become entrenched in the dominance of white Euro-Americans over non-white people. Although I acknowledge that the concept of race is not an invention of imperialism, it was quickly appropriated and became one of its most supportive and central ideologies. Both Akomfrah and Julien examine notions of landscape as it connects to groups of people, creating meditations on identities, belonging and diasporic figures through the prism of race, their works attest to the very real struggles that exist because of the category and as such I refer to the term as laid out above, within a tradition of anti-imperialist thought.

A significant element of this study is the critical engagement with the concept of racial whiteness and its constructions. Akomfrah and Julien appropriate the white Arctic landscape as a symbol of racial whiteness, confronting the idea of racialised landscapes and the geopolitics associated with the high north. I will therefore discuss my decision to use the term *non-white* in relation to the artists' individual foregrounding of the postcolonial body within *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. In almost every other context the term *non-white* would be inappropriate with the negative 'non' of the term suggesting people of colour only have an identity by virtue of what they are not, which in this case is white (Dyer, 1997). Following from Dyer's definition and use of the term, I will be using *non-white* solely within the context of this research as the two alternatives 'black' and 'people of colour' pose many conflicting problems when creating a combined analysis of the two case studies this research focuses on. *Black*, the most widely preferred term excludes a range of people who are neither black or white (Asian, Native American, Jewish, Chicanos, Inuit), and the term *People of Colour* poses the opposite problem within the context of this research which is that it is inclusive of all colours, insinuating that white people have no colour and are therefore set apart (Dyer, 1997: 11).

I have chosen to use the term *non-white* when applicable because of the nature of visual representations I will be referring to that include images of black and Inuit peoples. In line with this I also apply the term when referring to works by artists of mixed heritage and wouldn't necessarily align themselves with the term 'black'. However, when referring to specific examples within John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* I use the term 'black' because

his work is outwardly concerned with creating a monument to the black experience of African and Caribbean peoples living in Britain. When referring to racial *blackness* and *whiteness* throughout my study, I acknowledge the politics of representation within these two loaded terms. Taking into consideration the aforementioned structures of race and implicit binaries, I will explicate my reasoning for choosing the term 'black-British' filmmakers and confront the importance of recognising racial difference. The term *black* and my use of it in direct reference to a number of the actors and historical figures referenced in Akomfrah and Julien's film requires further discussion.

It is clear through the works of artists, curators, writers and theorists that there is no conclusive agreement on the application and meaning of the term 'black'. I have referred to the work of artist and cultural critic Gen Doy who states within her study *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* that from the 1980s and the rise of young black artists gaining recognition in Britain, the term was applied both to people of African origin deemed to be making work about the social realities of the black experience, to the more politically inclusive application of the term to include all peoples who had a conscious sense of marginalisation and under-representation, expanded to accept notions such as hybridity, diasporas and ethnicity. Under the inclusive term, Chinese, Turkish, African, West Indian and South Asian people were all placed under the umbrella term of black (Doy, 2000: 7).

With regards to my own application of the term when referring to the work of John Akomfrah and Isaac Julien, I follow Kwesi Owusu's statement;

"Black Arts" refers to the creative expressions of the African and Asian communities in Britain, both continental and diasporic...a living, interminable challenge to imperialism in the metropolis. The state of consciousness which informs them articulates the dialectics of race, sex and class within the context of the exploitative and endemic racism of capitalist social relations.'

- (Owusu, 1988: 1)

To further expand on this, I will use the term 'black' in line with the word's own specific history, which as discussed previously, is entrenched in the realities of social oppression. Artist and art historian Eddie Chambers begins his 2014 book *Black Artists in British Art: A*

History Since the 1950s with a discussion of the importance surrounding the issue of upper-case B or lower-case b in the application of the term Black/black, suggesting the use of the word as a 'racial descriptive has a history marked by contention and strategising' (Chambers, 2014: ix). Chambers charts a history of the applications of the upper-lower cases and notes that in recent years this has evolved into the term BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) (Chambers, 2014). I will use a lower case 'b', with the exception of quotations, to differentiate from the use of upper case 'B', following Doy's suggestion that the latter signifies the association with African roots and a chosen identity, as such I do not want to enforce this on the artists' individual identity and ethnic difference within this research (Doy, 2000).

Methodology

I have applied a semiological analysis to the films, dissecting the images frame by frame, and reading their signs in order to understand how they relate to broader systems of meaning. Semiology is primarily concerned with the ways in which social difference is created, as Gillian Rose describes, 'its focus on ideology, ideological complexes and dominant codes, and its recognition of resistance to those, means that it cannot avoid considering the social effects of meaning' (Rose, 2001: 96). I would therefore consider this study to employ a semiological methodology as I concentrate on the images themselves, moving and stills, as the most important sites of meaning and read them in relation to the theories and research questions outlined above, in order to underscore their relation and contributions to social change. At the core, I am proposing that these artworks alter social constructions and challenge systems of power through the visual signs, codes and conventions they deploy. Furthermore, semiology supports my choice to concentrate on just two case studies, as detailed by Rose, 'semiology very often takes the form of detailed case studies of relatively few images, and the case study stands or falls on its analytical integrity and interest rather than on its applicability to a wide range of material' (Rose, 2001: 73). I decided to focus on just two of the films in the identified trend as I felt the conceptual richness engrained in all the films of *the trend* case studies could not be fully explored within the limitations of this dissertation length. Employing curatorial thinking, I selected *The Nine Muses* and *True North* as they were the two films that struck me as highly refined and vastly rich in terms of conceptual signifiers. I was led first by the visual signs they deployed and then began to connect the artworks with theory. As discussed

earlier in this introduction, *The Nine Muses* and *True North's* respective content presents a vast array of visual material that can be critically engaged with and read in relation to my core interests of whiteness, landscape and the formation of identities.

During the early stages of this research I thought it necessary to form a number of curatorial public outputs, such as exhibitions, a discussion series or film screenings in order to form my own reading of the works. This seemed like the natural thing to do with a body of research that claimed to be undertaken using a curatorial methodology. However, as the research developed, I realised a public output would not only be premature, but may be a distraction, and an interruption to my own reading of the films. I wanted to create a body of work that did not rely on gathering other opinions or present a proposition mid-way through the research via a public presentation; rather, I wanted this thesis to reflect a curatorial approach, to have a curator's voice, that allows space for a sustained body of research to be fully developed pre-exhibition, based on my own personal reading and critical thinking. Following the notion of curating a thesis, I decided to focus on the development of the theoretical content which has the potential to be translated into an exhibition format at a later point in time. I employed all the methods I would employ to create an exhibition, such as engaging with the key academic theories and concepts which underpin the visual works and building an academic framework to read the images within. In the early stages of the dissertation process I conducted archival research at the Royal Geographical Society, London and the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge in order to develop my understanding of polar visual narratives. This not only aided my reading of the visual and conceptual narratives that Akomfrah and Julien wanted to disrupt through their films, but the collections allowed me to contextualise and engage with other studies such as Hill's text on 19th century polar exploration and its relation to the construction of imperial masculinity, a crucial book for this thesis. Although the archival materials I referenced are not contained in the thesis itself, they provided the foundational context for me to read Akomfrah and Julien's works and create the critical analysis contained in the following chapters.

I also sought to interview Akomfrah and Julien in the latter stages of my write-up period. In line with my earlier assertion, I did not want to engage in gathering opinions on the works in developmental stages of the research; my aim was to create my own sustained reading of the artworks. I believed from the beginning that all the signs that needed to be read were engrained within the films, and that the artists had already said everything they needed to say through the works in addition to interviews in print and their own writing.

My impetus to conduct interviews in the latter stages of write-up was born of a curiosity to understand if Akomfrah or Julien's relation to the works had changed. For example, with reference to Akomfrah, the artist has gone on to produce several more films which engage with the Arctic landscape, one of which is anchored by an exploration of political ecologies. With reference to Julien, as chapter two discusses, the themes engrained in *True North* have developed and been extended into two more Arctic artworks which support my original reading of *True North*. Unfortunately, I was not able to secure interviews in the last nine months with either artist. A combination of timing issues and work schedules have created difficulties in the case of Akomfrah. However, in the case of Julien I did not receive replies to my numerous requests. I have included evidence of this in the appendix and will expand on future potentials in the conclusion.

Structure

This thesis comprises five chapters. The first chapter, *The Geopolitics of Arctic Space*, is an overview of both the contemporary and historical geopolitics of the Arctic and provides a foundational context for my reading of Akomfrah and Julien's films. I begin by extending my thinking on the aforementioned paradoxical nature of the Arctic's current identity as a space which has been defined by the United Nations as a *territory for all mankind* (Basler, 1998), eliding the rights of indigenous peoples, whilst simultaneously representing a contemporary focal point for economic exploitation in light of its recently discovered richness in natural resources. Concurrently, eyes have steadily ventured to the Arctic in relation to accelerating ecological degradation, with the territory becoming recognised as a global barometer for environmental health. Further to mapping current political ecologies of the Arctic, I shift my attention to Euro-American colonial constructions of the territory as a 'blank, empty and detached' space, and demonstrate how these enduring representations are employed to support present-day collusions for ownership and resource extraction. I also frame the analytical and critical field of Arctic studies in order to position my own research as a contribution to this emergent, and increasingly relevant subject. By incorporating a literature review, I demonstrate that the masculinist, colonial exploration narrative is the single most influential aspect of how the history of the Arctic has been written and represented, further still, this section illustrates how the Arctic's linear history intersects with nationalism, race and gender, all of which are addressed within Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic films. I review texts which critically engage with the

Arctic – both historically and presently – in order to map the limited theoretical terrain and situate my own research within it. Furthermore, I attempt to underpin the urgency for new interdisciplinary studies which engage critically with the region and interrupt enduring tropes of the Arctic as a blank, silent space. By providing this contextual chapter, I provide a foundation upon which individual threads of Akomfrah and Julien's work can be read in relation to the official and unofficial histories of Arctic space, underlining the lack of critical enquiry in Arctic colonial history.

Chapter two, *Isaac Julien's 'True North'* takes the form of an in-depth analysis of the first case study. Following a mapping of Julien's thematic focus, I elaborate on the relationship which unfolded between Henson and Peary, referencing a number of primary sources such as the explorer's respective autobiographies and material published in historical interviews. In addition, I draw from film reviews, academics texts and journal articles in order to construct my argument that *True North* is a crucial contemporary interrogation of the racial whiteness which dominates official polar narratives. Led by various visual sequences in the film, I discuss how the explorer's volatile relationship illuminates wider, interconnected issues of racial dynamics, Inuit-explorer relations, unofficial histories and how imperial masculinities governed polar exploration narratives. Elaborating on Julien's filmic rememoring of Henson's journey, I seek to position *True North* as a major challenge to the whitewashed history of Euro-American discovery, and a reclamation of a space which has been confined for the exclusive performance of whiteness.

The second section of the chapter looks at *True North* as part of Julien's wider trilogy *Western Union*, which is concerned with the creolisation of spaces, the concept of diaspora and movement. I consider the recurring motif of the desert throughout the trilogy, from the sun-baked terracotta deserts of Burkina Faso to the polar deserts of *True North*, the isolated figure of the black British actor Vanessa Myrie – which is foregrounded in each film – confronts the question of racialised landscapes and authenticity, of who is considered to be an 'authentic' part of the landscape and who is 'permitted' to exist within it. Myrie represents a constant presence throughout the trilogy, linking and revealing connections between seemingly disparate landscapes which I reveal as connected through colonial exploration narratives. Weaving literary criticism and historical analysis through my study of *True North*, I seek to demonstrate that Julien's film functions as a vehicle to think critically about the Arctic, its history and its position as a postcolonial landscape within a globalised world.

Chapter three, *John Akomfrah's 'The Nine Muses'* constitutes a sustained analysis of the second case study and its conceptual framework as a testament to the migrant experience of South Asian, African and Caribbean settlers in post-war Britain. Discussing the aesthetic strategies Akomfrah employs, namely his structural formations using montage and splicing of archival monochromatic imagery with coloured digital footage of the Arctic, I focus on the film's deployment of Roland Barthes's concept of *third meaning* as strategy to rearticulate silenced histories and create temporal disjunctions which simultaneously deal with pasts, presents and futures. The second section of the chapter develops the geopolitics of Arctic space and questions the idea of North, specifically the geographical position of North as a concept. Drawing from a range of contemporary Scottish, Scandinavian and Canadian academics, I create an analysis on the constructions of northern landscapes via the Romantic Movement and consider them in relation to Akomfrah's employment of northern rural landscapes as spaces to describe 'othering' within his expansive filmic oeuvre.

In addition to revealing the historical constructions of landscape art present in Akomfrah's work, I follow by theoretically zooming in on *The Nine Muses* alternative visualisation of the Arctic, not as a vast, white empty space, but as one which contains an industrial and human presence, in contrast to colonial constructions of the region. The final section of the chapter looks at the foregrounding of the isolated figure in the landscape, wherein I trace a history of the motif in Akomfrah's expansive filmic oeuvre and speculate on the significance of the incorporation of the isolated diasporic body in relation to the white gaze. Once again referencing the Romantics and their foregrounding of the heroic male figure within sensationalised landscapes, I question if the primacy of the black isolated figure within the 'trend' challenges the Romantics' construction of *national characters* through symmetries between identity and place, and their aestheticising of European nationalisms and its intrinsic connection to 'nature'.

The fourth chapter *Invisible to Whom: Representations of Whiteness* focuses on the concept of whiteness, its historical construction and dominant representations. The chapter's function within the context of the wider thesis is to reveal the constructions of the concept in relation to the Arctic territory, and thereby the film case studies at the heart of this thesis. Describing the complexities, problematics and origins of critical whiteness studies as a discipline, I also relate the concept of whiteness to the current socio-political moment and underscore the crucial need for its continued examination, thereby arguing for the timeliness of this thesis. I employ whiteness studies, as per Eric Garner's theory, as a

problematic and analytical perspective to examine the construction of the concept in direct relation to ideas of north and racial hierarchies, located within a body of anti-racist scholarship. The chapter primarily focuses on visual representations of whiteness and questions the relation between white racial identity and the Arctic and how the white landscape has come to be known as, what Hill terms, 'the heart of whiteness' (Hill, 2008: 1).

Within the study of visual representations, I examine the recurring motif of the snowy mountain as a key site for the inscription of white male identity in Europe, tracing its origins back to the term Caucasian. The term Caucasian not only foregrounded the mountains as a crucial factor and geographical location in the establishment of the Aryan ideology, but also provided legitimisation for the myth of mountain origins and racial stratification, most notably employed by Nazism. I follow this through to the 1930s German Bergfilm movement which foregrounded the relationship between white men and mountains, transporting and applying some of its most prominent critical theory to the Arctic, and Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic films. I unpack the relationship between whiteness, coldness and northernness by tracing its construction from Christianity – specifically ideas of virginity and chastity – in relation to the Arctic as an untouched, virtuous (and thereby feminine) space, further relating to the notion of racial purity.

In the final section of the chapter I direct my analysis to the black/white racial binary and question both case studies visualisations of the binary with reference to Marc Black's theory on multi-lateral double consciousness. As theorist Black posits, by creating a relationship between DuBoisian double consciousness, Fanon and multilateral double consciousness, fresh and dynamic dialogues have the possibility to emerge and destabilise concealed power structures of white supremacist society, eventually leading to a new state of race consciousness (Black, 2007). I question if *The Nine Muses* and *True North* exercise Black's theory through their challenges of the black/white binary, exploring the ways in which they are important and ground-breaking works for not only revealing that whiteness continues to occupy a position of invisibility within discussions about race, but also in addressing the ways in which the black/white paradigm of race is visualised and presented.

The final chapter, *Polar Space: Locating Afrofuturism in The Nine Muses and True North*, is an analysis of both case studies through the lens of Afrofuturism, positing that the films can be considered as deft, contemporary contributions to this emergent literary and

cultural aesthetic. Afrofuturism is an inter-disciplinary concept combining science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, Afrocentrism and magical realism, and extends across aesthetics, scientific and historical philosophy in order to critically address current oppression of subjects of the African diaspora, but also to excavate elided histories, revise imperial narratives and create speculative visions for the future. I critically discuss the respective films within the context of Afrofuturism, examining the key theme of excavation, an important concept for the creation of counter-memory, and a key conceptual strategy in the works of Akomfrah and Julien, primarily incorporated through their revision of historical narratives. Engaging in Foucauldian historiography and his theories of counter-memories, I create an analysis of archival appropriation in relation to *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. I also apply key themes of Afrofuturism to an Arctic context and demonstrate a relation between Arctic space and outer space as constructed via imperialist territorial agendas.

In a later section of the chapter, I explore the relationship between the Arctic and outer space in line with its long history as a setting for the genre of science fiction. Linking the film case studies to prevalent science fiction themes, I address the genre's strong associations with racial whiteness, referencing several contemporary critical works which engage with the role of race in futurist narratives. Polar science fiction narratives have an overwhelming focus on race, particularly racial tensions between white and non-white people, a tension which I argue is further emphasised through the remote, white setting of the North Pole. Non-whites are often metaphors for aliens in science fiction narratives, often coming to earth from distant, unknown planets. I evidence Akomfrah and Julien's respective engagement with these concepts through an analysis of their respective works, not only focusing on the particular case studies, but uncovering Afrofuturist expressions within their wider filmic practices.

In the final section of the chapter, I turn my attention towards what Alondra Nelson has identified as the ethnic boundaries and privileging which exist between white people and non-white people that is mirrored in technology and digitalisation as a concept, despite the founding fiction of the digital age: 'that race (and gender) distinctions would be eliminated with technology in a raceless future paradigm' (Nelson, 2002: 1). Shifting my focus to the concept of technology as it relates to racial representation, I employ Mark Fisher's theory on *science fiction capital* to understand the role of technology in a futures industry. Using Akomfrah's essay *Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora* (2010) which examines the concept of the digital divide as a catalyst, I explore the text's assertion that

the onset of digital technologies enabled self-representation and a liberation from the confines of the analogue which privileged white skin, therefore further exploring Afrofuturist strategies which are inherent in black filmmaking.

As I hope to demonstrate through the conceptual evolution of the thesis and its structure, the final chapter is a culmination of the primary themes my investigation is concerned with: race, the diasporic subject, the Arctic, film, and territories of exclusion. Afrofuturism is the concept under which I unite all these seemingly disparate themes and evidence my argument that they are intrinsically connected, as visualised by Akomfrah and Julien in their respective films *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. The final chapter functions as a crystallisation of my principal arguments, advancing them as a call to attend with urgency to whiteness as a continuing dominant construct.

Chapter One

The Geopolitics of Arctic Space

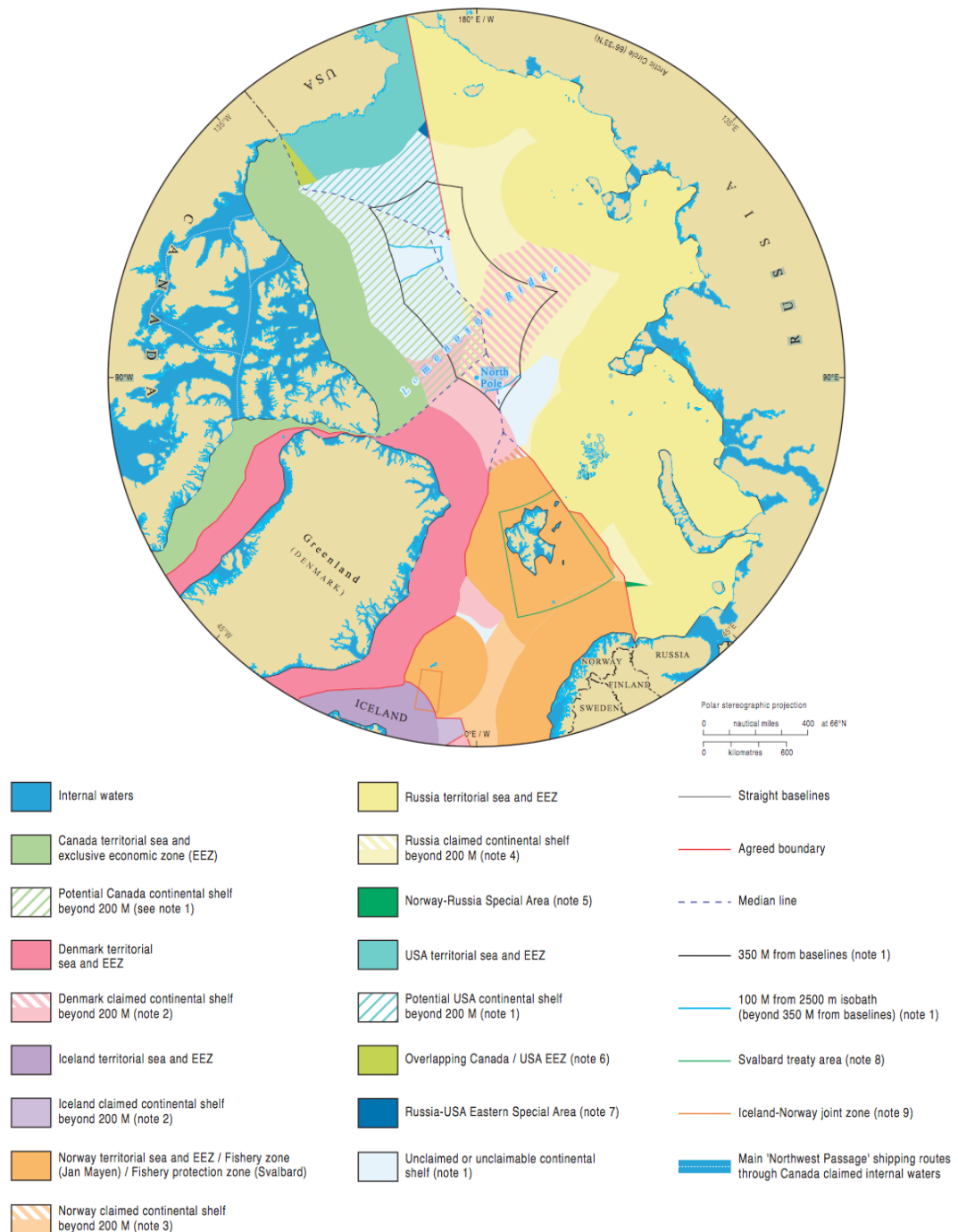


Fig. 1.1 *Maritime Jurisdiction and Boundaries in the Arctic Region*. (2008). International Boundaries Research Unit, Centre for Borders Research.

‘Blank space on a map represents a region of the globe that has remained unreached, untouched, unclaimed. As such, it becomes something to be conquered and possessed, and something to be feared. “Terra Incognita” is not merely a placeholder, words to fill that space with words, with narratives, with names. More specifically, it is a challenge to fill that empty space with proper names that claim it. As an aporia to be assigned meaning, the blank space functions as a site for the inscription of identity. In this manner, the history of cartography is always already a history of exploration and colonization. The landscape of the uncharted region becomes a mirror image of desires and needs, modelled on the known, yet defamiliarised and distanced as the unknown.’

- (Nenno, 1996: 305)

As Nancy P. Nenno describes above, blank spaces on a map give rise to a number of persistent tropes; desolation, detachment, otherness, and most pertinently a stage upon which to perform national characteristics and inscribe identities through a process of claiming the landscape. With the aim of advancing Akomfrah and Julien’s respective films as political interventions which reclaim the Arctic landscape from an exclusively white history and disrupt dominant visual, cultural and political representations of the region, this chapter provides a geopolitical survey of the Arctic, from both a contemporary and historical perspective in order create a foundation for my reading of the films. In discussing the processes by which the Arctic has been claimed, and its identity formed, my intention is to demonstrate a) the increasingly volatile nature of the territory, climatically and politically, b) how recent representations of the Arctic – as a relatively new world-wide focal point intrinsic to global environmental health – sit in opposition to enduring colonial constructions of the territory as a blank, detached space, c) the dramatic shift in these representations attest to the crucial need to re-evaluate perceptions of the Arctic as they greatly affect the manner in which it is interacted with, culturally and politically. I also present a review of literature produced within the field of critical Arctic studies with the aim of underscoring the originality of my study and positioning it as a contribution to the small collection of studies which have been produced to date.

Marked Differences: The Arctic and the Antarctic

Cartographically, the Arctic is defined as the region north of the Arctic Circle surrounding the geographic North Pole. While the South Pole lies on a continental landmass of Antarctica, the North Pole is situated at the Centre of the Arctic Ocean amid frozen waters which form a mass of pack ice. The North Pole defines geodetic latitude 90° north and is described in directional terms as *True North*. Contrary to popular belief – and visual representations which have been in circulation since the early 18th century – the Arctic and Antarctic are vastly different territories, not only in terms of geological formation and climate, but also socially and politically. Whilst the unpopulated and denationalised South Pole has been designated as a ‘frozen laboratory’ for science and experimentation for ‘all mankind’, the populated North has endured as a site for repeated colonisation with the Arctic states of Canada, Russia and Scandinavia laying claim to ownership in addition to nations such as the US, UK and China becoming increasingly active in recent political scrambles for territorial stakes.

I am often asked by peers why I have not considered researching artists and filmmakers engaging with the Antarctic region as well as or instead of the Arctic, of which there are many; however, my answer pertains to the starkly differing geopolitics of the respective regions. Sitting in direct opposition on the earth’s axis, the poles mirror each other visually, however this is where the similarities end. Aside from possessing vastly different eco-systems and, as I will continue to lay out, geological, social and political formations, Antarctica is a part of the global South while the Arctic has been, as I will argue within this thesis, culturally constructed as the heart of the of the global North, bearing Euro-American colonial ideologies and offering tremendous potential for the analysis of representations of racial whiteness through its nationalist exploration dominated histories.

An example in relation to the contrast in symbolic potential between the North and South Poles is the artwork of African-American artist DJ Spooky, also known as Paul Dennis Miller, and his audio-visual work *Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica* (2009) which was referenced by the critic Sukhdev Sandhu as part of the aforementioned trend that incentivised this thesis (see fig. 1.2). DJ Spooky is a composer, multimedia artist, and writer who creates bridges between sound art and contemporary visual culture. *Sinfonia Antarctica* – titled after English composer Vaughan Williams’ 1952 seventh symphony which was based on music he scored for the 1947 film *Scott of the Antarctic* – is an

acoustic portrait of the rapidly transformative continent of Antarctica. DJ Spooky travelled to the continent with a portable studio to collect audio recordings of ice fields from various locations in order to encapsulate the sounds of disappearing ice. On return to America, his recordings were converted into sound loops and frequencies that were merged with unique compositions performed by a string quartet. The artist designed live performances accompanied with visuals such as photographs and film that he had captured during his time in Antarctica, in addition to glimpses of archival footage and scientific data, multiple threads of the project united to create a focus on the environmental criticality of the region in an ever-warming world.



Fig. 1.2 DJ Spooky. (2009). *Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica*. [Audio-Visual Installation Artwork].

Still images of DJ Spooky standing upon the whiteness of the Antarctic glaciers dressed in colourful outerwear are, I propose, notably similar to scenes from Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (see fig. 1.2). Furthermore, the composition of a black figure standing alone in the mass of white ice chimes with both Akomfrah and Julien's employment of a solitary figure to express notions of the sublime. In a recording of DJ Spooky presenting his *Sinfonia Antarctica* at the Savannah College of Art and Design, he speaks of the metaphors and

layers at play within the work, such as notions of *coolness* referencing Yale Professor, Robert Farris Thompson's work on the aesthetic concept and its links with modernism and science fiction stating 'black people just love ice: *Ice T, Ice Cube*' (*DJ Spooky: Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica*: 2011), all of which describe the foundations of Afrofuturism, a key concept I use to create a new reading of Akomfrah and Julien's work in chapter five. However, while the visual and theoretical similarities are present, I contend DJ Spooky's work is rendered incomparable in terms of symbolic potential for issues of post-colonialism and whiteness because of the work's geopolitical setting at the South Pole. As the only continent on the planet without an indigenous population, Antarctica is not a site of colonial trauma as a result of Euro-American exploration. The potential of the Arctic landscape to speak for notions of whiteness goes far and beyond that of the Antarctic because the political histories of the North and South Pole are too different to override their visual similarities. As I seek to demonstrate within this chapter, the Arctic has been used as a key location to enact Western colonial ideologies, becoming mythologised as a landscape to describe the 'white national character' through a relentless agenda of exploration. From early 19th century Western explorers vying to plant national flags at the pole, to 21st century scientifically backed claims to land rights, the history of the arctic is steeped in collusions for ownership.

Black Gold: Oil and Arctic Ownership

The Arctic has been contested territory throughout history; no country owns the North Pole or the frozen region of the Arctic Ocean that surrounds it. As demonstrated by the Maritime Jurisdiction map (see fig. 1.1) the territory has been carved up between nations that fall within the Arctic Circle radius with no regard for the indigenous populations original borderlines, much in the same way as competing European empires dissected the African continent through colonial expansion. There are currently eight nation states registered as full members of the Arctic Council: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the USA. They each sit alongside permanent members of the Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC): the Aleut International Association (AIA); the Gwich'in Council International (GCI); the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC); the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON); and the Saami Council (SC). Although there are currently eight-member states of the Arctic Council, according to United Nations International Law, there are five surrounding countries that qualify to be part of the

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)⁵ of 200 nautical miles adjacent to their coasts; the Russian Federation, United States (via Alaska), Canada, Norway and Denmark (via Greenland). The waters that lie outside of the 200 miles beyond these countries' coastlines are labelled 'high seas' and are the 'common heritage of all mankind (CHM)' under the United Nations International Seabed Authority (Basler, 1998). An ethical concept within international law, CHM has established that defined geographical sites belong to humanity and should be held in trust for future generations in order to be protected from exploitation by individuals, corporations or nation states.

The principle of CHM was first introduced in the 1960s, elements of which have been transferred to the United Nations Outer Space Treaty (1967), which governs state exploration of outer space, the moon and celestial bodies. CHM was applied to celestial space for the same reason it was applied to the Arctic: to protect the territory from economic exploitation by individuals, private industry and national governments. Territorial rights of the Arctic and the *Race to the Poles* of the 19th and early 20th centuries have many parallels with the *Space Race*, not only in relation to the white masculine exploration narrative but also with reference to the ideological pursuit of territory under the auspices of nationalism. As mentioned in the introduction, the parallels between Arctic and Celestial Space are important ideas for this thesis; I want to demonstrate that the Arctic has been conceived of and represented as *other* throughout the centuries, designating it as Scott Mackenzie and Anna W. Stenport term, 'the final point reached before the end of the known and habitable planet' (MacKenzie and Stenport, 2013). The 'othering' of the Arctic, a landscape which is likened and consistently referred to as 'other-worldly' – as I will proceed to demonstrate throughout this thesis – has been constructed via the exploration narrative as a de-territorialised and stainless space for the inhabitation and staging of the ideologies of the individuals and states that enter it. This leads me to a further development of my principal research questions: did Akomfrah and Julien use the Arctic region in this mode despite their obvious anti-imperial stances; by using the Arctic to discuss socio-political conditions for people of colour, were they perpetuating the troublesome trope of the Arctic as a reflective, representational space, adopted to stage debates about home territories? Further within the thesis I develop thought around these questions with direct reference to each of the film works.

⁵ The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'an area of coastal water and seabed within a certain distance of a country's coastline, to which that country claims exclusive rights for fishing, drilling, and other economic activities' (Exclusive Economic Zone, n.d.).

To return to territorial claims in the Arctic, the concept of *Common Heritage of All Mankind* (CHM), referred to earlier, achieved prominence primarily in conjunction with the United Nations Convention on the *Law of the Sea*⁶ in relation to the Arctic territories. However, it has been met with recurrent controversy due to its approach to issues of seabed mining in the face of ecological degradation and the search for untapped natural resources (Taylor, 2011). CHM is an important concept for this body of research as it underpins the ironies in the complex reality and continuing colonial representations of the Arctic region. Despite an indigenous Arctic population of an estimated four million, the Arctic is recognised, under international law as belonging to all of mankind, disregarding Arctic peoples and their government's rights to autonomy and self-determination. Further still, the global North has been the sole controller of the territory despite the United Nations defining the Arctic as belonging to all mankind; within this the only recent disruption has been China's increasing interest in potential Arctic industrial affairs. The disregard for the global South's stake in Arctic futures is evidenced in the acts of determinism from countries such as Canada and Russia increasing militarisation and claiming sole ownership upon the principle of proximity.

Alongside economies of geographical space, opposing representations of the Arctic are emerging: on the one hand, it is becoming a focal point for territorial claims due to shipping rights and natural resources in conflict with its status as a barometer for environmental health. Simultaneously, pervasive Western representations such as 'detached, blank, empty and pure' continue to govern perceptions of the territory and conveniently render its indigenous inhabitants invisible. The irony of the Arctic's colonial representation as a space which is literally and symbolically white lies in the fact that there currently exists a population of four million Arctic Inuit within which are forty ethnic groups, all of whom are non-white. These conflicting descriptions of the Arctic determine how the region is perceived and politically manipulated by powerful states with a vested economic interest in exploiting its natural resources and industrial possibilities, its whiteness aiding the global north to remain in a position of power. The films of Julien and Akomfrah provide unique and timely vehicles to explore these complex and inter-related ideas set within the context of the Arctic *now*. Although it has been eight years since the release of *The Nine Muses* and fourteen since *True North's*, and as my following literature review will testify to, there has been a distinct lack of critical engagement with

⁶ The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the international agreement that resulted from the third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea which took place between 1973 and 1982. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea lays down a comprehensive regime of law and order in the world's oceans and seas establishing rules governing all uses of the oceans and their resources. It enshrines the notion that all problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be addressed as a whole (*United Nations Law of the Sea*, 2017).

the shifting identities of the Arctic as an increasingly critical and globalised space, evidencing my argument that Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North* are as relevant and important to stimulating critical Arctic dialogues as they were on their initial release.

To return to issues of territorial ownership, the UN Convention Law of the Sea stipulates that a country has a ten-year period after ratification to lay claims to an extended continental shelf, which, if validated, grants exclusive rights to resources on or below the seabed of that extended shelf area. Norway, Denmark and Russia launched ratified territorial claims on continental shelves beyond their economic zones between the years of 1996–2004. The US has signed, but as yet not ratified the convention. In December 2013, Canada submitted a geographical survey on the limits of its continental shelf claiming sole ownership of the North Pole, its push to extend national landmass was immediately contested by Russia who opposed the scientific findings and claimed ownership in return. Russia increased militarisation across the entire Arctic territory which led to a dispute on an international scale (Alexandrov, 2009). In August 2015, Russia resubmitted a bid for sole ownership of the Arctic, the bid contained new arguments based on scientific data on its continental shelf which were collected from years of Arctic research in an effort to secure its strategic, economic, scientific and defence interests in the territory (Isachenkov, 2015). There is increasing rhetoric within Euro-American defence studies regarding what has been termed the threat of a new *Cold War* emerging in the Arctic. Concerns for the advent of fresh conflict in the region has led to international criticism, particularly of Russia's aggressive expansionism. However, as the authors of the 2014 report *Russian Strategies in the Arctic: Avoiding a New Cold War* have pointed to, the current motives of the Russian state are concerned with pragmatic interests in competition for natural resources and control of the Northern Sea routes which are in opposition to previous Soviet behaviour driven by ideological factors (Heininen, 2014).

The foundations of these competing territorial claims lie within economic interests to extract what is thought to be 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves, 30% of undiscovered gas deposits and 20% of undiscovered gas liquids. Alongside the obvious economic gain promised from the wealth of natural resources, an equally lucrative benefit lies between the melting ice caps: newly formed shipping routes which will connect Europe with the commercial giants of Asia. While there is global alarm at the unprecedented pace at which the Arctic ice caps are reducing, the melting of the frozen

boundary along Russia's North coast could provide its government with a strategic and unrivalled shipping line which would become one of the world's most significant trade routes. This newly established route would mark the rebirth of the Northwest Passage, a much sought-after historic sea link between Europe and Asia and prompt an economic revival of Russia's most northerly regions which amount to one-fifth of the country's enormous territory. The re-opening of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) would allow the 7,200-nautical mile distance between Asia and Europe to be navigated at a 37% shorter distance than the current sea path. During a 2011 Russian Arctic conference *Arctic Forum*, the political economist David Monteleone reported in the *Financial Times* that President Vladimir Putin 'strongly backed' the NSR Administration's aims to strategise and regulate foreign shipping traffic which is focused on China to Europe trade (Monteleone, 2016). NSR users would pay the Russian government to support sea vessels, supply and maintenance, rescue infrastructure, security patrols and weather data which would simultaneously cement Russia's primary role in Arctic affairs as well as reap significant economic gain and Russian Arctic development (Monteleone, 2016). As Monteleone identifies, the Northwest passage – which dominated Arctic exploration for over a century and witnessed four European empires race for its discovery – is once again at the forefront of contemporary Arctic narratives (Monteleone, 2016).



Fig. 1.3 Laser projection of nations flags taking part in the Sochi Olympic Torch Relay at the Geographic North Pole. (2012).
[Online photograph].

The current volatile nature of the territory, not just in terms of the political threats of military conflict and nation state land ownership, but also the environmental decline of the region, as I stated earlier, all attest to the crucial need to re-evaluate the underdeveloped study of visual representations of the Arctic. As I will continue to argue, our perception of the Arctic and its myriad of histories have almost exclusively been formed through visual and literary representations, real, imagined and speculative. As the authors of *Arctic Discourses* assert, these accounts constitute how the Arctic is perceived as they form 'major sources of powerful and popular images and assumptions' which in turn has a 'decisive influence on the development of European and Western interaction with the Arctic' (Ryall, 2010: ix). It is therefore imperative that these Western representations are questioned and re-aligned with the reality of the region as it remains shrouded by persistent tropes of Arctic life, or 'Arcticisms' as termed by Ryall in *Arctic Discourses* (Ryall, 2010: x). Propelled by the West's repetitive production of Arctic topoi, the term *Arcticism* describes the 'consolidated, self-perpetuating visions' (Ryall, 2010: x) in relation to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. As the authors define:

'Within this "Arcticism", images of the natural or indigenous other are reproduced and naturalised, taken for granted. Arcticism also becomes a strategy of imagining the self, for example, as an explorer hero, a scientific worker, or a white, imperial male. It can also be a strong force in the imagining of the collective identities of empires, nations and minorities.'

- (Ryall, 2010: x)

My aim is therefore to demystify and problematise classic and troublesome *Arcticism* of blankness, neutrality and sublimity by laying out a summary of the fraught contemporary political context of the region to commence this study. As I have emphasised, the increased militarisation in the territory and focus on ownership renders the Arctic a rapidly changing space, all eyes are on it, enabling the High North to become one of the most important spaces for global futures. This fragile context inevitably impacts my reading of Akomfrah and Julien's respective Arctic films and allows me to draw from many disciplines engaging with the Arctic (political ecology, political economies, human geography, literary studies) and unite threads of critical Arctic research in order to create an original study which contributes to the field of critical Arctic studies and helps to

prompt a gradual change in dominant Arctic discourse. As I laid out in the introduction and would like to emphasise at this juncture once again, the field of critical Arctic studies is reliant on other established academic disciplines. As Anka Ryall acutely identifies ‘any piece of Arctic discourse will be piggy-backing on other established discourses, exoticism, ecological, scientific, indigenous, imperial, masculine etc’ (Ryall, 2010: xi). This methodology is evident as my thesis progresses, where I use studies of the North, the cold (thermodynamics), whiteness, alpinism, Bergfilm, and science-fiction to create a new perspective of the High North through an interdisciplinary reading of *The Nine Muses* and *True North*.

Arctic Histories

‘Still, the North remains an empty space not just for environmental historians but also for most historians. A general history of the North, or the circumpolar region is yet to be found. The reason is not hard to see; apart from the old stereotype of emptiness and silence the global North has not, until quite recently been a region in its own right. Divided into national spheres of influence and colonial possession, it has lacked unity and commonality in conventional political and economic terms. It has been perceived as not holding one history but many histories, and although these have been increasingly told in recent decades – as extensions of various strands of historical approaches, be it economic, technological, environmental, or political – virtually no one has attempted a common historical frame on a professional scholarly level.’

- (Jørgenson and Sörlin, 2013: 2)

As Dolley Jørgenson and Sverker Sörlin point to above, for the historian, the Arctic remains largely silent. With the territory being portioned up into colonial possession and the exploration narrative dominating Arctic discourse for over a century, the history recorded is variable and often exaggerated to fit with colonial ideology. As remarked earlier, there has and continues to be an overwhelming reliance on the role of visual and literary narratives that were sent back to home territories to form an understanding of the relationship between the colonial explorer and the Arctic. I want to consider these

histories in order to underscore the instrumental function historical narratives have played in constructing and maintaining the territories perceived 'silence', 'blankness' and 'sublimity', and ultimately as a means to produce counter dialogues. As Ryall et al. propose, examining Western perceptions of the Arctic raises questions of power imbalances that remain between dominant representations from outsiders and indigenous counter discourses (Ryall, 2010: xi). Having surveyed the existing literature, what must be emphasised is that the history of the Arctic, and consequently exploration, is one that continues on a clear trajectory, reliant predominantly on Western explorers accounts, chiefly 19th century colonial activity from Britain, USA, Russia and Norway.⁷ As the written history of the region exists in a singular lineage, often chronological developments of expeditions, there is a distinct lack of critical analysis. The histories available are largely written within colonial contexts of nationalism, heroic masculinity and sensationalism, with very little evidentiary material originating from indigenous communities in the Arctic.

Historical records suggest humankind have explored the Arctic territories since 325 BCE, the Greeks being attributed to making the first voyages to the High North. The Middle Ages are marked by expeditions of Vikings as well as the Scandinavian peoples pushing further north. Historian Adam Day suggests it was not until the Renaissance period, with the impetus of resurging 'classical learning' and nationalistic policies of expansionism, that white Europeans began the age of Arctic exploration (Day, 2006). However, due to insufficient maritime technology and inadequate clothing against the freezing temperatures, the expeditions were greatly hampered. In 1409 Ptolemy's *Geographia* – a treatise on cartography and a compilation of what was known about the worlds geography in the Roman Empire of the 2nd century – was translated into Latin, thereby introducing concepts of latitude and longitude to Western Europe. Day suggests this discovery allowed the navigators to accurately chart global positions, and sparked a renewed interest in the race to the Orient for the purpose of trade (Day, 2006). European powerhouses such as England, Spain and Portugal were in competition to find the long sought Northwest Passage; at that time connecting the northern Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the

⁷ See A. Brandt (ed.), *The North Pole: A Narrative History*, Washington, National Geographic Society, 2005; E. Kolbert (ed.), *The Arctic: An Anthology*, London, Granta, 2008; R. McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007; M. Lainema and J. Nurminen, *A History of Arctic Exploration: Discovery Adventure and Endurance at the Top of the World*, London, New York, Conway, 2009, and G. Williams, *Arctic Labyrinth: The Quest for the Northwest Passage*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010.

Arctic Ocean, along the northern coast of North America via waterways through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago⁸ (Day, 2006).

The year 1845 marked the departure of English explorer sir John Franklin's ships the HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* to locate the Northwest Passage. The expedition provided a platform for Britain to take centre stage in the 'race for the poles' and constituted the greatest public following of an Arctic expedition in British history, one that as Hill posits can be understood as an act of affirming ideological imperial white masculine identities for the advancement of nation building (Hill, 2008). Franklin, a Royal Navy Officer and experienced explorer, was commissioned at the age of fifty-nine to explore the previously un-navigated section of the Northwest Passage. However, following two fatal accidents the ships became stranded in what is now recognised as the Victoria Strait in the Canadian Arctic. The mystery surrounding the crew's demise fuelled intense public interest for years to follow, laying the foundations for exaggerated aesthetic depictions of the sublime (Hill, 2008). As was recorded in literature for the recent exhibition *Death in the Ice: The Shocking Story of Franklin's Final Expedition* (2017) at the National Maritime Museum, between 1847 and 1880, over thirty search expeditions were commissioned to locate the *Erebus* and *Terror* and their 128-man crew, the disappearance of Franklin and his men captured the Victorian public imagination. Speculation of cannibalism and madness being induced by lead poisoning further sensationalised the narrative (John Franklin's Final North-West Passage Expedition 1845, 2017).

The legacy of these exaggerated narratives made themselves evident in the abundance of British literary works of the time, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Charles Dickens' *The Frozen Deep* (1856) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). As Hill states, 'the mid-19th century cultural preoccupation with the fate of the Franklin expedition can be more fully understood in the context of the wider and more long-term function of Arctic space in the British cultural imaginary' (Hill, 2008: 3). The author emphasises the importance of analysing 'Englishness' in relation to 19th century expeditions and the identity endowing properties of place. As Hill explicates,

'the Arctic in the 19th century was one such space, one that even as it was mapped by British explorers, remained out of the reach of ordinary people, and was thus paradoxically perceived to be accessible to all as a

⁸ After a series of expeditions, the passage was first successfully navigated by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen between 1903-1906 and continued to be an important marker for Arctic exploration history, a period that is well documented by historians.

representational space, a blank page on which to draft different national and imperial narratives that either embraced or critiqued Britain's increased investment in imperial and colonial identities[.] Assertions and critiques of nation and empire could unroll at a literal safe distance'

- (Hill, 2008: 2-3)

Hill's assertion that the Arctic functioned as a representational space to draft critiques of Britain's colonial identity leads me back to a central question of this thesis: does the Arctic provide the same function for Akomfrah and Julien – as a blank space to draft assertions and critiques on domestic affairs, and if so, does this compromise the politics of the respective films which are, at the core, created within anti-racist and anti-imperialist thought? I explore this question further within my analysis of the works in chapters two and three.



Fig. 1.4 William Smith. (1854). *They forged the last links with their lives.* [Oil on canvas] London: Royal Museums Greenwich.

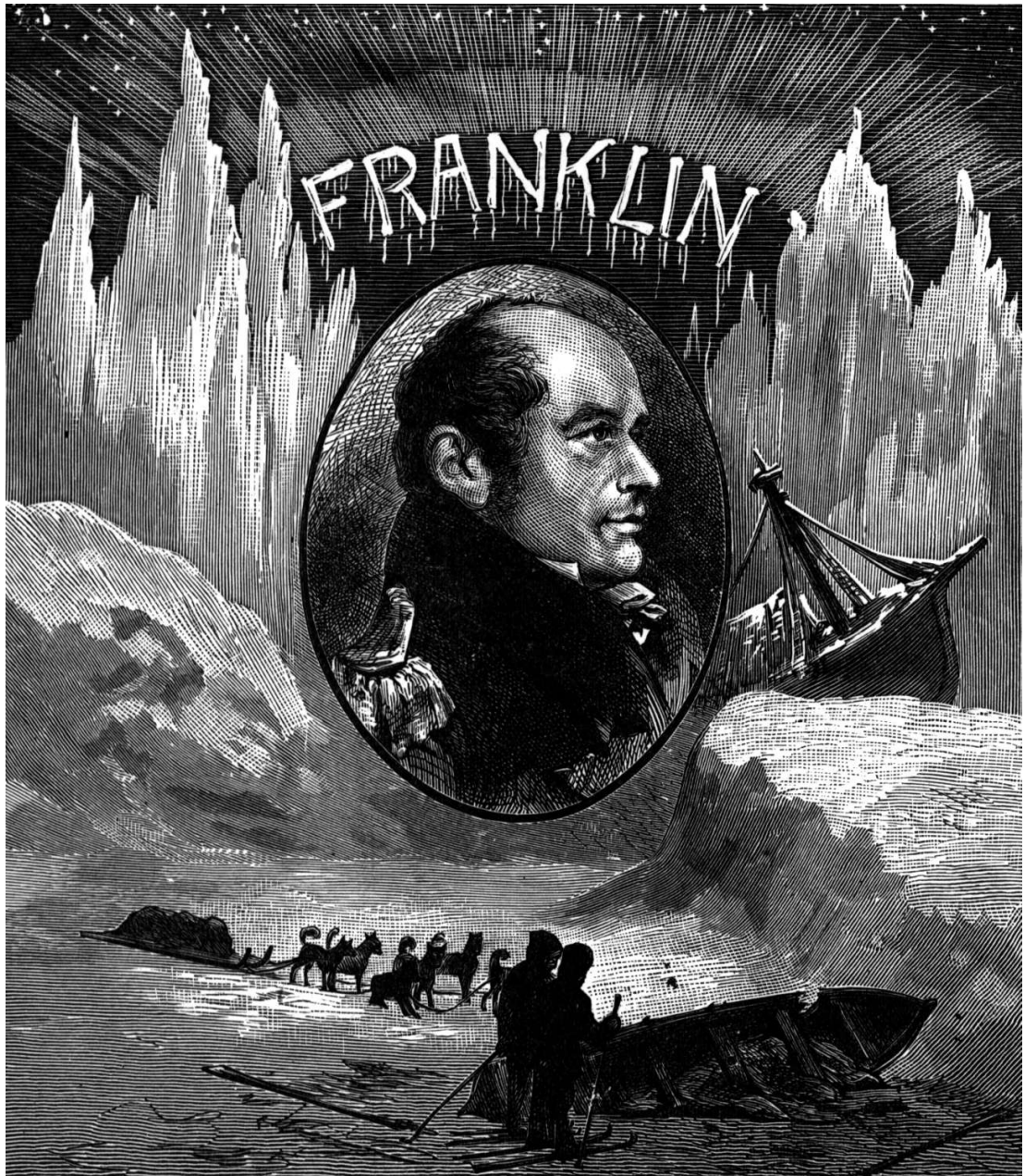


Fig. 1.5 Sir John Franklin, artists impression, artist & date unknown [online image].

Arctic Literary Criticism

As explicated above, Western exploration narratives were instrumental in constructing representations of the Arctic, primarily through illustrated and photographic images combined with literary material which were sent back to the home territories (see fig. 1.4 and 1.5). While there is a wealth of literature tracing a history of Western exploration through dominant exploration narratives, there is a distinct lack of critical engagement with the general history of the Arctic. This sentiment is supported by Jørgenson and Sörlin's statement, that although Arctic histories have been increasingly discussed in recent decades 'as extensions of economic, technological, environmental or political – virtually no one has attempted a common historical frame on a scholarly level' (Jørgenson and Sörlin, 2013). Since the authors published this view, there has been no change. Aspects of Arctic history have been challenged, however there is still no common historical framework to provide a foundation for critical Arctic studies to emerge. This section of the thesis is therefore intended to map the limited territory of texts which engage critically with the High North and examine the most relevant studies which have provided an important foundation to build my research upon, with the aim of situating this thesis in the field of critical Arctic studies.

A pivotal critical text is Hill's *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth Century British Imagination*. Although I have previously referenced this book, for the purposes of this chapter it is necessary to return and discuss the text in detail as it connects the male-dominated exploration of the Arctic to 19th century British understandings of masculine identity, nation building and the expansion of the British Empire. Bridging historical and literary studies, the author organises her text around the narratives of the Franklin expedition, Jane Eyre, Frankenstein, and the literary collaboration between Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins' *The Frozen Deep*. One of the first works in 19th century polar studies to discuss the Arctic in relation to the British Empire, Hill insightfully reveals the constructions of the Arctic territories and their place in the public imaginary through the careful analysis of popular writing at that time.

White Horizon is set apart from a number of other texts in the genre of critical Arctic studies as she acknowledges the concept of racial whiteness in relation to the constructions of the territory. Coining the phrase *heart of whiteness* (Hill, 2008), Hill's *White Horizon* is a foundational text for this thesis. I want to expand a number of Hill's theories into new contexts and apply them to evidence my argument that historical

constructions of the territory as literally and symbolically white prevail throughout contemporary visual culture. However, while I find many areas of the author's work insightful, I deem it troublesome that although a mapping of British empire and its relationship with exploration is evidenced in the work, Hill does not apply postcolonial theory to an analysis of the Arctic territory. I contend postcolonialism is an essential concept for a reading of the Arctic, particularly with regards to the indigenous Arctic populations and the legacies of imperialist exploration for notions of race in Britain. I apply postcolonial theory to my investigation of Arctic representations in order to create a nuanced reading of Akomfrah and Julien's work in relation to British arctic histories whilst simultaneously arguing for the Arctic territories place within postcolonial discourse.

White Horizon is one of a handful of works that have been produced in recent years that examine 19th century Arctic literary criticism beginning with Beau Riffenburgh's *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (1993) and continuing with Lisa Bloom's *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Exploration* (1993), Sarah Moss's *The Frozen Ship: The Histories and Tales of Polar Exploration* (1994), Francis Spufford's *I May be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (1996), Fergus Fleming's *Barrow's Boys* (1998), Robert G. David's *The Arctic in the British Imagination, 1818–1914* (2000), Eric G. Wilson's *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Ice and the English Imagination* (2003) and Anna Ryall et al.'s *Arctic Discourses* (2010). David's book, *The Arctic in the British Imagination, 1818–1914* offers the only comprehensive study to date of visual Arctic material produced and circulated in Britain around the early 19th century. Drawing upon representational theory and applying it to the Arctic, David's work is a study of the vital place of the Arctic in the mental landscape of Victorian Britain. Through a chronology of media including paintings, panoramas, dioramas, advertising, travel narratives, international exhibitions, plays, newspapers, illustrated press, children's books and lectures organised by geographical societies, he evidences the prominent position the Arctic held in identity politics in Britain between 1818 and 1914, and the vital role of the press in forming and maintaining the public's interest in Arctic exploration. The study of all of these forms of media over a prolonged period of time allows for an accurate assessment of their changing importance and enables an argument to be constructed for Arctic representations.

Through the volume and range of media, David goes some way to answer the question: why, given the huge risks and cost of so many human lives, was Arctic exploration pursued with such tenacity for no significant material gain? Furthermore, why was it

enthusiastically supported by the Victorian public? (David, 2000). An extension of Beau Riffenburgh's *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism and Geographical Discovery*, David's text pays attention to the role of the illustrated press, from a social-historical perspective, to illuminate the tactics employed by journalists in order to create a surge of interest around the subject of Arctic Exploration (David, 2000). Clear timespans are laid out in order to reveal that Arctic exploration, like scientific and medical discovery, had become an intrinsic element of Western mentality. Furthermore, exploration across the polar regions and the more traditional imperial locations of Africa and India had, according to Riffenburgh, become an instrument to achieve 'moral, racial, spiritual, and physical supremacy [...] justifying nationalist doctrine and embodying the supposed collective cultural superiority of the nation [of Britain]' (Riffenburgh, 1994: 4).

In line with Riffenburgh's earlier analysis, David's study provides strong arguments for the journalist-explorer relationship as one which not only relates to the history of the press and exploration, but 'connects with modes of imperialism, and the diffusion and absorption of knowledge in the public realm' (Riffenburgh, 1994: 3). With direct relevance to my own study, these texts provide a legacy of Arctic visual and literary narratives to build upon and extend within a rare critical context. They each contain arguments that support and evidence the persistent tropes of the Arctic territory. Furthermore, David's text existing as the only critical source (in terms of visual criticality and the British context) also helps to reinforce the importance for new studies, such as this thesis, to introduce contemporary visual examples to the field of critical Arctic studies and to attribute their significance to contemporary geopolitical issues. One of the imperatives for this research was born from the fact Akomfrah and Julien's films were released and exist within the realm of contemporary visual art. By writing about the conceptual films in relation to historical and contemporary accounts of the region, a new context is formed, with the filmic artworks providing a bridge from one area of study into another.

The recent volume *Arctic Discourses* (2010), edited by Anna Ryall, John Schimanski and Henning H. Waerp, provides a rich mix of historical and contemporary critical analysis conceptualised from a research project (Arktiske Diskurser) based at the University of Tromsø, Norway – the most northerly University in the world – with academics specialising in political science, history, visual arts, literature, and music. The selection of essays examines fictional and non-fictional accounts of the Arctic from the 1800s to the present in order to provide a wide-reaching investigation into Arctic discourses. The introduction establishes the title word *discourse* is an invitation to think about notions of

power and control, particularly the relation between dominant Western narratives and indigenous counter-narratives, 'answering back from the Arctic' (Ryall et al., 2010: 3). The various chapters reflect on the myriad of Arctic representations and investigate conflicting versions of the space as a designated imaginary landscape through an analysis of scientific reports, exploration narratives, travel writing, crime fiction, visual arts, music, poetry and prose. Topics in the book range from *Kund Rasmussen and the Ambivalence of Cultural Translation*, *The Conquest of the Arctic: The 1937 Soviet Expedition*, *Arctic Crime Discourse* to *Nils-Aslak Vakepaa: Indigenous Voice and Multimedia Artist Harald Gaski* demonstrating the breadth of the books enquiries. Modelled on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the authors offer the term *Arcticism* as a way to describe their consolidated study on Arctic representations and the intersection of discourses of modernity, race, ecology, indigeneity and aesthetics (Ryall, 2010). One of the only critical studies to emerge which dedicates space for Arctic peoples and the legacy of colonisation, this text fills a necessary gap in the field by providing perspectives from both inside and outside the Arctic. While the geographic scope of the book is vast, many of the sentiments concerning the postcolonial nature of the space chime with my own research aims and inform my arguments on how Akomfrah and Julien interact with ideas of the Arctic as an inhabited postcolonial space.

Lisa Bloom's *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Exploration* (1993) falls into the category of literary criticism, however, the author has gone on to produce multiple reviews and essays – as an extension of the book – with reference to contemporary art practice, including Isaac Julien's *True North*. *Gender on Ice* is a feminist critique of Euro-American masculine polar exploration and its relationship to theories of nationalism and race, particularly how the activity produced and validated contemporary ideologies of masculinity. Bloom creates a sustained study on the intrinsic relationship between the National Geographic Society, which avidly supported polar expeditions, and the explorers' personal accounts, positing that American explorers Robert Peary and Robert Falcon, the expeditions which form her case studies, rendered reports of their individual polar journeys in a manner which greatly exaggerated ideas of heroism thereby embodying American masculinist doctrine (Bloom 1993). The rise of photography in the mass media at the time of Peary's fame was used as an instrument to support views of American superiority in scientific and cultural development. Bloom presents evidence of an entanglement of political interests, revealing that subsequent to the endorsement of Robert Peary from the National Geographic magazine ahead of his expedition in 1909, it had no choice other than to support him, otherwise masculine ideologies, scientific

progress, mythologies, and economic power would become instantly discredited (Bloom, 1993).

Rectifying both gender and race biases in the fields of historical travel and tourism, Bloom examines Peary's treatment of his associate explorer Henson – his companion on seven expeditions over twenty-three years. As laid out in the introduction, Henson was elided from Peary's expedition accounts, his central role of navigator, engineer, and translator was reduced to that of an assistant. By discussing the realities of Henson's treatment by Peary and the rest of the scientific community at that time, Bloom reveals the operations of racial discrimination in early 20th century America (Bloom, 1993). Bloom provides evidence that the survival of Peary and his 1909 Arctic expedition relied predominantly on Henson's skills, disrupting the white male exploration narrative and demystifying the heroism associated with Peary (Bloom, 1993).

To date only two sustained critical academic studies exist which investigate Henson's exploration legacy. The first was conducted by S. Allen Counter *North Pole Legacy: Black, White and Eskimo* (1991), which serves as a personal account of the author's trials and tribulations to bring the story of Henson to popular attention in America. While conducting audiology research on Inuit communities in the Swedish Arctic, Counter became aware of stories that mixed-heritage men, thought to be the descendants of Henson and Peary, were living in a remote area of Greenland. An African-American himself, Counter became committed to raising awareness of the achievements of Henson. *North Pole Legacy* details the author's travel to Greenland and the relationship he forged with Anaukaq Henson, son of Matthew Henson and Kali Peary, son of Robert Peary, and the lengths the author went to in order to facilitate contact with their respective American relatives. Comprising a vast array of oral histories as relayed from Inuit communities within the Arctic, Counter's text was instrumental in verifying the story of Henson and positioning him as a pioneering figure within American polar exploration history. Bloom's text *Gender on Ice* constitutes the second substantial critical exploration study which examines the history of Henson. Bloom references Counter's text throughout her own study and uses it as a foundation to discuss how racial discrimination overlaps and intersects with American exploration histories. It is within Julien's *True North* that Henson's experience, combined with Bloom's theories and Counter's oral histories, is visualised.

Gender on Ice provides an understanding of the American context of colonial exploration, and thereby illuminates the differences between British polar exploration and the American model. Britain's polar century happened far earlier than America's and constructed imperialist ideologies through mediums of explorers' diaries, drawings, paintings and the illustrated press. The power of combined visual and literary Victorian narratives that were predominantly subjective portrayals or impressions of the territory, aided the mythology which surrounded British Arctic exploration. In terms of visual polar narratives, America constructed theirs using photography and film, it was not so much imagined as a controlled perspective.

Sixteen years after the publication of *Gender on Ice*, Bloom wrote an essay for NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art titled, *Arctic Spaces: Politics and Aesthetics in True North* (2010) which discussed Julien's work, six years after the film's initial release. The article serves as a review of Julien's film, reintegrating material from *Gender on Ice* in order to reconsider the book and its relation to *True North*. Continuing to focus on the narrative of Peary and the American context of early 19th century exploration, Bloom analyses Julien's film in relation to the themes of masculinity and power. While the article is acutely insightful and has informed my reading of *True North*, my own sustained engagement with cultural and political visual representations of the Arctic and their intersection with whiteness is what separates my research from Bloom's. While Bloom acknowledges the concept of whiteness, it is not the driving force behind her enquiry, rather it is Julien's extended research on Henson and his relationship with Peary that Bloom is preoccupied with. Historical literary narratives informed the book and continue to take centre stage in her critical Arctic enquiries. My own research departs from the specific context of American exploration to consider the construction of the region through a more expansive timeframe of cultural and political visual representations, analysed in relation to the aesthetic strategies at play in the Arctic films of Akomfrah and Julien, who have conceptualised the artworks within a British context and from a position of resistance.

Contemporary Visual Arctic Criticism

There are only two substantial works within the field of critical Arctic studies which look at contemporary instances of visual Arctic narratives, rendering the field under-researched: the 2012 publication *Far Field: Digital Culture, Climate Change, and the Poles*

edited by Jane Marsching and Andrea Polli and the more recent 2015 *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic* edited by Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerstahl Stensport, both of which have been conceptualised and edited by American and Canadian based scholars. *Films on Ice* marks the first complete text to address an expansive range of Northern circumpolar cinemas from a transnational perspective. Aiming to present the Arctic as a region which contains much overlooked cinematic diversity, the editors invite a number of scholars from diverse geographies to critically examine polar explorer films, silent cinema, documentaries, ethnographic and indigenous film, gender and ecology, in addition to Hollywood productions and the USSR's employment of the Arctic in films from 1989 to the present. By compiling a volume of such variety in terms of cinemas that have been inspired by the Arctic and emerged from it, the authors fulfil their mission to alter the stereotypical assumptions of the region and reframe film history itself.

Films on Ice creates a ground-breaking genre, of which I contend my own research can be located within what the editors term 'a new conceptual rubric within World Cinema called *Arctic Cinemas*' (MacKenzie and Stenport, 2015: 1). This thesis provides a similar function to *Films on Ice* whereby it brings together Arctic films which have never before been examined in relation to each other, analysing connections and allowing new dialogues to emerge by revealing their significance for the visual, cultural and political history of the Arctic. My research could be considered to attend to and extend the limited engagement *Films on Ice* has with contemporary British film, particularly in light of the trend I have identified of black British filmmakers using the High North to describe notions of whiteness. Although *Films on Ice* has been a pivotal text for this research, there is no chapter within the book that solely focuses on the racial constructions of the Arctic as a literal and symbolic white space. The intersection of visual representations of the Arctic and formations of racial identities is an area which is not explicitly dealt with, and it is within that gap that I situate my own research.

Bridging contemporary cultural studies and the critical study of climate change, the second text *Far Field* (2012) presents thirteen essays on the rapidly changing environments of the North and South Poles. Focused primarily on issues of climate change, the contributors offer artistic, technological, scientific, philosophical and spiritual understandings of the poles and their shifts in cultural significance over the past decade. The book encapsulates the dramatic shift in Arctic representations with the advent of digital technology and climate change consciousness. As the introduction of the text lays out, the poles have been communicated to the public through varying forms of media;

historically this was the printing press, lithography and lantern slide shows, all of which provided highly sensationalised and often unreal subjective depictions of the territory (Marsching and Polli, 2012). With the emergence of new and sophisticated technology, remote real-time encounters with the poles are possible for the first time in our history. The poles have shifted from masculine proving grounds to spaces of Western scientific research and barometers for global climatic health in the 21st century. As the authors assert:

‘In the middle of climate change media super-saturation, age-old narratives of exploration, myth and literary imagination yield to the data of satellites and ocean currents. What was once Shelly’s Frankenstein lecturing about the quest for glory on the way to the North Pole in the popular imagination is now Al Gore on an elevating platform gesturing towards complex graphs of temperature fluctuations. Technologies of communication deployed by science, industrialization, and geopolitical concerns picture this territory now. What was once considered a wilderness foreign to Western culture is now a harbinger of the future, and so has become part of this culture. The natural, the technological, and the production of data are no longer in conflict, but exist in reciprocal need.’

(Marsching and Polli, 2009:1)

Particularly relevant to my own research is an essay located in *Far Field* titled *Disappearing Ice and Missing Data: Climate Change in the Visual Culture of the Polar Regions* by Bloom and Elana Glasberg which looks at how photographers represent the poles as locations which have historically remained outside the global system and are now, very suddenly, intricately connected to a myriad of concerns around the world (Bloom and Glasberg, 2009). The authors reference a number of artworks, films and media to create a sustained focus on the new and emergent Arctic visual representations proposing that global warming is a complex discourse through which geopolitics, aesthetics, science and environmental concerns come together. Despite the onset of visual and virtual accessibility with new images of the Arctic emerging within the context of current ecological concerns, historical romantic and heroic images of the Arctic remain

dominant in visual representations of the region. As such, there is a stark disjuncture of Arctic representations as the region grapples with shifts in identity. To further clarify, the Arctic has been persistently represented within the aesthetic category of *the sublime*, an unchanging, timeless space. However, with the onset of environmental threats, increased militarisation in the region and political collusions for ownership, the Arctic is no longer silent and still. This stark shift in the region's identity is an aspect which Akomfrah and Julien's filmic works allow me to examine. As I will continue to discuss throughout this thesis, Akomfrah and Julien illuminate the conflict in Arctic representations within their respective films by interlacing scenes of an industrialised and peopled Arctic with images of sublime, otherworldly Arctic space, facilitating new Arctic dialogues to emerge.

As a development of *Far Field's* illumination of the Arctic as an increasingly technologised space and its strong links to notions of critical futures, I dedicate chapter five to an analysis of Akomfrah and Julien's films as they intersect with themes of technology, science-fiction narratives and, most significantly, Afrofuturism as a conceptual and aesthetic strategy which facilitates the democratisation of space. To date, only one study exists which creates a sustained analysis on the historic and contemporary visual and literary relationship the Arctic has with the genre of science fiction: Eric G. Wilson's *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Ice and the Imagination* (2003). Within the book's introduction, Wilson lays out some literary context which parallels the resurgence of Arctic images: between the years of April 1997 to July 2001, *The New York Times* recorded at least twenty-two books on polar phenomena, yet between the earlier period of April 1990 to June 1996, *The Times* reviewed only four polar texts in total (Wilson, 2003). The author explores what links exist between ice and notions of science fiction and the apocalypse. Divided into three sections, *Crystals*, *Glaciers*, and *The Poles*, Wilson addresses the neglected context of the Romantic Age by tracing a history of ice through the 19th century figures of Coleridge, Poe and Shelley who challenged traditional representations of ice as expanses of waste and recognised the poles as poetic spaces full of life. Wilson focuses on historical literary examples and their related images and I want to extend this study by reading it in relation to Akomfrah and Julien's films, transferring Wilson's theory into a new context of contemporary visual culture and the politics of coldness.

Shortly after the burst of polar fiction works identified by *The New York Times* (1997–2001) appeared, a number of interdisciplinary art works emerged which featured the Arctic as a key theme and space. This collection of films, which I have identified and termed as a *trend* in the introduction, emerged around the time global climate change

consciousness was gathering pace in a Euro-American context. However, the theoretical and historical references the artists make within the trend's artworks suggest their incorporation of the Arctic was more about the symbolic potential of the landscape to revision imperial ideologies associated with the space, thereby they became distinct from a collection of other artworks examining the Arctic at the time. Alongside the *trend*, a number of large-scale artistic projects began to form which focused on issues of climate change, science and technology, looking to the Arctic as the pinnacle location for visualising ecological degradation. As a form of eco-activism, the artistic multidisciplinary projects employed the Arctic as a key site to communicate notions of urgency and loss.

One such example is *Cape Farewell* (2001–present), an interdisciplinary artistic project of monumental scale, formed in Britain by the artist David Buckland. *Cape Farewell* constitutes one of the most prominent British projects focused on the subject of political ecology. It aims to instigate a cultural response to climate change in the Arctic and has gained wide-spread media attention across the globe. Working internationally, *Cape Farewell* brings artists, designers, filmmakers, scientists and academics together in the Arctic region in order to engage with environmental issues and reinforce the urgency of the global climate challenge (*Cape Farewell*, 2017). As the cultural critic T.J. Demos articulates within his introduction to *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2016), the term 'political ecology' as it intersects with contemporary art and environmental activism 'acknowledges approaches to the environment that, although potentially divergent, nevertheless insist on environmental matters of concern as inextricable from social, political, and economic forces' (Demos, 2016: 7).

Since 2001, *Cape Farewell* have conducted eight expeditions to the Arctic, each with the aim of combining science and creative arts in order to raise public awareness of climate change. The project cites the reason for continued return to the territory as, 'the notion of expedition – Arctic, island, urban and conceptual – to interrogate the scientific, social and economic realities that lead to climate disruption' (*The Expedition*, 2017). Whilst I follow another of Demos' propositions that legible visual forms which take on a populist dimension, opposed to experimental and abstract meditations, invest in the potential to reach wide audiences and affect social transformation (Demos, 2016), the nature of *Cape Farewell's* 'explorative journeying' I view as problematic. The intricate cultural and social politics of the Arctic are underdeveloped within a number of *Cape Farewell's* smaller satellite Arctic projects and go against what Demos states above as the important

interrelation of social, political and economic within studies of political ecology (Demos, 2016).

A number of *Cape Farewell's* Arctic projects bring large teams of practitioners into the Arctic, continuing a long tradition of bringing Western traffic to the region. The volatile and multi-layered geopolitical climate of the Arctic demands questions of agency, autonomy and sovereignty for all parties who journey to the area under political auspices. While there are many critical and rigorously-researched smaller projects within the large group expeditions, there appears to be a lack of critical engagement which extends across the project as a whole and engages with the territory as a postcolonial site, regions of which have Inuit communities striving for self-governance. The project leads me to question if the manner in which these expeditions are undertaken proposes journeying to the Arctic is some form of artistic endeavour in itself; does the journey constitute the artwork? If so, this would be dangerously reminiscent of original colonial polar exploration which was in essence a test of the individual character and an act of self-affirmation. As MacKenzie and Stenport lay out as a key principle in their introduction to *Films on Ice*, there exists a wealth of eco-activism work emerging from the Arctic by First Nation artists, therefore, would it be better to channel efforts into amplifying their voices and creating cross-cultural exchanges rather than repeating (consciously or not, and despite admirable intentions) a tradition of bringing Western voices in, only to project them back out?

Bringing Western traffic into the Arctic is a critical political and environmental issue in light of the surging popularity of Arctic tourism. The tourism industry in the Arctic encompasses several aspects such as nature tourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism and sport fishing and hunting. Arctic states such as Norway, Iceland, Canada, Russia and Alaska operate tourist programmes to bolster state economies, while Iceland relies on it as its second largest industry with an annual growth of 9% since 1990. As the article by Hanna Krueger points out, in 1990 only 7,952 cruises passed through Iceland, however by 2016, 250,000 were visiting annually, the majority of which were Chinese tourists (Krueger, 2018). According to strategist John Snider, tourism development became essential for Inuit communities in Greenland, Nunavut, Manitoba, Yukon and the Russian Federation to create economic stability, with tourists representing the single largest human presence in the Arctic (Snider, 2007).

Tourists are drawn to the region for what Krueger terms 'last chance tourism' in relation to the fragility of the environment and its increasing degradation (Krueger, 2018), however,

paradoxically, the effect of the industry is causing further decline in terms of strains on the already scarce natural resources and the obvious environmental impacts which global travel brings. In line with Demos' earlier proposition of affecting social change, Kruegar identifies that at the heart of the region's tourism lies a 'dark irony: tourists further endanger the Arctic's environment, but their experience may also result in them taking action to protect it after returning home' (Kruegar, 2018). Less optimistically, I do not believe the positive effects of climate change consciousness which may be gained from this manner of mass journeying are enough to circumvent its devastating effects. Therefore, I am compelled to question the role which artistic tourism plays in current Arctic environmental politics and whether or not large-scale projects such as *Cape Farewell* which revisit the Arctic regularly are doing enough to critically reflect on the role they play in this complex industry.



Fig. 1.6 Siobhan Davies. (2005). *Walking Dance*. A Cape Farewell project [documentation of performance].

By laying out the historical and contemporary political, cultural and artistic landscape of the Arctic territories, I hope to have demonstrated that the exploration narrative is the single most influential aspect of how the history of the Arctic has been written and represented in the West, and how this intersects with nationalism, race and masculinity, all of which continue to influence how the Arctic is interacted with on a global scale today. By summarising the volatile contemporary politics of the region, I underpin the urgency for new studies such as this, to better understand the myriad of histories of the Arctic, but also to interrupt the enduring and dominant representations of blankness and silence. The historical and contemporary politics of the region are key to gaining a more meaningful engagement with the works of Akomfrah and Julien, and to create an original and nuanced

reading of their geopolitical and cultural significance. By presenting a review of substantial literature produced within the field of critical Arctic studies I hope to have illustrated the originality and necessity of my thesis and position it as a contribution to the small collection of studies which have been produced to date.

To conclude, the field of critical Arctic studies is a new academic territory with only eight books in existence which focus on critical literary studies, and two which look at contemporary visual representations of the Arctic, as such it is glaringly underdeveloped. Despite Britain's primary role in Arctic exploration and the subsequent wealth of historical material it has produced on the topic, no study exists which examines contemporary visual representations of the region. While literary criticism has emerged reflecting critically on Arctic narratives in the British context, no substantial study exists which primarily analyses the visual. I propose two of the richest British enquiries to extend and develop critical thinking on the Arctic as a postcolonial space are Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North*. By creating an in-depth and interdisciplinary analysis of their works, this study offers a contribution to the underdeveloped field of critical Arctic studies emerging from Britain, to help navigate the counter-histories of the territory through contemporary visual culture and provide a new cultural context to the analysis: black British filmmakers exposing the history of white colonial exploration and its intersections with nationalism, race and masculinity. Akomfrah and Julien's engagement with the territory reveals and extends the existing studies in a new and meaningful way, not only for the Arctic but for postcolonial studies in Britain. In chapter two I develop my theoretical framework from this contextual chapter and create a sustained analysis of the first case study, Julien's *True North*.

Chapter Two

Isaac Julien's 'True North'



Fig. 2.1 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation] UK: Isaac Julien Studios.

'It's a white landscape linked to the sublime, but actually it's not a sublime, ideal landscape at all. It's "raced," it belongs to a culture, but in a postcolonial sense – it's the embodiment of ideals people have about themselves in relation to fixed notions of identity and national belonging as well as a European idea about landscape.'

- Julien (Kaplan, 2005)

Shot in Iceland and the circumpolar region of Sweden, *True North* is a fourteen-minute, visually lush three-screen audio-visual colour installation which serves as a radical repositioning of a black subject reclaiming Arctic space, which, as Julien states above, has been 'raced' through European imperial interests (Kaplan, 2005). A conceptual meditation on the African American explorer Matthew Alexander Henson (1866–1955) who accompanied the white American explorer Admiral Robert Peary (1856–1920) to the North Pole in 1909, Julien visualises Henson's journey as a black man in a literal and symbolic white space, uncovering the tension and fear which underpinned Henson's relationship to Peary. Through a series of fragmented narratives depicting Henson's epic journey, Julien contemplates official and unofficial historical accounts of the first men to reach the North Pole simultaneously creating a counter narrative and testament to

Henson's crucial role. In Julien's words *True North* 'contests binaries which are present in many notions of the expedition and of adventure that clutter the history of discovery' (Julien, 2004).

The aim of this chapter is to create a comprehensive reading of *True North* as the first major artwork to explore the troubling relationship that unfolded between Henson and Peary following their ascent to the pole. Led by various visual frames and sequences in the film, I will discuss how the relationship between the explorers illuminates wider, inter-connected issues of racial dynamics, Inuit-explorer relations, official and unofficial histories and the power with which imperial masculinities governed nationalist colonial exploration. Drawing from primary research sources such as Henson and Peary's respective expedition accounts and archival recordings, I focus on the collective erosion of Henson's crucial role in the 1909 Arctic expedition in order to underscore the deeply racist motivations behind this. If we understand the history of polar exploration as a linear narrative of white men, conquering white space, then Henson's polar achievements not only challenge this narrative but also threaten the colonial ideology of white supremacy that fuelled it.

Casting a Critical Gaze

Produced as an audio-visual triptych installation spanning almost forty feet, *True North* necessitates a gallery setting rather than a traditional cinematic 'black box' context. Julien creates an immersive experience by designing the space in which the audience views the film, from the colour of the walls, often sharp whites or deep blues and teals in keeping with the Arctic landscape, to the scale of the installation space and the position of the viewer, who, when located in front of the triptych has their peripheral vision almost entirely absorbed by the expanse of screens. Fourteen minutes in length, the filmic installation encapsulates the notion of the sublime associated with the Arctic through a combination of surround sound and high definition visuals. Liberated from the fixity of single, central images within the traditional cinematic dark seated space, the viewer is able to move around the installation, shifting their perspective between the three sprawling screens. The installation thus becomes an exercise in complex perception, a whole-body experience in which the Arctic environment is mediated to the viewer through a hyper-produced cinematic display.

As Julien stated in an interview about the making of *True North* and his decision to return to a gallery setting opposed to a traditional cinematic 'black box', his choice of an exhibition format was one that allowed him to remember his own true vision of what cinema has the potential to be: 'film here [in Britain] is still quite structured around the idea of entertainment and the linear progression of a storyline, which means you don't have a lot of control. Artistic creativity is not prioritised in the same way it is in an art gallery' (Davies, 2005). By situating *True North* within a gallery setting, Julien created an experience that went beyond the fixity of the viewer and the screen, he carefully curated an environment for the images to be experienced within. Spaces of art traditionally encourage a critical gaze and nuanced vantage points, while destabilising expectations of a traditional linear film narrative and structure. The principles of criticality and nuanced perspectives which are so highly associated with experimental exhibition spaces are mirrored in *True North's* conceptual and physical composition: Julien creates an abstracted homage to Henson, rearticulating his experience and its wider significance for the cultural rendering of the Arctic territories via fractured narratives, fusing representations and relinquishing control while inviting the viewer to question the visual essay in relation to the conceptual space it is situated within.

True North opens with blinding whiteness which slowly dissolves to reveal a vast Arctic panorama. Accompanying images of Arctic space as it fills the expansive triptych, delicate sounds of icicles chime together, cold winds whisper and snow crunches under Henson's footsteps, creating an introduction to Julien's conceptual territory. In a poignant early scene (fig. 2.1), an immaculate white ice field is shadowed in part by a sprawling mountainscape, as if draped in black velvet, the absorbent darkness of its lumbering mass juxtaposed with the glittering whiteness of the foreground set the visual signifiers of the black-white racial binary which literally and conceptually unfold throughout *True North*. The sheer natural beauty of these Arctic vistas is emphasised through Julien's intensely technologised production values which echo Arctic exploration historian Bloom's assertion that European colonial exploration was fuelled not only by nationalistic urges for possession, but by a vehement aesthetic drive (Bloom 2008). *True North's* sharp, sumptuous imagery and critical conceptual basis mirror, and simultaneously counter, the intrinsic relationship between the seductive beauty of the Arctic landscape and Britain's historical relationship to the region which went beyond what Bloom terms as 'purposeful activity', such as exploration, science and discovery, and fulfilled a longing to experience the sublime (Bloom, 2008: 6).



Fig. 2.2 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation] UK: Isaac Julien Studios.

Through a series of early frames depicting highly stylised grand ice formations comprising sparkling whites, crystalline blues and deep moody teals, the viewer is introduced to the central character of *True North*, Henson, played by the black female actor Vanessa Myrie (fig. 2.2). Julien's employment of Myrie to re-imagine Henson's journey brings forth the subject of gender, creating a double disruption to traditional representations of who is perceived to 'belong' in Arctic space in terms of race and gender. Her tall, lean frame and shaven head signal androgyny, a notion that becomes key for Julien to simultaneously highlight and destabilise the pervasive imperial masculinity which defines exploration histories. I will return to Julien's casting and styling of Myrie later in this chapter, however, for now I want to lay the foundations for a critical reading of *True North* by providing the context for the conceptual core of Julien's film – the complex and tense relationship that unfolded between Henson and Peary which contributed to Henson's absence from official polar histories.

Henson and Peary: A Master/Slave Dialectic⁹



Fig. 2.3 Matthew Henson (left) and Robert Peary (right), 1908.

Escaping the racial violence that plagued the southern states of America in 1867, Henson's parents relocated from Maryland to raise their child in Georgetown. By age seven, due to the death of both of his parents, Henson was left an orphan and sent to complete his education at a black public school in Washington D.C. under the supervision of his uncle (Counter, 1991). Following the conclusion of his studies at age twelve, Henson travelled to Baltimore and enrolled as a cabin boy travelling to international ports such as China, Africa, Russia and Japan.

In 1887, during a period between voyages, Henson took a job at a clothes store in the city of Washington and it was here he met Peary. After learning of Henson's sailing experience, Peary, an established Navy officer, enlisted him, first as a valet, and subsequently as an aide for his planned surveying expedition to Nicaragua (Henson, 1912). Following this initial voyage, and spanning a period of twenty-three years, Henson undertook seven major expeditions as Peary's assistant. Serving as a principal navigator, blacksmith,

⁹ Title referencing Julien's statement on the relationship of Henson and Peary as embodying a master/slave dialectic (Kaplan, 2005).

craftsman and chief interpreter with Inuit communities, Henson played a pivotal role in Peary's American programme of Arctic exploration. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach the North Pole, Peary secured a final instalment of funding to embark on his last attempt to reach the pole. In July 1908 Peary, Henson and a twenty-two-man crew sailed from New York aboard the *SS Roosevelt* to the Arctic. Upon returning to America from the final voyage, Peary declared himself the first man to reach the highest point north, asserting he had reached the target on 6th April 1909.

Peary's claim as the 'discoverer' of the North Pole was subject to a number of contestations, one of which came from his fellow American explorer Frederick Cook, who served as a surgeon on Peary's earlier 1891 expedition to the Arctic. Just a few days after Peary's return to New York in 1909, Cook claimed he had reached the pole while leading his own expedition party one year previously. After a number of court trials, Cook's claim was dismissed and Peary was acknowledged as attaining the pole for the United States. Nonetheless, Peary's claim remained controversial and was subject to a procession of investigations¹⁰, the most extensive of which took place at a 1911 congressional hearing set up to decipher if, through an analysis of navigational documents, latitude observations and depth soundings, Peary had in fact reached the pole. The verdict was returned as inconsistent, revealing that Peary had neglected to keep accurate records of longitude or compass variation observations during the expedition and, as a result, the committee struck the words discover and discoverer from the record' (Bloom, 1993: 17). Despite this, the *National Geographic* which had tirelessly supported Peary, continued to proclaim him as the ultimate Arctic pioneer, which secured his continued position as a respected and accomplished explorer until his death in 1920 (Bloom, 1993: 97).

However, the most significant contestation of Peary, and the primary concern of this chapter, came from Henson. Published in 1966, forty years after Peary's death, Henson, during an earlier interview with the historian Robert Fowler,¹¹ stated that he had in fact reached the pole before Peary on the 1909 expedition:

'He [Peary] told me he wanted me to stop before I got to the pole. "I'll take one of the boys and go on from there," he said. But he had let it slip out what he was thinking.

¹⁰ Peary's claims continue to be scrutinised by polar historians, the most recent of whom have been published by Pierre Berton (2001) and Bruce Henderson (2005).

¹¹ Second instalment of a two-part article published in *American History Illustrated* based on multiple interviews with Henson by Fowler in 1953.

Shoot, I had been with him up there nearly twenty years. Freezing my hands, I saved his life when a musk ox tried to gore him. I helped amputate his toes. Of course I wanted to be there side by side with him...

I had my igloo built when Peary came in. I said, "I think I've overrun my mark two miles. I think I'm the first man to sit on top of the world."

"What?" he said. Then, "We'll see tomorrow."

Oh, he got hopping mad. No, he didn't say anything, but I could tell. I didn't know what he would do. I took all the cartridges out of my rifle before I went to sleep. Took them out and buried them in the snow. I had the only rifle in the party.

After that he took Iggianguaq [an Inuit member of the expedition crew] and was gone about one and a half hours, long enough to take observations. He found out we'd overshot the mark.'

- Henson (Fowler, 1966)

In the years that followed the 1909 expedition, Henson was subjected to unequivocal silence from his former captain Peary, and excluded from the majority of narratives surrounding the expedition (Bloom, 1993). As part of Peary's post-expedition press programme, he delivered a series of lectures which took place at the New York Museum of Natural History, the New York Zoological Park, the National Geographic Society and the American Explorer's Club, of which Henson was absent from all (Dick, 2004: 23). Further still, as historian Lyle Dick has identified in his study *Robert Peary's North Polar Narratives: The Making of an American Icon*, between 1900 and 1913, 'the North Pole received more column inches in the *New York Times* than any other single event' (Dick, 2004:7). Despite the volume of press coverage surrounding Peary's polar expeditions, Henson remained an unknown polar figure, evidencing his omission from official narratives. According to Bloom, Henson received a cheque for ninety-eight dollars as payment for one year's work (Bloom, 1993: 97). At the time of his death in 1955, Henson was working as a parking attendant in a Brooklyn warehouse and surviving on a relatively basic one-thousand-dollar annual pension (Henson, 1948: 225). In the same revealing

interview with Fowler published in 1966, Henson detailed the repercussions of Peary's deep-seated rage as they took affect post-expedition:

'When I got back, he didn't help find me a job or anything. He tried to keep me from making that lecture tour too. Said he would stop [prevent] the pictures. He didn't even shake my hand and say goodbye when we landed at Spuyten Duyvil in New York. I didn't even have carfare. Some of the newspaper reporters had a handsome carriage. They took me home. One of them gave me five dollars.'

- Henson (Fowler 1966)

Despite this silence that Henson met on his return to New York, he was permitted by Peary to release his autobiography *Negro Explorer at the North Pole* in 1912, published by the white American Frederick Abbott Stokes, the same publisher of Peary's two-volume autobiography *Northward Over the Great Ice* (1914). Relaying the 'official' narrative of the expedition, Peary wrote the foreword for Henson's book, and according to auto/biography historian Anthony Foy, Peary exercised full editorial control (Foy, 2012: 25). The foreword is short and consists of two pages in total, the majority of which is biographical information. However, of note is Peary's continual emphasis on Henson's race, beginning the text by underscoring the 'great interest' which has been displayed at a man of colour being an 'effective' member of a serious Arctic expedition (Henson, 1912: ix). Peary continues to list Henson's qualities and achievements as, in his own words, 'a distinct credit and feather in the cap of his race' stating that Henson has 'added to the moral stature of every intelligent [black] man' (Henson, 1912). Despite Peary's praise, he undermines Henson's achievements by framing them as exemplarily *for a black man*. The subtext of this framing simultaneously positions Henson as a racial *other*, and separates his accomplishments from white feats, such as Peary's own.

Bloom notes within her critical study of imperial American polar narratives that Peary drew a wealth of criticism from his conservative white contemporaries for employing an African-American as his primary assistant (Bloom, 1993). According to Bloom, Peary

appeased the fears of his critics and the threats it posed to white imperial masculinity by minimising the significance of Henson's role in the 1909 expedition (Bloom, 1993: 97). Peary justified his decision to take Henson on the final leg of the expedition by stating he was concerned Henson 'would not find his way back to land' and become lost, citing Henson's supposed lack of ability as 'racial inheritance' (Peary, 1910), a stark contrast to his foreword in Henson's book. Historian Russell Gibbon has further speculated upon Peary's employment of Henson as a method of maintaining accolade and honours. Peary relied upon the fact that no matter the extent of Henson's achievements, few would reason him as eligible to share polar laurels owing to his race (Gibbon, 1987). As Gibbon acutely suggests, the twenty-year working relationship the men had prior to the expedition was immediately discarded following the 1909 expedition. Henson's performance and ability on the expedition clearly posed such a risk to Peary's reputation as the pioneer of Arctic exploration that he carried out a systematic programme of exclusion against Henson, as discussed earlier in Henson's omission from the post-expedition lectures and press. I thereby speculate that Peary approved Henson's 1912 autobiography only because he did not perceive it as a threat. Henson followed the commanders 'official' narrative and made no contestations to Peary's claim of reaching the North Pole first. If Henson's later claim to have reached the pole first was in fact true, this early autobiography of Henson's perhaps went some way to abating Peary's concerns surrounding Henson revealing the authentic account of the ascent and contesting Peary's claim. Additionally, I surmise that Peary expected Henson's text to be read only by a black readership thereby further abating his concerns of being denounced from his esteemed position as the pioneer of Arctic exploration.

The most radical speculation I have encountered while researching both primary and secondary sources relating to Henson and Peary's expedition accounts is Bloom's assertion that Henson, upon learning Peary was planning to exclude him from the final ascent to the pole after two decades of service, outwitted Peary and purposefully arrived at the pole first. A plausible hypothesis, Bloom describes how this manoeuvre would have demonstrated to Peary that Henson had beaten him 'at his own game' and momentarily 'subverted codes of order and rules embodied by white society' (Bloom, 1993: 100). While Henson has never alluded to this, either in interviews or his own autobiographical accounts, there are three instances towards the end of Henson's 1912 autobiography that suggest there was conflict between the two men. The first passage describes the trek from the pole back to the ship in which Henson states, 'I often think that from the instant when the order to return was given until the land was again sighted, Peary was in a constant

daze' (Henson, 1912: 99). This is followed by a suggestion of conflict as Henson describes being back aboard the ship: 'from the time of my arrival at the *Roosevelt*, for nearly three weeks, my days were spent in complete idleness. I would catch a fleeting glimpse of Commander Peary, but not once in all of that time did he speak a word to me' (Henson, 1912:111). This latter quote describes a pivotal moment in Henson and Peary's longstanding relationship wherein the suggestion of conflict and tension between the men is explicit. This quote allows me to suggest Henson's claim to the pole is further legitimised as why else would Peary be so unwilling to confer with Henson and launch his post-expedition programme of exclusion.

In light of the above, Henson's deeply shocking revelation within his interview with Fowler that it was he who had in fact reached the pole first is the axis around which Julien's *True North* centres. Julien constructs an elliptical visual essay that begins to describe the fear that Henson experienced during the final stages of the expedition and the subsequent fall to obscurity. Creating images of a breathless and exhausted Henson moving heavily through the snow, Julien punctuates the frames with narrated excerpts from the explorer's interview with Fowler. Consisting of a whispered layering of the female voice of Myrie and Julien's own voice, the narration recounts the moments after Henson told Peary that he had overshot his mark and arrived at the pole first, detailing Henson's abject fear of Peary's reaction by a repetition of Henson's quote, 'I did not know what he would do, I did not know what he would do. I took all the cartridges out of my rifle and buried them in the snow' (Julien, 2004). The soft and breathy whispering of the film's narration simultaneously transmits a sense of secrecy and anxiety, evoking emotions which Julien imagines Henson experienced at the time. As Julien describes, the whispering suggests a tension, a 'certain intimacy is being relayed about how the relationship between Henson and Peary must have developed. We're talking here about the possible idea of murder. It's a master/slave dialectic taking place in that moment' (Kaplan, 2005).

Henson: Rescued from Invisibility

As discussed above, Henson's invisibility and purposeful removal from post-expedition narratives can be directly linked to the events which unfolded on the final days of the ascent to the North Pole and the subsequent conflict that came to define Henson and Peary's relationship. Henson remains a relatively unknown figure, and there continues to exist a great deal of controversy surrounding his claim to the pole, largely due to the

endemic racism in America during the early 20th century which prevented his achievements from being recognised in the first instance and continues to shroud his crucial contribution to polar exploration to this day. The man cited as having rescued Henson from invisibility is Allen Counter, an African American neuroscience professor at Harvard and the director of the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations. Counter became interested in Henson while researching the cause of widespread hearing loss among the Inuit of Greenland. While visiting Sweden, Counter became aware of stories of mixed-heritage Inuit in Greenland and thus made the connection between Henson, Peary and the children they fathered with Inuit women during their expeditions (Counter, 1991). Alongside his medical research, Counter wrote about the contributions of black Americans have made in remote territories and thus became interested in Henson's legacy. In 1991 he published *North Pole Legacy: Black, White and Eskimo* which focuses on his efforts to pay homage to Henson through interviews with both Henson and Peary's Inuit-American sons, Anaukaq Henson and Kali Peary. Counter collected vast amounts of research in the form of oral histories from Inuit communities across Greenland, some of which were direct relatives of the explorers, others descendants from the Inuit men who travelled alongside Henson and Peary, and used the material to initiate a programme of establishing Henson's name in American exploration history. As an esteemed member of the Harvard academic community, Counter used his connections to publicise the oral histories he was gathering and raise awareness of Henson and his Inuit relatives.

Following a period of press coverage about Counter's research around Henson in Greenland, the *National Geographic* became interested and featured a two-part article on the legacy of Henson and Peary as part of their hundredth anniversary edition in 1988. As Bloom observes in her study, given that the *National Geographic* ignored Henson's presence and contributions to the history of discovery for over seventy years, their sudden interest in his memory was, according to Bloom, evidence of the institution's desire to 'refurbish its image' as inclusive and forward-thinking (Bloom, 1993: 102). The growing interest in Henson produced by Counter's research during the 1980s placed him firmly within the public and political consciousness, allowing further accounts and details to emerge of his pivotal contribution to American polar history. Following Counter's appeal to transfer Henson's remains to a place of honour, the president of the time, Ronald Reagan, granted his request and on April 6th 1988, seventy-nine years since he reached the North Pole, Henson's remains were moved from Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, to Arlington National Cemetery, a burial ground reserved for esteemed military personnel. His reburial within Arlington Cemetery is highly significant as it is a gesture of admission

from the USA that Henson should have been recognised and honoured in the first instance, and this gesture functions as a testament to his achievements. It is further significant in light of the conflict between Henson and Peary as the re-burial reclaims power from Peary who held such control over Henson's legacy. Henson was laid to rest with full military honours and bestowed with a five-foot high black granite monument designed by Counter. Poignantly, Henson's monument was positioned adjacent to Peary's grave, offering a form of equality that was missing from their relationship and representations of their expeditions. Engraved with gold leaf it reads, *Matthew Henson, co-discoverer of the North Pole* (Counter, 1991). The conclusion of Counter's eulogy at the reburial was recorded in *Ebony* magazine as follows:

'Matthew Henson, we give you the long overdue recognition you deserve. We lay you to rest to right a tragic wrong, to correct a shameful record.'

- Counter (*Ebony*, 1988)



Fig. 2.4 Matthew Henson's reburial at Arlington National Cemetery, April 6 1988. [Photograph].

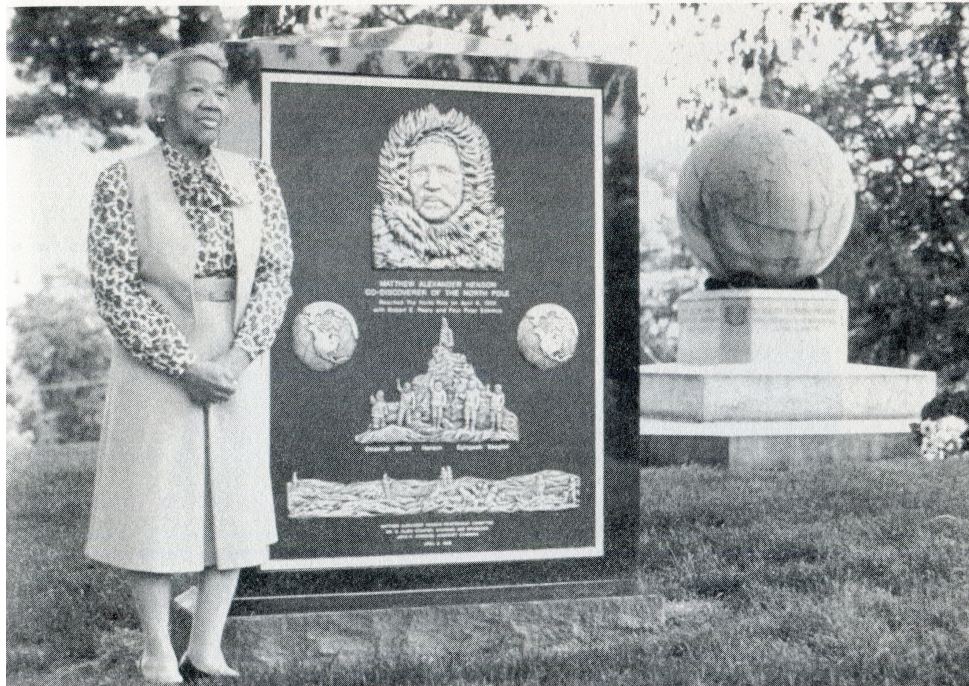


Fig. 2.5 Matthew Henson's niece, Virginia Carter Brannum, standing next to her uncle's headstone, in the background is Peary's grave, marked by the globe, April 6 1988. [Photograph].

Revisioning Henson's Journey

Functioning as a meditation of Henson's epic Arctic journey, Julien's *True North* visualises Henson's story and functions to extend and elaborate upon the biographical and theoretical studies by Counter and Bloom which piece together Henson's experience from the official Peary-centred narratives. The blinding white snow blizzard which whips around Henson and eventually renders him invisible in *True North's* opening scene is a visual metaphor for his disappearance from Arctic exploration narratives, whilst reaffirming his crucial position as navigator, interpreter and his declaration that he was the first of the party to set foot upon the pole, vanishes into the disorientating Arctic white-out. During an interview about the research Julien undertook for *True North*, he accurately identifies that 'Peary had a dependent relationship with Henson as a guide', exclusively relying upon him to navigate the Arctic terrain, further asserting that Henson's epic achievements have been masked and shrouded in Peary-focused heroism (Kaplan, 2005). Despite a surge of interest around Henson in the 1980s, largely due to Counter's research, he remains a relatively unknown figure. Julien's artwork brings the narrative into a recent historical moment (2004) and again, as an extension of Counter and Bloom's

studies, rescues Henson from invisibility. *True North* focuses on the pivotal moment in Henson and Peary's relationship when the codes of order are ruptured, and the binaries of race and class are temporarily subverted when Henson, a black man born one generation post slavery, reached the eighteen-year target of the pole ahead of Peary, the figurehead of white imperial masculinity. In resurrecting the unofficial narrative of Henson's historic moment from the Arctic landscape, Julien's film provides a visual demonstration of the interrelation of race, gender, masculinities and politics that govern the history of polar exploration.

Opening up debates about the relationship between landscape and identity, *True North* is a firm reminder that the history of the Arctic is not solely a white history about white men in a white space. As Julien expresses in an interview conducted in 2007 in BOMB magazine, 'I'm playing with the idea that someone might not be a displaced person. It's about trying to second-guess what people might see as being incongruous to a space' (Kudlacek, 2007). Julien's motivations to make this critical artwork encapsulates the notion of the Arctic as a racialised landscape. Aside from the persistent racism of the time which rendered Henson to be perceived as far less capable an explorer than Peary, a further factor in his omission from Arctic exploration narratives is that the Arctic was a white stage for performing white, nationalist imperial masculinity. Through foregrounding Henson, a body perceived to be 'alien' to the Arctic, Julien exposed the racial whiteness which continues to be associated with the High North, illuminating the endurance of historical representations which continue to govern perceptions of the territory (as discussed in chapter one), and have contributed to Henson's ongoing obscurity. Julien cited his interest in the field of racial representations and of whiteness studies as an early instigator for the making of *True North*. In the passage below, Julien describes how the complexity of Henson and Peary's relationship within the context of polar exploration provided a narrative where the invisibility of whiteness could be visualised, marked and ascribed through a creative envisioning of an historical event:

'It begins with making a piece about ice and snow. I am very interested in debates that took place about a decade ago [early 1990s] about representations of whiteness. I always thought that I couldn't just make a piece that would be about those questions in a film because it wouldn't really substantiate what I saw as theoretical interests in these debates that had been

taking place in various domains of the humanities. So, I guess I have always been interested in translating some of these ideas into the realm of the thematic or realm of visual arts. When I came across Matthew Henson's story I found the perfect vehicle.'

- Julien (Taubman, 2008)

In 2013, Julien revisited his motivations for the making of *True North* and recollected that:

'Ever since reading Frantz Fanon for my thesis at Saint Martin's, I've wanted to create an image of the black subject in a white void. Aimé Césaire and the others in the Négritude movement wrote poetically about that; it was a metaphor for what Fanon called the "disalienation" of the black subject. As Fanon puts it, "my body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day." All these histories construct a counter-culture of modernity with a mise-en-scène that puts the black subject in an all-white universe'

- Julien (Julien, 2013: 166)

Therefore, the white Arctic landscape became symbolic of, and a proving ground for 'heroic white imperial masculinity', which Henson supposedly lay outside of. *True North* confronts the notion of authenticity, of who is considered to be an 'authentic' part of the landscape. This raises new questions around the placement of the black body in the High North and whether it appears 'out of place', and if so, why? Does this expose a societal truth that the white man is perceived to have the ability to traverse multiple spaces whilst people of colour are confined, through structural racism and dominant representations, to certain landscapes? Is the role of the 'explorer' ascribed only to the white male? Julien's film allows me to develop thought into wider ideas of racialised landscapes, how notions of 'innocence' and 'purity' are ascribed to geographic locations, and how in turn, these spaces become racialised.

Racialised Landscapes: The Constructions of Exclusion

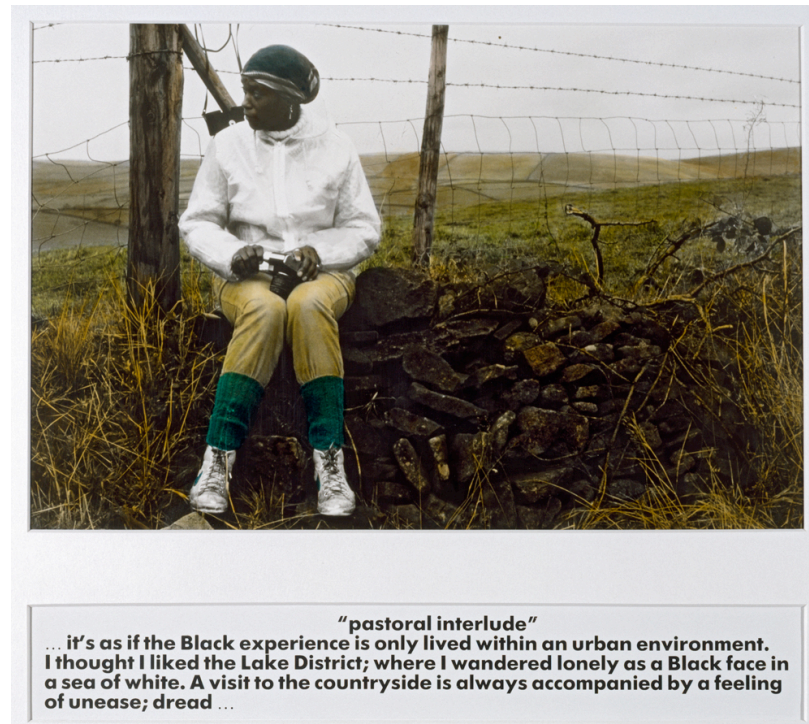


Fig. 2.6 Ingrid Pollard. (1988). *Pastoral Interludes*. [Photographic Series].

As Julien states above in relation to the conceptual basis for *True North*, he wanted to play with what people may perceive to be incongruous to a space (Kudlacek, 2007). In thinking about the symmetries between identities and place, I am reminded of the seminal artwork *Pastoral Interludes* (1987–88) by black British artist Ingrid Pollard that interrogates the notions of racialised landscapes and territories of exclusion. Pollard has produced a wealth of visual research on the issue of racialised landscapes and notions of alienation, particularly in relation to the significant tension which exists between rural and urban areas in England. The majority of her work challenges the lack of written and visual representations of the black body in the English countryside and deciphers ideas of belonging alongside constructions of quintessential 'Englishness'. *Pastoral Interludes* challenged the way English culture places black people in cities and confines the countryside to the white middle and upper classes. Pollard highlights how England has traditionally represented itself by an idealised rural landscape of green pastures, golden valleys and pretty floral gardens, predominantly constructed via 18th century English painting and the picturesque. The artist challenges the idea of who is considered to be an

authentic part of that landscape by creating images of black women and men in rural settings around the Lake District, an area which established itself, again via 18th century painters such as Thomas Gainsborough and Joseph Farington, as a location of upper-class whiteness, operating as art historian Ceylan Tawadros describes as a 'metaphor for individual freedom and transcendence' (Tawadros, 1989: 41).

Subverting established narratives of traditional landscapes of the English countryside, Pollard's imagery of black figures in quintessential English rural locations reveal the social, economic and political ideologies the landscape is imbued with. Fences, stonewalls and railings become literal and metaphorical borders for who is permitted and who is not. As Pollard lays out in the image caption (fig. 2.6), the constructed space of calmness and harmony represents alienation and tension to bodies that have been obscured from its representations:

'...It's as if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment. I thought I liked the Lake District; where I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease; dread...'

- Pollard (V&A Online)

The general British rural landscape, ordered, arranged and naturalised as a space of serenity sits in binary opposition to the urban. The city, abundant with smog, crowds of people and unclean smells, slowly encroaches and threatens the 'purity' of the 'natural' countryside. The binaries of rural/urban, pure/contaminated, traditional/modern, rich/poor begin to emerge from these constructions implicating the representation of the social make-up of each location: white rural/black urban. As W.J.T. Mitchell discusses within his introduction to the text *Landscape and Power* (1994), landscape should be understood as a cultural medium which plays two roles in forming an ideology; the first is by naturalising a social and cultural construction, creating false representations which are circulated as established truths, and secondly forces the dominant representation to become operational by 'interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. Thus, landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as a space, as an environment, as that within which

“we” (figured as “the figures” in the landscape) find – or lose – ourselves’ (Mitchell, 1994: 2).

In January 2018, the Yorkshire-based black British rapper and beat-boxer Testament, otherwise known as Andy Brooks, launched his first theatre production, *Black Men Walking*, at the Royal Exchange Manchester. The play strikes me as an extension of Pollard’s work as it raises the same questions around the incongruity of black figures in rural settings and investigates the ideologies attached to English rural landscapes. Approached by Eclipse, the UK’s foremost black-led touring company, Testament was asked to address the erasure of black British histories and create a play which foregrounded key moments from over 500 years of black people in the British landscape. Alongside Dawn Walton, the play’s director, Testament took part in a countryside ramble with a prominent black male walking group that have been established in Yorkshire for over thirteen years. Walton relays this experience stating that while on the ramble and navigating an historic Roman road, ‘I was looking at my feet, concentrating on walking, and I suddenly saw sandals next to me. Septimius Severus, our black Roman Emperor. That’s where the idea came from’ (Minamore, 2018). Inspired by the black men’s walking group in Yorkshire, the play draws on the histories of Septimus Severus, the first black Roman Emperor, and Pablo Fanque, a black circus owner from the 1800s and incorporates them into a narrative which depicts three central characters who encounter their ancestors whose footsteps they follow on a Yorkshire ramble.



Fig. 2.7 Andy Brooks. (2018). *Black Men Walking*. [Theatre Production].

In order to bring silenced black histories to the fore, the opening line of the play's description states: 'We walk. Though we are written into the landscape you don't see us. We walked England before the English' (*Black Men Walking*, 2018). Forced to reflect on the past before they can move forwards, the characters address how black people have walked what are perceived as white spaces before, their presence in the landscape highlighting its constructed whiteness. A founding member of the Yorkshire men's walking group that inspired the play, Maxwell Ayamba, stated in a recent interview that the group's aim is to make the 'next generation of black people feel confident to be out and about in the countryside in Britain, in a way we perhaps weren't when we were their age' (Minamore, 2018). The author of the interview Bridget Minamore reflects on her own feelings with the following pertinent statement,

'The more we walk, the more I wonder why the idea of black people hill-walking seemed so strange to me. So many immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean come from rural areas, and movement – or more specifically, displacement – goes hand in hand with being part of the African Diaspora. Black people on foot have featured in many significant moments in history, from the death walks through West Africa to reach slave ships, to the American civil rights marches in the 1960s. When I think of my family, and of the first and second-generation immigrants I grew up with, I think of them on the move, never still, working second, third and fourth jobs. Perhaps that's why hill walking felt so at odds with my blackness at first: this is walking without purpose. Going up then down, arriving in the same spot you left. Walking is reclamation. Of moving slowly enough to say this is a land you can take your time with; these peaks are safe, I won't need to run.'

- (Minamore, 2018)

As Minamore states, walking is a mode of performed reclamation, and it is the key theme of reclaiming the landscape which links *Pastoral Interludes*, *Black Men Walking* and *True North*. When Minamore discusses the black body on foot and how the history of the African Diaspora is predicated by movement, I am reminded of Henson and how his

twenty years of expeditions, particularly Arctic expeditions which were navigated on foot, can be subsumed into this narrative and further support the Minamore's argument. All three artworks unite to grapple with the theme of racialised northern landscapes, their time-span, ranging from the 1980s to the present highlighting that the exclusion of the black body from remote, rural spaces continues to exist. As a continuation of Pollard's early investigation into the symmetries between place and race, *True North* and *Black Men Walking* extend the study by reimagining historical black journeys in white spaces. Bringing buried and silenced histories to the fore, the artists illustrate the systematic exclusion of black bodies and their histories from northern landscapes as they present a threat to the construction of symbolic white landscapes, which in turn are instrumental in forming the identity of the white national character. The respective artworks' significance is therefore twofold; they simultaneously make visible the pervasive whiteness of remote spaces through the presence of black bodies *and* uncover black histories buried and obscured by the dominating whiteness of the landscape. To reinforce Mitchell's point quoted earlier in this section, landscapes are cultural mediums which play crucial roles in forming ideologies, firstly by naturalising social constructions and secondly by continuing to circulate these false constructions until they become accepted as truths (Mitchell, 1994). Julien and Testament challenge these 'truths' by providing evidence of black bodies traversing northern remote spaces for over 500 years, revising past narratives in order to walk forward into a better present and future.

Traversing Spaces and Dissolving Cinematic Boundaries

I want to build on this key theme of reclaiming histories of landscapes through the act of walking by creating a close analysis of *True North*, and what Julien considers to be the second instalment of the film titled *Fantôme Afrique* (2005). *Fantôme Afrique* is set in the urban centre of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, and is connected primarily by the figuration of Myrie, a recurring protagonist in both films who wanders the respective landscapes creating a constant presence across the body of work. Myrie embodies the central concerns of each film which I will further discuss, and translates themes from one film into the other, weaving thematic references and dissolving conceptual and cinematic boundaries. Through her wandering of the polar desert of *True North* into the urban desert of Ouagadougou, Myrie's presence allows me to further consider the overriding themes of reclamations and unofficial histories as they relate to landscapes. Furthermore,

by reading the desert of Burkina Faso, a key postcolonial landscape, in relation to the Arctic, I am able to include the Arctic in postcolonial discourse and further argue for its inclusion in the postcolonial field, an aim I established at the beginning of this thesis.

Three minutes into *True North*, after the viewer has been led through a vast, shimmering white landscape, the trio of screens cut to a single central image of the interior of a dwelling constructed entirely of ice. The deep blues and dark greys that are refracted through the smooth, translucent walls indicate that night has fallen and darkness fills the screen. Sounds of howling winds begin to intensify as the two screens on either side illuminate to reveal the figure of Henson; he is clad in black fur and wandering through winding icy corridors. The thickness of the walls distort Henson's movement and the further he wanders, the more obscured his figure becomes, a further visualisation by Julien which mirrors Henson's vanishing into the white-out in the first scene and reinforces his disappearance from 'official' polar histories. The warped figure also reminds me of the concept of doublings, particularly with reference to Henson's official and unofficial identities. As stated earlier, on the one hand he was a highly skilled Arctic explorer, speaking several Inuit languages, and is recorded as having ensured the success of the 1909 expedition. On the other, the 'official' accounts of Henson render him as a mere assistant of Peary. Bloom has discussed this dual representation of Henson as the relation between oneself and 'Otherness' (Bloom, 2010), which is pertinent to these specific filmic images of a distorted Henson.

As Henson slowly disappears, the camera gently pans around to reveal a long room within the dwelling, at the bottom of which stands a towering cross carved from white ice (fig. 2.8). Rhythmic music reminiscent of Inuit throat singing gradually becomes louder and is accompanied by drum beats as the viewer is led step-by-step towards the cross. Reindeer skins are sprawled across a platform at the foot of the structure and are suggestive of a spiritual space, perhaps a Western religious chapel, or one of ritual for the original shamanistic practices of Arctic Inuit. The loaded symbol of the cross in relation to heightening drumbeats allude to the legacy of 18th and 19th century European colonisation of the Arctic, particularly the internal colonialism from neighbouring Scandinavian states which outlawed Arctic peoples' original shamanistic beliefs and native languages whilst brutally enforcing Christianity across the region. The cross could also represent the auspices upon which Arctic exploration rested: to discover the highest point on earth, and therefore be closer to experiencing the sublime and 'almighty' in line with the Christian faith.



Fig. 2.8 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation].

Four minutes into the film, with a sharp flash, the drumming crescendo ceases and a new scene begins: loud and constant thundering sounds are accompanied by images of its source, monumental torrents of water roar down onto glacial flows from the steep cliffs above. The three screens are illuminated with the fast flow of water, the sheer scale and pace of the sight invokes feelings similar to that of the initial frames: the viewer is engulfed, overwhelmed, flooded by the absolute power of the landscape. The relentless force of water is a literal signifier for the current rapid demise of the Arctic territories, the quick and clear obliteration of the ice which was once part of the landmass, melts and transforms into cascades of liquid, creating a clear reminder of the urgency with which global environmental issues must be attended to. However, the thawing ice serves as a further signifier: ice dissolving into water, transforming space and location, adaption and migration, traversing boundaries across rivers, oceans, sky and ground, all of which are key themes of *True North* in relation to all forms of human movement. The water becomes a visual metaphor for the movement of people and the fluidity of identity.

Fantôme Afrique provides a cultural and visual contrast to the polar desert of *True North* with sun-baked scenes of terracotta and dry earth populated by market goers in vivid coloured fabrics. Equally mesmerising in its filmic approach to landscape, the work weaves cinematic and architectural references with rich imagery of urban Ougadougou, the barren rural landscapes of Burkina Faso, and archival footage from important moments in West African colonial history. Each component is interweaved laying forth ideas of denationalised and de-territorialised spaces born of the encounters between local and global cultures (*Fantôme Afrique*, 2005). *Fantôme Afrique* was combined with *True North* to create a body of work titled *Fantôme Créole*, a four-screen installation Julien presented at the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 2005. Described by Julien as a film installation conceptualised to investigate the ‘creolising of space and crossings, the works explore the impact of location – both cultural and physical – to resounding effect through a juxtaposition of opposing global regions’ (*True North and Fantôme Afrique*, 2005).

True North and *Fantôme Afrique* focus on polar and African deserts respectively, and by existing within the same filmic series, Julien provides a vehicle to discuss the intrinsic relationship the Arctic territory developed with wider British colonial projects - particularly those on the African continent – as the polar scholar Jen Hill has identified:

‘British Arctic narrative is traceable through three distinct phases that correspond with different periods of British colonial encounter and expansion; the early phase during which Britain’s main imperial focus is on the West Indies and fears of miscegenation and disease, a second phase in which the disappearance of [Franklin] coincides with unrest and resistance to British rule in India, and in a third phase, following the discovery of the Northwest Passage, that accompanies Britain’s expansion into Africa and its recognition that its imperial pre-eminence would not last. Arctic space served as a literal and symbolic space where national and imperial identities mapped British values, a “pure” space conceived as being separate from the

problematic political, racial and economic relations of empire, but from a potential class conflict at home.'

(Hill, 2008: 4-5)



Fig. 2.9 Isaac Julien. (2005). *Fantôme Créole*. [Film Installation].

As a visualisation of Hill's acute observation above, *Fantôme Créole* extends *True North's* foregrounding of visual and conceptual polarities and combines images of the seemingly disparate territories, creating new relations within the field of the postcolonial. The 'oppositional' locations of the West African desert and the Polar North are combined and read within the same visual field, the fragmented landscapes of each setting move across the four screens and are read in relation to one another, producing nuanced connections and allowing new discourses to emerge. Mutually concerned with the poetic re-articulation of European colonial narratives, *Fantôme Créole* illustrates that both landscapes have been sites of exertions of power, they are spaces of trauma, the representations of which have endured and continue to dominate their present-day identities. As addressed in the introductory chapter, the Arctic is a region that is largely

neglected from postcolonial discourse. Julien's *True North* is a significant and much-needed vehicle to bring the territory into postcolonial debates.

With reference to the visual culture of the Arctic, *Fantôme Créole* occupies a unique space which uses the concepts of binaries and polarities in order for one location to reveal something about the other: the warmth of the desert intensifies the coldness of the Arctic, the abundance of water in the north accentuates the dryness of the south, the whiteness of the Arctic underscores the vibrant colours of the Burkina Faso landscape. The glowing warmth of the desert images radiate and infuse the icy coldness of the Arctic on the adjacent screen. Julien renegotiates each region's respective emblems by creating a space in which they are literally and conceptually read within the same frame. By placing the High North within a postcolonial visual field, the traditional trope of being a physically and culturally isolated, untouched space can be re-evaluated and its colonial history made visible.

Integrating themes of walking and reclamation, Julien further connects the two locations through the employment of Myrie who features as a recurring protagonist in both *True North* and *Fantôme Afrique*. As Julien explains, 'trespassing from one location or film to another [Myrie] represents the cosmopolitan subject, traversing different locations like a nomad' (Kudlacek, 2007). By moving through cinematic spaces, she becomes a trans-textual character, travelling from one location to another, embodying the narrative of each film and translating it into a new context for parallels to be drawn. She is a visual reminder that despite the vast distances between the film's geographies, they are intrinsically linked by their pivotal concerns; expeditions, movement of people, postcolonial spaces and the notion of ones belonging and authenticity in relation to a landscape. Julien references two significant terms; firstly, he uses the term *trespass* in relation to the non-white body in the Arctic landscape, signalling the Arctic as a territory of exclusion, an area I discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to bodies being perceived as authentic and 'at ease' within a particular landscape. To trespass is by definition, to enter a space without permission, Julien therefore suggests a higher authority is at play with reference to the black body of Myrie traversing northern spaces (trespass, n.d.).

Secondly, Julien states Myrie represents the cosmopolitan subject, which sits in direct opposition to the notion of trespassing (Kudlacek, 2007). Representing cosmopolitan characteristics is by definition a body at ease, familiar with a number of different nations

and cultures, 'free from national limitations or attachments' (cosmopolitanism, n.d.). Mica Nava's *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (2007) details the evolution of the term from the beginning of the 20th century to the mid-2000s as it relates to questions of Otherness and antiracism, tracing a history of how the term has altered according to historical episodes, political contexts and academic texts. Focusing on the terms relation to structures of feeling and affect, 'as an empathetic and inclusive set of identifications' (Nava, 2007: 3), Julien channels a specific understanding of the cosmopolitan subject via Myrie that aligns with Nava's analysis of the British early 20th century application of the term: 'free from national limitations and prejudices [...]' cosmopolitanism was considered part of modern consciousness, part of the structure of feeling associated with modernity [...] a set of attitudes within this modern frame signalled a loosening of national identifications and a positive engagement with difference, [it] constituted a countercultural revolt against traditional cultural forms and beliefs' (Nava, 2007: 5). Myrie's presence as a black female in the Arctic is thereby an explicit rejection of the idea of 'trespassing' and a challenge to the landscape as continuing to be read as literally and symbolically white. *True North* marks the landscape as a territory of exclusion, and through a retracing of Henson's journey, carries out a radical act of reclaiming the territory from the grip of white male imperial explorers it is so highly associated with.

Possession of the Pole: Imperial Masculinity and Explorer Figures

As laid out earlier, the history of the Arctic has been historicised in line with the white imperial males who traversed the territory for centuries. In Julien's employment of Myrie to retrace Henson's epic journey, the artist not only confronts the racialisation of the landscape but also challenges its associated masculinity. Disrupting defined codes of race and gender, Julien inserts a female presence into the canon of Arctic visual history. To further complicate gender codes and displace binaries, Myrie's first appearance does not immediately register as female. Her tall, lean frame and shaved head bring what Julien describes as 'a unique look, [an] androgynous look, which, I felt could be used to queer images of the Arctic explorer' (Julien, 2013: 168). Myrie's 'female-masculinity' (Kudláček, 2007) alters the relation she has to the Arctic landscape, which through male colonial exploration has become a feminised, passive space. By referencing how, within the polar environment, 'masculinity becomes fragile,' (Julien, 2013: 168), Julien's *True North* creates space to address how the hyper-masculinity of polar exploration has become naturalised

through Arctic exploration histories, aligning the racialisation and the gendering of the landscape to create dominant representations of a white, male space.



Fig. 2.10 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation].

As the field of gender studies has demonstrated, there are many configurations of masculinity. Dependent on historical timeframe, culture and sub-cultures, varying expressions of masculinities arise (Shalom, 1993). My focus here is on early 19th century imperial masculinity that has been, in part, constructed and performed upon the Arctic by white Western males for centuries. A pillar in the construction of the Arctic as a literal and symbolic white space, polar explorers carried out a specific enactment of masculinity, which the theorist Riffensburgh terms *heroic masculinity* (Riffensburgh, 1994). Within the configuration of *heroic masculinity*, which resides within a larger framework of *imperial masculinities*, there is an obsession with the notion of *possession*. Julien evidences the drive for ownership by Euro-Americans through a narrated excerpt from Peary's records which features in *True North*:

'To be entombed in ice, to freeze as you walk, or to drop from starvation is all in the game. Death can come from one

hundred directions at once, but there's a glory locked in that icy hell, and my soul will never give me peace, until it's mine!"

- Peary (Julien, 2004)

Riffensburgh details, specifically in relation to early 19th century polar exploration, of which Peary was the American figurehead, that ultimately, the attainment of the North Pole did not produce imperial gain, the scientific material acquired through exploration made no great impact upon existing knowledge, and there was no clear benefit to Western nations which poured vast amounts of money into attaining the pole (Riffensburgh, 1994). Despite this, reaching the North Pole was widely considered one of the greatest triumphs of all time.

Riffensburgh suggests this was due to a combination of factors: claiming the pole was a culmination of centuries of exertion in exploration with only sub-Saharan Africa and the North Pole left 'unmapped' by the beginning of the 19th century, therefore exploration had become a defining feature of Western mentality (Riffensburgh, 1994). An outcome of this mentality was that blank spaces on the map, such as the Arctic, were seen as 'dark' spaces of insignificance until explorers 'flooded them with light' (Riffensburgh, 1994: 2). Secondly, the press had been instrumental, in both America and Britain, in elevating the explorer to personify the extreme nationalism, imperialism and heroic masculinity that defined the early 19th century. As Riffensburgh explicates, 'men who achieved remarkable feats were more than just popular heroes; they were symbols of real and imagined nationalist and or imperial cultural greatness [...] Since continued expansion represented a means to achieve moral, racial, spiritual, and physical supremacy, exploration thus became an instrument not only to justify imperial or nationalist political doctrine, but to embody the supposed collective cultural superiority of a nation' (Riffensburgh, 1994: 2). This sentiment is evidenced in an article Peary wrote for the *National Geographic*:

'Six years ago, we were sleeping content within our borders, drowsy of our strength and possibilities. Since then we have embraced the earth, and now right-hand clasps left in the Far East in a grasp never to be loosened. What a splendid feat for this great and wealthy country, if, having girdled the earth, we might

reach north and south and plant “Old Glory” on each pole.’

- (Peary, 1903: 436)

Riffensburgh used the controversy surrounding the American explorers Peary and Frederick Cook, regarding who reached the pole first, in order to demonstrate the immense influence the press had at that time in adopting the masculine explorer figure as a political propaganda machine for colonial expansion and possession. As discussed earlier, in 1909, just days apart, Cook and Peary’s respective expeditions claimed to have reached the pole first. Deciding on the ‘pioneer’ of the North Pole escalated into a spectacle of white male rivalry and a major national media event propagated by *The New York Times* and *The New York Herald*, turning into as much of a competition between the newspapers as the explorers. The construction of white imperial masculinity took centre stage as the conquest of unclaimed territory began to define masculinist ideology, and further still, as Bloom asserts, ‘legitimize the exclusion of women from many public domains of discourse’, as they were in comparison, rendered unable (Bloom, 1993: 6). As Bloom expresses, while men battled through extreme environments to become a ‘true’ and ‘noble’ man, women were confined to domestic spaces, there to support and serve ‘manly’ ambition. Bloom explores these gender codes with reference to the narratives produced surrounding Peary’s wife Josephine Diebitsche-Peary, who was an Arctic explorer in her own right and took part in six expeditions led by her husband. Bloom argues Josephine Peary’s expedition accounts¹² were feminised to conform to a more traditional role such as loyal ‘support’ to her husband, braving the extreme conditions to ‘be by his side’. As Bloom points to, this ensured that her own individual aims and accomplishments were firmly placed in the shadow of her husband’s masculinist glory (Bloom, 1993).

¹² Josephine Peary published three books of expedition accounts: *My Arctic Journal* (1893), published in London by Longman’s Green, and Co; *The Snow Baby* (1901) published in New York by F.A. Stokes, the same publisher under which her husband Robert Peary and Henson’s expedition accounts were released; and *Children of the North* (1903) again published by F.A. Stokes.

'Arctic Hysteria'¹³: Inuit and Explorer Relations

Peary cites the structure of a successful expedition crew in terms of masculinity and its ideal physical form:

‘One intelligent white man would represent the head,
two other white men selected solely for their courage,
determination, physical strength, and devotion to the
leader would represent the arms, and the driver and
natives the body and legs.’

- Peary (Dick, 2001: 382)

Peary diverged from this ‘structure of success’ through his reliance on Henson to navigate and lead expedition parties, further still, according to Henson’s account of their final ascent to the pole in 1909, the Inuit men which formed a significant part of the expedition team, were crucial to navigating the treacherous landscape (Henson, 1912). Within a notable passage from his autobiography, Henson described the moment when Ootah, an Inuit member of the party, saved his life after he plunged into open water between ice floes, crediting his survival to Ootah’s quick reactions. Furthermore, Henson goes on to describe how Peary had also been saved by an Inuit member of the expedition party after falling through thin ice, further emphasising the pivotal roles Inuit men played in ensuring Euro-American explorers’ survival. As Bloom points to in her reading of Peary’s exploration career, the Inuit men and Henson’s achievements are subsumed into a master narrative of Peary’s individual masculine heroism and success, keeping them distinct as racial ‘others’ (Bloom, 1993).

Upon reaching the pole in 1909, Peary is credited as taking a photograph of Henson and four Inuit crew members, each with a flag in hand (fig. 2.11). Central to the image, Henson holds the American national ‘stars and stripes’ flag, and the Inuit men hold flags which represent the American Navy, Delta Kappa Epsilon – a Yale fraternity, DAR peace¹⁴, and the Red Cross. While the Inuit men are named in the image caption, providing a sense of

¹³ *Arctic Hysteria* is a psychological disorder thought to be culturally specific to Inuit peoples, it is also the title of Greenlandic artist Pia Arke’s multimedia artwork which scrutinise Arctic colonial histories.

¹⁴ A DAR flag, also known as a peace flag, represents the Daughters of the American Revolution Society, inscribed in its border were the words ‘Peace Among All Nations’ (McMillan, 2008).

presence that is missing from written Arctic exploration histories, there are no images to be found which depict Peary standing with Henson or his Inuit crewmen. Although there could be multiple reasons for this, such as equipment failure, image exposure problems and so on, it appears to be a further demarcation of profiling Henson and the Inuit crewman, to follow Bloom's assertion, as distinct racial 'others'.



Fig. 2.11 North Pole 1909, L-R: Ooqueah holds the Navy League flag, Ootah holds the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity flag, Matthew Henson holds the US flag, Egingwah holds the DAR peace flag, and Seegloo holds the Red Cross flag. [Photograph].

Within the body of Arctic exploration narratives, Inuit experiences are overwhelmingly marginalised with only a small number of publications to date that reveal the ramifications of colonial exploration on indigenous communities in the High North. Often central to the success of Euro-American expeditions, Inuit men would be handpicked by explorers to strengthen their crews and more importantly, increase their chances of survival. As writer Gísli Pálsson identifies, when part of an expedition team, Inuit males would work as hunters and navigators while Inuit women would take on the roles of seamstresses and cooks (Pálsson, 2008). Despite these facts, Inuit crewmen are rarely acknowledged in polar narratives and are most typically represented through a lens of ethnographic exoticisation and 'primitiveness'. Representations of Inuit men which did

feature in Euro-American press were minimised for two reasons: firstly, to maintain ideas of sublimity and 'blankness' associated with the Arctic, and secondly to preserve focus on the white male heroic explorer (Riffensburgh, 1994).



Fig. 2.12 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation].

In the latter scenes of *True North*, Julien introduces two Inuit men to the film (fig. 2.12). Framed by the fur of their outerwear, the viewer is presented with two clear facial portraits. Eyes focused intently centre screen, their clothing fills the frame and causes the background to become obscured, perhaps a strategy employed by Julien to detach the white landscape from the identity of the Inuit men, disassociating them from imperialist representations as mere stereotypical 'flora and fauna' of the territory. Myrie's portrait, framed in the same manner, fills the central screen while the two Inuit men are positioned on either side. Reading the three frames together, the portraits unite to create a visual testament to bodies that have been rendered invisible by white male exploration narratives. In addition to paying homage to Henson, Julien is also paying respects to a long history of Inuit men who have been rendered powerless in their own homelands, which will be discussed below. Julien's purposeful, prolonged close-up framing of the Inuit men and Henson is an act of re-inserting their presence into the canon of Arctic exploration history. Additionally, the powerful, vivid imagery of the three figures, side-by-side creates

a sense of solidarity and serves as a testament to the Inuit men who journeyed with Henson more than one hundred years earlier further displacing white imperial masculinity within a contemporary context.

The role of Inuit women in the history of Arctic exploration is an area that is not directly addressed in Julien's *True North* but is suggested by Myrie's presence. I want to address the role of Inuit women in relation to Peary's expedition in order to underscore the Arctic as a site of postcolonial discourse, thereby strengthening my argument that the territory should be attended to as a postcolonial site. Much like any other colonial pursuit, sexual dynamics crucially underpinned many of the explorer's encounters with indigenous Arctic peoples, and as such, the advent of Euro-American Arctic exploration, whether directly or indirectly, dramatically changed the lives of Inuit communities. In *Hot Bodies in Cold Zones: Arctic Exploration*, Gísli Pálsson has identified a growing body of literature that reveals the strategies implemented in managing intimacy in European colonies as part of imperial politics. The majority of these studies focus their attention on the more traditional imperial locations of Africa and India, with work on the Arctic yet to be attended to (Pálsson, 2008). Just as Inuit men provided invaluable assistance to expedition parties, native women took on the domesticated roles of seamstresses sewing warm clothing, preparing and preserving food, maintaining base camps, and most significantly, providing sexual pleasures for white explorers. As Pálsson describes, complications of pleasure took place across the Arctic in the 19th and 20th centuries, 'Inuit "seamstresses" and Euro-American males engage[d] each other in intimate relations, establishing families and raising children in the compartmentalized context of emerging empires' (Pálsson, 2008).

Intimacy between explorers and Inuit women was viewed as a necessary precaution against carnal relations developing between male crewmembers. Often radically altering the social dynamics of Inuit communities, explorers' relations with native women asserted power over Inuit men and ruptured existing spousal and family relationships. As referred to in a study by Lyle Dick, which examines Peary's sexual relationships formed during his expedition in 1908–9, Dick states that Inuit women functioned as mere sexual objects, or 'cogs' in the expedition machine (Dick, 2001). Drawing from Peary's expedition records, Dick evidences the explorer's attitude towards Inuit women by quoting the following statement '[women are] an absolute necessity to render men contented. Feminine companionship not only causes greater contentment but as a matter of both physical and

mental health and the retention of the top-notch manhood it is a necessity' (Dick, 2001: 382).

Peary legitimises his presiding relationship with the Inuit women under the banner of masculinity, defining the role of Inuit women as sexual objects to be allocated as necessary. Unlike the majority of white male explorers who did their best to keep sexual relations out of public knowledge due to prevalent ideas around the shame of miscegenation, Peary openly publicised the relationship he formed with a very young Inuit girl, Allakasingwah, who was fourteen at the time, creating a classic 'pin-up' style naked photograph of her (fig. 2.13) which he published within his autobiography *Northward Over the Great Ice* (1898), with the caption *Mother of the Seals (An Eskimo Legend)* (Henderson, 2009). Diverging from what was termed scientific, or anthropological in photographic approach, the pin-up pose depicts the young girl naked and smiling as she leans forward towards the camera. The pose sexualises her and caters for the imperial male gaze. Within the historical context of the early 20th century, Bloom suggests that native peoples occupied a blurred position somewhere between human and animal, and therefore were not recognised as a threat towards white society and its own class systems (Bloom, 1993). As such, Dick suggests Peary's sexual encounters with women were perceived as a demonstration of virility and necessary for the success of his expedition (Dick, 2001).



Fig. 2.13 Allakasingwah, Peary's Inuit mistress and mother to his son. (circa 1890s). [Photograph].

Both Henson and Peary fathered children to Inuit mistresses. Henson's son Anaakaq was born to a woman named Akatingwah, and Peary's son Karree born to Allakasingwah (fig. 2.14) Although Henson was unmarried at the time, Peary, a married man, openly publicised his relationship with the young Inuit woman in his expedition accounts, as mentioned above. Both mothers and children remained in Northern Greenland within their communities, as was commonplace, while Henson and Peary returned to America. Threats of miscegenation and racial tensions, which were present in more traditional imperial locations such as Africa and India, were thought to be absent from the Arctic. Constructed as an 'empty' and 'stainless' space, perhaps these tropes provided Peary with an added sense of freedom to fully engage in sexual relations with Inuit women. Pálsson underscores that Peary was an exception in publicising his intimate relationships, stating that Arctic explorers who fathered children with Inuit women carefully guarded their secret families on return to their homeland, emphasising, 'the shame and guilt this engendered, often weighed like nightmares on the brain of their descendent and family outside of the Arctic' (Pálsson, 2008).

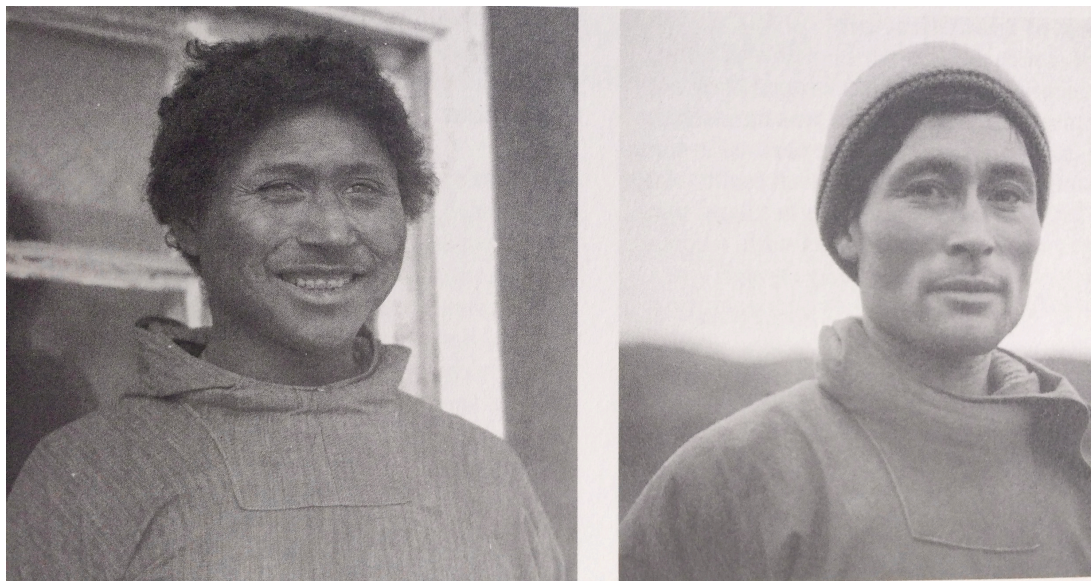


Fig. 2.14 Henson's son Anaakaq (left) and Peary's son Karree (right), both born to Inuit mothers. [Photographs].

As discussed above, the Harvard academic Counter, was first alerted to Henson through discovery of the existence of mixed-heritage Inuit in Greenland. Upon conducting further research in the area, Counter confirmed that the men he had traced in Northern Greenland were the sons of Henson and Peary. Counter's research objective, in addition to creating

visibility and recognition for Henson in America, was to coordinate a family reunion between Henson and Peary's American and Inuit relatives, a desire that was enthusiastically met by both Inuit families. While Henson's American family willingly confirmed their participation in the reunion, a large section of Counter's published reflections on the event are dedicated to the struggles he undertook in persuading the American Peary family to participate (Counter, 1991). Mirroring the shame and guilt Pálsson describes above in relation to secret explorer-Inuit families, Counter reports the denial he was initially met with from the American Peary family when relaying that he had traced Peary's Inuit son:

'I wanted to know if I could take Kali [Peary's Inuit son] some word or letter or anything that would indicate that his American relatives were now aware of him and that they cared about him. Some of those I contacted refused to discuss the matter, while others made it clear that they were not interested in communicating with Kali. I received a letter stating that I was off the mark in my efforts to "exalt" Henson and to "question" Peary. The writer accused me of using "bastardy" as a way of discrediting Peary.'

- (Counter, 1991: 47)

Following a process of negotiations with Peary's family, in 1987, Counter successfully arranged for Anaukaq and Kali, alongside their sons and grandchildren, to travel to the United States and meet some of their North American relatives. Supported by Harvard University, Counter titled the event the *North Pole Family Reunion* and used the occasion as an opportunity to gain press coverage and further illuminate Henson's achievements. In addition to visiting multiple historic landmarks across the city of New York, the families visited the respective burial sites of Henson and Peary. Having fulfilled his ambition to meet his American relatives and visit the resting place of his father, Henson's son Anaukaq, died later that year (Counter, 1991).

Echoing Pálsson's earlier call, the ramification of Euro-American exploration on Inuit communities is an area of academic enquiry that requires further attention, and as such I have included the narratives of Henson and Peary's Inuit families as a demonstration of the effects colonial explorations had and continue to have across Inuit communities. It

remains underdeveloped, in part, because the Arctic is not sufficiently recognised as a postcolonial territory. The late Greenlandic artist Pia Arke (1958–2007) undertook a wealth of research that focused on Inuit-Explorer colonial relations. Born to a Greenlandic mother and Danish father, she dedicated much of her artistic career to the neo-colonial struggles of Greenlandic communities and their continued relationship with the coloniser Denmark, creating the first major body of work to address postcolonialism in the Arctic. Arke conducted a lifetime of research in the Danish Arctic Institute archive¹⁵ in order to create a counter history to dominant representations Greenlandic Inuit have endured and continue to endure in contemporary society. Vocal about her aversion to the label postcolonialism, Arke preferred the term ‘Ethno-Aesthetics’. For Arke, Ethno-Aesthetics concerns two groups of disciplines: the first, ethnology, ethnography and anthropology, and the second, artistic practice, art theory and aesthetics. Her work originated from an interest in Eskimology and the feeling that she herself was the subject of studies rather than being afforded the opportunity to reverse the gaze. In her own words, Arke saw ethno-aesthetics as a ‘messy concept, a concept that inspires further work. [It is] a description of the West seen from the outside, from the point of view of the “other”, from a point of view such as mine, the Greenlander’s’ (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2012).



Fig. 2.15 Pia Arke. (1997). *Arctic Hysteria IV*. [Photomontage].

¹⁵ The Danish Arctic Institute has a unique collection of photographs, film, maps, books, art and ethnographic materials, which focus on the history of Greenland and the Arctic during the last 250 years (<https://arktiskinstitut.dk/en/the-archives/>).

Within her artistic oeuvre, which spans painting, photography, installation, film, performance and critical writing, Arke produced the seminal body of work titled *Arctic Hysteria* which addressed the violence Inuit communities, particularly women, were subjected to during the 19th and 20th centuries. Using archival material from Peary's expeditions, Arke created artwork that directly confronts the sexual nature of predominantly white Euro-American explorer's encounters with Greenlandic Inuit women. In *Arctic Hysteria IV* (1997) (fig. 2.15), one of the most powerful of Arke's, the artist created a sepia-toned, black and white photomontage consisting of seven juxtaposed photographs from Peary's aforementioned book, *Northward Over the Great Ice*. Four photographic portraits of Peary and fellow white expedition crew, Clark, Baldwin and Entrikin, are placed next to three portraits of naked, unnamed Inuit women whom Peary refers to in his autobiography as 'Mistress of the Tupik,' 'An Arctic Bronze,' and 'Flash-Light Study' (Peary, 1898).

The photographs of the naked women are not anthropological in style, smiles are worn, hips are tilted and knees bent, reminiscent again of classic 'pin-up' poses which sexualise the women and further categorise them as passive. The images, captured by Peary for his own records, hyper feminise the Inuit women, much like the feminisation of the Arctic landscape. As the Scandinavian curator duo Kuratorisk Aktion point to in their essay *Arctic Hysteria: The Greenlandic Women's Body as a Battlefield*, 'colonialists have consistently read the indigenous culture as signs of effeminacy, while the culture of the metropole was of course viewed as masculine,' the curators continue 'Arke highlights the troubling commodification and exoticisation of these young Inuit women' by placing their images alongside contrasting portraits of the white explorers; dressed head to toe in full furs, standing tall and most significantly, in control of their image (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2012: 73–4). In relation to this I argue that *Arctic Hysteria IV* endows the white male explorers with hyper-masculinity and in turn, although not present in the photograph, emasculates the women's fellow Inuit males as passive.

In addition to highlighting the psychological impact of Euro-American explorers on the Arctic region, Arke sheds light on the nature of the widely used and accepted term of the 19th century, *Arctic Hysteria*. Known within the Arctic territories as 'piblotog', *Arctic Hysteria* is a term which describes the trauma experienced by Arctic peoples during the age of exploration and is commonly understood as a temporary psychotic episode experienced specifically by Inuit societies. Most prevalent in women, symptoms include hysteria, depression, insensitivity to severe cold and the compulsive repetition of words.

As Kuratorisk Aktion detail in their expansive survey of Arke's work, it had long been assumed hysteria was a mental condition experienced in females brought on from a uterine disorder. Traced back to a theory of Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, the state of hysteria was understood to be a pathology caused by the womb wandering the body in its longing to become impregnated. Neurologist Sigmund Freud later illustrated at the end of the 19th century that this could not be the case, positioning the womb anatomically in the place it occupies today and arguing that hysteria is a direct psychological result of sexual violence (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2012).

Arctic Hysteria first appeared in exploration literature over a century ago and has been the subject of research for scientists, ethnographers, anthropologists and psychiatrists, predominantly because of its so-called culture-specific nature. The extreme behavioural condition and amnesia that follows has only been reported within the Arctic region. A multitude of theories were advanced from all over Europe and North America hypothesising dietary factors, such as the high consumption of vitamin A present in the traditional Inuit diet of livers, kidneys and the fat of Arctic fish; environmental effects such as lack of visual stimuli and sensory deprivation from the vast whiteness experienced throughout winter; and lastly, a genetic predisposition to psychotic instability, invariably in-keeping with Western colonial representations of the Inuit as 'primitive' and 'savage'. A growing body of literature has emerged which examines the diverging semantic contexts of *hysteria* in Inuit languages and the same in Western literature which highlight the vast differences in cultural interpretations. A seminal study by Dick argues that 'pibloktoq' was an umbrella term used to describe various forms of Inuit anxieties, born from early contact with Euro-American explorers and the symptoms of physical illness, sexual coercion, oppression of shamanistic practice, and expressions of resistance to patriarchy and cultural domination which ensued (Dick, 1995). As discussed above, the implications of historical Euro-American exploration on the Arctic and Inuit communities are far reaching, with their legacies continuing to shape present representations of the territory. A territory of colonial trauma, the Arctic needs to be included in postcolonial discourse in order to counter the amnesia that continues to steep the region.

As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this chapter, Julien's *True North* is a prolific and rich resource for the development of critical Arctic studies and its myriad of concerns. Within his short film, Julien addresses the complexities of polar history as it relates to whiteness, masculinities and postcolonial trauma. Through a series of images and narrations depicting Henson's Arctic voyage, Julien contributes to the limited studies that

devote themselves to the resurrection of Henson's story. It revisions, reclaims and most significantly, creates a rare contemporary visual reference point which evidences that Henson's omission from polar narratives was not only confined to his conflict with Peary, rather, his unrivalled skills, endurance and intelligence threatened white masculinity to the core. Henson's body represented such a threat to imperial ideologies that he was cast into a certain disappearance. Racial whiteness is often described as a *slippery* concept, an omnipresent force that draws power from its invisibility. *True North* succeeds in marking whiteness. Through a revision of Henson's presence in what Julien terms an 'all-white universe' (Julien, 2013: 166), the ubiquitous nature of whiteness as a construct becomes visible. Retrieving Henson from a white void, Julien's film masterfully employs binaries and constructed opposites in relation to both race and landscape in order to begin a process of reclamation.



Fig. 2.16 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation].

Chapter Three

John Akomfrah's 'The Nine Muses'



Fig. 3.1 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film] UK: John Akomfrah.

‘Something about the place [Alaska] started to remind me of the stories every post-migrant family, either here or outside would recognise. When you first speak to your uncle or your grandad or your mum about the experience of coming here [England], certain motifs come up again and again, and normally the first thing they say is: the cold! It seemed to mark them in a way, so that was the first clue. The second was the monochromatic nature of the space they encountered, it was so grey and black and white. If I were going to do something which starts to suggest what it’s like – symbolically – to exist here [England], Alaska was a pretty good space to start.’

- (Akomfrah, 2014)

John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* is a stylised, poetic and deeply affective feature-length filmic essay which extends the genre of documentary filmmaking and creates a monument to the migrant narrative through the montage of archival film from 1948–70 and freshly-

shot digital footage. It is conceptualised as a contemporary epic about the history of mass migration of South Asian, African and Caribbean settlers to the shores of post-war Britain. Taking the classic Homer's *Odyssey*,¹⁶ – considered the second extant work of Western literature – Akomfrah uses the poem as a key reference point, demonstrating that pillars of classical white patriarchal literature have the ability to speak for multiple experiences of journeying, memory, loss and trauma. Akomfrah's meditation on the history of migration to post-war Britain synthesises and draws parallels with migrant conditions of journeying from margins to centres in contemporary times. Echoing *Odyssey*'s structure – fractured narratives and overlapping story lines – *The Nine Muses* aligns migrant and black-British experiences from the late 1940s until the present-day with one of the founding texts of Western civilisation.

The film is arranged into nine sections, each titled after one of the nine muses born to Greek goddess *Mnemosyne* after spending nine nights with *Zeus*, King of the Gods: *Calliope* (The Muse of Epic Poetry), *Clio* (History), *Erato* (Love), *Euterpe* (Music), *Melpomene* (Tragedy), *Polyhymnia* (Hymns), *Terpsichore* (Dance), *Thalia* (Comedy) and *Urania* (Astronomy). Each section is unique in its assemblage, comprising a vast array of British Broadcasting Association (BBC) material from the 1940s onwards which show scenes such as migrant arrivals into English dockyards, graveyards, towering monuments, riot scenes, industrial labourers, factory production lines, snowstorms, heavy rain, and grey, smoggy traffic jams. The archival, grainy black and white footage is spliced with freshly-shot high-definition (HD) colour scenes of Alaskan Arctic panoramas depicting seemingly desolate snowy-white landscapes and the contemporary post-industrial residue of the West Midlands via haunting images of their abandoned industrial buildings. In an interview with Robert Beeson, director of *New Wave Films*, the distribution company for *The Nine Muses*, Akomfrah recalls a question he asked himself when beginning to assemble the film, 'what aesthetic and ethical considerations should govern how one constructs a "historical fiction" about events and lives that have been profoundly shaped by what the St Lucian poet Derek Walcott called, "the absence of ruins"? Lives without monuments, without the "official" signature of recognition and interest' (Akomfrah, 2010). A haunting, emotive work, *The Nine Muses* is Akomfrah's antidote to the amnesia related to black British histories, it is a contemporary monument to the migrant experience, constructed from images, texts, songs and poems which begins to describe a search for forgotten identities.

¹⁶ The second of two epic poems attributed to the Greek poet Homer composed circa 8th century BCE.

In 2008, Akomfrah was the recipient of a BBC and Arts Council *Made in England* bursary which required him to link a new project with an English region. Provided with free rein of the vast BBC archive, Akomfrah initially produced the forty-minute gallery film installation, *Mnemosyne*, titled after the Greek goddess of memory, set in the West Midlands. With the wealth of material gathered and the potential to extend the project, the work ultimately grew into the ninety-three-minute feature film *The Nine Muses*. The crisp new Arctic footage was shot in Alaska, by Akomfrah, as part of a previous BBC filming commission to document the fallout from the 1989 Exxon oil disaster when 10.8 million US gallons of crude oil were spilled into the ocean at Prince William Sound on the south coast of Alaska. To this day, it remains one of the most devastating human-caused environmental disasters. Despite political ecologies not being directly addressed within *The Nine Muses*, the location of the Arctic footage imbues the film with environmental reference points. As established in chapter one, present-day images of the Arctic have become synonymous with the global environmental health crisis, however, within Akomfrah's work, the melting of ice does not immediately register as metaphors for the disappearance of the Arctic landscape, rather, they function as metaphors for movement, transition and change, akin to experiences of human migration in all its forms.

Describing pillars in the thematic framework of *The Nine Muses* as ideas of *being* and *becoming*, Akomfrah asserts he wanted to understand how people, in this case migrants, move from a place of 'certainty', such as one's birthplace or hometown, into 'this other thing, which is not really here nor there' (Power, 2011: 62). Within *The Nine Muses*, notions of *neither being here nor there* are signified and visualised through Arctic imagery. The white Arctic landscape is employed to conjure notions of detachment, distance, otherness and unfamiliarity which aid Akomfrah's visual descriptions of human experiences of occupying the place between *being* and *becoming*, thus the Arctic becomes a twilight zone, a space between spaces. This chapter questions the function of landscape in Akomfrah's work and looks specifically at the significations of Arctic space to speak for notions of dislocation and intermediate states of existence, which epitomise the migrant experience. In what follows I analyse Akomfrah's complex visualisations of the Arctic and read them in relation to critical Arctic theorist Hill's proposition that polar landscapes have functioned as key spaces to debate imperial politics and perform national characteristics throughout British colonial history (Hill, 2008). I question whether Akomfrah's anti-imperial meditations and critique of British colonial legacies upon the white landscape subvert the established trope of the Arctic as a stage for domestic affairs.

In order to answer this question, I focus on key elements of *The Nine Muses* such as Akomfrah's presentation of the Arctic, not as a sublimely white, blank space, but a territory marked by human and industrial presence which goes some way to disturb traditional Arctic representations and advances an alternative, nuanced perspective of the region in line with its emerging identity as a space of industrial possibilities. In addition to the recurrence of northern landscapes in Akomfrah's filmic practice, I look to a further recurrent motif, the isolated figure in the landscape, or tableaux vivants, and read this emblem in relation to the artistic and literary movement of Romanticism. I question how these ghostly figures make visible hidden, silenced narratives through their unmistakable presence, and will continue, later in this chapter, to construct an argument for Akomfrah's employment and extension of Romantic aesthetics as an additional strategy of identifying key Western literary and conceptual aesthetics and inserting black narratives within them.



Fig. 3.2 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film] UK: John Akomfrah.
Collage of stills comprising new digital arctic footage and archival film.

Assembling Postcolonial Identities on the Great White Stage



Fig. 3.3 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film] UK: John Akomfrah. Opening still.

The film opens with a melancholic composition of sound and Arctic landscape. Slowly panning across the vast Alaskan mountains, the viewer is introduced to the epic setting of the film and its imbued stillness. The sublimity of bright whites and shimmering blues which are traditionally associated with the Arctic are replaced with dark, heavy skies and endless moody grey snowscapes that create a sombre, reflective tone from the outset (see fig. 3.3). Thunder begins to rumble in the dark skies above, and with a fade to black, the scene cuts to a passenger boat moving steadily through calm, gloomy waters. The looming mountains which hug the edge of the water are dusted with white snow, creating an interruption to the sky and sea merging into an infinite landscape. The impending darkness of the first scene provides an alternative visual introduction to the Arctic territory which at once becomes more familiar than traditional sensationalised, hyperreal images of bright, white Arctic-scapes. Instead, the visual sensationalism and sublimity most associated with the high north, which is often further intensified by the photographic lens, is neutralised within *The Nine Muses*.

As the boat continues to cut across the water, a figure standing upon the deck appears in shot. Wearing a black padded, hooded jacket, they stand with their back to the camera and look out at the passing mountains. A combination of the figure's contemporary outerwear, the design of the boat and the saturated HD colour footage of the Arctic-based shots in the film mark it as contemporary, in direct contrast to the archival black and white celluloid it is continuously juxtaposed with, indicating that *The Nine Muses* is simultaneously dealing with both the past and the present. After this calm introduction to the Arctic, the screen suddenly cuts to grainy archival footage of a young black man labouring within what appears to be a steelworks factory. As loud noises of grinding metal can be heard in the background, the man focuses intently on his work. The narration of an archival interview begins:

'Sometimes we think we shouldn't blame the people,
because it is we who have come to their country. On the
other hand, we think, well, if they in the first place had
not come to our country and spread false propaganda,
we would never have come to theirs. If we had not
come, they would none be the wiser, we would still
have a good image of England, thinking that they are
what they are not. And the English would be as
ignorant of us.'

- Unknown (*The Nine Muses*, 2010)

Akomfrah's engagement with the philosophy of the dialectical is made clear in the composition of *The Nine Muses*, throwing seemingly disparate narrations and visual narratives together through the process of montage, they collide to produce something new. Following principles of cinematic montage developed by key thinkers such as 20th century soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, Akomfrah creates a framework of image, narration, object, and sound, from the past and present, in order to produce what Roland Barthes described as *third meaning*. Defined as an affect, or non-articulated content, Barthes proposed *third meaning* could be found beyond the first and second orders of meaning which constitute the informational and the symbolic (Barthes, 1977). In line with Barthes's proposition that three layers of meaning are omnipresent in cinematic compositions, it is through the process of montage that Akomfrah develops a tapestry of historical and new moving image, allowing the symbolic to collide with the

informational and create, what Barthes terms a new 'signification' or *third meaning* to emerge. The concept of triangulation is a constant through all aspects of the work, relating in particular to the Transatlantic Triangular Trade in terms of the history of slavery, and to the material composition of the work with its three primary sources. Image, object and sound come together to produce an affect that transcends language and rearticulates old and new images. The framework of montage gives archival images new life and simultaneously imbues the Arctic landscape with a new historical relation. It is within this montage that the Arctic emerges as a stage upon which Akomfrah's silenced black British migration histories are rearticulated. The Arctic landscape is therefore used as a backdrop, a stage or a screen, as Barthes terms a *symbolic* structure in the second order of cinematic meaning (Barthes, 1977).

The contrast of the image fragments are further punctuated by a variety of textual narrations and quotations from interviews found in the archive – such as the one above – combined with text by authors considered to be canonical figures of Western literature: Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, John Milton, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickson, T.S. Eliot, Sophocles, Dante Alighieri and those outside of the Western literary canon: Matsuo Basho, Li P, and Rabindranath Tagore. Positioned as a resistance to the assumption that these Western literary figures and their works represent the essence of modernity, thereby excluding and suppressing any forms of 'other' identity outwith the Euro-American context, Akomfrah interweaves these classical Western narratives when creating testimonies of African, Caribbean and South Asian experiences in order to position their testimonies of migration as global forms of modernity, sitting alongside master Eurocentric narratives. This is, in essence, an act of postcolonial critique visualised and communicated through the montage of text, image, object and sound.

By continuing to weave references of migrant folklore throughout the film, Akomfrah uses the literary classics to signify an idealised 'Englishness'. In a director's interview, Akomfrah recounts that texts such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Beckett were held up as examples of English cultural heritage, and as such, were read by first and second-generation, largely middle-class migrants, in order to *become* English (John Akomfrah, 2010). Both the migrant subjects of the film and the textual fragments are journeying from their original contexts and arriving somewhere new, creating a conceptual echo to Akomfrah's exploration of the central ideas of the film: *being* and *becoming* in relation to migrants' experiences of settling in England. In his interview with *New Wave Films*, Akomfrah states that the original literary impulse behind the film was T.S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land, regarded as the primary work of modernist poetry, *The Nine Muses* is a re-imagining of this classical Western poem as a 'black journey through a frozen landscape' (Akomfrah, 2010).

Discussing his appropriation of the classical literary works, Akomfrah states, 'I was excited to place some of these texts within such a cold environment, to see if they could work allegorically' (Akomfrah, 2010). In this respect, Akomfrah uses the Arctic landscape in the same way he does the texts; by lifting and transplanting the literary samples into a cut and mix of cold Arctic landscapes and contrasting hot industrial scenes, the texts transform and absorb new meaning, becoming commodious enough to describe multiple experiences outside the boundaries of their original intent. Akomfrah's literal creolisation of the classical Western texts advances a position of resistance to the assumption that authors such as Shakespeare and Milton speak only to and for white Euro-Americans, and he visualises this through the insertion of black figures and narratives into the 'whiteness' of the Arctic. In the same manner, Akomfrah transforms the Arctic, neutralising its traditional representation as a literal and symbolic white space and, in his own words, creates an 'expedition about putting a black presence in all the "whiteness" of the landscape' (Akomfrah, 2010). Akomfrah's political and aesthetic strategy evidences cultural constructions of the Arctic as a racialised landscape and displays the symbolic potential of the space to describe whiteness. By inserting black histories into a space traditionally confined for the performance of whiteness, Akomfrah reclaims the Arctic in the same way he reclaims classical Western texts.

As polar scholars Scott MacKenzie and Anna Stenport point to within their essay *All That's Frozen Melts Into Air* (referencing Marshall Berman's modernist work, *All That's Solid Melts into Air*), the Arctic has been represented as a blank, white space since exploration narratives emerged, in this respect the Arctic's function is comparable to cinema: an empty white screen which is projected onto and perceived to belong to the realm of the imaginary. As the authors observe, cinema offers a space to play out alternative narratives that may otherwise be unavailable, much in the same way the Arctic has historically provided a stage to construct nationalist imaginaries and ideologies (MacKenzie and Stenport, 2013). As the authors describe:

'Just as the end of film grants apparent and imaginary closure, the Arctic so often has been conceived as the end of the known and habitable planet, offering

similarly facile and illusory sense of closure to Western assumptions of epistemology and existence. In this manner, cinema shares with the Arctic a constitutive oscillation between the spectacle and the sublime. Like current visualizations of the Arctic sublime that codify impending environmental destruction in the wake of anthropogenic climate change, the spectacle of the Arctic is, *pace* Guy Debord, about the naturalizing of power relations.'

- (MacKenzie and Stenport, 2013: 1)

The authors argue that a Debordian spectacle has been imposed on the Arctic for centuries, rendering its changing characteristics and varied populations invisible behind the illusions of a frozen white, static and sterile landscape. Furthermore, they point to the notion that the territory's 'natural' isolation has become conflated with notions of death; in English poetry and literature the season of winter is often symbolic of death or the encroachment of it (MacKenzie and Stenport, 2013). Death is a concept which has become intrinsic to Arctic narratives. For the majority of men who travelled to the territory under the auspices of colonial exploration, death was a looming probability. Mortality is the principal theme of the majority of historical literary and visual narratives connected to the region, a prime example being the symbolic naming of Franklin's Arctic expedition ships the *Erebus*, denoting the primeval god of darkness, son of Chaos, and *Terror*. Death is also a concept which has become synonymous with racial whiteness, as theorist Dyer develops within the final chapter of *White*, titled *White Death*, Caucasians have developed a special relationship to death, to glorify it while bringing it to others (Dyer, 1997). As Dyer expresses, 'it is said that when sub-Saharan Africans first saw Europeans, they took them for dead people, for living cadavers. If so, it was a deadly perception, for whites may not only embody death, they also bring it' (Dyer, 1997: 209). Within the context of historical Arctic exploration, the white male explorer figure not only engaged with death knowingly through long, arduous expeditions, but he himself simultaneously harboured and represented death as he brought disease, social disruption and ultimately death to Inuit communities across the Arctic.

However, Mackenzie and Stenport's overriding argument states representations of the imaginary, fictionalised and 'otherworldly' Arctic have overridden the realities of the region and have played a key role in establishing the territory as a passive space in world order. Arctic visual histories have been elided, 'melting into thin air' as a result of the recurrent motifs which represent the space and as such cement it as a land which literally and symbolically marks *the end* of the known planet (MacKenzie and Stenport, 2013). Furthermore, the authors' comparison of the white Arctic to cinemas blank screen substantiates the notion that the Arctic is a concept, and a place which, for the majority, will only be experienced through a screen, out of reach it is therefore elevated into the realm of the imaginary, akin to cinema. Most significantly, in relation to *The Nine Muses*, is the continued function of the Arctic as a stage upon which these imaginaries, ideologies and meditations of national identities are performed. The landscape has functioned as what critical Arctic theorist Hill has defined as a *stage* for centuries (Hill, 2008).

Beginning with early 19th century exploration narratives, the Arctic was used as a platform upon which British imperial aspirations were performed and national characteristics solidified, as Hill defines, the Arctic 'made legible and articulated invisible spaces of ideology and national subjectivity, separate[ing] Arctic space from other colonial spaces and gave the Arctic a unique place in the [British] national and imperial imaginary' (Hill, 2008: 30). *The Nine Muses* partially engages with the Arctic in this manner, Akomfrah arguably uses the Arctic as a stage or structural backdrop through his use of the landscape as an intermediate space to resurrect black British histories. However, Akomfrah subverts the traditional use of the Arctic as a stage to articulate national imperial motivations and instead employs the landscape as a space to critique Britain's imperial legacies. I propose these images are creating a new space within Arctic visual history as they are engaging the landscape with its historical entanglement in the British Empire. As laid out in chapter one, the Arctic's identity is in flux between traditional tropes of blankness, neutrality and disconnect, and its recent emergence as a critical space for global environmental futures. Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* occupies an alternative space, a space between these dominant dialogues, as it refutes both categories and engages the region in postcolonial, anti-imperial discourses, allowing studies such as this to further engage with the region's inextricable connection to colonial pasts. As I described in the introduction to this thesis, one of my primary aims is to contribute to the small pool of critical studies which position the Arctic as a postcolonial space, and I contend *The Nine Muses* is a key visual study which provides a vehicle to further engage with this aspect of Arctic history.

Moreover, Akomfrah further disrupts tropes of the Arctic, as explicated earlier in this chapter, by advancing an alternative view of the landscape. In place of blank, blinding-white, traditional visual representations, the artist presents darkened, moody landscapes and incorporates images that testify to an industrial presence, overall presenting a truer representation of the region aligned with its current identity. Rather than focusing on a generalised Arctic location, Akomfrah presents the specific location of Alaska and its emerging identity as a new frontier for industrialism in the high north. In the background of the majority of Arctic footage within *The Nine Muses*, footage of steel containers, pylons and towering metal gates fencing off large areas of the landscape can be seen. Images such as these combined and visualised with colonial critique as defined above unite to create a film, which not only challenges dominant and troublesome emblems of the Arctic, but also engages the territory with postcolonial debates and the landscapes inherent relationship to British imperial activity.

Melancholic Peripheries: Reflections on Labour in the Relative North and Revisiting Histories in the Imagined North

As established earlier, in place of blinding whiteness and blank snowscapes, Akomfrah presents dark, dramatic images which foreground, not a generalised Arctic, but the specificities of Alaska as an increasingly industrialised natural landscape. Using these images as a catalyst, I want to discuss the term North and its relative application in order to further evidence *The Nine Muses* as a film which creates discourse around northern landscapes and rejects traditional visual depictions. Within *The Nine Muses*, Akomfrah explores the term North and its varying applications, simultaneously addressing representations of northern English industrial towns and their connections to migrant labour, the symbolic potential of northern natural landscapes, and the notions associated with the ultimate northerly location, the Arctic.

‘Everyone carries their own idea of north within them.

The phrase ‘true north’ is itself a piece of geographer’s precision, the difference between the northernmost point on the globe and the slight declination marked by the magnetic north to which the compass needle tends.

The phrase has metaphoric force beyond that

definition. 'True north' goes beyond the idea of the prodigious (or malign) north and suggests that, for each individual, there exists somewhere the place that is the absolute of the north, the north in essence, northerness in concentration and purity...North, a concept epitomized by difference.'

- (Davidson, 2005: 8–11)

As Peter Davidson posits above, the idea of north is a relative concept, one person's notion of north may be a significant departure from another's, and is dependent on geographical, political and cultural factors. As a cultural category, ideas of north can be placed in two distinct classifications within the context of Britain (England/Scotland) and Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Finland/Sápmi). The first is the essentialist, romanticised constructions of northern fringes of countries, remote from centres of power, they are perceived as locations of coldness, nature, escapism, reflection, isolation, otherness, spirituality and imbued with a sense of authenticity. 'Wild' and 'unspoiled' landscapes function as visual signifiers for the category of what I want to term *northernisms*, within which the Arctic sits at the top of the scale as the pinnacle of the idea of north. I want to apply the term *northernisms* in the same manner as the editors of *Arctic Discourses* applied the term *Arcticisms* (Ryall, 2010), as I elaborated upon in chapter one. *Arcticisms* are defined as 'major sources of powerful and popular images and assumptions' (Ryall, 2010: x), which have a decisive influence on how the Arctic is interacted with. I propose this term can be extended into *northernisms*, to encapsulate the similar strategies of power asserted over romanticised northern landscapes in Britain, such as the highlands and islands of Scotland.

Cultural theorists Ysanne Holt and Anna McInanahan describe that in opposition to romanticised, sensationalised constructions, such as *Arcticisms* and *Northernisms*, is the second cultural category which continues to associate the idea of north with the 1980s period of declining manufacturing and agricultural industries, such as the border towns of northern England, the fishing villages of the Scottish Highlands and the dwindling mining towns of northern Sweden (Holt and McInanahan, 2013). Often characterised as regressive and underdeveloped locations, Holt suggests that these peripheral towns continue to be viewed in a pre-modern light, afflicting communities with contests of private/public ownership and imposed laws which radically alter communities' self-determination, often resulting in population decline, environmental neglect and social and

economic hardships (Holt, 2013). These two categories of the north, the romantic utopia and the declining dystopia, do not contradict one another, but highlight the conflicts in identity that northern, peripheral spaces, often far from centres of power experience.

Akomfrah simultaneously addresses both categories defined above within *The Nine Muses*. The highly saturated, glossy images of the Arctic landscape chime with a number of characterisations of the location as a meditative space upon which reflections can be mediated. These ideas are conveyed through a marriage of sound components and slow-panning images of the landscape. Particularly poignant are the scenes of the lone figure Akomfrah places in *The Nine Muses*, walking, seemingly aimlessly, through the white landscape. Spliced with these are the noisy, bustling archival images of migrant labourers working in the industrial ports of northern England, harking back to the golden years of British industries. *The Nine Muses*, concurrently deals with the two varying ideas of North, the relative north and the imagined north, further substantiating the many academic studies in existence which seek to reveal the myriad of cultural constructions attached to the term.¹⁷



Fig. 3.4 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film] UK: John Akomfrah. Collage of film stills, industrial presence in the Arctic and archival footage of West Indian man working in a British factory.

¹⁷ For further reading on ideas of north see Basu (2007); Cohen (2000); Davidson (2005); Ehland (2007); Holt (2010); MacDonald (1997); McCrone (1992); Rapport (2002) and Russell (2004).

A further significant dimension that Akomfrah's film suggests is the notion of *future norths*, conveyed through his incorporation of images of Arctic industry such as ports, shipping containers and large heavy-load vehicles. As Holt and McClanahan point to within their essay *Northern Peripheries*, northern regions of the global north such as Canada, Scandinavia and Scotland have become new focal points, or frontiers, for natural resources and renewable energy on an industrial scale (Holt and McClanahan, 2013: 203). Motivated by conservative capitalist interests and liberal responsible energy consumption views, these seemingly blank spaces take on a renewed significance in the global urgency for cultural, scientific and economic strategies for energy production (Holt and McClanahan, 2013: 203). The authors go on to address the social dimensions of the idea of north and the possibilities peripheral spaces hold for society's second chance; locations of new utopic futures which allow communities to imagine new methods of 'ethical' sustainable living. The authors state that a wealth of speculative discourses have emerged that 'engage with landscapes, economies and cultural practices through the use of fictional narratives, architectural and art practices as generative, imaginative and fertile ground for re-introducing utopian thinking to governance, culture and the way in which we might live our everyday lives' (Holt and McClanahan, 2013: 204). In keeping with the general history of northern peripheral regions, much of these speculative narratives which propose to alter the geopolitics of the region have come from 'outsiders' or central locations of power in the south.

In light of the above, I want to concentrate here on two main strands of thought regarding *The Nine Muses*; firstly, labour and the relative north, and secondly Akomfrah's employment of northern locations to revisit British histories, particularly black British histories. Throughout the film, Akomfrah visually foregrounds elemental opposites, cutting and mixing images of ice-cold Arctic landscapes with the white-hot heat of industry: crystal clear images of figures slowly wandering through quiet snowscapes are juxtaposed with grainy historical footage of young black migrants working with molten iron in foundries, white steam screaming as it escapes from gurgling vats of liquid iron set to a sonic backdrop of rhythmic clashing metal. Visual depictions of white hot/white cold, soiled/pure elemental figurations are advanced at the beginning of the film and continue to be juxtaposed throughout.

It is through the images of the young men at work that the key element of industrial migrant labour and its locations in northern England are foregrounded, exposing that within a British context, and as critic Jeroen Verbeek has pointed to, the migrant exists, in

the first instance, exclusively through the process of their labour (Verbeek, 2015). Their relationship with England is one which is subject to work and therefore, as the ethnographer Abdelmalek Sayad describes within his text *The Suffering of the Migrant*, the *illusion of the provisory* in relation to the social, political, economic and the existential conditions of immigrant status (Sayad, 2004). Sayad designated this condition as a *double absence* as the immigrant is considered to be 'other' within his new surroundings and simultaneously becomes 'other' through his prolonged distance from his home country, creating a state of paradox (Sayad, 2004), or to reinforce Akomfrah's term in relation to his conceptual focus for *The Nine Muses*, 'the part between *being* and *becoming*' (Power, 2013). The migrant's existence in the new country, and particularly the relation and reliance on labour, results in the idea of returning home never being entirely abandoned according to Verbeek (Verbeek, 2015). As argued earlier within this chapter, this middle space, this state of paradox, the margin between *being* and *becoming* is signified by images of the Arctic within *The Nine Muses*, revealing powerful Western cultural constructions of Arctic space as an intermediate, dislocated landscape.

This dislocation is mirrored in Akomfrah's filmic montage of archival footage set against not only freshly shot Arctic panoramas, but new digital colour scenes filmed at Birmingham's abandoned industrial buildings. Sepia toned and rotated to disorientating angles, the viewer is introduced to the post-industrial ruins of the West Midlands via an array of extended scenes featuring another lone figure. Reclining on weed-woven shattered paving stones, the figure gazes aimlessly at heavy skies above. Once an industrious, bustling and noisy space, the large decaying buildings sit silently at the fringes of the city empty and without purpose. As critic Sandhu points out, the deterioration of the sites Akomfrah features serve as a visual metaphor for the collapse of working class communities, often centres of interracial sociality, their decline attesting to the rise of capitalist individualism (Sandhu, 2011). Notions of isolation and loneliness, which were initially introduced through a foregrounding of the lone figure in Arctic space, are now paralleled in the scenes of Birmingham's post-industrial landscapes.

As I have described, the relative north and its associations with locations of industry and labour are mirrored in *The Nine Muses*. Although Akomfrah's Arctic is predominantly represented as vast and unpopulated, *The Nine Muses* momentarily offers an alternative perspective of the region, illuminating industrial presence through images of towering silver pylons and huge load bearing trucks. Tyre stains on pristine white snow are revealed alongside rows of shipping containers which can be seen in the distance, all of

which suggest themes of *contamination*, a concept which is also reflected in the interrelation of archival scenes of English anti-immigrant protests such as the slogan 'Keep Britain White' daubed over a city wall. Arctic footage cut with scenes from the dockyards and further intermixed with black and white archival film create a relationship between the images, forcing them into dialogue in order to reveal intricate symbolic connections. Fleeting glimpses of industry within Akomfrah's Arctic appropriation echo the aforementioned concept of *northern futures*, suggesting that locations within the landscape are sites of a new kind of activity; trucks, dockyards, shelters, containers, and pylons all attest to a recent form of labour and industrialisation in the Arctic. While the archival images of industry are noisy, busy and full of activity, the juxtaposing locations of Arctic industry are still, silent and largely void of human presence, creating spectral, post-apocalyptic imagery which looks more like a dystopian northern future, than the more traditional utopic vision.

Hauntological Landscapes

I now want to address a further strand of thought in relation to northern territories, which is my proposition that the imagined north is an evocation of the hauntological in the work of Akomfrah. Jacques Derrida described the term *hauntology* within his seminal text *Specters of Marx* as the notion of the present being haunted by ghosts of the past, ghostings which are neither present or absent, but palpable (Derrida, 1994). Applied as a critical lens to examine visual culture, theory, music, architecture, psychoanalysis and Afrofuturism (to be discussed further in chapter five), hauntology describes a sense of failure in modernity, advancing the theory that contemporary culture is haunted by *lost futures*, offering an opposition to notions of nostalgia and revivalism which are more commonly called upon. Theorist Mark Fisher suggests that by refusing to give up on a desire for the future, artists, writers and theorists create speculative works which draw upon the past in order to reimagine a future (Fisher, 2014). *The Nine Muses* is an example of hauntology in its approach to the potential of the archive. Akomfrah retrieves images of the past, rearticulates them and provides new meaning that extends across past, present and future within a future-orientated film.

Within Akomfrah's extensive filmic oeuvre, there are three films alongside *The Nine Muses* which feature Northern landscapes: *The Call of Mist* (1998), *Genome Chronicles* (2009) and

the most recent *Vertigo Sea* (2015). Each shot across many locations on the Scottish islands of Skye and Mull, the films individually position landscape as places of drama and untold stories. *The Call of Mist* is a vivid reflection on loss, inheritance and post-humanism. Originally commissioned as a response to the first hundred days of Tony Blair in government (May 1997) and the seismic shift which was taking place across Britain's political landscape, Akomfrah looked to the contentious Dolly the Sheep cloning experiments which were taking place in Scotland at the time, levelling a futurist view on the political climate through complex notions of inheritance and cloning. The relation between the Scottish landscape and Akomfrah was also a personal one with the recent passing of his mother and her yearning to visit the Highlands, a trip that was never realised. Comprising sepia and blue toned film, which are representative of Ghanaian national colours of grief, Akomfrah journeys to the Scottish Highlands with his mother's ashes in hand, making the symbolic trip for them both. In this sense, *The Call of Mist* is a profound filmic journey concerned with notions of loss, memory, and mourning, wherein the northern landscape figures as a key space for these personal and political meditations to play out.

Akomfrah describes his relationship to landscape, a recurring concept within his work, as multi-layered (Akomfrah and Rughani, 2013). In the first instance, he describes how he has been influenced by Romanticism and its relationship to notions of freedom. Originating in Europe towards the end of the 18th century, Romanticism was characterised by its emphasis on the primacy of the individual, subjectivity, and emotion, and the glorification of the past and nature. A movement which was gaining strength at the same time as early 19th-century Arctic exploration, Romanticism's new aesthetic categories of sublimity, beauty and terror came to represent Arctic exploration visual narratives as well as many other northern territories. Most significantly, Romanticism foregrounded the question of *becoming*, which as Akomfrah identified, in the context of the late 18th century, was a question of how one *became* in front of the eyes of God, therefore posing relatively radical ideas about freedom in reaction to the political conventions of the Age of Enlightenment (Akomfrah and Rughani, 2013). Akomfrah traces affinities with the *Romantic idea* in relation to the diasporic subject, stating that the key question of *becoming* in relation to landscape is the same for diasporic artists:

‘How does one highlight the question of becoming in a way that realigns the perceptions that people have of background and

foreground, between figures in history (foreground) and the places/space(s) of the historical (background). Where do you sit in relation to these two things?’

- Akomfrah (Akomfrah and Rughani, 2013: 217)

In this sense Akomfrah uses the past – historical ideological movements and aesthetics – in order to re-align and reclaim spaces of dispossession. Romantic images depicted the heroic individual and cemented the idea that the pre-condition for experiencing a primal, authentic sense of being relies on a connection with the outside world, otherwise termed ‘nature’. However, as Akomfrah discussed in an interview about his film *The Call of Mist* and his layered relation to landscape as a concept, the assumption that these ‘pristine’ and ‘barren’ landscapes have always existed in this manner is a construction of British history (Akomfrah and Rughani, 2013). Northern peripheries exist as ‘empty spaces’ for historical reasons, they are legacies of imperial actions which can be evidenced, for example, in the Highland clearances which took place across Scotland over the course of one-hundred years in the 18th and 19th century, corresponding with the height of Romanticism (Richards, 2012). As historian Eric Richardson identifies, it is therefore no coincidence that these lands have remained largely unpopulated when the majority was portioned up as agricultural property of the aristocracy (Richards, 2012). Akomfrah once again illuminates the power dynamics at play in representations of ‘natural’, ‘untouched’ landscapes by challenging the notion of who is perceived to belong in a space. I want to recall Stenport and MacKenzie’s critical Arctic work here in which they state that visual spectacles of sublime landscapes are exercises in ‘naturalising power relations’ (Stenport and MacKenzie, 2013:1). I suggest Akomfrah illuminates the concept of power in his visualisations of landscapes and reveals that they are not merely natural backdrops to historical narratives, but active agents of cultural and political powers.



Fig. 3.5 John Akomfrah. (2015). *Vertigo Sea*. [Film Installation].

Although Romanticism was a relatively radical movement – most notably many of the Romantics fought for the abolition of slavery which did not reflect populist politics at the time – its foregrounding of the individual heroic male figure within dramatic landscapes began to create symmetries between identity and place, solidifying visualisations of the *white national character*. Therefore, Romanticism yielded the power to cement a relationship between white national characters and remote spaces of nature. I propose it is precisely this unquestioned symmetry between person and place which Akomfrah is tackling within his works featuring landscape. The foregrounding of a central, isolated character within these landscapes is an attempt to confront what appears incongruous to a space, therein questioning the connection between character and landscape, place and identity. Through the artists creation of new images of solitary figures in the landscape, a primary icon of the European Romantic movement, Akomfrah is illuminating the concept of racialised landscapes and subverting the movements white history. In addition to inserting a black presence in classical Western texts and visual representations of the Arctic, Akomfrah now extends the possibilities of the Romantic Movement and inserts a black presence in its exclusively white visual narrative.



Fig. 3.6 John Akomfrah. (2012). *Perpetia*. [Film Installation]; (2010). *The Nine Muses*. [Film]; (1998). *The Call of Mist*. [Film].

Absent Figures in the Landscape

To return to a crucial text for my reading of Akomfrah's work, particularly his employment of northern landscapes as locations of hauntology and the concepts mobilisation via the lone figure, Davidson's seminal topographic text *The Idea of North*, describes perceptions of northern territories as locations of struggle (Davidson, 2005). To travel north is to be faced with a difficult journey, it implies hardship, remoteness, severe weather and a willingness to face adverse situations. Within a literary context, the position of north is often symbolic of *the unknown*, and within Akomfrah's filmic oeuvre, northern landscapes are configured as spaces of otherness and dislocation. Described by Akomfrah as 'overlapping exercises in spectre-poetics' (Akomfrah and Rughani, 2013: 216) his work featuring landscapes are about returning to spaces of hauntings, all of which are visualised through the recurring tropes of tableaux vivants or isolated figures wandering

melancholic terrain. *The Call of Mist* (1998); *Genome Chronicles* (2009); *The Nine Muses* (2010); *Perpetia* (2012); *Transfigured Night* (2013); *Tropikos* (2014); *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *The Airport* (2016) and *Auto Da Fé* (2016) all include a prominent lone figure which raise questions on the concept of outsider status and spaces of dislocation. Historically, tableaux vivants were formed of figures posed, silent and immobile, for twenty or thirty seconds, in imitation of well-known works of art or dramatic scenes from history and literature.

The viewer is introduced to a lone Romantic figure within the first scene of *The Nine Muses*, their stillness in the landscape creating a ghostly, statuesque presence. As the film progresses, the figure begins to re-appear, sometimes trudging through snowy pathways, at others standing and gazing out at the landscape in typical tableau vivant fashion, however they almost always conceal their identity with their back to the camera. As proposed by Romanticism, the pre-condition for experiencing the *sublime* was to be isolated and immersed in nature. Tracing the motif of the 'rear-view figure' in the landscape, Verbeeck further reifies that Akomfrah's habitual motif of the isolated figure has far more of a relation to the histories of painting than to cinematic tradition (Verbeeck, 2015). Verbeeck references the theatre scholar George Banu and his discussion around the presence of such a figure throughout the history of painting and theatre, proposing that the composition of the rear-view figure confronts the viewer as a 'cyphered poem', opposed to the 'unequivocal nature of the gaze or the clarity of facial features in classical portraiture' (Verbeeck, 2015: 154).

With regards to his 2013 film *Transfigured Night*, which also features the recurring motif of the rear-view figure, Akomfrah describes the postcolonial state as narcoleptic, in the sense that it slips into unconsciousness in order to avoid accepting reality (Verbeeck, 2015). Verbeeck suggests that this state of inactivity is mirrored via the inclusion of the still human form, unmoving and constant (Verbeeck, 2015). Akomfrah's images can therefore be aligned with the silence and amnesia that steepens the histories of black British migration. Each of Akomfrah's figures represents those who have been left in a state of paradox and met with abject silence with regards to their own historical relationship to Britain. As laid out earlier within the chapter, through a combination of the conceptual ideas described at the beginning of *The Nine Muses*, the viewer gathers that the figures represent an 'other' within the symbolic whiteness, however the presentation of the body is continually abstracted, their identity shrouded by clothing and rear-view framing. Akomfrah thereby denies a pervasive white gaze and directs the viewer to engage with the subject matter, not through the eyes of the figure, but through a montage of abstracted

sound and image. By employing the rear-view motif Akomfrah subverts the dominant gaze and inserts the black body within the Arctic landscape through suggestions, collisions of images and spectre poetics. Furthermore, by shrouding the figures' personal identities of the lone figure in *The Nine Muses*, Akomfrah creates a visual strategy in which one hauntological figure can represent the many, simultaneously symbolising past, present and future experiences.

In contrast to the rear-view motif that appears throughout the new digital footage in *The Nine Muses*, facial close-ups are prevalent in the archival film that Akomfrah interlaces it with. I was particularly struck by an archival shot featured in the early scenes of a young black man working in what appears to be a steelworks factory (see fig. 3.7). The footage creates a sustained engagement with the subject through prolonged shots of him labouring, the camera pans ever closer until the final frame is an extended and lengthy close-up of his face. Film theorist James Harvey-Davitt has written on the subject of filmic portraiture in his article *Black Skin, White Light* (2015) claiming that when 'we gain such intimate proximity to a face, it alters our relationship to the on-screen figure [providing] a moment of human identification' (Harvey-Davitt, 2015). In writing specifically about portraits of the soul singer Otis Redding, Harvey-Davitt addresses the raced elements of the images by referencing Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and his theory of *crushing objecthood* which defines the deeply violent psychological effects of the dominant white gaze levelled at people of colour.



Fig. 3.7 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film] UK: John Akomfrah. Opening still of man working in factory.

Relating Harvey-Davitt's text to my analysis of *The Nine Muses*, there is an indisputable raced element to the archival footage that Akomfrah appropriates. Thinking specifically of the frames of the young man in a factory setting (see fig. 3.7), the prolonged focus on the subject's face is one which can be defined as an unequivocal white gaze, a scrutinising stare at the *other* which simultaneously creates a moment of human identification and establishment of difference. Despite Akomfrah rearticulating the image and subverting the ethnographic gaze through a process of contextualisation and montage, the inherent racism of the original filmic eye is engrained in the image's celluloid. As Harvey-Davitt quotes in relation to his reading of portraits of Redding, Fanon stated that 'the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye' (Fanon, 1967: 82). Akomfrah's montage of this frame creates a visual testimony to Fanon's conception of the white gaze and marks it explicitly as a strategy employed to control or *fix* the subject in the British mind's eye. Although the process of montage does not elide the racism which is within the genetic make-up of the archival film, it testifies to the tyranny towards black bodies in the West and marks the reality of migrant experiences. Perhaps this is where the inclusion of the rear-view figure can be better understood in the new digital footage of *The Nine Muses*: I propose it is a rejection of the unwavering white gaze. By withholding the figure's identity, Akomfrah is reclaiming power and denying the pervasive gaze. The rear-view figure can thus be understood as a political symbol of resistance to the legacies of what Fanon described as *crushing objecthood* (Fanon, 1967).

During an interview in 2013, Akomfrah was asked why the recurrent figure within *The Nine Muses* is kept distant from the viewer, the face shrouded in clothing and the identity never revealed. He stated that it was a challenge to the idea that truth and intimacy are only ever delivered through the eyes of a subject (Akomfrah and Rughani, 2013). Akomfrah questions this assumption in *The Nine Muses* by using a montage of landscape and sound to enable the viewer to read the subject through an abstract narrative and mixture of non-verbal cues. Additionally, the connection between identity and location is questioned and problematised by placing the black body within a cold, northern, white territory. As aforementioned, although the race or gender of the figure is never revealed within *The Nine Muses*, the stance, build and movement suggest they are male, and the context of the film suggests they are black. Significantly, it is only in the closing credits of *The Nine Muses* that the identities of the figures are revealed and appear as follows: 'Cast: Yellow Coats: Trevor Mathison¹⁸ and John Akomfrah; Blue Coat: David Lawson¹⁹; Black

¹⁸ Trevor Mathison is an audio visual artist and a founding member of The Black Audio Film Collective. He is a long-standing collaborator with Akomfrah and was the sound recordist and composer for *The Nine Muses*.

Coat: David Lawson and Trevor Mathison. If we understand the figure as a phantom, an amalgamation of sounds and archival images, by placing himself in the whiteness of the landscape, Akomfrah's own biography is haunting the films, becoming part of the testament to black British migrant experience. Like the majority of Akomfrah's films, the autobiographical element is prolific and *The Nine Muses* proves to be no exception.

Layers of references continue to be added throughout the film: the solitary figure begins to multiply and the viewer is presented with two figures who stand some distance apart, distinguished only by their brightly coloured jackets. One in blue and one in yellow, the colourful jackets are literal insertions of colour into a monochromatic space. As Akomfrah described in an interview, 'there's a folklore about immigration, ask grandmothers, mothers and they'll say it was so gray that they felt they were the only thing with any colour in it!' (Power, 2011: 62). Perhaps as a form of re-enactment of migrant arrivals, the figures enable Akomfrah to visualise past and present narratives which have played out upon the landscape whilst simultaneously signifying the epic journeys which the migrants endured. The solitary figures act as counterpoints to the archival footage and provide a contemporary vehicle for diasporic narratives which are obscured from official accounts. Momentary echoes of the still rear-view figure appear within the grainy archival celluloid, such as a man peering into a shop window and labourers looking out over the factory floor. As painterly, Romantic figures which can be imbued with political and historical sentiments, the figures personify the hauntological within Akomfrah's filmic practice, advancing history as a system of loops in which narratives are being played, replayed and layered in order to question notions of trespass, spaces of dispossession, outsider status and the gap between *being* and *becoming*.

¹⁹ David Lawson is an audio visual artist and a founding member of the Black Audio Film Collective. He continues to collaborate with Akomfrah in the capacity of a producer.

Chapter Four

Invisible to Whom: Representations of Whiteness

‘The discovery of a personal whiteness among the world’s peoples is a very modern thing – a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed.’

– (Du Bois, 1920)

‘Avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject...from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers.’

– (Morrison, 1992)

‘What we are trying to do when we use whiteness as a conceptual tool is insert an intellectual crowbar between whiteness as *looking white*, and whiteness as the performance of culture and the enactment of power, then pull the crowbar down.’

– (Garner, 2007)

This chapter seeks to trace a brief history of the construction of whiteness and expand upon the key notions and expressions of the concept that *The Nine Muses* and *True North* raise. Creating an overview of whiteness studies as a discipline enables me to evidence the filmic case studies as seminal contributions to the field and illustrate the potential the films harbour to create further understandings of the concept as it is mobilised by various political and aesthetic signifiers. According to American whiteness theorist Gregory Jay, when discussing the complexities and problematics relating to constructions of race, attention is almost exclusively focused on Black, Latino, Asian and any other racial category which is non-white, therefore rendering whiteness un-raced, and furthermore,

invisible (Jay, 2017). By neglecting to be examined, whiteness continues to occupy a position of normative, central and oppressive power, becoming accepted as the standard by which 'other' racial categories are defined and understood. Steve Garner identifies within his text *Whiteness: An Introduction*, that the lack of white society's self-identification of being raced is considered by many academics working within the field of critical race and whiteness studies, the single largest obstruction to the dismantling of white supremacist society and achieving racial equality (Garner, 2007). Returning to Dyer and his text *White* (1994) which greatly informs this thesis, he crucially observed that, 'this assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture' (Dyer, 1997: 2). Whiteness is the primary concept this thesis is anchored by.

Shifting the gaze upon whiteness is resisted within dominant Western society as it ultimately threatens the continued power and status of whiteness as a construct within global racial stratification and the privilege it yields. bell hooks has written about the anger that outpours from white Americans when their whiteness is brought into focus, often verbalising an outrage that their liberal beliefs in universal subjectivity, and the notion that all people are 'the same on the inside', are brought into question. hooks suggests their indignation stems from an emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness', choosing – consciously or not - to ignore their white skin privilege and the system they are part of and visually represent (hooks, 1992: 167). Garner further expands on this by highlighting that the idea of an individual, single identity is afforded only to whiteness, whilst collective, communal identities are ascribed to all other racial groups, further reifying the long-standing construction that a white man speaks for himself, while a black man speaks for all black men: 'the distinction between white/individual and non-white/communal represents a way of understanding the world that has developed since Enlightenment thinkers instated the rational European individual at the top of the hierarchy as the universal man' (Garner, 2007: 4). Reni Eddo-Lodge further emphasises this and demonstrates there has been little change. She describes her weariness of the emotional disconnect the vast majority of white people display when a person of colour articulates their lived experience, suggesting 'the journey towards understanding structural racism still requires people of colour to prioritise white feelings ... I can't have a conversation with them about details of a problem if they don't recognise the problem exists' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

Whiteness studies is an interdisciplinary area of scholarship which aims to challenge and destabilise European instated racial hierarchy. Tracing economic, cultural, sociological and political histories supporting the social construction of people identified as white, its primary aim is to reveal and therefore disempower whiteness as a dominant ideology in present society. Theories of whiteness intend to problematise the normalisation of whiteness and its privileges, critically analysing how whiteness, and white-skin privilege, have operated systematically, methodically and most often unconsciously, as a commanding force on global society and culture. As Jay points to, 'often articulated within the fields of globalisation and post colonialism, critical studies of whiteness trace a lineage of privilege and power with European imperialism in order to reveal it as a mere ideological fiction' (Jay, 2017). Critical studies of whiteness are used as tools to reveal the historical constructions of these fictions, whilst simultaneously examining their continuing influence on contemporary global society, particularly the subject of white skin privilege.

White privilege in the West exists in many forms: material privilege includes full access to higher education and the institutions it takes place in, as well as a safe and secure area to live. Symbolic white privilege manifests in notions of intellect and beauty, often represented by pale or lightly tanned skin, as theorist Audrey Thompson advances, not only preferencing white skin, but excluding anything that is not (Thompson, 2001). Whiteness theorist Peggy McIntosh identified and composed a list of forty-six daily effects of white privilege in order to underscore the oppressive effects whiteness continues to yield globally, from the full list I have selected four points which describe the breadth of experience white privilege extends across, from education and racial profiling, to choice and personal freedom:

'7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.'

'8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.'

'25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.'

‘38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.’

- (McIntosh, 1988: 70–81).

Studies of whiteness originated in the writing of black Americans before being broached by white writers within dominant Euro-American culture. One of the original recognised works on whiteness is traced back to Ida Wells-Barnett, an African American journalist, editor, and co-owner of the 1890s Memphis based black newspaper *Free Speech*. Wells-Barnett was also a suffragist and an early leader of the Civil Rights Movement at the end of the 19th century. This was followed by W.E.B. Du Bois’ work in 1903; Langston Hughes (1934); Richard Wright (1940); Ralph Ellison (1952); James Baldwin (1955) continuing up to Toni Morrison (1987); bell hooks (1992) and Charles Mills (1997). Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination* (1992) is considered to be a key work in triggering an explosion of scholarly texts in critical whiteness studies that continued to emerge throughout America and Europe during the 1990s. As whiteness theorist Tim Engles lays out, the majority of these subsequent texts responded directly to Morrison’s urge for ‘scholarly excavation of an “Africanist” presence in American literature, and for an understanding of the ironic ontological dependency white identity has had on such figurations of minority people’ (Engles, 2006: 27). Whiteness studies are inherently interdisciplinary, and extend across cultural studies, history, sociology, anthropology, popular culture, communication studies, music history, dance, art, philosophy, and linguistics amongst others.

Perhaps a factor in the concept of whiteness being used as a critical conceptual tool to examine a range of disciplines, as described above, stems from its multitude of meanings and expressions. As Garner establishes at the beginning of his text *Whiteness: An Introduction* (2007), whiteness ‘has no stable, consensual meaning, and has been conceptualised in a number of different yet not mutually exclusive forms’ proposing it as a mere lens through which a multitude of social relations can be examined (Garner, 2007: 3). Major groups of research within whiteness studies include the following: the historical construction of white identity, white skin privilege, white cultural identity from the perspective of non-whites, and the processes of social change as they affect white identity.

I am employing whiteness studies here in the manner in which Garner advances the discipline, as a 'problematic, or analytical *perspective*: that is, a way of formulating questions about social relations' located within contributions to anti-racist scholarship (Garner, 2007: 3). Furthermore, I am specifically interested in the construction of white identities in relation to the geographical location of North as it relates to my investigation of the Arctic as the heartland of racial whiteness, constructed through the early 19th century masculine exploration narrative. Before doing so – and in order to remain critical and self-reflexive in the tradition of whiteness studies – I will lay out the problems and pitfalls of the discipline, as identified and explicated by Garner in his introduction to the field.

The Currency of Whiteness Studies

Garner states that the primary criticism of whiteness studies is the danger in reifying the construct of the 'white race' as a homogenous group, transporting racial whiteness from a constructed ideology into a real, palpable, autonomous object which has biological and cultural links and in doing so, gives rise to white supremacist groups, legitimising their beliefs in essentialist, racial hierarchical structures (Garner, 2007: 8). The second concern Garner identifies is the misconception that whiteness studies can create a sense of equality between racial groups, based on the levelling of racial identification (Garner, 2007: 9). Whiteness is set apart from other racial identities precisely because it has historically, and continues to, determine self-representation, defining itself by what it is not. By working on the assumption that whiteness studies harness the potential to even out historical imbalances, according to Garner it not only naively proposes that whiteness is something experienced identically across all whites, irrespective of nationality, class, gender or sexuality, it also gives rise to 'white victimhood, creating a backlash to multicultural policymaking which is deemed to preference non-white concerns' (Garner, 2007: 11). The final pitfall which I am seeking to avoid is the assumption that by merely discussing whiteness, I am automatically contributing to anti-racist thought. As Garner cautions, studies concerning whiteness have the potential to unintentionally bolster racial stereotypes rather than challenge them (Garner, 2007:11).

This study focuses on the representations of whiteness. Akomfrah and Julien's filmic meditations on the concept of whiteness are extensions of early critical thought around

the social construction by African-Americans and are thereby continuing a legacy of critique by black intellectuals. *The Nine Muses* and *True North* address the socio-political and personal effects of whiteness as a social construction, using the Arctic as a literal and symbolic space to describe contemporary and historical black experiences of the concept. This research primarily questions 1) the relationship between white racial identity and the Arctic region, and its material significations of snow and ice; 2) the black/white racial binary that is visually and conceptually foregrounded not only in Akomfrah and Julien's films, but also within each film produced as part of the identified trend, between the years of 2004–2010. Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North* are contemporary contributions to whiteness theory as they are made in the tradition of whiteness studies; that is to say, they have been created from a position of resistance to whiteness as a prevailing construct. As such they are rich in their contribution to developing contemporary thought around the intersection between whiteness and landscape, but also in their employment of the black/white racial binary to create visual representations of whiteness as an expansive force from black perspectives.

Studies that question the concept of whiteness are increasingly relevant in the current global political moment. Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic appropriations act as contemporary reflections of the political climate they were produced within (2004–10): the rise of nationalisms, ever-increasing preoccupations with racial purity and the aggression directed towards southern bodies moving north to perceived spaces of refuge, free from civil war and economic crisis. However, despite the length of time since their initial release, the artists' meditations on the concept of whiteness are as powerful and crucial to understandings today. Their continued relevance is twofold: firstly, whiteness as an academic discipline is still in need of critical attention. Secondly, they have successfully navigated the problematics of whiteness as a 'slippery and omnipresent' concept by marking and dismantling it through visualisations of histories and landscapes that have been intrinsic to its construction. In line with one of my main arguments of this thesis, I contend their visual meditations on expressions of whiteness and the potential they harbour to further understand the concept in line with its ideological homeland of northern Europe and America is yet unrivalled.

Since 2010, the year Akomfrah released *The Nine Muses*, Euro-American politics have continued to swerve to the right, reaching a crescendo with Britain's Brexit referendum (June, 2016), and within the American context, the official implementation of the Trump Era. Historian Nell Irvin Painter discusses in her article *What Whiteness Means in the*

Trump Era (2017) that the term 'whitelash', which was widely circulated in the media following Trump's inauguration, describes white Christian anger, an anger that stemmed from the perceived loss of dominance and power of whiteness within a multiracial, multi-ethnic America (Painter, 2017). His campaign slogan *Make America Great Again* can be read as Painter suggests, '*Make America White Again*', advancing a plea to bring back a country that was once again controlled by whites, marking his 2016 election a turning point in white identity (Painter, 2016). In this sense, white American identity became visible as a racial identity, no longer, as Painter termed, an 'un-marked, default, normalised white, but a nationalistic, bigoted white which stands against multiculturalism and racial equality' (Painter, 2016). As Painter states in relation to the Trump Era white identity shift:

'Here lies the snare that has entrapped white identity for decades [...] white nationalism scares many ordinary white people away from embracing whiteness, which white nationalism makes appear bigoted and terroristic. Given the people who emphasize their white racial identity – white nationalists, Nazis, Klansmen and so on – the white race is a spoiled identity. Embracing whiteness would seem to enmesh one in a history of slave-owning and all the discrimination flowing from it. What righteous person would want to embrace that? Up to now, there's hardly been a pressing need to do so, for a fundamental dimension of white American identity has been individuality. Conveniently, for most white Americans, being white has meant *not* having a racial identity'

- (Painter, 2016)

In the same manner as Trump incited a nostalgia for total white control in American politics and population, the British EU referendum Leave campaign operated a similar strategy, positioning Britishness (read Englishness) as white, projecting white victimhood with reference to economic strains emanating from a perceived burgeoning migrant population. As writer Akwugo Emejulu points to, a leading argument constructed by the Leave campaigners is that an ever-increasing strain is being piled onto British public services by the migrant population, causing suffering to working class communities across

the country (Emejulu, 2016). The working class that the Leave campaign continually referenced were 'irrefutably assumed to be white' (Emejulu, 2016). Emejulu has written about the ways in which the power relations of whiteness have operated during Brexit, simultaneously representing itself as a 'victim' and 'innocent' within the rhetoric of the Leave campaign. Emejulu demonstrates that the main argument of victimhood, as laid out above, is the idea of the working-class being held-hostage on home turf by migrants (Emejulu, 2016). The non-white migrant population is thus the main focus of blame, a smoke-screen or erasure for the conservative implementation of an unequally distributed austerity policy, shrinking, cutting and privatising public services across the UK (Emejulu, 2016). According to Emejulu, women of colour are disproportionately affected by austerity as they are more likely to be public sector employees, but also part of the poorest households which are in turn further impacted by the reduction of local services such as libraries, transport and childcare (Emejulu, 2016). The second operational strategy whiteness has employed within Brexit negotiations is the concept of 'innocence': as Emejulu points out, the 'outrage' and surprise by the public body surrounding the sharp increase in race-related verbal and physical attacks create a false sense of these happenings being a departure from the norm, and out of character for British society (Emejulu, 2016). As Emejulu suggests, the framing of whiteness is linked with the concept of innocence in line with a form of amnesia, operating to maintain its invisibility.

As I hope to have demonstrated above, the complexities of white identities and white skin privilege are in crucial need of attention. The discipline of critical whiteness studies has become increasingly relevant in our current political moment of Euro-American right-wing politics and extreme xenophobia. I also suggest that it remains relatively under-researched in relation to the concept's impact and the possibilities for change that critical whiteness studies harbour. In response to the criticisms of the discipline of whiteness studies, my aim for this research is not to re-centre whiteness, nor reify it as a homogenous group; rather, my objective is to create further knowledge around its historical constructions in order to mark it, undermine it, and remove its invisibility. As I have laid out in chapter one, there is a distinct lack of academic investigation around the importance of early 19th century Arctic exploration narrative in forming the white masculine national character that in turn establishes the intimate connection between whiteness and extreme northern landscapes. I am examining whiteness within a context of Northern landscape in order to contribute to this limited field of whiteness studies which traces a lineage to its original constructions. Further still, I want to reveal the constructions of an *ideal, perfected* whiteness which I discuss in conjunction with the

theorist Richard Dyer's *scales of whiteness*, read in relation to northern geographies, in particular Scandinavia as an idealised place and people. I am arguing for Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North* as significant contributions to whiteness studies as they create a visual language around the subject, employing powerful symbols such as snow, ice and mountains to signify its presence, and for the first time, creating nuanced and abstracted filmic testaments to the experience of whiteness from both historical and contemporary black experiences. These films harbour the potential to reveal the history of the Arctic as a postcolonial, racialised space and therefore encourage new critical perspectives not only towards whiteness as a concept but also of the Arctic as its geographical heartland.

White: Inclusions and Exclusions

In what follows I look at the origins and meaning of the term white as a form of inclusion and exclusion in order to support my investigation of an idealised whiteness as it relates to northern landscapes and populations. Traced back to the 17th century, 'white' emerged as a legal term which was designated as a means to authorise citizenship, marriage contracts, entry to educational institutions, religious affiliations, and who could be enslaved (Painter, 2010). To return to theorist Jay, he outlines in his introduction to whiteness studies, "whiteness" is a term derived from the historical practice of institutionalizing "white supremacy" (Jay, 2015). Whiteness is often understood as a homogenised social group however; the construction of white identity has a history of multiplicity. During the mid to late 19th century, the existence of multiple white racial groups was not only accepted, but represented and discussed in popular culture and academic literature. At the top of the constructed scale of whiteness were the Saxons, and placed at the bottom were the Celts. Interestingly, as theorist Painter points to in his analysis of the history of whiteness, each racial group was defined not only in terms of colour, but also by temperament. Characteristic racial constitution was a fundamental factor in the construction of racial hierarchy within whiteness, with the 19th century advancing the Saxons as intelligent, sober, protestant, and attractive, in contrast to the Celts who were said to be drunken, impulsive, Catholic and unattractive (Painter, 2015). Anne McClintock's study *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) includes a section titled *White Negroes and Celtic Calibans* which lays out a history of the term 'White Negros' as it was applied by the English to the Irish in the early

19th century. According to McClintock the *Index of Nigrescence* was employed by the British Ethnological Society to measure the amount of residual melanin in skin, hair and eyes, concluding that within Britain, the Irish possessed the highest levels and ‘therefore distinguished *Celtic Calibans* from Anglo-Saxons’ (McClintock, 1995: 52).

Following a surge of Irish immigrants to America in 1849 as the result of the potato famine, an anti-Catholic bigotry gained momentum across the country, marking the Irish as a racial category set apart from whites. Concurrently, large numbers of poor eastern and southern European immigrants arrived in America which led to new divisions within the concept of whiteness. Anthropological assessments were enforced, with head circumferences and IQ levels recorded in order to create evidence of racial difference, which would later be denied (Painter, 2015). By the end of the 19th century, Italians, Jews and Greeks were placed at the lowest end of the scale of whiteness, with the newly emergent northern European ‘Nordics’ becoming the apex. As Painter discusses within his article *What is Whiteness*, published in *The New York Times* in 2015, it was not until the 1940s that European anthropologists declared there were in fact only three distinct racial categories: white, black and Asian, within which there were no subdivisions (Painter, 2015). As such, whiteness was no longer divided into inferior southerners and superior northerners, however, within racial representations of whiteness, characteristics associated with Nordic people (blue eyes, snow-bronzed skin, blonde hair) continued – and continues – to dominate representations of idealised whiteness. Whiteness as a construction articulates that there exists a scale of whiteness, wherein some whites – via skin, geographical location and national characteristics – are whiter than others. Within this scale, Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and primarily Scandinavians, sit at the top, representing the epitome of whiteness under what Dyer identifies as ‘British Imperialism, United States development and Nazism’ (Dyer, 1997: 19).

‘The Aryan and Caucasian model share a notion of origins in mountains. Such places had a number of virtues: the clarity and cleanliness of the air, the vigour demand by the cold, the enterprise required by the harshness of the terrain and climate, the sublime, soul-elevating beauty of mountain vistas, even greater nearness to God above and the presence of the whitest thing on earth, snow. All these virtues could be seen to have formed the white character, its energy, enterprise, discipline

and spiritual elevation, and even the white body, its hardness
and tautness (born of the battle with the elements) its
uprightness (aspiring to the heights), its affinity with (snowy)
whiteness'

- (Dyer, 1997: 21).

As Dyer lays out above, whiteness as a construction articulates that there exists an intrinsic relationship between coldness, northern geographies and representations of whiteness. *White*, Dyer's seminal study of cinematic whiteness, was the first book which alerted me to whiteness studies and as I mentioned in the introduction, was a key informer for the inception of this research, specifically Dyer's tracing of representations of the idealised white body and its connection to northern European landscapes, such as Scandinavia and the Alpine region. In *White*, Dyer traces a history of the term Aryan, advancing that it was one of self-designation, adopted as a racial category to describe the so-called founders of all major civilisations through the work of Arthur de Gobineau, a French aristocrat in the early 1800s. A variant of this term emerged soon after called the Caucasian, titled after the Caucasus Mountains through which the Aryans purportedly came to Europe. Dyer states the term Caucasian not only foregrounded the mountains as a crucial factor and geographical location in the formation of the Aryan belief system, but also provided validation for the myth of mountain origins and racial stratification, most notably employed by Nazism (Dyer, 1997: 21). I want to unpack and extend Dyer's work on the relationship between whiteness, coldness and northernness by tracing its construction from Christianity – specifically ideas of virginity and chastity – in relation to the Arctic as an untouched, virtuous (and thereby feminine) space, further relating to the notion of racial purity, creating a literal and symbolic parallel with the Arctic, which is the coldest, whitest, northernmost, seemingly 'untouched' space on earth. Although Dyer lays out the connection between the construction of the white character and links it to the myth of mountain origins, there is no further investigation or reference to contemporary visual examples. By using Dyer's study as a foundation, I can further develop thought around the relation between whiteness as a racial construct, coldness, northernness and what I have termed *racialised landscapes*.

Man, Mountain and Aryan Myth

To reiterate what Dyer has established, the connection between the white European masculine character and snow-capped northern European mountains can be traced back to the origins of the invention of the term Aryan. The cultural investment by whites and the power of longevity within this connection is evidenced in the existence of Bergfilm. Also known as Mountain Film, Bergfilm is a German film genre that emerged shortly after the First World War in the 1920s and focused on the practice of mountaineering. Classified as a cinematic genre indigenous to Germany, Bergfilm is comparable to American *Westerns* and Nigerian *Nollywood* in that it is understood as a film genre connected to the cultural and political landscape of a specific geographic location. Bergfilm presents a cinematic combination of mountaineering, sublime atmospherics and the demonstration of man versus nature. The focus of Bergfilm was not primarily protagonists or narratives, rather, its draw was one of sublime images where the mountains not only provided a backdrop (a key concept I refer to throughout this thesis), but became intrinsic to the characters that scaled them. The cinematic genre sought to describe the country's post-First World War 'collective soul' providing escapism from what Bergfilm saw as modernity's chaos, and offering sanctuary in the vast, pristine, snow-topped mountains (Rentschler, 1990).

The German film director, geologist and mountaineer Arnold Fanck is credited as the pioneer of Bergfilm through his focus on white alpine landscapes in films such as *Mountain of Destiny* (1924), *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929), *Storm over Mont Blanc* (1930) and *The White Ecstasy* (1931). Fanck's productions inserted alpine scenery into the heart of German visual narratives creating a strong connection between German national identity and the natural landscape, once again giving primacy to the emblem of the mountain and suggesting an intrinsic link between man, mountain and the Aryan myth, all centred around the concept of purity. Bergfilm had strong connections with the German Alpine Club, a national mountaineering group formed in order to increase tourism to the eastern alps and characterised by its support of nationalist politics and anti-Semitic policies. In 1924, sections of the club's regulations were amended under the title of the *Aryan Paragraph* to prohibit non-Christian members (Holt, 2008). The ban not only prevented Jews from being part of the club, but extended over the mountainous alpine regions themselves, inscribing the Alpine Club's principle belief that the 'purity' of the natural German landscape should be confined for the 'purity' of white Europeans, thereby racialising the landscape.



Fig. 4.1 Bergfilm, Dir. Unknown.

Critics of the mountain film genre – such as German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer – have written extensively on the relation of Bergfilm to proto-Nazi sentiments and the endorsement of anti-modernism, writing within his 1974 publication *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* that the surge of Nazi tendencies during the pre-Hitler period ‘could not better be confirmed than by the increase and specific evolution of the mountain films’ (Kracauer, 1974: 257). In his analysis of one of the most popular Bergfilms, *Avalanche* (1930), Kracauer discusses the simultaneous violence and beauty of the high peaks paying particular attention to the majestic cloud displays that feature at the opening of the film and likening the scene to the beginning of the Nazi documentary *Triumph of the Will* (1935) in which similar cloud masses surround Hitler’s airplane as he travels to the Nuremberg rally of 1934. As Kracauer acutely identifies, this visual similarity ‘reveals the ultimate fusion of the mountain cult and the Hitler cult’ (Kracauer, 1974: 258).

Nazi sentiments and fascist aesthetics are further emphasised in the filmic genre by the involvement of controversial figures such as the actor and film director Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003) who was involved in all but two of Fanck’s productions. Riefenstahl directed two monumental documentaries, *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) as mentioned above, and the two-part *Olympia* (1938), which was commissioned by the International Olympic Committee and lavishly funded by the Nazis. Writing about *Olympia*, Richard Falcon has

suggested Reifensahl's film operated to advance the image of a modern, powerful Germany abroad and 'remains the most vivid proof of the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin's contention that fascism is the aestheticisation of politics' (Falcon, 2003). These links are further compounded in Susan Sontag's acclaimed review *Fascinating Facism*, in which she writes that Reifensahl and Fanck's Mountain Film productions were 'visually irresistible metaphors of unlimited aspiration toward the high mystic goal, both beautiful and terrifying, which was later to become concrete in Führerworship ... allegorising dark themes of longing, purity and death' (Sontag, 1975).



Fig. 4.2 *Storm Over Mont Blanc*. (1930). [Film]. Germany: Arnold Fanck.



Fig. 4.3 *Holy Mountain*. (1926). [Film]. Germany: Arnold Fanck.

Conducting an analysis of Bergfilm and the critical writing which has been produced surrounding the genre has allowed me to translate some of the arguments in to an Arctic context. I want to emphasise here that many parallels exist between the constructions of German national identity through Bergfilm and the construction of idealised racial whiteness through the Arctic: both representations are mobilised through visualisations of cold, 'pure' northern landscapes, the 'unspoiled' snow becoming a metaphor for the constructed 'purity' of whiteness as a racial identity. Furthermore, the figure of the mountaineer and the polar explorer become one and the same, imbued with the 'purity' of the landscape upon which they wander. Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic films are significant interruptions to these historical visual representations and their enduring legacies. As I have stated in chapter one, the black figure within a white, mountainous or isolated cold

landscape is an anomaly because spaces such as these have been intrinsic to the establishment of white identity and therefore confined for the performance of white identities only. Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic works significantly disturb this dominant narrative and reveal the racialisation of extreme northern landscapes through the figuration of black bodies upon symbolic whiteness.

Bergfilm academic Eric Rentschler states within his essay *Mountains and Modernity*, 'the Bergfilm's celebrations of Alpine scenery echo the enthusiasms of 18th century nature aesthetics and share the emphasis of German Romantic landscape painting' (Rentschler, 1990: 141). It is interesting to note here that both Akomfrah and Julien have cited the influence of the prominent German 19th century Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich (fig. 4.4) on their approach to representing landscapes, particularly his ability to imbue land with spirituality and a sense of the ethereal (as discussed in the previous two chapters). Akin to the function of the Arctic for explorers, the mountains of Bergfilm operate as sites of self-discovery, spaces for which personal reflection, maturity and a connection with nature could unfold, foregrounding what Rentschler has identified as Romanticism's founding trope of the primacy of the individual and the precondition for experiencing the sublime: solitude (Rentschler, 1990). The mountain climbers of Bergfilm display what Rentschler states is an anti-rational relationship with the landscape and an overriding sense that the power of nature will provide them with a new-found spirituality, a self-knowledge that can only be experienced by being 'at one' – and only one - within the landscape, as a young mountaineer of the time testifies:

'That was my yearning: for all the divine solitude and calm of
the mountains, for white virginal snow.
I was weary of the big city.
I am at home again in the mountains, I spend many hours in
their white unspoiled-ness and find myself again.'

- (Goebbels, J. 1987 quoted in Rentschler, 1990:140)



Fig. 4.4 Casper David Friedrich. (1819). *Mountaineer in a Misty Landscape*. [Oil on Canvas].

Within the Romantic Movement both Alpine and Arctic landscapes functioned as primary spaces for the performance and enactment of white masculine upper class European identity. Similarly, as laid out in Hill's study of 19th century Arctic explorers, a quest for spiritual enlightenment and a knowledge of the self was a founding, and well documented motivation for 19th century British Arctic exploration (Hill, 2008). Cold, white and remote spaces signified locations of the sublime, the transcendental and the enactment of extreme physical exertion that, according to theorist Nancy P. Nenno 'refocused the desire for the metaphysical into physical experience' (Nenno, 1996: 309). In reference to the construction of Alpinism, Nenno posits that 'the distance and foreignness of the mountains heightens [...] yearning for intimate contact with them, and in the contact with this unreachable "Other" [...] he becomes an explorer, setting off on an expedition in search of identity' (Nenno, 1996: 305). In written and visual narratives, Akomfrah and Julien have inscribed Romantic traditions within their works, adapted to a new context and conveyed in the contemporary medium of moving image. Both films foreground white, cold spaces which become stages to enact, debate and question issues of identity through the figuration of a solo explorer. In the same manner as the Romantics, the Arctic is

formulated by Akomfrah and Julien as an ideological, spiritual space, representing the quest for identity through the medium of landscape, creating a new alternate and diverse triangulation between man, white space and spirituality. As such, the visuals and concepts of *The Nine Muses* and *True North* allow me to advance them as contemporary reconfigurations of traditional white Romantic landscapes.

As identified above, the historical constructions of racial whiteness have been mobilised through visualisations of cold landscapes. In *Coldness: Towards a Political Thermodynamics of Culture*, English Professor Steven Connor has stated that cultural perceptions of coldness have a long history of being related to ideas of an unshifting permanence, death, and a denial of life and development, while warm environments were linked with an abundance of life and hot-blooded vitality (London Consortium, 2014). However, the negative connotations of coldness do not extend across all semantic fields. Thermodynamics played a crucial role in legitimising imperial projects and the constructions of racism across the southern hemisphere via the creation of environmental determinism. The discipline of environmental determinism had a central proposition which was, that physical environment predisposed societies to certain behaviours, characteristics and physical developments. Closely linked with eugenics and the practices of scientific racism, environmental determinists of the 19th century proposed that the southern hemisphere's warm and tropical climates produced 'slackness' whilst the cold northern atmosphere encouraged 'strength of mind and character, tautness, civilized behaviour and enterprise' (Dyer, 1997: 21). Ultimately, the practice was instrumental in not only legitimising racism, colonialism and white supremacy, but also in establishing the link between coldness, northernness and whiteness.

In 2009, Sweden's Umeå University published the monograph *Cold Matters: Cultural Perceptions of Snow and Ice*. Within the introduction, the editors Heidi Hansson and Cathrine Norberg discuss the prevalence of negative associations with coldness, such as death, hunger, permanence, and reserved, controlled personalities, often made evident in idioms such as: cold as ice; revenge is a dish best served cold; cold, hard facts; to kill someone in cold blood; in the cold light of day, and to give someone the cold shoulder (Hansson and Norberg, 2009). As the editors discuss, whilst ice is thought of as hard, impermeable, sharp and dangerous, snow is considered the opposite: soft, gentle, intricately designed, reinforcing enough positivity in the English language to elide its dangers (Hansson and Norberg, 2009). In this sense coldness is often gendered female, evidenced in the representations of the Arctic as both a 'femme fatale who lures men to

their death' (Hansson and Norberg, 2009: 8), whilst simultaneously serving as a feminine, passive space for the performance of Euro-American masculinity. Polar exploration further cemented the gendering of spaces as it necessitated that males left the home to battle the cold elements while females continued to exist in warm domesticity (Hansson and Norberg, 2009). The gendering of remote, cold, white landscapes, whether they are alpine snow-topped mountains or polar plains strengthens their connection to the central tenet of idealised whiteness; the concept of *purity*. Recurring language around cold white landscapes as spaces of 'virgin' 'untouched', 'unspoiled' passive spaces, further reify racial whiteness as something *pure*. As discussed in chapter two, the gendering of the Arctic is another cultural construction which Julien destabilises in *True North* through his visualisation of Myrie wandering the landscape. Her female body disrupts visual conventions of men traversing the landscape and creates a new relation to the landscape, inserting a female presence into a male dominated visual and literal history.

White: As Pure as Driven Snow

'Snow and ice are the emblems of the deeds done in their
clime...the history of Arctic enterprise is stainless as the Arctic
snows, clean to the core as an ice mountain.'

- (Henry Morley, 1853 quoted in Hill, 2008: 8)

As established above, the principal commonality between constructions of whiteness, Bergfilm and representations of the Arctic is their deep investment in the idea of *purity*. Purity is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 1) 'The state of being morally or spiritually pure; sinlessness; freedom from ritual pollution; ceremonial cleanness; innocence; chastity' 2) The state or quality of being physically pure or unmixed; freedom from impurities, contaminants, or foreign matter; cleanness (purity, n.d.). As I have sought to demonstrate above, the notion of purity functions as, and continues to anchor, representations of racial whiteness as an identity. Purity is thereby a concept which has become intrinsic to creating contemporary visualisations of whiteness. As laid out in chapter one and two, and defined by Hill within her study on the Arctic within 19th century

literature, representations of the Arctic as an empty, un-peopled space lifted the pressure from colonial projects that took place across the territory, justifying exploitative actions as 'pure' and 'clean', diametric to the traditional colonial pursuits taking place in 'the "darker" continents of Africa and South America' (Hill, 2008). The notion of purity is intrinsic to the construction of both racial whiteness and the Arctic traced back to Christianity and the ideological concepts of virginity, chastity, and virtuousness.

Within the aforementioned identified trend of Arctic films made between 2004–10 which appropriate the Arctic landscape to discuss issues of race, exists the artwork *Invisible* (2006) by Roz Mortimer. Filmed in the Canadian High Arctic of Baffin Island, Nunavut, in the communities of Iqaluit and Qikiqtaaluk, Mortimer challenges the dominant perception of the Arctic as a 'pure' and 'uncontaminated' space by examining the dangerously high levels of industrial chemicals found to be present in Inuit mothers' breast milk over recent years. Creating a filmic journey through the Arctic, Mortimer documented and abstracted a scientific study on Inuit mother's milk. Expecting to find the 'purest milk anywhere on earth' (Mortimer, 2006), instead what the scientists found was an unprecedented level of contamination. Linked to the territory's traditional food sources such as whale and seal meat, chemicals present in southern oceans migrated to the far north and built up within the Inuit food supply, slowly contaminating the community over an estimated twenty-year period. *Invisible* is not immediately identifiable with the trend's foregrounding of the racial dimension of Arctic appropriation, evident in Akomfrah, Julien, DJ Spooky, Adkin and Ndiritu's work. However, it is through Mortimer's setting of the Arctic to explore themes of *purity*, *contamination*, and her focus on the white signifier of the cultural history and symbolism of milk, I propose her work *Invisible* is part of the trend which reveals white signifiers through visualisations of the Arctic.

Invisible demystifies the Arctic territory as an 'uncontaminated' and 'sterile' space, revered as one of the last spaces on earth that has remained so, and thus challenges traditional Arctic tropes. Mortimer's use of the vast white landscape in relation to a perceived 'clarity' showcases colonial constructions of the region which are deeply intertwined with notions of literal and symbolic whiteness. Milk is not only a casual racial term in America used to describe white people but has become connected – in Northern Europe and the United States where it is widely available and consumed in the largest quantities – to be synonymous with notions of *health*, *strength* and *nature*, concepts which I have previously demonstrated are also intrinsic to the cultural constructions and visual representations of racial whiteness and its idealised geographical locations. I position

milk within the context of this study, and its central role in Mortimer's work, as a commodity which informs a broader discussion about racial whiteness and social justice. Food historian Melanie DuPuis states, according to Durkheimian classical social theory, that the intersection of food in culture, traditions and histories, also known as *foodways* and the cultural, social and economic practices relation to the production and consumption of the product, in this case, milk, is a way to interpret social groups understandings of belonging and exclusion. In more recent social theory, the study of *foodways* has been revisited and developed in terms of how it gives agency for one or more groups to dominate or exclude another (DuPois, 2007). The cultural construction of cow's milk as a white Western product related to notions of health and strength can be understood as a commodity which signifies racial whiteness in its idealised form. I will demonstrate this through a consideration of Mortimer's work in relation to scholarship which examines Euro-American milk propaganda and selected aesthetic and political strategies contained in its campaign histories.



Fig. 4.5 *Invisible*. (2006). [Film]. UK: Roz Mortimer.

Within artist and writer Ylva Habel's essay *Say Milk, Say Cheese: Inscribing Public Participation in the Photographic Archives of National Milk Propaganda* (2011), she discusses the cultural currency of milk in the Scandinavian context and the deeply symbolic nationalistic, domestic and agrarian values of the product which are engrained within its advertising campaigns (Habel, 2011). Taking the historical Swedish context of Milk Propaganda (1923–72) as an example, she elucidates the methods by which the Swedish national Dairy Council mobilised both eugenics and nationalistic sentiments in its propaganda campaign in order to establish milk as a product 'promoting perfection and the progression of a perfectible society' (Habel, 2011: 99). Habel argues that 'milk propaganda tapped into the extant, increasingly eugenic regimes of knowledge during the inter-war period and transposed into their sales rhetoric an established logic of medical, aesthetic and moral discourse on normality and health' (Habel, 2011: 109). As the author references in line with Foucault's theory of *ethics of care for the self*, propaganda campaigns attempted to inscribe the idea that consumers of milk could perfect their bodies and minds by consuming it. A particularly poignant example identified by Habel is that of the campaign *Milk Boy, Coffee Boy* and *Meat Boy* (1928), a set of characters appearing in pamphlets that were distributed throughout milk events and aimed at the youth demographic. Each of the milk characters represented an innate 'nature' that was coded by racial features – such as skin tone – and signified their specific dietary preferences, for example, milk, meat or coffee (Habel, 2011). The text accompanying the images read: *The Milk Boy – Healthy, Strong, The Meat Boy – Fat, Dumb* and *The Coffee Boy – Pale, Skinny*. The *Milk Boy* is depicted as the idealised Aryan image; tall, athletic and blonde, complete with a large glass of milk in hand. The remaining characters are darker skinned and illustrated as unhappy and unhealthy next to the glowing *Milk Boy*. Habel dissects the campaign and clearly demonstrates the master narrative of what the author terms a health/race profiling, which has been visually inscribed within the cultural narrative of milk (Habel, 2011).

An example of the health/race profiling associated with milk in recent history is the Californian-born advertising campaign *Got Milk?* The *Got Milk?* campaign was created in 1993 in order to encourage cow's milk consumption within the state of California and was subsequently licensed for use by dairy producers across America and northern Europe. To date, no critical research exists which looks specifically at the *Got Milk?* campaign in relation to whiteness, while Mortimer's work on challenging representations of the Arctic as a pure space mobilised this section of the research, the images below testify to the rich

aesthetic and political strategies at play in modern milk propaganda and its relation to racial profiling.

The campaign's widely circulated *milk moustache* advertisements began in 1995 and featured a diverse range of celebrities and athletes who appeared at the core of the visual campaigns. Revered as one of the longest standing campaigns in advertising history, its twenty-year trail established cow's milk as a 'wonder tonic' of the West, compounding notions of idealised beauty and athletic perfection into its already loaded cultural constructions. The history of the campaign showcases a multiplicity of racial identities, however, the commonality across the entire campaign is that the visual subject – the athlete or celebrity – is an aspirational figure within their field. In this regard, milk signifies the characteristics of success and, most notably in relation to the athletic subjects, physical *perfection*. As demonstrated in fig. 4.6 ten athletes symbolising the apex of their sport, showcase their perfected athletic forms within a branch of the campaign titled, *Body by Milk*.



Fig. 4.6 *Got Milk? Body By Milk* Campaign. Beijing American Gold Winners. (2008). [Advertising Campaign].

Set against a backdrop of the American stars and stripes, the image is composed of ten American gold medal winners from the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Standing upon a stainless white floor, each athlete is dressed in a crisp white costume representative of their sport. Of the ten athletes representing multi-racial America, all are 'light skinned', their skin tones appearing whitewashed by the images exposure, glowing and reflective from a whiteness that emanates from the glare of the white costumes. This feature of the image is reminiscent of Dyer's work around the *culture of light* and the representation of spirituality in Christian imagery, wherein white light appeared to be emanating out of the centre of the subject, symbolising the Christian soul by casting a 'godly' glow upon darker skin tones (Dyer, 1997), the contrast of the bold red and white backdrop against the whiteness of the floor, the props, the costumes and the skin, filter out the darker skin shades making them appear lighter. Within this portrait, visualisations of nationalism, idealised physical forms and tone, health, strength and success are compounded within the cultural construction of milk, tag-lined, *don't forget the white* (fig. 4.6).

The history of milk production has been traced back to the first farmers in central Europe and Britain milking cow herds around 4000 BCE. Until European colonialism, milk and dairy products were not part of a staple diet anywhere other than Europe. Despite China and Russia being the largest current importers of milk, Europe and America remain at the top of the scale for milk consumption based on the size of respective populations. Those who lay outside of the geographies of mass milk consumption - to be specific, those outwith America and Northern Europe - are excluded - by said nations - from a rhetoric of idealised Western physical form and consumption. Milk as a material substance has been marketed, as aforementioned, as a 'wonder tonic' of the West, a staple food source within white Euro-American culture, it has been constructed as intrinsic to the maintenance of white identity as something 'natural' and 'pure'. While the mountains of Bergfilm represent the geographical location of whiteness with their snow topped peaks, I am suggesting milk functions in a similar sense as a signifier of whiteness as it relates to racial representations of health and strength through food-sources.

Considering milk's strong history with representations of *idealised* racial whiteness, I want to question images of the *Got Milk?* campaign which feature elite black athletes, such as the basketball player Dennis Rodman, American footballer Michael Strahan and the tennis champions Venus and Serena Williams (fig. 4.7-4.9). If we take the *Body by Milk* athletic strand of the campaign to suggest milk is the principal determinant in the athletes' perfected physical form and performance, then by placing elite black athletes within this

frame, milk, a literal and symbolic white food source, is being accredited to their success. The images featuring black athletes create a direct relation between their success and the consumption of a product which has been instrumental in the construction of white identity, therefore the images become inherently politicised. Mobilising notions of white strength, prowess and *perfection* for decades, milk has become synonymous with an idealised white identity; only in the last thirty years has its advertising been associated with non-white bodies, and the only non-white bodies which enter that arena are either elite black athletes or celebrities, in other words, figures of perceived success. The history of the *Body by Milk* campaign defines milk as a provider of an idealised white identity. To reiterate my original motive behind extending my enquiry to the politics of milk, like snow and ice, milk is a visual signifier of idealised whiteness, and through a reading of its cultural and political constructions, I am able to reveal how it has been employed to support notions of whiteness. Milk, particularly the *Got Milk?* advertising campaign feeds into the contemporary constructions and maintenance of whiteness as something 'natural' and 'pure' – conceptual threads which run through the entirety of this chapter. The visual and cultural implementation of milk as something inherent to health, strength and defined as a Western food source has been intrinsic to formulating and maintaining whiteness as an idealised identity.

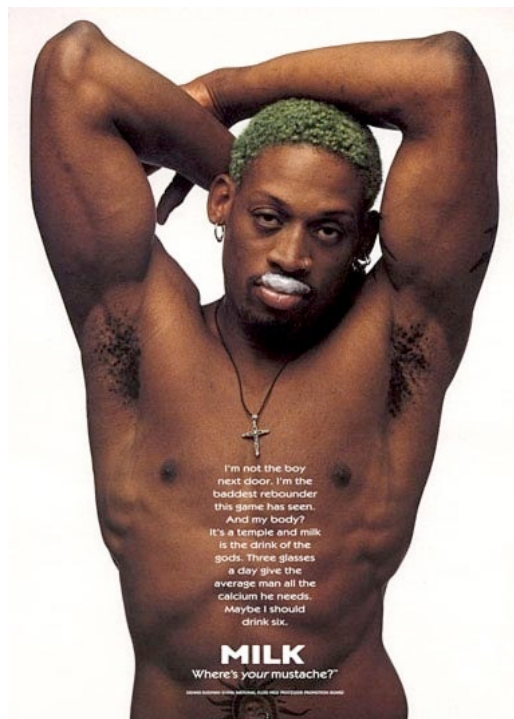


Fig. 4.7 *Got Milk?* Poster Series, Dennis Rodman. (1996). [Advertising Campaign].

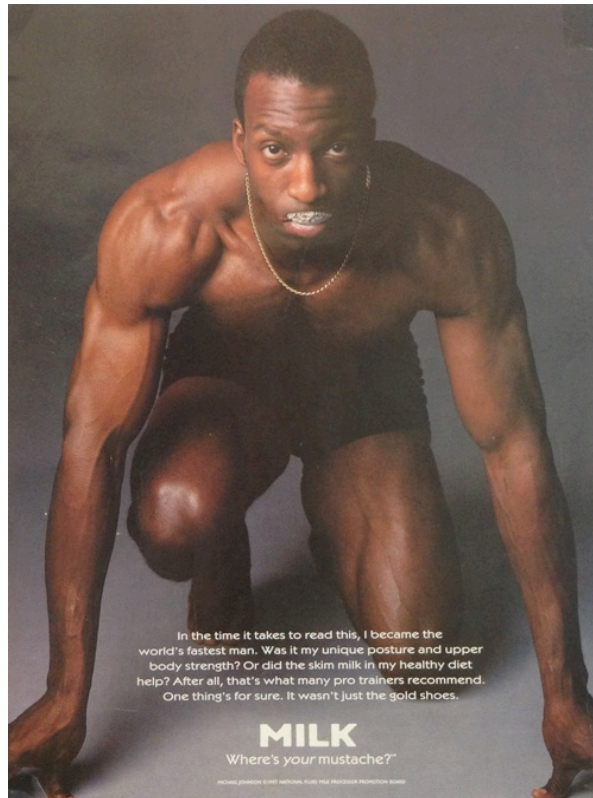


Fig. 4.8 *Got Milk?* Poster Series, Michael Johnson. (1997). [Advertising Campaign].



Fig. 4.9 *Got Milk?* Poster series, Serena and Venus Williams. (1999). [Advertising Campaign].

The Black/White Racial Binary



Fig. 4.10 Rotimi Fani Kayode. (1983). *The Milk Drinker*. [Photograph].

‘Black – White: fantasy-races in which infinite difference reveals infinite affinity’

- Alex Hirst (Fani-Kayode, 1988)

The images of American black athletes within the *Got Milk?* campaign introduce a principal concern of this thesis: the black/white visual and conceptual binary. When beginning this body of research, particularly with reference to thinking about the compositions of blackness and whiteness residing together within the frames of *True North* and *The Nine Muses*, I was led to the photographs of the artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode and found within his publication *Black Male/ White Male* (1988) an exploration of the black white racial binary through portraits of male nudes. Fani-Kayode’s photographs are primarily shot using

black and white film and describe complex experiences of otherness, racial and sexual tension, and the dislocation produced from negotiating binaristic cultures. Within *Black Male/White Male* exist two photographs which feature milk as a principal theme – *The Milk Drinker* (1983) and *Maternal Milk* (1987). *The Milk Drinker* (fig. 4.10) is a monochromatic image depicting a black male nude against a dark screen, shot from height, the viewer looks downwards at the figure as he drinks milk voraciously from a large container. The literal and symbolic white substance streams down the subject's body. The inclusion of the West African drinking vessel incorporates a mode of Fani-Kayode's personal history, specifically his birthplace of Nigeria, and further emphasises the binaries at play within the image; the white milk against dark skin, the high contrast in the photograph's tonality, the energetic consumption of an idealised Western food source pouring from a non-Western native object, summarised by the art critic Steven Nelson as a composition that 'questions power and transgresses boundaries erected between Africa and the West as well as self and other' (Nelson, 2005: 5). Similarly, *Maternal Milk* also depicts milk pouring down a black male body from height in a visualisation which suggests the figure is being moulded by the liquid. In an analysis of Kayode's short-lived yet prolific practice,²⁰ Mercer frames Kayode's images as part of a dualistic allegory which states the world can be divided into mutually exclusive opposites (Mercer, 1997).



Fig. 4.11 Rotimi Fani Kayode *Maternal Milk*, 1987.

²⁰ Rotimi Fani-Kayode died in 1989. His career spanned only six years, yet within this time he produced a wealth of artistic research.

Fani-Kayode's photographs *The Milk Drinker* (1983) and *Maternal Milk* (1987) have provided an essential link for this latter part of the chapter as they allow me to extend discussions of milk as a signification of whiteness and introduce the discussion to crucial themes within *The Nine Muses* and *True North*: dualism, oppositions and contrasts through a focus on the black/white racial binary. In reading the respective films, questions continue to emerge such as is the black body in Arctic space revealing the Arctic's intrinsic connection to constructions of racial whiteness? By using the Arctic as a literal and symbolic white backdrop upon which to scrutinise black histories, do the artists illuminate the whitewashing of Arctic histories? Dyer has described whiteness as a slippery and largely undefinable concept which is simultaneously invisible and omnipresent (Dyer, 1997), is the black body marking whiteness by its presence in the Arctic; are structures of whiteness only revealed by being defined by what they are not? If Akomfrah and Julien's films featured white bodies in Arctic space, this research would not be possible. It is this black/white binary and the primary themes of dualism, contrasts and oppositions that I want to address in the following text.

Dyer has traced the dualism of skin consciousness back to Western Christian imagery, creating a visual illustration of the struggle of Christianity (white) against non-Christianity (black), therefore creating a dualism or binary concerned primarily with black and white (Dyer, 1997: 17). The whitening of Christianity's key figures fell in line with European expansionism and the increased travel beyond Europe, resulting in Europeans meetings with people of darker complexions. Dyer who has traced a history of the construction of the idealised white figure back to Christianity, has described the foundation of Christian images as being focused on the body, most notably the two most reproduced images in Western history: the birth and death of Christ through scenes of the nativity, the crucifixion and the endless iconography of the cross (Dyer, 1997).

The notion of embodiment, of a person who holds a quality or spirit within the flesh, is a central tenet of whiteness. From the Renaissance period onwards, Dyer identifies that depictions of Christ and Mary become increasingly white, so much so that they begin to glow from within, visually suggesting the Christian spirit in the form of white light, casting a luminescence on non-white or darker skin tones within the frame, as referenced earlier in relation to *Got Milk?*'s American Olympic gold winners visual campaign (Dyer, 1997). Dyer lays out within his work on the embodiment of whiteness as a concept, by the end of the Renaissance in the 17th century, Christ was represented as the apex of whiteness: 'his hair and his beard were given the colour of sunshine, the brightness of the light above,

while his eyes retained the colour of the sky from which he descended and to which he returned' (Dyer, 1997: 27). Interestingly, in relation to scales of whiteness which I discussed earlier in the chapter, this quote is visually paralleled in the Swedish national flag, inspired by the coat of arms in 1402 and officially adopted in 1906, the Nordic golden cross traditionally represents Christianity and the blue background symbolises the skies above, creating a further connection between idealised whiteness and the geopolitical north.

In tandem with Dyer's seminal *White*, John Harvey has written the substantial social, political, aesthetic and sexual study on the concept of black, titled, *The Story of Black* (2013). Tracing a history of the word from ancient and classical times, Harvey reveals how *black* has been used as a symbol, a tool and a metaphor in a vast number of problematic ways. Describing the Ancient Egyptians' incorporation of black into symbols of death, to the dress for professions such as judges, merchants and some monarchs, its dualism with white is brought to the fore, signalling black – as constructed by Western thought – as an emblem of absence, negativity, evil and 'the other', giving justification to the enslavement of black people (Harvey, 2013), while rendering white with characteristics such as light, purity, positivity and goodness. While whiteness came to mean light, blackness became representative of darkness. Although black also represents authority, power, masculinities and respect for others through the colour of mourning, its history is largely related to the negative significations described above. Dualism of black/white is evident across all forms of visual material, from the prime example of black and white photography and film, to iconic fashion brands and design concepts such as Chanel's signature monochrome styling. The rich histories and charged connotations of black and white have been constructed in relation to each other, therefore monochrome is an image which is binaristic in concept and in visual form.

Akomfrah and Julien present the aesthetic black/white binary paradigm of race by positioning the black body upon the white landscape. The conceptual delivery of the binary is achieved through the respective artwork's rememorising of marginalised black histories at the hands of oppressive whiteness, thereby illustrating the nature of the binary itself, in which one side (white) feeds from the other (black). The images which unfold throughout Akomfrah and Julien's respective artworks are visually seductive in their juxtaposition of form and tone; the warmth of the living body upon the cold white ice, the movement and fluidity of the figure upon the fixed, immovable surface. The films are alluring not only because they focus on black bodies in cold white spaces, images

which have been obscured from visual histories, but because they also contain what theorist Petrine Archer-Straw defines as an *exotic aesthetic* which resides between black and white in monochromatic images in direct relation to the paradigm of race (Archer-Straw, 2000).

Archer-Straw defines exoticism as something alluring, 'referencing the unfamiliar and exciting in a way that is decorative, edgy, but ultimately non-threatening. It is a representation of otherness that suggests compromise' (Archer-Straw, 2000: 27). *The Nine Muses*, *True North* and a number of other works within the identified trend – incited consciously or not by the filmmakers – play with the idea of exoticisation in visualisations of the black/white racial binary. Who are the images seductive to; do they cater for or subvert the established white male gaze? Julien interrupts codes of gender through the employment of Vanessa Myrie to play the character of Henson, suggesting the overt masculinity which is associated with the territories history and the subsequent feminisation of the landscape as it was traversed by explorers. Akomfrah subverts this gaze by featuring the rear-view figure, never granting full visibility to the viewer. By subverting the dominant gaze, and only permitting the viewer to see an abstracted sense of the central character, this then alters the relationship of the binary. The alteration takes place in the explicit foregrounding of the black/white racial binary within the films as the artists use the juxtaposition of blackness and whiteness for one not to define itself by the other in the traditional sense, but for one to reveal the other in a multilateral sense.

Taking into consideration the Du Boisian concept of *double consciousness*, which underscores the physiological force of the construction of racial hierarchies for non-white peoples' subjective consciousness, I am applying this concept to the film works in question and to consider them in relation to the need for expanding white racial consciousness through interracial dialogue. By foregrounding whiteness within their works as a means to explore silenced black histories and the social conditions of being a post-colonial subject in Britain, Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic works employ, what theorist Marc Black terms *critical multilateral consciousness* (Black, 2007) in order to make a constructive comment on underrepresented people and histories. As Black posits, by creating a relationship between Du Boisian double consciousness, Fanon and multilateral double consciousness, fresh and dynamic dialogues have the possibility to emerge and destabilise concealed power structures of white supremacy, eventually leading to a new state of race consciousness (Black, 2007).

The Nine Muses and *True North* contribute to the field of multilateral double consciousness and visualise this theory through their concentration on the black/white racial binary. As I have stated previously, whiteness has been constructed to be simultaneously dominant and invisible, a strategy which allows it to continue as the *norm*, unchallenged. In line with Garner's assertion which I quoted in the introduction to this chapter, Akomfrah and Julien mark whiteness and reveal it as a construct by visualising 'the performance of culture and the enactment of power' (Garner, 2007: 11) through the memorising of black histories silenced by whiteness. They are important, ground-breaking works for not only thinking about whiteness as the primary problematic within discussions about race, but also in addressing the ways in which the black/white paradigm of race is visualised and represented within one frame. In addressing the primary themes of binarism, dualism and oppositions which are visually and conceptually foregrounded in both *The Nine Muses* and *True North*, I have been focusing on the black/white binary. However, I now want to shift my attention to a further binary which Akomfrah's film introduces through his insertion of figures in colourful jackets within vast white landscapes, the monochrome/colour binary.

'Chromophobia'²¹ : A Fear of Colour

As the study by David Batchelor lays out, a historical and analysis of the concept of colour in Western society harbours the possibility to deepen understandings of its opposite, blankness or whiteness. Within the opening chapter of Batchelor's book *Chromophobia* (2000), the author quotes Isaiah 1:18 'though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' illustrating the binarism which resides in the relation between colour and whiteness (Batchelor, 2000: 19). The author continues to state that Western culture has positioned colour as something to be mistrusted, often being treated as 'foreign', 'superficial' and 'other' (Batchelor, 2000). The condition of *Chromophobia* is defined by *Campbell's Psychiatric Dictionary* (2009) as a 'persistent, irrational fear of corruption or contamination through colour' (Campbell, 2009) and as Batchelor argues, can be traced throughout the history of Western art, literature and architecture, namely by relegating features of colour within these genres 'as the property of some foreign body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological' (Batchelor, 2000: 22–23). The first section of the book titled *Whitescapes* discusses the

²¹ Chromophobia is a term used to describe a fear of colour and is also the title of my main reference for this section of the chapter, *Chromophobia* (Batchelor, 2000).

author's experience of a modern house, owned by an Anglo-American art collector, and built on the southern fringes of a rich Northern European city. His description upon entering the house is as follows;

'At first, inside looked endless. Endless in the way an egg must look endless from the inside; endless because seamless, continuous, empty, uninterrupted. Or rather: uninteruptable. There is a difference. Uninterrupted might mean overlooked, passed by, inconspicuous, insignificant. Uninterruptable passes by *you*, renders *you* inconspicuous and insignificant. The uninteruptable, endless emptiness of this house was impressive, elegant and glamorous in a spare and reductive kind of way, but it was also assertive, empathetic and ostentatious. This was assertive silence, emphatic blankness, the kind of ostentatious emptiness that only the very wealthy and the utterly sophisticated can afford. It was a strategic emptiness, but it was also *accusatory*...There is a kind of white that is more than white, and this was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything. This was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach. This was that kind of white. This white was aggressively white. It did its work on everything around it, and nothing escaped.'

- (Batchelor, 2000: 9-10)

When discussing the architectural vision for the house, the author cites that the architect himself wanted to create something 'pure' that held no possibility of 'lies', further strengthening the relation between whiteness and the concept of *purity*. The verbal associations with generalised literal whiteness as something almost *godly* and serving as a visual representation of highly aspirational characteristics reveals a constructed moral privilege of whiteness over colour from the outset of the book (Batchelor, 2000: 10). Conrad and his work *The Heart of Darkness* is brought into the argument in order to establish the West's long relationship with a generalised and abstracted relationship to whiteness, in this case through Conrad's fierce interrogation of the term whiteness and the many associations that go along with it, positioning it as something abstract and open to contamination of words such as *pure* and *genuine*. Throughout Conrad's narrative, a

backdrop of whiteness is kept firmly in place through appearances of white objects; ‘white teeth, white hair, white bones, white collars, white marble, white ivory, white fog’ and each is associated with the tropes of coldness, death, and fixity (Batchelor, 2000: 13). The manner in which whiteness is described in both contexts above, the architectural vision and Conrad’s literary work *The Heart of Darkness*, has striking parallels to the language used in both narrative and visual Arctic representations making these descriptions of *purity, blankness* and *death* – in other words a generalised whiteness – transferrable to many contexts of whiteness. My argument here is that the historical constructions of whiteness through visual and literary representations is transferrable, and has been built in tandem, to Arctic narrative. As I have explored in previous chapters, the historical constructions of the Arctic as a space identifiable only through its vast whiteness, with its myriad of indigenous histories erased, can be identified as the core of this generalised whiteness Batchelor speaks of. My assertion that any of the passages in which Batchelor has described other forms of whiteness – be it architectural descriptions or fictional narratives – can be applied to representations of the Arctic, is crystallised and evidenced within this final passage from Batchelor in his detailing of the modern white house;

‘[The] “minimalist” interior, where everything was finished, completed and strictly limited in a closed individuality that was not allowed to merge with the world outside. The idea that anything might protrude, bulge, sprout or branch off from this sheer whiteness was inconceivable. The inner life of this world was entirely hidden: nothing was allowed to spill out from its allotted space...In this way, openness really was an illusion maintained by closure, simplicity was ridiculously overcomplicated, and unadorned clarity was made hopelessly confusing.’

(Batchelor, 2000: 18–19)

A significant interruption in visual representations of the Arctic as a blindingly white space is the British Film Institute’s 2011 restoration of Herbert Ponting’s *The Great White Silence*. From 1910–13 photographer and cinematographer Herbert Ponting joined Captain Robert Falcon Scott of the ill-fated Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole, and produced a silent documentary which was later released in 1924. The Terra Nova expedition was an effort by the British Government to plant the British flag at the South Pole and claim the territory as an asset of the British Empire. Ponting was the first known

photographer to bring a cinematograph to the Antarctic continent and filmed almost every aspect of the expedition. Leaving Lyttelton, New Zealand and travelling through the ice floes of the Southern Ocean, Ponting captured the scientific work, wildlife encountered on the journey, and day-to-day life at the basecamp on the coastline of Ross Island. Recordings of the preparations for the assault on the pole included the training the men undertook in track sledging, preparing adequate clothing and finally the kind of food and cooking equipment they would need for their long journey ahead, all in all creating a very real sense of the practical challenges the explorers would face on their expedition. Ponting was not granted permission by Scott to accompany the exploration team to the South Pole, so remained at base camp where he waited on Scott and his three companions who subsequently never returned. Ponting returned to England in 1913 and during the next ten years re-edited, tinted and toned the huge amounts of film to compile *The Great White Silence*. The British Film Institute National Archive, custodians of the expedition negatives, restored the film in 2011 using the latest photochemical and digital techniques, and most significantly for this study, reintroduced the film's original sophisticated vivid tinting and toning to bring the images into colour. As the BFI states in its press release, 'the alien beauty of the landscape is brought dramatically to life and the world of expedition revealed in brilliant detail' (British Film Institute, 2011). The emphasis is my own to highlight the important associations colour has brought to the polar territory within the context of the film: life and vibrancy, a far cry from the traditional tropes of death and inertia typically associated with white-washed polar imagery. As evidenced in scenes from the restoration which I viewed within the BFI archives, the colours are not soft, pastel hues or reflective spectres of colour glimpsed among the whiteness, they are bold, vibrant and unmistakably tinted.



Fig. 4.12 *The Great White Silence* (reconstruction of archival film, originally produced in 1924). (2011). [Film] UK: Herbert Ponting



Fig. 4.13 *The Great White Silence* (reconstruction of archival film, originally produced in 1924). (2011). [Film] UK: Herbert Ponting



Fig. 4.14 *The Great White Silence* (reconstruction of archival film, originally produced in 1924).
(2011). [Film] UK: Herbert Ponting

Since the early 19th century, the majority of polar visual representations have been eradicated of colour, much of that is connected with the territory's intrinsic connection to Euro-American cultural constructions of whiteness and its associations with death. The vivid colour lenses used within the film's restoration of *The Great White Silence* transform the territory. The insertion of colour immediately rejects a symbolic and generalised whiteness from invading the narrative of the film and separates it from traditional polar imagery. Colour in this instance conforms to its Western construction and represents life, vibrancy and movement. In making Antarctica colourful, the generalised whiteness of the region which has been implemented through imperial exploration is removed and its representations shift from the imaginary to the living. I want to extend the effect of colour toning from an Antarctic context to the Arctic and question if applying colour to what Hill terms the *heart of whiteness* (Hill, 2008) would have the same affect. I have written previously about the geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctic being vastly different, namely the associations of whiteness and their innate connections to the concept of *northern imaginaries*, which leads me to question: has the coloured toning of the polar imagery been carried out on Antarctic film because it is geographically part of the global south and therefore more closely connected with notions of colour and the 'orient'; would colour toning have been implemented if the film footage had been shot in the Arctic?

A significant element of Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* relates to this research question, as the figures that roam the Arctic are adorned in brightly coloured jackets which act as vehicles to insert colour into the Arctic landscape. Within the film's Arctic monotone vistas and grainy black and white archival footage, the insertion of colour via the various figures' bright blue and yellow outerwear is metaphorical of the literal insertion of colour from migrant populations to Britain. As I discussed previously in chapter three, Akomfrah talks about the typical responses from migrants upon reaching Britain in the 1960s; the first observation was primarily the coldness of the country, but secondly, a surprise at the lack of colour in British society; grey clothes, skies and houses. The figures within *The Nine Muses* emulate what it must have felt like to arrive in a place of no relatable community, warmth or colour, and with a strong sense of identity and history already carved into the social fabric and landscape, much in the same way as the Arctic landscape is perceived as pre-determined. The vivid yellows and blues of the jackets function to insert colour into Arctic space, a space which has been perceived and perpetually represented to be free from colour – both literally and symbolically. In stark contrast to the visually disorientating whiteness which is most commonly associated with Arctic representations, the Austro-Hungarian explorer, cartographer and artist Julius Von Payer attests to the varied features and kaleidoscope of colour which the Arctic landscape showcases in his essay *An Artistic Expedition to the North Pole* which he wrote in 1895. Most notably, Von Payer's paintings which he produced as part of his various expeditions to the pole evidence his statement above and showcase a myriad of colours within the frozen landscape. Akomfrah's insertion of colour marks a further contemporary disruption to the recurring Arctic trope of an area containing only whiteness; on this occasion, it is unable to whitewash its contents. The bright yellows and blue hues of the jackets worn by the figure(s) appear stark against the perpetual whiteness and intensify the feeling of solitariness, of existing within an environment in which one does not blend in, is not permitted to, or refuses to. As such, Akomfrah simultaneously addresses the overwhelming whiteness of the space and interrupts it.



Fig. 4.15 *The Nine Muses*. (2010). [Film]. UK: John Akomfrah.

Chapter Five

Polar Space: Locating Afrofuturism in The Nine Muses and True North

‘The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry...Africa and America – and so by extension Europe and Asia – are already in their various ways Alien Nation.’

- (Sinker, 1992)

Afrofuturism is an inter-disciplinary concept combining science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, Afrocentrism and magical realism, the emergent literary and cultural aesthetic of Afrofuturism extends across aesthetics, scientific and historical philosophy in order to critically address current oppression of African diasporic subjects, but also to excavate elided histories, revise imperial narratives and create speculative visions for the future. Lisa Yaszek, a prominent Afrofuturist academic, proposes that Afrofuturism is a tool that provides what she calls ‘Afrodiasporic’ subjects with the ability to resist structures of power which shape and determine futures through economically-driven industries. As an aesthetic expression, Afrofuturism encapsulates political opposition through envisioning new, alternative futures (Yaszek, 2006).

To my knowledge, *The Nine Muses* and *True North* have yet to be critically analysed in relation to Afrofuturism. My aim is therefore to create the first sustained study on the two works and their significance for developing Afrofuturist thought. Although I predominantly concentrate on *The Nine Muses* and *True North*, I expand into a number of Akomfrah and Julien’s other works in order to uncover veins of Afrofuturism which can be traced throughout their filmic oeuvres. Developing my research question from chapter one on the construction and signification of the Arctic landscape as an ‘otherworldly’ space through a reading of the emergent discipline critical Arctic studies, I trace a history of the Arctic as a prominent location within the genre of science fiction and speculate if the Arctic’s relationship to visualisations of outer space and futuristic themes renders it a primary agent in my reading of the film case studies as harbouring Afrofuturist aesthetics.

In the final section, I turn my attention to the concept of technology, a concept which draws all previous conversations around futurist narratives together. Discussing Afrofuturism and its interdependence on technology as a medium through which futurist projections can be realised, I level my investigation at image-making technologies specifically and discuss them in the context of what Alondra Nelson calls the *digital divide*, a term used to describe the inequities in access to technologies in races, genders and geographies (Nelson, 2002). Taking one of Akomfrah's essays around digital image-making technologies as a catalyst, I explore Akomfrah's assertion that the onset of digital technologies liberated black filmmaking and provides a form of self-representation and distribution that analogue machines denied (Akomfrah, 2010). Linking discussions around digital image making technologies with Afrofuturism and their shared possibilities for liberation, I am able to further explore Afrofuturist strategies in the work Akomfrah and Julien.

The Emergence of Afrofuturism

The term Afrofuturism was initially coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in his 1994 anthology *Flame Wars: The Discourses of Cyberculture*. He defined Afrofuturism as 'speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century techno-culture, and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future' (Dery, 1994: 136). However, as literary critic Bart Bishop has identified, the practice of literary Afrofuturism goes back to the African American sociologist, historian, writer and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois' 1920 short story *The Comet*, published as the tenth chapter in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*²² (Bishop, 2012). *The Comet* features Jim Davies, a black bank messenger who emerges from an underground vault to find that New York has been destroyed by a comet and its poisonous tail gasses, and that the only other survivor is the beautiful daughter of a white millionaire, Julia. DuBois uses the speculative scenario to draw attention to the irrelevance of the racial distinctions in force in America whilst also playing with what Bishop terms 'the great American taboo: miscegenation and sex across the colour line' (Bishop, 2012). Functioning as a rewrite of traditional science fiction narratives in which the end of earth

²² *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* was DuBois sixth book and the first of three autobiographies. Consisting of short stories and poetry, the volume is a call for radical social, political and economic reforms for black Americans.

offers new possibilities, Du Bois eradicates the shackles of an intensely racist industrial society and imagines what a future without the concept of race would look like.

A further work which aided the inception of Afrofuturism was Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. The period in which it was published is interesting: seven years after the Cold War began; four years following the influential science fiction writer Robert Heinlein published his second novel, *Space Cadet*, which explicitly uses aliens as a metaphor for minorities; and five years before the Gold Coast became the first country to gain independence from European colonialism, the first sub-Saharan African nation to do so. Ellison's novel tells the story of an African-American man attempting to become an American political leader through his alignment with various powerful organisations. Rendered invisible by his skin colour, Ellison creates a critique of the conventional futures envisioned for black Americans such as poor education and low-income employment, urging readers to question the rhetoric of the futures industry and the way in which they impact upon black people's lives. *The Invisible Man's* protagonist forges allegiances with a host of different people in an attempt to create a new future outside the one that has been determined for him.

Both Du Bois and Ellison's plots pertain to a key mode of Afrofuturist thought, the concept of *control through prediction*. Writers such as Du Bois and Ellison challenged the white monopoly on futures in their texts. Preceding the black consciousness movement of the 1960s, both writers drew from respective experiences of racial segregation and the oppression that governed African-American lives to produce texts which created space for the oppressed to imagine an alternative black existence. These writers can therefore be considered to have nurtured the roots of speculative, future-orientated writing that forged a mode of agency and allowed Afrofuturism to emerge. This has been advanced by Kodwo Eshun in his influential essay *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism* (Eshun, 2003). Eshun states that 'power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively' continuing,

'In the colonial era of the early to middle twentieth century, avant-gardists from Walter Benjamin to Frantz Fanon revolted in the name of the future against a power structure that relied on control and representation of the historical archive. Today, the situation is reversed. The powerful employ futurists to draw power from the

futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past.'

- (Eshun, 2003: 289)

Eshun states above that advancing alternative visions of the future became proleptic in that this mode of working provided an element of agency, anticipating and answering possible objections before they were advanced (Eshun, 2003). As Eshun continues to explain, this strategy of prediction is not a new tactic, within white oppressive society 'digitopian futures are routinely invoked to hide the present in all its unhappiness [and absolve the anxieties of the future]. The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past' (Eshun, 2003: 289) or to paraphrase: to not participate in the future is to be left behind, or at least told that you are, and to feel like no matter what progress is made, you will always be one step behind.

The mid to late 20th century development of Afrofuturism included an expansion of the concept from literary works into the fields of art, philosophy, poetry and predominantly music. As Lisa Yaszek traces in her essay *Afrofuturism, Science Fiction and the History of the Future* (2006), following World War II, the development of science and technology in the West was mirrored in the rise of science fiction narratives. Yaszek explains that futuristic storytelling practices became evident in jazz music, 'Americans first encountered what we now call Afrofuturism in the work of 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s jazz musicians such as Sun Ra' (Yaszek, 2006: 46). Incorporating ancient African symbolism such as Egyptian hieroglyphics with cosmic philosophy and further fusing with space age themes, both artists created prolific theatrical performances that changed the history of jazz as a musical genre. Sun Ra insisted until his death in 1993 that he was born on the planet Saturn. Refuting any ties to his early conventional identity, his alien persona went on to define him as a pioneer of Afrofuturist thought (Corbett, 1994: 8). Sun Ra's assertion of originating from another planet was extended in 1986 when George Clinton and his band Parliament-Funkadelic released their jazz-funk album *The Mothership Connection* and created a live performance featuring Clinton emerging from, or being birthed by, a metallic space-pod, in what John Corbett has suggested creates a visualisation that conflates ideas of Africa as the *motherland* with outer space (Corbett, 1994). The elaborate forms of futuristic storytelling which Perry and Sun Ra forged in jazz music was a key influence in the extension of the concept of Afrofuturism into wider musical forms such as Public

Enemy (1989s), DJ Spooky (1990s), Missy Elliot, Erykah Badu, Ras G and Janelle Monae (2000s).

Yaszek proposes it's important to recover and maintain the history and development of Afrofuturism for two reasons: firstly, the genre of techno-science mushroomed in the 1980s and 1990s, and criticism of the works often follow a raced trajectory, crediting white authors such as T.S. Eliot and William Gibson as the founders of modern techno-cultural narratives. This dominant narrative suggests people of colour did not engage with futuristic storytelling until the explosion of identity politics in the 1960's following the black consciousness movement, thereby positioning black writers, as what Yaszek states were seen as 'mere respondents' to the genre (Yaszek, 2006: 58). The second reason cited by Yaszek intersects with the ongoing correlation between imagined futures and the concept of disaster. Drawing on themes of climate catastrophe and referencing Hurricane Katrina in addition to the war on terror, Yaszek acutely observes that almost all disaster-related political coverage in the West is associated with non-white bodies (Yaszek, 2006). In relation to Africa specifically, futurist projections in the West depict famine, medical urgency in relation to AIDS, failed economic strategies and a general social dystopia. Eshun argues that the continual circulation of these projections are the trigger points which begin to determine their eventuality, demoralisation and cause of socio-political apathy (Eshun, 2003). Yaszek calls for a recovery of Afrofuturism as a black artistic practice in order to 'express dissent from those visions of tomorrow that are generated by a ruthless, economically self-interested futures industry' (Yaszek, 2006: 59).

As Yaszek implies, and Eshun supports through his earlier work, futurists have the power to determine futures for all, and so it is imperative that Afrodiasporic subjects are not only included in futurist rhetoric, but that Afrofuturism continues to be practiced and its agency recognised. Tobias Wofford has recently echoed this sentiment in his article *Afrofutures* (2017) in which he states that futurist narratives are vital as they not only harness power to create the future 'but rather [they] alert the reader or viewer to new possibilities of the future, and to see a future as possible is the first step toward its realisation' (Wofford, 2017:649). Accepting Yaszek's cultural and political calls for the recovery and maintenance of the history and development of Afrofuturist thought, my aim is for this chapter to respond and contribute to this call by advancing Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North* as examples of the political and aesthetic expression. As I will continue to demonstrate in the following two sections of this chapter, one discussing *The Nine Muses* and the other *True North*, the films recover black histories that have been

lost from 'official' narratives by digging through the archives which these stories are buried within. The artists reclaim important black histories and transport them into recent history in order to rescue them from disappearance. By employing futurist aesthetics, such as the cyborg figure in Julien's *True North* and time-travel in Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses*, the artists choose to meditate on themes of identity and alienation in Arctic space, a landscape that has figured as a key imaginary space in the genre of science fiction, and a territory which has become synonymous with global futures.

Assembling Futures from Fragments of the Past in Akomfrah's The Nine Muses

This section of the chapter is dedicated to locating and examining Afrofuturist expressions and the critical tools Akomfrah employs in his films, pinpointing aesthetic and conceptual moments within his expansive filmography in order to analyse *The Nine Muses* within this wider context. It has been the synergy of thinking on slavery, modernity and agency between the African American novelist Toni Morrison, Eshun, and British art historian Jean Fisher, respectively, that initially led me to consider *The Nine Muses* as Afrofuturist.

In a 1993 interview with Paul Gilroy, Morrison argues that African slaves of the middle passage were the first moderns (Gilroy, 1993: 88). Developing this statement in the article *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism*, Eshun explains that the experience of violent dislocation – kidnapping, mutilation and removal of language – which slaves from the middle passage experienced, rendered the estimated twelve million subjects of the 16th–19th century African slave trade into a state of existential homelessness and alienation, key experiences which Eshun identifies Western philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche would later define as the epitome of the modern condition (Eshun, 2003). Alongside Greg Tate, an African American musician, writer and producer, and Ishmael Reed, an African American poet, novelist and playwright, Eshun appears within an interview section of Akomfrah's early film *The Last Angel of History* and states that the momentous loss enforced by the slave trade necessitated an emphasis on assembling futures from whatever was recoverable from the past, 'preferring to disdain the present that accords them less than human status or, at best, offers "inclusion" in a humanity not of their design, using technology and art to invent when historical research fails to yield anything useful' (Akomfrah, 1995).

Jean Fisher writes within the retrospective exhibition publication of the Black Audio Film Collective, *The Ghost of Songs*, that to reclaim agency ‘means negotiating a passage out of the impasse of the traumatic effects of separation and loss, between the compulsion to remember and the need to forget. It concerns re-founding a place of dwelling and links the body intimately to language: to be “at home” is first to be at home in a language capable of forging a meaningful existence’ (Fisher, 2007: 17). Morrison, Eshun and Fisher articulate the momentous and complex task of dealing with the effects of the past on Afrodiasporic subjects in order to forge a path to recovery and all the possibilities that holds. It was these articulations of grappling with the past in relation to the concept of techno-cultures and futuristic narratives from Morrison, Eshun and Fisher which initially led me to consider Akomfrah’s filmic relationship with the archive as harbouring Afrofuturist expressions, specifically his reliance on the past to carve new understandings for the future. His emphasis on themes of excavation and memorising align with Afrofuturist principles, particularly the creation of agency, responding to Eshun’s call for ‘*control through prediction*’ (Eshun, 2003: 289). It is these synergies in theoretical and conceptual approaches to filmmaking that allow me to position Akomfrah as an Afrofuturist and consider *The Nine Muses* to be born from his legacy of early Afrofuturist filmmaking.

Akomfrah’s early film *The Last Angel of History*, which he produced with Black Audio Films in 1995, is considered to be a seminal contribution to the development of Afrofuturism (fig. 5.1). Conjuring Walter Benjamin’s renowned depiction of history as an angel who simultaneously looks backwards to the past whilst flying forwards into the future, the film connects ancient West African culture with science fiction, tracing a history of black musicians, writers and artists who have pioneered the intellectual and artistic movement of Afrofuturism (Marks, 2015). The film is a hybrid of documentary and fictional narrative beginning with an allegorical story around the character of Robert Johnson, a 1930s blues pioneer who is said to have sold his soul to the devil at a desert crossroads in the southern states of the US in exchange for a secret black technology: the blues, which then produced jazz, soul, hip-hop and R&B. Instantly transported forward two-hundred years and the second character emerges, the Data-Thief. The Data-Thief character is told to locate the cross-roads and make an archaeological dig to recover ‘fragments’ and ‘techno-fossils’ which, when pieced together to crack a code, will release the keys to his future.

The concept of archaeology, of digging, excavating and mining the past are recurrent strategies in creating alternative histories throughout Akomfrah’s filmmaking career. *The Last Angel of History* is organised around the theme of ‘ruins’ as Laura U. Marks identifies:

scenes of timeless, desolate deserts and devastation, flooded landscapes lying quiet and still, Detroit's once vibrant buildings transformed into graffiti-daubed rubble (Marks, 2015). Fast forward over ten years through Akomfrah's filmography and similar themes are emphasised in *The Nine Muses*, both in terms of the 'future-past' evocation of Afrofuturist thought, and the foregrounding of the archaeological impulse conveyed through the mode of filmic montage to create a non-linear narrative which flashes between past, present and future. The desolate burnt sienna landscapes of *The Last Angel of History* are inverted and transformed in the white polar landscapes of *The Nine Muses*, both deserts become settings for futurological meditations and the figuration of the black individual time and space traveller. Detroit's crumbling urbanscape featured in *The Last Angel of History* are echoed in the dilapidated shipyards of the West Midlands within *The Nine Muses*, both alluding to a present dystopian state of disillusion, detachment and apathy with failed industrial society and lost hopes for the future. The empty, abandoned structures in both films also remind me of post-apocalyptic residue; empty and vacant spaces that were once built on bustling imperial aspirations.



Fig. 5.1 *The Last Angel of History*. (1996). [Film]. UK: Black Audio Film Collective.

Akomfrah evokes 'future-past' time travel which takes place in both films, via the mode of filmic montage. Within *The Last Angel of History*, archival images, photographs and interviews are montaged together in a non-linear fashion, mirroring the conceptual act of gathering historical fragments. These are further intercut with Egyptian symbolism and hieroglyphic codes, referencing a journey back into aspects of ancient north-eastern African culture. The images are accompanied by rhythmic clicking sounds and recurring frames of the aforementioned Data-Thief, suggesting the character is examining a vast source of material. Scrolling through torrents of information and remnants from the past, the Data-Thief extracts historical fragments from a large database, or what Laura U. Mark's has termed, an 'organised ruin' (Marks, 2015: 122).

Ten years on and Akomfrah elicits a similar strategy of evoking 'past-present-future' in *The Nine Muses*, translated through the composition of archival celluloid and new digital film. Creating a kaleidoscope of imagery, the grainy black-and-white archival scenes represent liftings from the past, re-narrated and transported into the future where nuanced and previously unspoken stories can be gleaned. However, within *The Nine Muses*, in place of the Data-Thief and the burnt-orange deserts, the polar desert represents the future in its full, intensely technologised, super-HD, digital filmic form. The high-end production values of the Arctic scenery in *The Nine Muses* and its conceptual mirroring of futuristic, de-populated, sublime space sit in contrast to the archaeological remnants of the archival footage, suggesting the Arctic represents the futurological within the film. As discussed in chapter four, the concept of coldness is intricately linked to technology, machinery, and a future less dependent on human function. Thereby, the white hues and metallic silver shimmers of the Arctic landscape within *The Nine Muses*, in conjunction with a seeming lack of human presence, further intensify notions of futuristic narratives. Mirroring the Data-Thief's identity-shrouding rear-view stance, the solitary figure within the Arctic is another form of time and space traveller, the brightly coloured outerwear worn by two of the figures is a form of space suit, the snowscape becomes a symbol of new beginnings, free from pre-determined futures.

Akomfrah's 2016 work *The Airport* (fig. 5.2) can be considered as a further example of his engagement with Afrofuturism through its extended significations of temporal disjunctions, established in *The Last Angel of History* and *The Nine Muses*. A three-channel, fifty-three-minute audio-visual exploration of the architectural ruins of a former airport in southern Greece, the film recalls the work of seminal filmmakers Stanley Kubrick (1928–99) and Theo Angelopoulos (1935–2012), and 'contemplates the significance of empire

and the ghosts which linger in our collective consciousness – both physically through architectural ruins and metaphorically through the traces and personal histories of previous generations’ (*The Airport*, 2016). Comprising long slow panning shots of Athens’ depopulated landscapes triangulated by frames of architectural ruins and a lone figure in a spacesuit, the aesthetic and conceptual strategies at play are strikingly Afrofuturist. Akomfrah’s statement on the film further intensifies futuristic meditations describing the films ‘elastic sense of time’ continuing ‘where characters from different eras and generations encounter one another referenc[ing] Stanley Kubrick’s masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (*The Airport*, 2016). Akomfrah also reflects Angelopoulos’s mode of filmmaking by employing continual movement of the filmic lens, echoing the conceptual basis of the film and its poetic movement through histories and futures. *The Airport* explicitly demonstrates Akomfrah’s preoccupation with epic natural landscapes and themes of other worlds.



Fig. 5.2 *The Airport*. (2016). [Film]. UK: John Akomfrah.

Throughout Akomfrah’s filmic oeuvre, he routinely employs depopulated remote landscapes to invoke soul to poetic affect. His assemblage of unofficial, alternative histories mined from archives are mirrored in visualisations of seemingly depopulated spaces. This specific relation of poetics and natural landscapes has been a primary motivation for colonial exploration, none more so than Arctic exploration upon which the quest to experience the ‘sublime’ reached far beyond any economic imperatives. I want to

underscore here the recurring thematic triangulation of remote landscapes, other worlds, and reconfigured histories within the filmic oeuvre of John Akomfrah. This recurrent triangulation which mediates across histories, futures, geographical and imagined spaces has compelled me to arrive at two key themes for Akomfrah's filmic practice: Afrofuturism and the 'sublime' (Eshun, 2003: 299).

Transcending Spaces: Cyborg Figurations in Julien's 'True North'

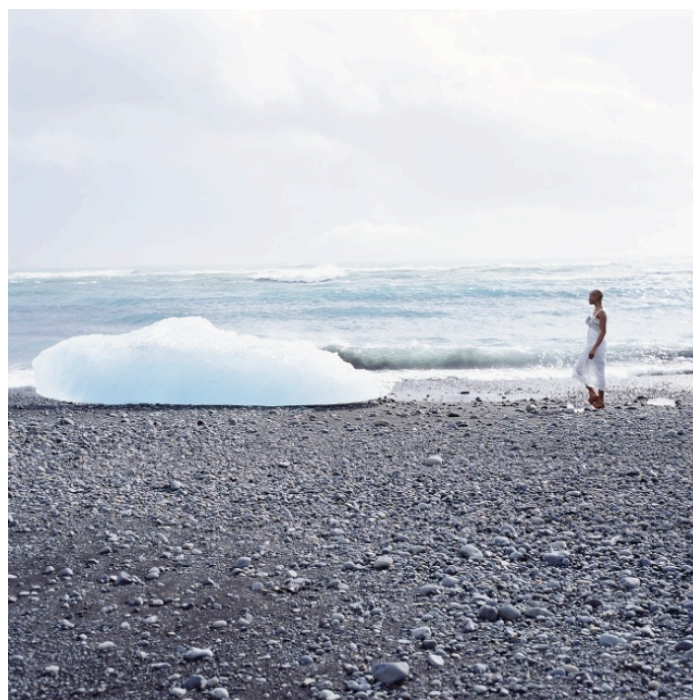


Fig. 5.3 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation].

Afrofuturist concepts and aesthetics are also masterfully evident within Julien's *True North*. There is one specific set of frames in *True North* that triggered my thinking around themes of science fiction, technologically-enhanced resistance and cyborgism. Towards the conclusion of *True North*, Myrie, while meandering the black sands of the iceberg strewn coastline, sheds her dark Arctic furs which she has appeared in thus far, and walks the terrain clothed only in a sheer white dress (fig. 5.3). In such a style of dress that would make survival in the Arctic territory impossible, Myrie wanders forward into a blinding whiteness of sun and ice, a visualisation which I propose explodes themes of futurism and emphasises the relation between Myrie's body and the cyborg, a prevalent theme of

human to post-humanism explored throughout the history of science fiction. It is this specific film sequence which depicts Myrie's bare skin in the Arctic environment that triggered my thinking around prevalent themes of science fiction such as technologically enhanced resistance and cyborgism. By creating a relation between the black diasporic subject and cyborgism, Julien's frames reminded me of the cultural concepts of coldness and its correlation with machinery, technology and artificial life as it sits in opposition to the natural heat of a living human body, themes I discussed in chapter four.

A cyborg is defined as a biological organism that has been altered or combined with robotics to create a robo-organism, or cyber-organism (cyborg, n.d). The cyborg is a familiar trope of science fiction as it allows subjects to become increasingly sophisticated through technology, extending the limits of human experience and transcending spaces. Filmmaker and theorist Jeffrey Skoller asserts that through the visualisation of a cyborg figure – a figure that transcends time and space – the image will raise questions of what exactly is a human being. Skoller's thinking also brings us back to references to enslaved people above: 'was the slave figure a man or machine [...] issues concerning legal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the right to vote, education and the rights of a national subject have all been subjected to racist debate as it applies to the African, ultimately questioning black human-ness' (Skoller, 1997: 14). Eshun continues this line of thought and states that the abduction of Africans, the dislocation and forced labour they experienced not only rendered the subjects' literal cogs in the wheels of the imperial machine, but 'genetically altered and mutated their material being by becoming enslaved in new, alien Europe' (Eshun, 2003: 298).

True North raises this key question of *humanness* and the relation of the diasporic subject to man-machines, or cyborgs, through the figuration of the post-human body as communicated by Myrie's presence. I propose Julien's nod towards the cyborg is a conceptual reference to the historical character of Henson and his role as a cog in Peary's white exploration machine. As defined by Peary himself and quoted in chapter two, the 'structure of success' in terms of a masculine exploration machine includes the white man as the 'intelligent head', two other white men would represent the arms through their 'physical prowess and devotion to the leader' and the natives would take the form of the 'purely functional lower parts of the assembled exploration body: the legs' (Dick, 2001: 382). Significantly, Henson remains invisible even within Peary's defined structure.

In the summer of 2017, I visited the blockbuster Barbican exhibition *Into the Unknown: A Journey Through Science Fiction* which included work by Julien. The show, which took place across three floors, featured installations for more than 800 works that spanned visual art, film, design and literature. There were significant contributions to Afrofuturist film included in the Contemporary Art programme, such as Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009), a Kenyan science fiction short depicting a future state of civilisation in East Africa, thirty-five years after World War III which is otherwise termed the Water War. *Pumzi* portrays survivors of the ecological devastation who are locked within a confined community and have developed technology to ensure their survival without water. Containing Afrofuturist motifs such as unnatural resistance, deserted landscapes and water, allow *Pumzi* to be read as Afrofuturist. Ghanaian filmmaker Frances Bodomo's *Afronauts* (2014) also featured in the film programme. Based on the late 1960s Zambian Space programme, the plot centres around a seventeen-year-old *Matha* as she prepares to embark on her epic journey to the moon. Recalling true events, Bodomo brings the visionary Edward Makula Nkoloso's little-known African space programme to the fore and highlights how, in a historical moment when the Cold War defined the space race between the US and Russia, there were other, marginalised, players in the game.

There are many parallels to be drawn between these examples of Afrofuturist film and Julien's *True North: Afronauts* also retrieves a marginalised event from the history of discovery and reinserts it into the present through a filmic revisualisation. While within *Pumzi*, the symmetries with *True North* exist in relation to themes of technologically enhanced unnatural resistance. I'm thinking here specifically of Myrie surviving the inhospitable coldness of the Arctic clothed only in a dress, and how this is mirrored by *Pumzi*'s characters who have also developed an unnatural resistance to their territories' inhospitable lack of water through technological development.

Among these films, the exhibition showcased a rarely exhibited film of Julien's, *Encore II (Radioactive)* (fig. 5.4). Produced in 2004 shortly after *True North*, *Encore* is a three-minute short 'inspired by a character from the writings of Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006), an American science fiction writer best known for her recurring exploration of genetic manipulation, contamination and hybridity (Victoria Miro Gallery, 2017). Taking Butler's science fiction classic, *The Parable of the Sower*, a tale of a cyborg who has just lost her husband and son in a final World War where the earth is being rapidly destroyed by an atomic fire, Julien's film imagines the solitary heroine as she grapples with her 'mixed race of human and mechanical origins through a solarised landscape' (Julien, 2004). What is

highly significant is that *Encore* is composed of re-digitised footage from *True North*. As Julien states in the exhibition text, 'In *Encore II (Radioactive)*, the protagonist (Henson) is recast as a cyborg played by Vanessa Myrie. The film manipulates the landscape and its surroundings, imbuing them with a visual and sonic electronic aura that dislocates the setting from a specific time and place' (Julien, 2004).



Fig. 5.4 Isaac Julien. (2004). *Encore II (Radioactive)*. [Film Installation].

Up until visiting the Barbican in August 2017, I had not seen Julien's *Encore*, nor had I been aware that it was composed from reconfigured *True North* footage. Watching the film unfold across the twenty-foot suspended screen, I felt profoundly moved. Within *Encore*, subtle conceptual threads I had been pulling from *True North*, such as technology, cyborgism, futurism, were intensified and made explicit in *Encore*. At this late stage in my research, during my writing-up period, *Encore* provided me with evidence that Afrofuturist expressions which I had been writing into the thesis since the beginning of my research in 2012 were in fact engrained within *True North*. *Encore* functions as another opportunity for Julien to categorically state the futuristic aspect of *True North* and crucially allowed me to underpin and develop ideas around Afrofuturism I had advanced earlier.

Familiar yet strangely unsettling, the landscape within *Encore* is far from identifiable with the Arctic. Like a *True North* set even further in the future, the glittering whites and blues of the region are transformed into fluorescent, bilious greens which permeate across the entire screen. Strikingly, by inverting the colours so associated with the Arctic – crisp whites and pale blues of the ice and sky – Julien dislocates the film and Myrie's figure from the Arctic location and the exploration narrative in *True North*, casting the central figure into a new realm of time and space. Julien deftly evidences the power of colour and its connection to natural landscapes and reinforces the importance of literal whiteness for the imperial identity of the Arctic. Julien's employment of bright colours reminds me of an earlier discussion contained in chapter four which details the disappearance of colour from Arctic visual narratives which has, over time, created a false supposition that the Arctic is distinctly lacking in any colour, merely reflecting back the pale blues or greys of the sky. By Julien inserting such a distinct green, a tone of green often connected to something unnatural and manufactured, such as radioactivity, as the title suggests, he literally transports the story into a new, explicitly futuristic realm which I have argued previously is nuanced and subtly addressed within *True North*.



Fig. 5.5 Isaac Julien. (2004). *Encore II (Radioactive)*. [Film Installation].

Converting the original film through negative processing, the initial bright greens begin to fade into refracted blues tinged with oranges and reds as *Encore* progresses. Most arresting, and significant, is the appearance of black British Myrie's skin which through the film's colour inversion is transformed into a milky white. Her natural skin tone inverted, the pale whiteness of her body is now a similar shade to the landscape she wanders. Diametrically to *True North* in which Myrie's skin is foregrounded by the endless whiteness of the landscape, her body within *Encore* appears to momentarily absorb the colours around it. As shown in fig. 5.5, her features become washed out by a wave of whiteness, her eyes barely distinguishable from her skin colour. Julien removes the black/white binary element that is so striking within *True North* to create imagery that removes any codes of race or gender, liberating the figure from all preconceived identities and their constructs. In a visualisation in which Myrie's blackness literally fades, is Julien making a statement around themes of post-race and post humanism, or is he reinforcing the established connection between racial whiteness, technology and the future? What is the significance of a black female such as Myrie appearing to be transformed into white skin within an explicit visualisation of black science fiction futures? Myrie's skin remains black when she signifies the historical character of Henson in *True North* and transforms into a milky white when she is mechanically enhanced and signifies a future being. Reading *True North* and *Encore* in relation to each other, they produce their own specific black: white racial binary that is intersected with future/past and human/machine.

Reading *True North* for further futuristic significations, I began to consider the importance of water, and the various forms it occupies in *True North*; frozen seas, glaciers, snow, and the torrents that flow from melting ice towards the end of the film. To reinstate Eshun's assertion that to secure a future, the past must be understood and defined (Eshun, 2003) then the momentous loss encountered through the middle passage literally submerged these pasts, erasing possibilities for the future. Water therefore symbolises the eradication of black histories. The African American electronic music duo *Drexciya* developed an Afrofuturist theory that a city, named Drexciya, lay at the bottom on the Atlantic, populated by the unborn children of pregnant African women who were thrown off slave ships. Eshun argues that the preoccupation with water in Afrofuturist narratives was initially conceived of in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) 'which was treated as a black science fiction to be developed' (Eshun, 2003: 300).

The sonic vibrations, central role of water, and the expansive whiteness of landscapes or architectural forms are mirrored in Julien's third glacial orientated film, *Stones Against*

Diamonds (2015) (fig. 5.6). Produced ten years after *True North* and *Encore*, the filmic installation centres around a letter written by the Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914–92) to her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi (1900–99), the founding director of the Sao Paulo Museum of Art in Brazil. In the letter, Bo Bardi praises the beauty of organic, uncut semi-precious gemstones over the more traditionally sought after precious stones, such as cut and polished diamonds (Julien, 2015). Julien’s homage to Bo Bardi visualises this sentiment in a filmic homage to Bo Bardi through the untouched, isolated ice caves of Vatnajökull, Europe’s largest glacier which sits 400 miles south of Reykjavik in Iceland, nearby the ice fields where parts of *True North* were filmed. The natural ice formations and structures mirror Bo Bardi’s architectural creations, conceived of by Julien as organic versions of Bo Bardi’s buildings. Within the huge ice caves, Julien recreated one of Bo Bardi’s most distinguished designs of a spiral staircase, adding huge panels of glass and easels through a combination of carpentry and computer-generated imagery (CGI). Created by hyper-technologised imaging software, Julien’s part fictional/technologically enhanced structures appear otherworldly in combination with the organic ice caves, mirroring Bo Bardi’s sentiments around her preference for gemstones.



Fig. 5.6 Isaac Julien. (2015). *Stones Against Diamonds*. [Film Installation].

Remarkably similar to *True North* in its colour-scape and wintered aesthetics, Myrie wanders the icy terrain in *Stones Against Diamonds*. Again, clothed only in a white dress, themes of ghostings, futurisms and cyborgs from *True North* are echoed and translated

into the film through Myrie's transcendence from one filmic space into another. In addition to the recurring Afrofuturist motif of water, Julien's preoccupations with digging, mining and collecting fossils are suggested not only in the foregrounding of diamonds and semi-precious gemstones as a subject, but also by the material history of ice itself. A substance which captures information such as air chemistry, pressure and other scientific properties from centuries before, ice allows us to go back in time and reveal a myriad of previously unknown environments.

Stones Against Diamonds has been presented by Julien in several formats: a five-screen installation at the Venice Biennale, a ten-screen presentation at Art Basel and a mighty fifteen-screen walk-through version at Art Basel Miami. Its spectacular, super high-end production values and CGI fabricated structures further notions of hybridity and technological development, not only in the aesthetics contained within the film, but in its production and highly technologised presentation. Themes of futurisms are intensified in one particular shot wherein Myrie's hands, gloved in a metallic gold, hold a block of ice (fig. 5.7). Reminiscent of early scenes in *True North* in which Myrie plays with ice as it melts from the warmth of her hands, Julien once again foregrounds Myrie's tactile engagement with her surroundings. The lustrous warm gold of the metallic gloves reinforces futurist aesthetics and punctuate underlying Afrofuturist motifs and concepts such as technology, temporal spaces and uninhabited landscapes, allowing me to advance *Stones Against Diamonds* as a further instalment of Afrofuturism in the filmic oeuvre of Julien.

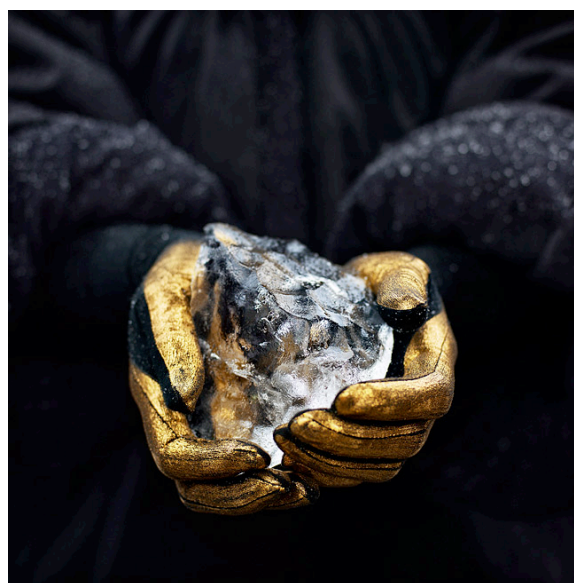


Fig. 5.7 Isaac Julien. (2015). *Stones Against Diamonds*. [Film Installation].

Arctic Space as Outer Space: The Recurrence of the Arctic in Science Fiction Narratives

‘Extraterrestriality thereby becomes a point of transvaluation through which this variation over time, understood as forcible mutation, can become a resource for speculation. It should be understood not so much as escapism, but rather as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance within the high-pressure zone of perpetual racial hostility.’

(Eshun, 2003: 229)

This section of the chapter is intended to trace a history of the Arctic in futurist narratives and question if the white landscapes figuration in *The Nine Muses* and *True North* intensify conceptual and aesthetic futurist strategies contained in the respective works. As discussed earlier, remote landscapes feature as a key motif in Afrofuturistic expressions, and as Eshun states above, spaces which appear to exist outside the confines of society, wildernesses and depopulated spaces such as the Arctic, have become identifiable with territories of hope, of new alternative futures, spaces in which people can live outside of dominant white society and the oppressive structures it yields (2003). If we understand the location of outer-space within Afrofuturism to represent a new, untainted alternative to the realities of racist societies, abundant with opportunities to reclaim and determine futures, then the Arctic takes on this role within both Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* and Julien’s *True North*. Through two centuries of colonial exploration, the Arctic has come to be defined within the West as the penultimate frontier before leaving planet earth, its isolation, hostile climate and constructed ‘emptiness’ give rise to its affinities with extra-terrestrial space.

Laura Kay, a professor of Physics, Astronomy and Women’s Studies at Columbia University has compiled an extensive online database of polar science fiction, a genre defined by Kay as narratives set on the poles ‘which focus on themes of lost cities, monsters, aliens, Nazis, Russians, nukes, viruses, and climate fiction’ (Kay, 2017). The database is categorised chronologically and denoted with a code *N* to signify its setting in the North Pole, or *S* for

the South Pole. It begins with the original polar fantasy, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and continues to list over 400 titles up until 2017. Scrolling through the summaries of all the titles contained on the database, they are in keeping with traditional science fiction narratives wherein a clear emphasis on the concept of race and preoccupation with the *other* can be identified with descriptions such as: 'underground civilization in hollow earth beneath the Arctic' (1935); 'meteors cool earth & icecaps spread. USA & China build spaceships to send white people, youths and Chinese women impregnated by "other race" to Alpha Centauri' (1967); '2000 years after Earth self-destructed in a race-war, descendants of black people who left for Mars return to find white descendants of a science station surviving in a now tropical Antarctica' (1969) and 'a polar base with racial tension, a powerful crystal is found, left behind by aliens who have been recording human history, aliens are humanoid and black' (1988) (Kay, 2017). Kay's database therefore provides a chronological overview of polar science fiction as it intersects with notions of race, difference and dislocation.

However, what is compelling in relation to Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic works is that the timeline of Kay's database reveals a sharp increase in polar science fiction novels emerging from the late 1990s. This spike in the genre has also been identified by Eric G. Wilson at the beginning of his seminal text *The Spiritual History of Ice* (2003), a book that has been instrumental for my reading of the case study films as Afrofuturist. Wilson observes that from 1997–2001 the *New York Times* reviewed twenty-two newly-published books on the subject of polar phenomena. During an earlier period from 1990–96, the newspaper reviewed only four polar texts. Wilson foregrounds his study by asking if the sharp rise in these literary works can be related to the dawn of the third millennium. With their dystopian themes and preoccupations with impending apocalyptic scenes, do the books reveal a deeper connection between polar space and notions of the future? (Wilson, 2003). Further still, can this literary explosion in polar fiction be related to the identified polar film trend at the centre of this thesis which emerged only three years after the literary boom, beginning with Julien's 2004 *True North* and latterly Akomfrah's 2010 *The Nine Muses*? A combination of the polar fiction trend identified by Wilson, and the contemporary film trend identified by this thesis, evidences that the Arctic as a location had somehow re-entered the public consciousness from the late 1990s. Wilson proposes that the spike in polar works can be related to increased rhetoric surrounding global warming, a discourse which Wilson suggests identifies the Arctic as a key geographical space for global futures (Wilson, 2003).

In 2012, the new genre of climate fiction or '*Cli-Fi*' emerged as a sub-genre of science fiction, dedicated to the speculation - or warning - of environmentally determined nightmares to come as a direct result of global warming. An ever-increasing genre, Cli-Fi offers authors the opportunity to speculate upon possible futures, constructing intricate narratives and researched points which encourage the reader to question current geopolitical conditions. Outside of the fictional narrative, environmental issues can be perceived as fractured, conflicting and distant, by speculating near or far-future climatic catastrophes, however the genre of Cli-Fi allows for an alternative mode of engagement with global warming. As the Arctic functions as an index for global environmental health, the territory occupies a central literal and imaginary role in the science fiction sub-genre, extending the landscapes' long history with futuristic thought.

Wilson suggests that the Arctic's primary mass, its anatomy - ice - shares a strong connection to Western visions of an apocalypse, a central theme of Western science fiction narratives: 'occidental Armageddon's tend to picture both violent dissolutions of time and blissful revelations of eternal realms' (Wilson, 2003: 2). The paradoxical representations of ice - giant crushing ice floes, deathly crevasses/serene stillness and delicate, intricate frosted formations - inspired the author to create a three-part essay (*Crystals, Glaciers and The Poles*) on representations of frozen matter from ancient times up until the 19th century. Continuing a thread throughout this thesis, Wilson pays particular attention to the Romantics who inflected a spirituality to the manner in which ice was, and still is, viewed as an ecological matter. Wilson maps the representational history of ice in two ways, the *exoteric* and the *esoteric*, demonstrating that the exoteric mode of seeing foregrounds external surfaces and visibilities, rendering ice as something deathly cold to be risen above and transcended; an organic matter to be commodified, and lastly a volume of matter that can be owned or governed, aspects which remind me of colonial exploration narratives. The esoteric way of seeing, most commonly adopted by Romantics and hermetic theorists, articulates perspectives of spirituality, depth, mystery, sublimity and etherealness. Esoteric viewers see icescapes as 'revelations of an abysmal origin, marriages of opposites, mergings of microcosm and macrocosm' (Wilson, 2003: 3).

As pointed out by Wilson, the representations of ice exist within a binary, they operate on an axis of positive and negative: the exoteric view is one of negativity, of impending surface doom, while the esoteric perspective is one of positivity, spirituality and sublimity. Wilson's binary proposition is particularly poignant in relation to the manner in which Akomfrah and Julien have staged visual and conceptual racial binaries upon the Arctic

landscape within their films. As pointed out in earlier chapters, both artists have referenced the Romantics as key influences in their perspective of landscapes and landscape art as a genre. Furthermore, Wilson's theory on the paradoxes of ice can be mirrored in the representations of racial whiteness; constructed as something attractive and aspirational, yet in reality represents pure terror.

Within the third and final section of Wilson's text, dedicated to the spiritual history of *The Poles*, the author emphasises the sheer abundance of polar narratives which include depictions of giant, monstrous creatures, assuming that such an inhumane environment could only contain something inhumane itself (Wilson, 2003). Akin to the imperialist mode of thought, the unknown is constructed as the very opposite of the known, 'the Christian mapper must conceive of alien space as a zone of everything that he and his godly brethren are *not*, just as the political coloniser must represent the colonised as nonhumans who must be humanised. In both cases, the 'other' mirrors – opposes, reverses – the 'same' and thus solidifies by opposing the narcissistic identities of cultures who think themselves superior' (Wilson, 2003: 149). Contrary to order and life, the construction of the Arctic's monsters, according to Wilson, were mere externalisations and projections of deep terrors imagined by 19th and 20th century geographers and novelists. In fact, they themselves were the terrors, mirroring the terror that they and other explorers' had inflicted elsewhere (Wilson, 2003: 162). As Wilson skilfully demonstrates, the Arctic monsters were mere reflections of imperialism and its perpetrators, an understanding that can be applied to polar science fiction and its preoccupation with creating narratives around the racial *other*.

As per my earlier assertion with regards to the substantial manifestations of racial narratives within the genre of science fiction, futurological projections are often mere exaggerated depictions of the present, an externalisation of fears and desires hence the focus on issues at the heart of Western society: race and difference. To reiterate, the Arctic has been constructed and continues to be represented as 'other' rendering it an ideal space upon which to narrate, speculate and discuss 'otherness' 'difference' and binaries. Focusing on the binary at play throughout the history of Arctic narratives, and a key notion which Wilson discusses throughout his book is the notion of opposites: the paradox in the material history of ice itself 'terror/sublimity'; 'same/difference'; can be read in relation to Julien's *True North* and Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* who address each of these relationships and visually foreground the black/white binary. Both films act as externalisations of the terror of all-encompassing vast whiteness, an oppressive and

blinding force signified by the endless whiteness of the Arctic. The black bodies which wander through the landscape in both films do so as human forms, adapting to survive in such an alien, inhospitable climate, representative of hostile conditions for black bodies in the West. Whilst the technologically-enhanced body of Myrie in *True North* and *Encore II (Radioactive)* is forced to adapt in order to create resistance to dominant whiteness.

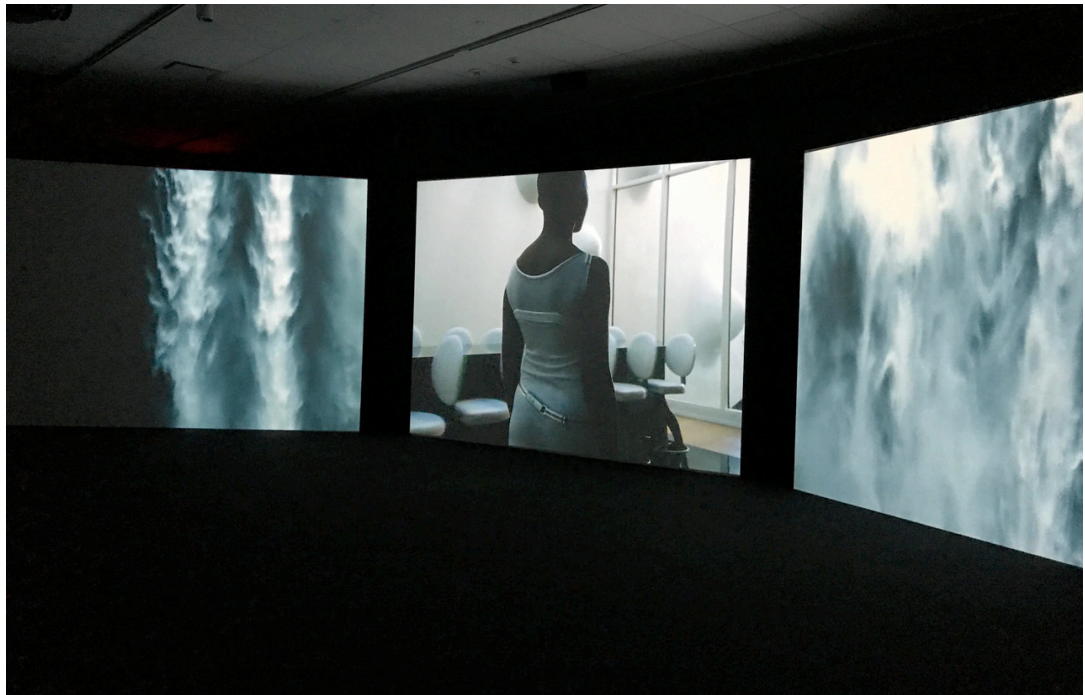


Fig. 5.8 Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*. [Film Installation].

The conclusion to Wilson's text, titled *Melting and Genesis*, advances the prognosis that on the eve of the eventual apocalypse, ice will return to its primal form and torrents of water will flow from the polar axis flooding the earth (Wilson, 2003). In August 2017, an article written for the New York Times titled *Alaska's Permafrost is Thawing* qualified Wilson's predication as a reality (Fountain, 2017). As Wilson describes, the northern polar cap is melting, with a warming rate calculated at twice the speed as the rest of the planet. Drastically altering landscapes across Arctic territories in Russia, Canada, Alaska and Scandinavia, areas of melting permafrost are creating mile-wide holes in the earth. As the permafrost thaws, it releases dangerous methane gasses, accelerating warming and causing further melting (Fountain, 2017). Themes of melting are prevalent in science fiction writing, particularly with reference to the demise of planet Earth. Richard Noone's

science fiction cult classic *5/5/2000: Ice – The Ultimate Disaster* (1986) suggests that Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn will align for the first time in around 6,000 years and increase the earth's temperature to an inhospitable level, wiping out humanity and creating a new beginning through a catastrophic ending.

'Hence, though ice suggests the original and final gulf, water, the compliment of ice, its twin and necessary other, is the more fitting image of the end that begins. If freezing and melting – two sides of the same coin, two hands of the same being – are signs of apocalypse, of an undifferentiating destruction from which new differences might one day arise, then ice suggests conclusions while water intimates introductions.'

- (Wilson, 2003: 218).

Thinking back to Julien's *True North*, themes of melting momentarily appear throughout the film: Myrie washing her hands under running water, her hands caressing ice which melts with their warmth, crashing waves washing up melting ice floes to the Arctic coastline, torrents of water crashing down from glacial edges (fig. 5.8.). The scenes of *True North* which depict floods of water crashing down from height initially reminded me of the literal disappearance of Arctic ice and thereby the territory itself, conjuring themes of environmental doom. However, when married with Wilson's theory on the relationship between ice, melting and the apocalypse, alongside Gilroy and Eshun's reference to water's function as a key motif symbolising the dilution and disappearance of African histories, together these frames provide further evidence that *True North* deals with futurist narratives in multiple ways, cementing it as an important contribution to Afrofuturist thought.

Julien's Arctic is a future landscape, a space which signifies a rapid transformation, presenting new beginnings, as Wilson states 'as a revelation of the groundless ground is to find oneself unmoored, undone, distributed in the all, not attached to any particular thing' (Wilson, 2003: 218). The sentiment of detachment which Wilson describes, of being 'unmoored and distributed in the all' can be read in relation to Myrie (as Henson), and other black figures wandering in racialised landscapes. The figures which walk the Arctic

in Akomfrah's and Julien's films are not seeking escapism, a concept which Eshun emphasises should be avoided when analysing Afrofuturism (Eshun, 2003), rather, their respective presence in the landscape is a conscious act of reclamation, of asserting presence in a literal and imagined space so intricately connected with notions of exoteric and esoteric futures. By asserting a black presence in a space constructed and identified as symbolically white, the artists trigger a process of undoing, of undermining the colonial constructions of the space and thus they themselves become undone from systematic structures of oppression and envisage a future within a previously uninhabitable space.

*Democratising Space: Technology and 'Digitopia'*²³

This final section of the chapter is focused on a concept that draws all my previous discussions around futurist narratives together: technology. Defined as a branch of scientific knowledge applied to a practical purpose (technology, n.d), technology is the means by which speculative futures are created and the material mode that harbours the possibility to translate them into reality. Cultural theorist Mark Fisher argues that information about the future and the technologies which are developed to generate this have a direct relation to economic value, termed *Science Fiction Capital* within a futures industry (Fisher, 2000). Eshun supports this idea by stating that employing technology to produce economic projections; trading predictions, speculative social reports, and the translation of these futures through science fiction books and cinema have fuelled and determined a technological boom (the author uses the 1990s computer upsurge as an example) and a desire for rapid technological growth (Eshun, 2003). The future lies in the hands of technology, or so we are told. But how does this affect those outside the economics of the futures industry? As Eshun expresses, it renders numerous populations powerless, their future in the hands of those that can exert dominance through economically driven science fiction capital, otherwise known as *the digital divide* (Eshun, 2003). Moreover, sociology professor Alondra Nelson proposes that despite the founding fiction of the digital age, that distinctions between race and gender would be absolved by the new possibilities that technology presented, as technologies spread, so did inequities in access to races, genders and regions, further evidencing the realities of the *digital divide* (Nelson, 2002).

²³ Term 'digitopia' defined by Akomfrah (2007).

My motivation to explore the intersection between Afrofuturism and technology was primarily inspired by Akomfrah's influential text *Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora*, an edited transcript of a keynote speech the artist gave at the *Re-presenting Diasporas* conference in Exeter in 2007. In the text, Akomfrah addressed a series of debates, practices and challenges that have taken place within the realm of diasporic cinema, advancing digital filmmaking technology as a form of democracy and allowing the gap to be narrowed in digital divides, specifically in relation to image-making. Considering the overlaps between the diasporic and new digital technologies, Akomfrah posits that issues of diasporic identities and diasporic or postcolonial cinema are already inherent in debates surrounding the emergence of digital cinema (Akomfrah, 2010). Akomfrah begins by laying out two fundamental problems which the promise of the digital has the potential to address and reconfigure: the first is that the birth of cinema was simultaneously the inauguration of fictional representations of black bodies premised on the imperial constructions of racial hierarchies, for example *The Birth of a Nation*, which also helped to legitimise the practice of spectatorship of non-white bodies within Western culture (Akomfrah, 2010). This thereby necessitated that the emergence of black cinema disrupted the traditional analogous fiction/non-fiction binary and function as, what Akomfrah terms, 're-negotiated realism' (Akomfrah, 2010: 23). The second problem Akomfrah identified was that in order to create images of truth, in opposition to the representations circulated within 'documentary' cinema, the image-machine itself had to be targeted because of the default racism inherent in the material specification of the camera and its film, which rendered cinema hostile to the possibility of black film on two fronts (Akomfrah, 2010).

Akomfrah discusses the persistent problems faced by filmmakers capturing black skin tones accurately when using analogue equipment as film stocks were produced and developed with white skin tones as a benchmark. Akomfrah references one of black-filmmaking's most distinctive historical figures, Ousamane Sembene and his leading questions on what variations of film stocks should be used for filming black skin: Kodak which was red in tone; Fuji which was blue; or the brown tones of Agfa – explaining 'black filmmaking is littered with many such official and unofficial moments, moments in which the promise of the digital is heralded before it is named, moments when a lingering and latent dissatisfaction with the default settings of cinema erupts into a new promise in a re-negotiated relation between image and self' (Akomfrah, 2010:23). Within this statement Akomfrah makes clear that digital technology, in this instance, offers a form of image-making democracy that the analogue system denied.

In light of the above, there have been a rising number of enquiries into the original skin bias of camera technology and the social conditions under which they were engineered. The exhibition *To Photograph a Horse in Low Light* by the London-based artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin has been instrumental in the development of my thinking on the intersection between race and image-making technology. The exhibition took place at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg in 2013 and was titled after the coded term employed by camera technology company Kodak to describe the effectiveness of a new film stock that had been developed in the early 1980s to correct the inadequacy of its predecessors in capturing black skin tones realistically, the artists created a body of still photography which interrogated the racism inherent in analogue image-making technology.

A key narrative of the exhibition revolved around the story of Caroline Hunter, a young chemist working for Polaroid in the 1970s who was instrumental in exposing the company as an indirect supporter of the South African apartheid regime through its development and distribution of the ID-2 camera to the South African government. Hunter and her partner Ken Williams, an African-American fellow employee of Polaroid went on to form the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Union in 1970 and organised a successful boycott which was instrumental in creating pressure for international divestment from South Africa at that time. Broomberg and Chanarin describe through their exhibition text how the ID-2 camera system was engineered to include a 'boost' button which increased the flash capacity and therefore captured black skin tones in far more detail than any other previous technology, explaining that black skin absorbs 42% more light than white skin, a percentage matched by the 'boost' function. The images were then used to produce the ignominious passbooks or 'dompas' for the black population, which subsequently supported complete state control of movement within the region. Broomberg and Chanarin suggest that the ID-2 was engineered to answer South Africa's very specific need: to capture accurate images of black faces in order to maintain state control of the black population (Broomberg and Chanarin, 2013). The artists thereby illustrate Hunter's initial connection and expose the racism inherent in the fabric of the ID-2 image-making machine.

Prior to the ID-2 model, cameras were designed purely to capture white faces. As writer Sean O'Toole has documented, the 1950s witnessed a wave of complaints from photographers who were attempting to photograph mixed heritage groups and were left with images of black skin tones underexposed with only the whites of eyes and teeth

developing alongside white faces (O'Toole, 2013). The situation was only addressed, David Smith explained in an article he wrote about Broomberg and Chanarin's exhibition, when Kodak's two biggest clients of the 1970s – the confectionary and furniture industries – complained that dark chocolate and dark furniture were losing out, that it came up with a solution (Smith, 2013). However, the chemistry of the South African company's early celluloid revealed the clear politicised nature of the technology. Emulsions were developed for the target market of whites living in a segregated society, photographs at that time would have captured only one social group at a time; white or black. This binary also highlights a further fundamental bias of the photochemical enterprise: the socio-economic burden which prohibited its accessibility to anyone outside of white society.

The exhibition *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light* presented a series of still photographs captured using a combination of original 1950s film stocks and an ID-2 camera in an effort to scrutinise the photographic medium and expose a further dimension to the complex relationship which exists between image-making and race. The exhibition originated as a response to a commission Broomberg and Chanarin received to document a series of Bwiti²⁴ initiation rituals in Gabon, Central Africa. The artists visited the country on two occasions and on both trips used a combination of black and white, and colour Kodak film stock, bought from eBay with a 1978 expiration date and their ID-2 camera. With only one image salvageable from the colour stock, the artists presented a series of black and white frames depicting a variety of subjects such as artefacts, statues, buildings and landscapes. Among these images are portraits of people participating in Bwiti rituals. Significantly, within each of these portraits, the subject's identity is shrouded through a variation of cropping, collage and image-splicing undertaken by the artists. By removing the identities of the photographic subjects, the artists subvert the original intention of the ID-2 camera and remove the dominant ethnographic gaze. The images operate to open up debates around the history of photography as one which has been established to cater for the white gaze. To recall Akomfrah's assertion quoted earlier, the birth of image-making was simultaneously the inauguration of the dominant white gaze which produced representations of black people premised on imperial constructions of racial hierarchies. With this in mind, the images which Broomberg and Chanarin produced and presented address this history and resist becoming part of it by concealing the identity of the men and women in the images.

²⁴ Bwiti is a spiritual discipline of Babongo, Mitsogo and Fang peoples of Gabon and Cameroon, and is recognised as one of the three officially recognised religions of the respective countries. Bwiti is a distinct spiritual tradition incorporating ancestor worship, animism and elements of Christianity.



Fig. 5.9 Broomberg and Chanarin. (2012). *Magic and the State #2* [Photograph].



Fig. 5.10 Broomberg and Chanarin. (2012). *Magic and the State #7* [Photograph].

To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light extended my thinking around the material substance of film and led me back to a question which I raised in chapter three in relation to Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses*: can the original racism engrained in the film or camera technology be removed through appropriation? Broomberg and Chanarin's exhibition further solidified my earlier conclusion that by creating a new context for the images to be read within that makes visible the racism which occupies images and image-making technologies, this act of recontextualisation is itself a political strategy of subversion which undoes the image/camera's original intention. While the sinister configurations of the camera stock and technology may be engrained in the material substance of the artists' appropriated images, by recontextualising them, the images produced are liberated from their origin and operate in the realm of what Akomfrah terms 'renegotiated realism', a term quoted earlier in this chapter (Akomfrah, 2010).

Within Smith's review of the Johannesburg exhibition, the artists Broomberg and Chanarin state that any image produced from the historic apparatus (ID-2) and its celluloid is, by nature, a political statement, whether it's of a person, an object, or something 'as mundane as the carpet' (Smith, 2013). The artists are adamant that the social conditions under which the images were produced render them inherently political. This is a sentiment that Akomfrah described earlier when discussing the importance of the digital, or the 'digitopian impulse' in relation to black cinema as a form of 'becoming' (Akomfrah, 2010: 29). By tracing the history of the photochemical machine and illuminating it as a primary tool in the construction of race and racism, the advent of the digital and its possibilities for democratising image-production become infinitely more significant. As Akomfrah asserts, although improved light sensitivity of film stocks helped to challenge conventional sensitometry, the changes that Kodak and other major film stock producers made still did not fully work to accommodate black skin tones:

'and yet, here again, all would not be lost, because this digitopic yearning and demand for a world beyond standard sensitometry – in which "impossible" film stocks would be hailed into being in order to capture "impossible" chiaroscuro possibilities – would, in the end, become a reality (at least for some of us) [...]

the advent of the digital offered the chance to quite literally invent appropriate film stocks, but also the laboratories in which they are produced.'

- (Akomfrah, 2010: 26)

In line with Akomfrah's expression above, if we understand Afrofuturism as a concept which is rooted in a desire to realise an 'impossible' set of desires, to rewire and reconfigure the present (and the past), then this impulse is harboured in the technological developments of the image-making machine and its new digital possibilities. The concepts of technology and Afrofuturism will always be entangled as it is through technological developments, such as digital image-making, that have propelled black cinema into a new realm and made alternative futures possible. It is through technological advancement that speculative futures can become reality. Akomfrah himself uses the term *becoming* in relation to the function of digital technology, positioning the digital as a 'space of ontology, of political epistemology and becoming' (Akomfrah, 2010: 27). The freedom that the digital provides is encapsulated in its ability to reconfigure cinematic history, cutting and mixing historical filmic remnants, re-positioning narratives in order to address gaps and omissions of the diasporic subject and thereby constructing new histories, all of which are masterfully evident within *The Nine Muses* and *True North*.

The utopia offered by the technological advancement of digital image-making is a founding pillar of the concept of Afrofuturism: that through technologies, alternative futures can be inscribed in the present. Herein lies my argument that the filmic spectacles of Akomfrah and Julien are inherently Afrofuturist. As I have developed throughout this chapter, the promise of the digital – of technology – is a key theme in both the concepts and literal production of *The Nine Muses* and *True North*. Concepts of the Arctic, of digital image-making in Akomfrah and Julien's films are united through the promise of technological advancement and the speculative futures of Afrofuturism. There is a clear preoccupation with technology across all of the subjects addressed in this thesis: outer space is technologised – like the Arctic – and is, for the majority of people, only perceivable through a technological lens, whether that be photographs, film, research data, images or satellite mapping, the territory is one that is fundamentally understood through technology, rendering it closer again to affiliations with extra-terrestrial.

Afrofuturist expressions are not only abundant in the aesthetics and concepts of *The Nine Muses* and *True North*, however they are also engrained in the production of the films as digital filmic spectacles. Having mapped Afrofuturist articulations in the respective filmographies of Akomfrah and Julien, I have sought to evidence that they have been producing futurist mediations throughout their careers and can therefore be considered as major contributors to the field. I have connected themes of the Arctic, the diasporic figure, Afrofuturism and explored their crucial significance for issues of race and identity through a reading of the rich and multi-layered films of Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North* which has led me to include trace veins of Afrofuturism in their wider practice. Reading their films through an Afrofuturist lens has allowed me to unite and explore themes which run throughout this thesis, forming a final chapter which addresses the intersections of this investigations core themes: race, representation, landscape and futurism.

Conclusion

‘The threat of climate change is the best motivation for a “Great Transition” which will require a systematic shift in reorganising social, political and economic life, in order to bring us into greater harmony with the world around us, including its human and non-human lifeforms [...] we cannot address climate justice adequately without also targeting the corruption of democratic practice by corporate lobbying, or indigenous rights violations by industrial extractivism, or police violence and the militarization of borders. For these areas all link up in one way or another as interconnected strands of political ecology.’

- (Demos, 2016: 12)

In the final weeks of writing this thesis, I re-discovered the above passage in the previously referenced book *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2016) in which the author Demos contends that issues of political ecologies are intricately connected to wider concerns of social and political forces of oppression. Further still, to recall a quote from Demos I included in the introduction that reaffirms this, ‘environmental stresses can be both a driver and consequence of injustice and inequality, including poverty, racism and neo-colonial violence’ (Demos, 2016: 8). Demos’ statements resonated with me towards the conclusion of my research as they underpin a fundamental conviction I have drawn from my reading of Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* and Julien’s *True North*: the artworks envision this very sentiment in their conceptual and aesthetic presentation of the entanglement of Arctic geopolitics with the oppressive force of whiteness and its effects on identity, belonging, and landscapes of exclusion for non-white bodies. As I have demonstrated through each chapter of this thesis, the artworks bring seemingly separate social, political and environmental debates into one arena, enabling me to create a study that evidences the interconnection of visual representations of the territory with notions of power, race, official and unofficial histories and future projections for the landscape. While the artists use the Arctic as a space to reclaim black histories and create testaments to those forgotten or left behind, *The Nine Muses* and *True*

North simultaneously lay claim to a stake in the Arctic's future, highlighting the increasingly volatile political ecologies of the space, in line with Demos' assertions above.

At the beginning of this research, I could not have anticipated that I would be led to consider political ecologies as a major concern for the thesis. Neither artwork directly address environmental challenges, yet through their own historical revisions and future projections, they reclaim the territory from the grip of whiteness which has controlled Arctic histories and continues to determine its future. It is through this process of reclamation that the artists are visualising Demos' call for 'The Great Transition' in 'systematically reorganising social, political and economic life' in order to address future possibilities for the territory outside of dominant white narratives. As chapter one, *The Geopolitics of Arctic Space* establishes in line with the emerging field of Critical Arctic Studies, the Arctic is an increasingly volatile space, both climatically and politically. Recent representations of the region as a focal point intrinsic to global environmental health sit in direct opposition to enduring colonial constructions of the territory as a 'blank' and 'detached' space. This accelerated and unprecedented shift in the Arctic's identity is the gap which this study addresses, arguing that ultimately, representations of the region greatly influence how it is interacted with, culturally and politically, on a global scale.

Collusions for ownership, increased militarisation, programmes for economic and industrial development all attest to the present volatility of the Arctic, necessitating an urgency to critically re-evaluate its cultural and political histories, a field I have demonstrated is vastly under-researched. Analysing key texts from the limited pool of Critical Arctic studies, I illustrated how Western perceptions of the Arctic and its myriad of histories have almost exclusively been formed through visual and literary representations, real, imagined and speculative. The histories available are largely written within colonial contexts of nationalism, heroic masculinity and sensationalism, with very little critical material available. As I have emphasised, the recurrent colonial motifs of the Arctic as a 'blank', 'detached' space present a danger wherein they are employed by structures of power to maintain control. I want to recall here a passage from the introductory chapter, specifically material from Demos which lists a number of American politicians who have employed colonial constructions of the arctic as blank 'nothingness' in order to support their speculative proposals for mass resource extraction, an outcome which would promise environmental catastrophe (Demos, 2016: 93).

Despite these monumental threats, as chapter one demonstrates, there exists a very limited number of studies that critically examine colonial constructions of the Arctic and their enduring legacy. The majority of critical texts which I identify in my literature review discuss colonial constructions of the region through literary analysis. While these texts were fundamental in developing my understanding of the relationship between racial whiteness and colonial exploration narratives, particularly Hill's chapter *The Heart of Whiteness* in *White Horizon* (Hill, 2008), the field neglects to consider the power of the visual. In an effort to position my research and underscore its originality, I mapped the limited territory of studies that examine visual representations of the Arctic and found two principle sources: *Far Field* (2012), an investigation of the relationship between digital culture and climate change, and *Films on Ice* (2015), an interdisciplinary study which traces a history of films concerning the Arctic. *Films on Ice* is a pivotal reference as it proposes a new genre of film titled *Arctic Cinemas*, within which I position Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North*. Situating my thesis within this limited field of critical visual research focusing on the Arctic, I am able to argue for its original and timely contribution, particularly in line with the emergence of *Arctic Cinemas* as defined by the authors of *Films on Ice* (2015). This new genre of region specific films recognises the Arctic as a crucial cultural and political location, displacing colonial constructions of 'blankness and emptiness', and showcasing the cultural and political intricacies of its postcolonial landscape.

Despite providing a primary source for the examination of visual narratives in critical Arctic studies, there is not one chapter in *Films on Ice* (2015) that attends to the Arctic as it relates to the concept of racial whiteness. In fact, apart from Hill's literary analysis of 19th century fiction, my literature review attests to the lack of a sustained engagement with the concept of the Arctic as a racialised landscape across all works in the field. My thesis therefore addresses this gap in research and begins a discourse around the concept of the Arctic as a literal and symbolic white space. Identifying the holes in the Arctic's cultural, political and visual histories throughout this thesis has allowed me, firstly to evidence the originality of this enquiry, and secondly, to underscore the importance of visual and literary representations and their role in shaping the territory's future at this crucial time. What is interesting to note is that *Films on Ice* (2015) was edited by critical Arctic academics based in America and Canada with the majority of essay contributions coming from writers based in Arctic states such as Denmark, Iceland and Canada, which further evidences that as a field, critical Arctic studies which call upon visual culture, have yet to be established in Britain. Despite Britain's primary role in 18th and 19th century Arctic

exploration, and the wealth of material relating to its entangled colonial histories, critical studies engaging with visual representations of the Arctic are yet to be attended to in Britain.

These gaps in research also enabled me to propose that two of the richest enquiries to extend and develop critical thinking around the Arctic as a postcolonial space are Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* and Julien's *True North*. By creating an in-depth and interdisciplinary analysis of their works, drawing from cultural theory, postcolonial theory, whiteness studies, political ecologies, film theory and critical Arctic studies, I have created a body of research which argues for the respective films' significance across all fields, simultaneously prompting a shift in Arctic discourse. The editors of the aforementioned book *Arctic Discourses* (2010) explain that 'any piece of Arctic discourse will be piggy-backing on other established discourses: exoticism, ecological, scientific, indigenous, imperial, masculine etc' (Ryall, 2010: xi). This methodology is evident in the evolution of my thesis wherein I draw from studies mentioned above in addition to scholarship concerning the north, the cold (thermodynamics), whiteness, alpinism, Bergfilm, and science fiction to create a fresh perspective of the High North through an interdisciplinary reading of *The Nine Muses* and *True North*.

A defining feature of this research is that its critical enquiry of the Arctic as a racialised landscape was instigated and has been led by the films of black British filmmakers. As black artists, Akomfrah and Julien began their critical enquiries into the relation between the Arctic and whiteness from a position of marginalisation and resistance. In line with this, it is my contention the most significant aspect of this investigation are *The Nine Muses* and *True North*'s illustrations of the capabilities inherent in employing the black/white racial binary, conceptually and aesthetically, to reveal constructions of whiteness. As discussed in chapter four, *Invisible to Whom: Representations of Whiteness*, whiteness as a construct and oppressive force relies on its invisibility, enabling it to operate and maintain power through the auspices of a 'normative' position. Whiteness is a slippery, evasive concept that the artists have marked and thereby subverted. Akomfrah and Julien have successfully visualised whiteness and revealed fundamental aspects of its construction and ideology through the aesthetic and conceptual employment of oppositions, binaries and contrasts.

The films visualise the operational theory of binarism in that one category (whiteness) is defined by what it is not (blackness), suggesting that in order to reveal representations of

whiteness, it must appear within the same frame as blackness, its constructed opposite. I want to recall here a key proposition contained in chapter four wherein I suggest Akomfrah and Julien's Arctic films visualise the theory of *multilateral double consciousness*, defined by the theorist Black as a means to examine and expand white racial consciousness through interracial dialogue (Black, 2007). As Black argues, by creating a relationship between Du Boisian double consciousness, Fanon and multilateral double consciousness, dynamic dialogues have the possibility to emerge and destabilise concealed structures of white supremacy, eventually leading to a new state of race consciousness (Black, 2007: 393). *The Nine Muses* and *True North* mobilise Black's theory and evidence the potential of visual and conceptual binaries to expose concealed structures of white power. In this regard, the works are deft contributions to critical whiteness studies not only through exposing whiteness and its ideological relationship to northern remote spaces, but also by revisioning black histories and reclaiming narratives from the whiteness of the Arctic.

In the last chapter, *Polar Space: Locating Afrofuturism in The Nine Muses and True North*, I examine these revisions of black histories, suggesting the artists stage recollections in order to reclaim the Arctic landscape from an exclusively white history. These re-examinations of silenced and disappeared histories that the artists rescue and transport into the present operate within the frame of Afrofuturism. Reading the works through an Afrofuturist lens allowed me to evidence a fundamental element of the films: the concept of agency. By looking back to obscured black histories, remembering them and providing a new space within which they can play out in the present, the artists are not only correcting official historical narratives, but are also shaping possible futures, extending the individual narratives' significance into the hereafter. To my knowledge, this thesis represents the first sustained reading of *The Nine Muses* and *True North* in relation to Afrofuturism, in addition to the respective films being examined within one conceptual framework.

I was led to consider Afrofuturism as an important concept for developing my reading of the works, principally through futurist motifs contained in the respective films and the narrative structures which moved back and forth through time and space. Analysing a number of other works within Akomfrah and Julien's filmographies, I began to uncover Afrofuturist expressions which could be located throughout their practices and related back to *The Nine Muses* and *True North* thereby supporting my reading of the films as key contributions to the emergent discipline. Afrofuturism therefore functioned as a critical

tool which aided my understanding of *The Nine Muses* and *True North* and allowed me to position them as significant films in determining futures as they relate to the Arctic landscape. Furthermore, by engaging with the concept of Afrofuturism and drawing comparisons from other Afrofuturistic film practices, I was able to knit together concepts which appear throughout the thesis and unite them in chapter five under the umbrella of futurist and science-fiction narratives. Concepts such as coldness, unnatural resistance, technology, hauntological figures and apocalyptic landscapes were unpacked from *The Nine Muses* and *True North* and contextualised within the rubric of Afrofuturism.

Future Orientations

Writing this future facing chapter not only led me to formalise my thinking on the respective film's temporal disjunctions and how meditations on time have carved new forms of agency for non-white narratives, but it also led me to further consider the timeliness of this thesis. As I have underscored throughout this body of research, the themes which *The Nine Muses* and *True North* raise are pertinent to current cultural and political discourses, particularly in relation to the political ecologies of the Arctic, whiteness and the emergent field of Afrofuturism. What is significant to consider at this final juncture are the dates that *The Nine Muses* and *True North* were produced. Despite being fourteen years since the release of *True North* in 2004, and eight since *The Nine Muses* in 2010, I propose the artworks are more significant *now* than when they were initially released. As my research for this thesis developed over time, so too has the significance of the respective films. There are two interconnected reasons for this.

Firstly, as I emphasised earlier in this concluding chapter, from the year 2000 the Arctic experienced an unprecedented shift in its identity. In line with this, as identified by Wilson in his book *The Spiritual History of Ice*, between the years of 1997–2001 there was a burst of Western polar fiction depicting themes of ecological catastrophe and its effects on humankind (Wilson, 2003). With the Arctic beginning to enter Western public consciousness as a key site for global futures, the artworks can be read as responses to this emerging cultural and political Arctic awareness. However, since the production of the films, environmental health has consistently deteriorated, and landgrabs alongside advances to extract resources have intensified, resulting in the region sitting at the centre of ideological, political, cultural and environmental conflict. Now more than ever critical reflections of the Arctic are necessary to determine global futures.

My second reason for proposing that the films are more pertinent now is their focus on racial whiteness. As argued in chapter four, *Invisible to Whom: Representations of Whiteness*, since the emergence of Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* in 2010, Euro-American politics have continued to veer to the right creating preoccupations with notions of nationalism, belonging and racial purity. The respective events of Brexit and the inauguration of the Trump administration have escalated right-wing politics in populist culture and provided legitimisation for white supremacist ideologies as they play out in Western society through racism, inequality and injustice. Within chapter four I draw from Painter, specifically his observation that the 2016 American election signalled a turning point in white identity wherein it transformed from an 'un-marked, default, normalized white' to a 'nationalistic, bigoted white which stands against multiculturalism and racial equality' (Painter, 2016). I continued to further relate this white identity shift to the British context and evidence how a similar alteration in white racial identity has taken place since discourses surrounding Brexit emerged. Akin to the ecological degradation in the Arctic which has recently reached crisis point, xenophobic nationalist ideologies associated with right-wing politics are steadily creating further inequality, injustice and racial discrimination across the West. As such, the complexities of white racial identities and white skin privilege are in critical need of attention.

Bearing this in mind, I want to re-introduce Demos, specifically his proposition quoted at the beginning of this chapter which states political ecologies are inextricable from issues of 'inequality, including poverty, racism and neo-colonial violence' (Demos, 2016: 8). Akomfrah and Julien presented *The Nine Muses* and *True North* wherein concerns of racial whiteness and the geopolitics of the Arctic become inextricable from each other. In this sense, and to mirror the sentiment contained in the opening of the conclusion, the films embody this interrelation of space, place and identity and mobilise Demos' proposition that in order to address critical environmental debates, transformations around the cultural and political attitudes which underpin policy must come first. However, what is fundamental to note here is the disparity in the dates between the emergence of Akomfrah and Julien's films and the publication of Demos' text in 2016. This gap testifies to the pre-emptive quality of the films. In addition to visualising Demos' theory, the films are predictive in their foregrounding of white supremacy as the primary problematic within all discussions as they relate to race, identity and landscape.

I began the research process for this thesis anticipating I would create a body of work concerning the visual representations of whiteness as they related to the Arctic landscape. My vantage point at that time was historical, and I expected my thesis would function as a re-examination and correction of obscured histories. I could not have foreseen the research process would also lead me to consider how those historical discourses present the opportunity to renegotiate and determine global futures across the field of political ecologies. I have therefore emerged from this thesis committed to the generative possibilities contemporary art and the field of visual culture harbours for examining the crucial matters of political ecologies as they relate to race, landscape and representation. Guided by Demos, specifically his book *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Politics and the Politics of Ecology*, I view this thesis as a foundation to continue to consider the inextricable connections between social oppressions and future landscapes.

I would like to further develop this body of work by extending its key avenues of enquiry and applying them to an in-depth consideration of other works in the trend of black artists employing the potential of the Arctic as a key literal and symbolic space. Artists such as DJ Spooky, Roz Mortimer, Grace Ndiritu and Terry Adkins have created films using the polar landscape as a space to revisit histories and debate notions of whiteness as it relates to the territory. Using this thesis as a foundation, I would like to apply the knowledge I have gained from my examinations of *The Nine Muses* and *True North* and unpack the conceptual and aesthetic strategies contained in these other Arctic works. By creating readings of these films, there was not enough space to fully investigate in this thesis, I will be able to develop and extend the significance of this original research. Analysing the other works in the identified trend would also crucially develop the field of critical Arctic studies and its newly defined sub-genre of *Arctic Cinemas*.

A key objective of the continuation of this thesis relates back to my curatorial methodology explicated in the introduction, principally my decision to undertake this research without production of a public output, such as the curation of an exhibition. Rather, it was my intention for this thesis to operate in a manner of providing the space needed to create my own curatorial reading of the works, without engaging in exploratory curatorial presentations to explore the subject matter. As laid out at the beginning of this

²⁵ Phrase used regularly by Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister and president of Ghana, in his efforts to lead the country to independence from British colonial rule.

research, I used the practice of curating as a means to gather experiences, meditations, externalisations and opinions on a set of subject matters. I therefore used the exhibition process of artworks to inform and in turn *form* my understanding of concepts. My practice therefore functioned as exploratory and investigative. Rather than presenting an exhibition as an argument or a proposition on a particular topic, I would have used it as a platform to showcase a multitude of vantage points.

This thesis therefore marks a major shift in my curatorial approach as, rather than using the practice of curation to inform this thesis, I wanted to create space for myself to examine the works closely in relation to a host of theoretical material and *form* my own personal reading of the films. To echo my Director of Studies Professor Tulloch's phrase I have sought to *curate a thesis*. The process of constructing this body of work has significantly impacted my practice as I now feel I have had the opportunity to fully develop my reading of the films *before* staging an exhibition. My proposed development of this thesis is therefore to translate this body of work into a formal exhibition, including my readings of the other films in the trend not considered here. It is also at this juncture I would like to secure interviews with Akomfrah and Julien in line with a proposed exhibition, specifically to follow my avenue of enquiry which examines the current significance of their Arctic films and how they have developed elements of *The Nine Muses* and *True North* into later artworks. To reiterate my earlier assertion, *The Nine Muses* and *True North* are prolific and timely in this political moment; I therefore seek to create an exhibition which frames the works as such.

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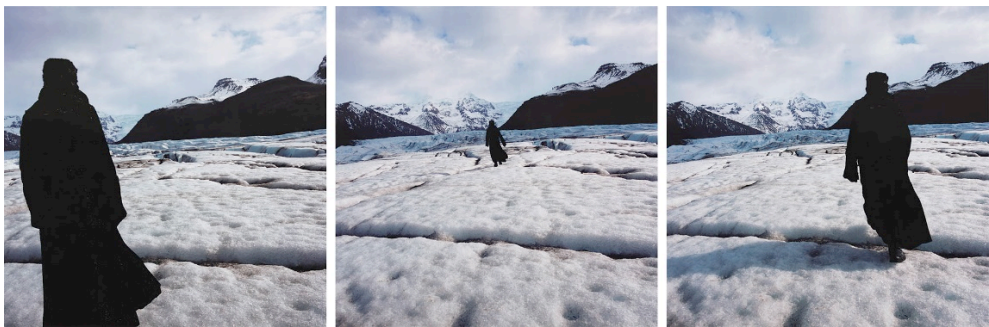
Archives Consulted

British Film Institute National Archive
National Maritime Museum Archive
The Royal Geographic Society Archive
The Scott Polar Research Archives
The Danish Arctic Institute

Appendix 1: Polar Film Trend

Films by black artists which foreground polar landscapes as a key symbolic landscape. Sandhu identified Akomfrah, Julien and DJ Spooky (Sandhu, 2011), and I have uncovered two further examples by Grace Ndiritu and Terry Adkins, as presented below in chronological order (2004-2011).

1. Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004)



Isaac Julien. (2004). *True North*, [Film Installation] UK: Isaac Julien Studios. Available at: <https://www.icamiami.org/collection/isaac-julien-true-north/> (Accessed 1 July 2018).

2. DJ Spooky *Terra Nova Sinfonia Antarctica* (2009)



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3. Grace Ndiritu *Journey's North: Pole to Pole* (2009)



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4. John Akomfrah *The Nine Muses* (2010)



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5. Terry Adkins *Nutjuitok (Polar Star) After Matthew Henson* (2011)



Terry Adkins. (2011). *Nutjuitok (Polar Star) After Matthew Henson*. [Film Installation]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5qn1MadRt4> (Accessed 1 July 2018).

Appendix 2: Filmographies

John Akomfrah

- 2018 *Mimesis: African Soldier*
- 2017 *Precarity*
- 2017 *Purple*
- 2016 *Auto De Fé*
- 2016 *The Airport*
- 2015 *Vertigo Sea*
- 2014 *Tropikos*
- 2014 *The Silence*
- 2013 *Venice 70: Futures Reloaded*
- 2013 *The March*
- 2013 *The Stuart Hall Project*
- 2010 *The Nine Muses*
- 2010/1 *Mnemosyne*
- 2009 *Oil Spill: The Exxon Valdez Disaster*
- 2004 *Urban Soul: The Making of Modern R&B*
- 2003 *Stan Tracey: The Godfather of British Jazz*
- 2003 *Mariah Carey: The Billion Dollar Babe*
- 1999 *Riot*
- 1999 *The Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong*
- 1998 *Call of Mist*
- 1998 *Goldie: When Saturn Returns*
- 1998 *Speak Like a Child*
- 1997 *Martin Luther King: Days of Hope*
- 1996 *Voices in the Dark*
- 1996 *The Last Angel of History*
- 1995 *African Footsteps*
- 1993 *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*
- 1991 *Who Needs a Heart*
- 1988 *Testament*
- 1987 *Handsworth Songs*

Isaac Julien

- 2019 *Ghost of Lina Bo Bardi*
- 2015 *Stones Against Diamonds*
- 2013 *Playtime*
- 2010 *Better Life*
- 2010 *The Leopard*
- 2008 *Derek*
- 2006 *Fantôme Afrique*
- 2004 *True North*
- 2004 *Peter Gabriel: Play*
- 2003 *Baltimore*
- 2002 *Badasssss Cinema*
- 2002 *Paradise Omeros*
- 2000 *Three*
- 1999 *Long Road to Mazatlan*
- 1995 *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks*
- 1994 *The Darker Side of Black*
- 1993 *The Attendant*
- 1991 *Young Soul Rebels*
- 1989 *Looking for Langston*
- 1988 *This is not an AIDS Advertisement*
- 1985 *Territories*