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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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At a time when the United States is renewing its ties to its own imperial past and making peace with itself, it becomes imperative to review certain *gendered* constructions and expressions of its national identity from early twentieth-century popular culture that government officials and the media are seeking to revive today. *Gender on Ice* examines the powerful and continuing cultural investment in the legacy of the so-called discovery of the North Pole in 1909 and the ongoing celebration of “great” white explorers such as Robert Peary as “heroes” of the national culture. This study documents the persistence of this legacy into the present in its examination of a wide range of discourses drawn from popular science magazines, promotional documentaries, science reports, photographs, and novels.

Working within a tradition of cultural studies, deriving a major inspiration from Donna Haraway’s *Primate Visions* and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, *Gender on Ice* takes what might seem a very localized subject and shows how it opens up all the central questions today in cultural studies around gender, nationhood, the politics of imperialism and postimperialism, race and male homosocial behavior, and the social relations of science. The book is also intended to be a contribution to current debates around multiculturalism regarding the definition of what is “American” and who is “American.” Thus, in my focus on Matthew Henson, the black American who accompanied Peary to the so-called North Pole, I critique the forms of nationalism

endorsed by official U.S. histories that systematically exclude men and women of color. My project will add another dimension to this discussion, as there has been relatively little work on examining the relation between national identities, gender, science, U.S. imperialism, and popular culture. This study challenges official definitions and constructions of U.S. national identities as exclusively white and male. My work brings together scholarship in the humanities (ethnic studies, history of photography, literature, and women's studies) and the social sciences (anthropology and history of science); theories of discourse as elaborated by Michel Foucault and Fredric Jameson; studies of travel and colonialism (James Clifford, Peter Hulme, Mary Pratt, Bruce Robbins, Edward Said); theories of nationalisms (Benedict Anderson, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, George Mosse, and Gayatri Spivak); gay and postcolonial studies (Richard Dyer, Kobena Mercer, and Simon Watney), and feminist approaches to gender, homosocial relations, technology, and colonialism (Cynthia Enloe, Donna Haraway, Susan Jeffords, Caren Kaplan, Anne McClintock, Chela Sandoval, Eve Sedgwick, Lynne Segal, and Ella Shohat).

The purpose of the book's project is also to put a feminist analysis to work on U.S. nationalism and colonialism, an area that has only recently taken into account the workings of gender, as in the anthology *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. Although earlier texts such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Homi Bhabha's collection *Nation and Narration* have widened the field of discourse on nationalism in the past decade, what is absent from their theory is an understanding of the way that nationalist events are tied to broader questions of gender. The book makes an intervention by foregrounding these connections in the way that it links the imperial gesture of polar exploration to questions of gender and ties these issues to models of masculinity as well as race.

What follows is a case study rather than a highly theoretical work on the subject of gender and U.S. colonial discourse. Colonial discourse here refers generally to the rhetorical strategies used to manage and control popular scientific knowledges in the course of U.S. expansion and domination. This approach puts emphasis on the ways in which early-twentieth-century discourses are reworked in the context of late-twentieth-century politics. Though the scope of the book is historical, it might prove a disconcerting study for U.S.

historians, for it is written within a tradition of cultural studies that takes as its starting point the political concerns set by the present. It also reverses the trend of traditional history: it deals with gender and race and takes popular culture seriously as its subject of analysis. It is worth pointing out that neither the popular cultural texts nor the literary ones cited in the Introduction are meant to be read as historical or "literary" in a simple sense. They are included as moments of a developing national *colonial discourse*, which I will argue was actually symptomatic of the main trends of U.S. imperialism during the early twentieth century. The study critiques how the North Pole's literal emptiness made polar exploration *appear* in the dominant media as an intrinsically pure field of knowledge rather than as a form of colonial discourse. For example, what was repressed from most media accounts was how the Inuit (Eskimo) people who resided in a nearby region were exploited by polar explorer Robert Peary, who coerced entire Inuit villages to work for him by controlling their trade. The strategies Peary employed to keep the Inuits under his supervision were fairly common colonial strategies, even though they were neither authorized by the U.S. government nor accompanied by a U.S. colonial administration.

The virtual absence of contemporary Inuit accounts has made me more or less exclusively dependent on the very U.S. texts that constitute the discourse of colonialism. Therefore the burden falls upon the rhetorical tools available for critiquing this limited choice of texts. This is very briefly the book's project and focus. Some of the issues that arise from this description are pursued further in the Introduction.

The disregard for the conventional boundaries of disciplinary practices has made me indebted to the advice of both published scholarship and the help of colleagues and friends working in cultural studies.

I am especially grateful for the intellectual guidance and support given by James Clifford. My special thanks to Donna Haraway, who made me attentive to the workings of popular science as well as to the complexity of gender and race relations operating in these texts. Also, I would like to thank Hayden White for working with me over the years and sharing his knowledge.

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## Introduction

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### **A Passion for Blankness: U.S. and British Polar Discourse**

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In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, while writing about Africa, brings in an unexpected reference to the North Pole:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that way) I would put my finger on it and say, "When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember."<sup>1</sup>

As long as the North Pole remained imperfectly charted and still remote from the knowledge of the West it had a romantic appeal, by the very fact of its blankness on a map. On Marlow's childhood map blankness suspends all the ordinary information that usually makes up geographical space and invites him to reinscribe divisions between nations. It is as if the adult Marlow imagines himself a child with a box of crayons, able to color in the map any way he likes. When it comes to coloring in the blank parts, he will not be subject to the disapproval that any child would hear whose crayon wandered past the edge of France into Germany, or who wanted to divide Poland by coloring it half green and half blue. If he was forbidden to color in the known parts in any way he chose, he was permitted to do what he liked with the blank spaces, which were all brought together to the same plane of representation. The very blankness of these