



# MATTHEW HENSON AND THE CONTAMINATED SUBLIME: RACE, SEXUALITY, AND RESISTANCE IN ISAAC JULIEN'S TRUE NORTH

LISA E. BLOOM

## Introduction: Matthew Henson, Isaac Julien, and the Arctic's Overlooked Narratives

Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004) forms part of his acclaimed body of work in which he reimagines and reconfigures historical narratives through the lens of Black and queer identities. Originally conceived as a multi-screen video installation, *True North* represents a major departure from traditional filmmaking, charting Julien's evolution from single-channel cinema to an artist reshaping the moving image through fragmented, choreographed, multi-screen installations. This approach is central to the retrospective exhibition of Julien's career, which showcases how his work challenges linear storytelling and asks viewers to reconsider histories and geographies through complex arrangements of image, sound, and movement.

In *True North*, Julien revisits the overlooked story of Matthew Henson (1866–1955), the African American explorer who accompanied Robert E. Peary (1856–1920) on the 1909 expedition to the North Pole. Henson's pivotal contributions were marginalized in favor of Peary's heroic narrative, a pattern Julien critiques by making Henson the focal point of his film.<sup>1</sup> This piece reclaims Henson's legacy through a unique blend of narration from Henson's writings, landscape cinematography, and a multi-screen presentation that immerses the viewer in the hauntingly beautiful, icy expanses of the Arctic. The title, *True North*, references how polar exploration might have had a different meaning for Henson than for white explorers of his time. Robert Stepto argues that “the seminal journey in Afro-American narrative literature

is unquestionably north,” positioning Henson’s autobiography as extending the African American tradition of northward journeys, often associated with freedom and migration.<sup>2</sup> Though Henson was born to freed slaves, his family faced persecution by the Ku Klux Klan, leading Henson to relocate to Washington, DC, and then to Baltimore, for safety.<sup>3</sup> Despite living in a new era, the remnants of slavery persisted in the Jim Crow era. Henson became an orphan by eleven and, before working for Peary in 1888, was an able-bodied seaman, and had already traveled widely as a cabin boy on the *Katie Hines*, a steam-powered merchant vessel, reaching destinations such as China, Japan, Northern Africa, France, Spain, and Southern Russia.<sup>4</sup> His journeys, Julien suggests, offer a more nuanced perspective on narratives of freedom and exploration.

*True North* also subtly references the crisis of masculinity at the turn of the century, a time when exploration was increasingly linked to ideals of ruggedness and self-determination.<sup>5</sup> Julien’s work invites viewers to reframe these masculinist ideals through a Black, queer, and feminist aesthetic lens. The result is a film that not only commemorates Henson’s achievements but also recontextualizes the Arctic as a space where histories of race, exclusion, and reclamation unfold.

### Decentering the Heroic Age of Polar Exploration

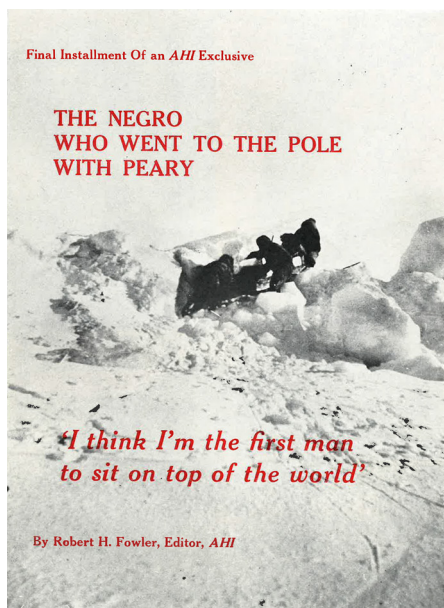
The Heroic Age of Polar Exploration (1897–1922) occupies a significant place in the cultural imagination, often constructed as the ultimate test of endurance, heroism, and masculinity. This era is characterized by nationalistic fervor, where expeditions to the North and South Poles became symbolic acts of imperial conquest. For much of the twentieth century, these narratives were dominated by white male figures whose achievements were celebrated while failures were either erased or reframed as noble acts of self-sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> Isaac Julien’s *True North* reclaims this historical narrative, offering a counter-narrative that centers on Matthew Henson, whose contributions were long overlooked due to the racial hierarchies of the time.

Julien’s *True North* brings us back to the Heroic Age of exploration, a time when many of the Arctic regions had yet to achieve independent Indigenous self-governance systems. The absence of this autonomy marked a stark colonial period, the implications of which linger even today, as seen in Nunavut’s 1999 independence and Greenland’s 2008 move toward self-governance while remaining part of Canada and Denmark, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Julien’s critique aligns with a broader movement within Arctic studies, which emphasizes that the heroic era cannot be viewed as entirely distinct from contemporary issues. Rather, these colonial and masculinist perspectives persist, subtly shaping ongoing political and environmental crises in the region.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing in part from my first book, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, published thirty years ago, and Henson’s writings, Julien critiques earlier Arctic representations, notably in works like Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), a signature silent film that presented the Inuit as primitive and incapable of adapting to Western “progress.”<sup>9</sup> Julien’s film resonates with contemporary audiences because it responds to the larger visual culture of the Arctic created in recent years that is temporally, geographically, and materially diverse. Aesthetics plays an important part in *True North* as



1. Photographic portrait of Matthew Henson taken immediately after the sledge journey to the North Pole and back, 1909



2. Title page from "The Negro Who Went to the Pole with Peary" in *American History Illustrated* (vol. 1, no. 2) from May 1986

Julien explores the relationship between aesthetics and politics, delving into the complex politics of exclusion present in Peary's expedition.<sup>10</sup> Through this critical lens, *True North* challenges the sanitized portrayals of heroism often associated with polar exploration by re-centering Henson's perspective.

Moreover, Julien's film brings to life the complexities of Henson's role in Peary's expedition, highlighting the tensions and raw violence inherent in his relationship with his employer. In retelling this story from Henson's point of view, Julien draws upon Henson's own account, where he describes reaching the North Pole before Peary.<sup>11</sup> Henson's decision to press on ahead of Peary, after learning he might be excluded from the final march, adds a layer of resistance to the narrative. As discussed in *Gender on Ice*, Henson's retelling unsettles colonial stereotypes that framed Black men as irrational or violent in contrast to the rational and "heroic" white explorers.<sup>12</sup>

True to Henson's perspective, Julien uses a voice-over in the middle of the film from Henson's writings posthumously published in 1966 to communicate the explorer's anxieties, especially after Peary's violent outburst aimed at securing his own claim to the pole.<sup>13</sup> The consequences of Peary's betrayal were profound for Henson, who struggled financially despite his pivotal role in the expedition. While Peary begrudgingly acknowledged Henson's contributions in a brief foreword to *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), Henson endured years of hardship, working low-paying jobs before gaining some stability as a clerk at the US Custom House in 1913. Although he received belated recognition later in life, including membership in The Explorers Club and the Peary Polar Expedition Medal, Henson's legacy was overshadowed by Peary's and his achievements undervalued during his lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

Julien's *True North* thus rewrites these otherwise sanitized narratives by presenting Henson not as a subservient figure but as a resilient explorer confronting racial and social barriers. In *True North*, Julien situates Henson at the center of a narrative that frequently privileges white male heroism, reconfiguring the story so that figures like Henson and the four Inuit men who accompanied Peary on the expedition — Egingwah, Ootah, Ooqueah, and Seegloo — become witnesses to Peary's achievement rather than silent participants. This approach shifts focus to the integral, yet historically marginalized, contributions of nonwhite individuals, with Julien using visuals to underscore their significant yet overlooked presence.<sup>15</sup> By recasting Henson and the Inuit men as central figures, Julien challenges the hierarchical narratives that have long dominated the discourse of polar exploration.

By casting the Black British actress Vanessa Myrie as Henson, Julien shifts registers to mock older racial theories, such as climate determinism, which argued that Black people could not endure or belong in the Arctic environment. Historian Anthony S. Foy has noted that this pseudoscientific notion functioned as an ideological counterpart to Jim Crow segregation, limiting Black individuals to the tropical South while suggesting they lacked the physical resilience for Arctic climates. Foy explains, "If Henson embodied the race's contribution to an American triumph, then his ability to weather the extreme physical demands of the Arctic frontier also symbolized the race's mobility as it excelled despite the political, economic, and social limitations placed on it at home."<sup>16</sup>



3. Matthew Henson's photograph of the four Inuit men (left to right: Egingwah, Ootah, Ooqueah, and Seegloo) who accompanied Robert E. Peary and Henson on their voyage to the North Pole, ca. 1909

In his own words, Henson disproved this pseudoscientific theory when he recounted a conversation in which he was told “he could not stand the cold — that no Black man could.” In response, he stated he was “willing to die if necessary to show them.”<sup>17</sup> This declaration, reflected in Julien’s reinterpretation, conveys a defiance against the racialized limitations imposed on Henson both by Peary and the society he represented. Furthermore, by casting Vanessa Myrie, a Black British actress, as Henson, Julien not only subverts racial hierarchies but also challenges traditional gender norms, reimagining Henson as a figure who embodies both resilience and fluidity across boundaries of race, gender, and geography.

### Images of Inuit Participation

Julien’s focus in *True North* is not limited to Henson. The Inuit men who accompanied Peary and Henson on the 1909 expedition — Egingwah, Ootah, Ooqueah, and Seegloo — are also given prominence in Julien’s work.<sup>18</sup> These men played a critical role in the success of the expedition as they shared with Henson the physical hardships of Arctic work, yet like Henson, their contributions were largely overlooked by the official narratives of the time. Julien corrects this omission by featuring close-up portraits of the Inuit men (played by Sami actors) and Henson (played by Vanessa Myrie), placing them at the center of the story. These images confront the viewer with the faces of those who have been written out of history, compelling us to acknowledge their presence and importance in the narrative of polar exploration. By featuring these portraits and including Inuit throat singing in the film’s soundscape, Julien emphasizes the cultural and material labor that the Inuit provided during the expedition. The sound of the Arctic wind, the cracking of the ice, and the haunting voices of Inuit throat singers combine to create an immersive experience that situates the viewers within the environment and compels them to reconsider the colonial narratives that have shaped our understanding of the region. This auditory and visual portrayal of Inuit life juxtaposes Julien’s view of a different Arctic — deeply connected to its people and history — against the Western, colonial gaze that characterized the region as desolate and in need of discovery.<sup>19</sup> Julien rewrites these older stories representing the four Inuit men and Henson as witnesses to Peary’s North Pole trek; in Julien’s film, they ultimately replace Peary as the narrative’s focus.

### The Multi-Screen Installation: Fragmenting Narratives, Expanding Perspectives

The film and installation *True North* (2004) are shown at the de Young as a large-scale multiple-screen audiovisual installation and offers one of the boldest examples of the new departure in the artistic and scholarly discourse on polar expedition narratives.<sup>20</sup> *True North* takes poetic license and restructures Henson’s story in unexpected ways. It is a film about the North Pole but was filmed in Iceland and northern Sweden, which is made evident to the viewer through shots of Iceland’s ice caves. It focuses on loosely conceived reenactments but draws from the documentary genre, historical documents, and nonfiction material and, like most of Julien’s films, is heavily research based. Unlike traditional single-channel cinema, where the viewer passively absorbs a linear narrative, Julien’s multi-screen works require active engagement from



4. Robert E. Peary’s photograph of Matthew Henson (center) and their four Inuit guides — Ooqueah, Ootah, Egingwah, and Seegloo — at the North Pole, 1909

5. Isaac Julien, *True North Series*, 2004. Triptych of digital prints on glossy paper, each: 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in. (100 x 100 cm)



the audience. The fragmented images and disjointed soundscapes prevent the viewer from settling into a singular, cohesive narrative, instead offering multiple perspectives that overlap and diverge. This technique mirrors the fractured history of Henson, whose experience as an African American explorer was excluded from the dominant narrative of Peary's triumph.<sup>21</sup>

Julien's approach recalls Homi K. Bhabha's idea of "cultural hybridity," in which marginalized perspectives disrupt monolithic views of history and culture.<sup>22</sup> By recontextualizing Henson's story in the multi-screen format, Julien positions him as an active agent of exploration and history, rather than a passive footnote to Peary's narrative. In this way, the viewer is encouraged to reconsider both the Arctic and its historical "heroes" through a fragmented and reflective lens, confronting what Paul Gilroy terms "the overlooked, the effaced, and the oblique" in colonial histories.<sup>23</sup>

The multi-screen presentation functions almost like an archaeological excavation of forgotten or erased narratives. As the viewer moves through the installation, they are enveloped by the simultaneous projections, each screen offering a different perspective or moment in the story. The Arctic landscape — presented in sweeping, majestic shots — contrasts with the more intimate moments of Henson's journey. This interplay between the personal and the monumental serves to highlight the tension between individual experience and the grand, nationalistic narratives that have traditionally dominated historical accounts of polar exploration. As I note in my book *Gender on Ice*, polar exploration offered "an ideal mythic site" to showcase nationalistic and masculine ideals, an effect Julien disrupts through this innovative format.<sup>24</sup>

This multilayered approach reflects Julien's desire to unsettle the viewer's expectations of both the medium and the message. By presenting Henson's story in fragmented pieces, the multi-screen installation reflects the fractured nature of history itself, particularly for marginalized figures like Henson. In incorporating the Arctic as both setting and subject, Julien merges Henson's story with the broader environmental and racial histories embedded in the polar landscape.<sup>25</sup> The audience is invited to participate in piecing together this multifaceted narrative, highlighting Julien's commitment to what he calls "the geopoetics of place."<sup>26</sup>

### Colonialism and Gender

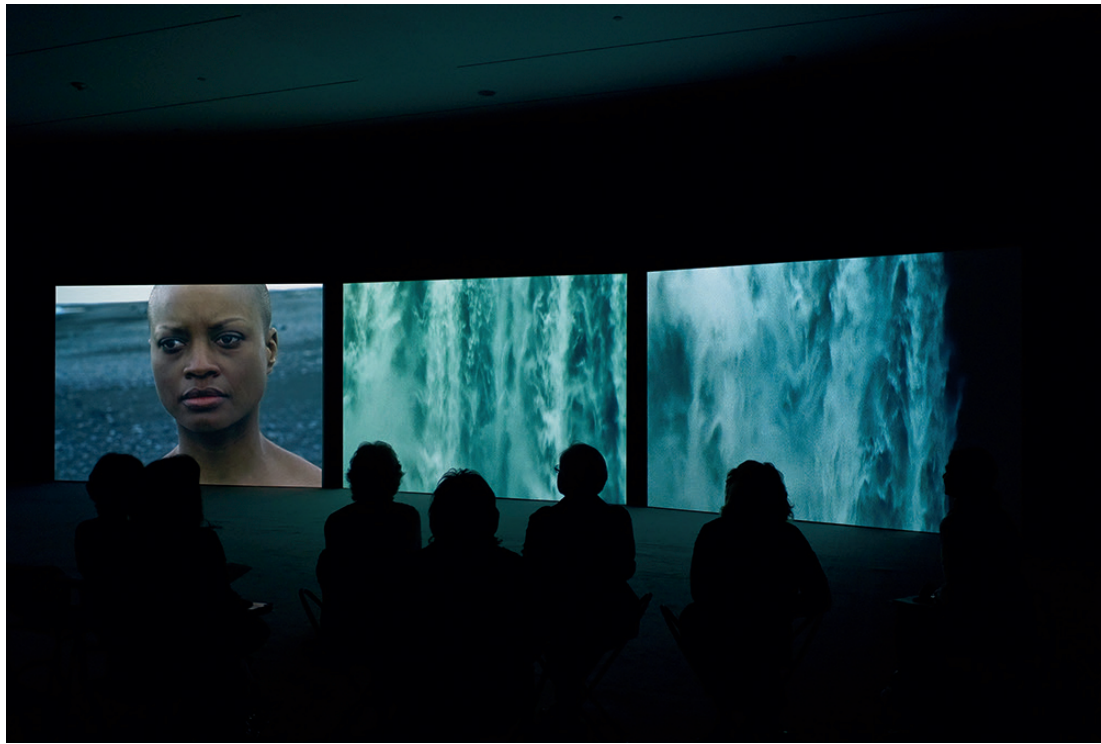
Isaac Julien's *True North* engages with the colonial narratives that have traditionally surrounded Arctic exploration, specifically reimagining the figure of Matthew Henson to foreground his subjectivity and connection to the Arctic landscape. By casting Vanessa Myrie as Henson, Julien not only affirms a recovery of Black subjectivity but does so in a mockingly counter-heroic way. This exaggerated heroism can be understood as a form of postcolonial mimicry, invoking Homi K. Bhabha's concept, which describes the process by which colonial subjects mimic the cultural expressions of their colonizers in ways that subtly subvert and destabilize authority. In Julien's film, this mimicry is articulated through the character of Henson/Myrie, who becomes a displacing gaze that questions and reinterprets the original authoritative discourse of exploration narratives. By positioning Henson/Myrie as both subject and symbol, Julien exposes the constructed, performed nature of polar heroism and the colonialist enterprise it represents.



6. Robert E. Peary's photograph of Allakasingwah, his youthful Inuit mistress, in the nude, 1898. It was originally captioned "Mother of the Seals (An Eskimo Legend)."

7. Installation view of Isaac Julien, *True North*, 2004, at Akron Art Museum, Ohio, 2010. Actress Vanessa Myrie is in the foreground of a melted Arctic set alongside two images of waterfalls.

8. Installation view of Isaac Julien, *Fantôme Créole* (four-screen projection combining *True North* and *Fantôme Afrique*), 2005, at Kunstneres Hus, Oslo, 2005. The projection includes close-up portrait images of actress Vanessa Myrie representing Black explorer Matthew Henson, and three Inuit actors representing the four Inuit men who accompanied Robert E. Peary and Matthew Henson on their voyage to the North Pole.



Julien's use of mimicry in *True North* disrupts the aesthetics and politics of traditional exploration narratives, taking us back not only to the original heroic polar exploration stories but also to a larger discourse of colonialist artistic, literary, and cinematic representations of the Arctic. By restaging these narratives, Julien draws attention to the colonial gaze embedded in works like Robert Peary's 1910 account, where Peary depicts the Inuit as dependent and incapable of survival without Western intervention. In his writings, Peary argued that the Inuit could not fully fend for themselves in the Arctic because they supposedly lacked the ability to embrace Western technology. This view anticipates the representation of Native people as exotic, timeless anachronisms in Robert Flaherty's 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*.<sup>27</sup>

However, as Julien's work underscores, these representations ignore the reality of Inuit expertise in navigating and surviving the harsh Arctic environment. Matthew Henson himself credited his ability to adapt to the Arctic's challenges to the Inuit, from whom he learned essential skills. Henson recounted that he began "dressing in the same kind of clothes, living in the same kind of dens, eating the same food, enjoying their pleasures, and frequently sharing their griefs." He became adept at constructing and driving dogsleds, building igloos critical for survival, and hunting reindeer and musk oxen, while also gaining fluency in the Inuit language. Living in close proximity with the Inuit, Henson formed lifelong relationships that played a crucial role in the success of the expedition. Julien's choice to include close-up portraits of the Inuit men who accompanied Peary and Henson serves as a corrective, highlighting the often-overlooked skills and agency of these Indigenous figures. In an installation view, Inuit and Black faces are brought together on-screen, visually aligning their shared experiences and resilience. By doing so, Julien once again subverts the colonial aesthetic that relegated Indigenous people to the margins, instead positioning them as central figures within the polar narrative. This acknowledgment is further complicated by the historical reality that both Henson and Peary had Inuit partners and children, revealing a legacy of intimate entanglements that challenges the myth that Black and Indigenous people do not belong in the Arctic.

Such entanglements underscore the gendered dynamics of colonialism that Julien also critiques. In contrast to Peary's 1898 photograph of his Inuit mistress, and mother of his illegitimate son, Karee Peary, Allakasingwah, is posed in a vulnerable, nude position.<sup>28</sup> Julien's depiction of Henson/Myrie is one of strength and self-possession. Myrie's portrayal is cold and iconic, presenting Henson as a figure who belongs in the Arctic yet remains radically unavailable to the colonial gaze. This image of Henson/Myrie contrasts sharply with the traditional depictions of Native women as symbols of nature and as objects to be conquered. By queering the character of Henson and subverting conventional gender norms, Julien challenges the binary between the heroic, masculine explorer and the feminized, passive landscape.

Through this subversion, Julien complicates the racial and gendered politics that have historically framed Arctic exploration. The Arctic, rather than being a pristine wilderness awaiting conquest, is reimagined as a space layered with histories of resilience, resistance, and survival. This is emphasized by Julien's use of high-fashion aesthetics, where Myrie appears in incongruous attire — a white summer dress — as she traverses the altered Arctic landscape,

transforming the space into an almost surreal runway that parodies racial and climatic determinism. Julien thus mocks and destabilizes the masculinist heroism of the polar exploration era, creating an Arctic that both welcomes and resists the gaze of Henson/Myrie, a complex figure who symbolizes both presence and defiance.

### A Contaminated Sublime

Julien's visual style in *True North* engages with the tradition of the sublime in art and literature, but his Arctic landscapes embody what he terms the "contaminated sublime." Unlike Romantic-era portrayals of a pure, untouched wilderness, Julien's Arctic scenes reveal the trauma and violence embedded in the region's history. The "contaminated sublime" suggests that beauty and terror coexist, a perspective Julien explains as "working with beautiful pictorial images and at the same time trying to portray a kind of trauma within these types of so-called beautiful scenes," disrupting the viewer's sense of aesthetic pleasure with historical unease.<sup>29</sup>

The melting Arctic serves as both a literal and metaphorical symbol of the fragility of the environment and the erasure of marginalized histories from the Arctic's dominant narratives.

Julien's juxtaposition of expansive, majestic shots with haunting portrayals of melting ice recontextualizes the Arctic landscape as a site of both visual allure and historical violence, where traditional heroic narratives of polar exploration dissolve.<sup>30</sup> The grandeur of the Arctic thus becomes "contaminated" by the histories of colonial exclusion, aligning with Anne McClintock's critique of colonial landscapes as marked by "imperial ruins," a term she uses to signal both environmental and historical degradation in spaces of conquest.<sup>31</sup>

As climate change accelerates, Julien's use of the contaminated sublime invites viewers to consider the entangled histories of environmental degradation and colonialism, emphasizing how the Arctic, long depicted as a symbol of purity, has always been a contested site marked by power struggles. By immersing the viewer in this contested space, Julien's work underscores the ongoing violence of historical erasure and the importance of reclaiming suppressed narratives. His contaminated sublime thus functions as both an aesthetic and political strategy, revealing the Arctic as a landscape haunted by histories of racial and environmental injustice and now by the climate crisis. Asked why he combines beautiful, compelling images with marginalized voices in his work, Julien writes:

We tend to think that [for] images to be posing certain political questions, or to be intellectually interesting, they need to somehow not be too aesthetically oriented. In a sense, anti-aesthetic image-making is the normative view made for politically "authentic" content. So, of course, I want to oppose that. And I want to oppose that because I think perhaps it's too easy to exist in this binary; and I want to think about the possibility of making images that can exist aesthetically in a culture that poses difficult questions. I think those images are connected to trying to reclaim desire politically or reclaim images that are more poetic and more associated with the lyrical, or "queering" of the image.<sup>32</sup>

Julien's own reflection on his method provides insight into why he pursues an aesthetic of beauty that also addresses political and social issues, reinforcing the idea of the "contaminated sublime." His point is that he does not give up politics to focus on beauty.

### Environmental and Racial Justice

As climate change accelerates the melting of polar ice caps, the Arctic has become a contested space once again, with nations and corporations vying to reap profits from its resources through projects such as deepwater drilling, mining for rare earth minerals, commercial fishing in newly accessible waters, and the construction of pipelines for oil and natural gas transport. Julien's *True North* offers a prescient commentary on this modern struggle, linking the environmental exploitation of the region to the historical exploitation of Black and Indigenous bodies. The melting ice in the film serves as a powerful metaphor for the erasure of marginalized histories within the dominant narrative of Arctic exploration.

Julien's emphasis on the Arctic's ecological vulnerability highlights how climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, reflecting feminist scholar Laura Pulido's arguments on "environmental racial justice."<sup>33</sup> Pulido posits that environmental degradation often mirrors racial hierarchies, as marginalized communities face greater exposure to ecological harm. In the case of the Arctic, Inuit women activists and writers, such as Sheila Watt-Cloutier, movingly demand "the right to be cold." For her, "[Inuit] rights to life, health, property and a means of subsistence [are] being violated by a dramatically changing climate."<sup>34</sup> Watt-Cloutier as a writer and activist has been instrumental in shaping an environmental justice campaign and has been widely recognized for suggesting that climate change is a matter of both Indigenous and multispecies survival.

The theme of environmental justice within *True North* reflects what Alaimo and Hekman describe as "trans-corporeality," a concept suggesting that human bodies and the natural world are intrinsically linked.<sup>35</sup> This connection is rendered visible through Julien's portrayal of the Arctic not just as a physical landscape in which Indigenous people are no longer able to survive through hunting and fishing and see climate change and environmental neglect as a human rights issue but as a repository of historical trauma, where narratives of racial exclusion intersect with environmental degradation. Through Julien's lens, the Arctic emerges as a complex space where histories of environmental and racial justice converge, urging viewers to consider the Arctic not only as an environmental crisis zone but as a site where suppressed stories must be reclaimed.

### Conclusion: Reimagining the Arctic

Isaac Julien's *True North* is a visually arresting reimagining of Arctic exploration, one that challenges colonial narratives and offers new possibilities for understanding the region's history. Through his innovative use of multi-screen installations, Julien disrupts linear storytelling, forcing the viewer to engage with multiple perspectives and reconsider who belongs in the Arctic and whose stories have been erased. As climate change reshapes the Arctic, Julien's work serves as a reminder that histories of environmental exploitation and racial

9. Isaac Julien, detail from *True North Series*, 2004. Triptych of digital prints on glossy paper, each: 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in. (100 x 100 cm)



injustice are deeply intertwined and that reclaiming these stories is essential for understanding our shared future.

By centering Henson's story through the concept of the contaminated sublime and incorporating feminist and queer aesthetics, Julien reframes the Arctic as a space of both beauty and contested histories. His portrayal challenges the dominant narratives of polar exploration, that contemporary artists and activists are devising, creating what I call the "new polar aesthetics," in my 2022 book *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic*. Like in Julien's work, such critical polar aesthetics reveal the multifaceted nature of aesthetic production, in contrast to work produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Julien's *True North* reorients our understanding of these landscapes as places of complex human interaction and resistance that counter colonial fantasies and histories of an earlier epoch promoting imperial entitlements and unbridled capitalism. As this retrospective exhibition demonstrates, Julien's artwork also reveals a new aesthetic practice that sensitizes us to the unfolding of climate breakdown at the same time it reclaims the Arctic as a space of resistance and possibility, where new histories can be written, and new futures imagined.

