

# Woman against a Background of White: The Representation of Self and Nature in Women's Arctic Narratives

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The polar regions, perhaps the most alien and hostile of natural environments on earth, aroused great popular interest during the nineteenth century. Even though by mid-century it became clear that the Arctic would not offer the fortune earlier explorers had hoped for, explorers continued to pit their ships and their bodies against the brutal conditions of Arctic cold and darkness in attempts to complete the Northwest Passage and to reach the North Pole. The accounts of these voyages were a highly popular form of literature throughout the nineteenth century, a form that has only recently been rediscovered and submitted to literary study. Typical of this literature is a peculiar mix of hardy adventure and exuberant national pride: explorers imagined their quests as demonstrations of national power; they claimed the lands they discovered for their countries and often named them after their wealthy patrons; and they prided themselves on maintaining their national identities—on not “going native.” Because of the physical duress involved in the conquest of the Arctic and because exploring was regarded as the *conquest* of virgin territory, nature in the far north was perceived by Americans and Europeans as a particularly masculine arena.

By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, however, white American women were beginning to encroach upon this territory of the masculine imagination and to propose variations on this masculine construction of nature in the Arctic. As they moved North, to work as missionaries, teachers, and journalists and to accompany husbands who were military men and government officials, American women recorded their experiences in letters, diaries, and travel books—some published in their time, others published only recently.<sup>1</sup> In this

paper I will focus on two narratives by women who visited the Arctic: the journals and letters written by Libby Beaman from the Pribilof Islands in 1879-1880, recently edited and published by her granddaughter, Betty John;<sup>2</sup> and *My Arctic Journal* by Josephine Peary, published within a year of her first journey to Greenland in 1891-92 with her husband, the polar explorer Robert Peary.<sup>3</sup> These narratives of women's encounters with man and nature in the Arctic raise questions of how women could find a place in a construction of nature already dominated by masculine images and male authority, and of the extent to which these women could construct and maintain their own sense of the extraordinary natural world they encountered. In these two particular narratives, the question of autonomy is not merely a question of imagination or of descriptive strategies. Both texts, like other kinds of private narratives that make their way into publication, show the effects of heavy editing and self-censoring, so that in some sense the texts themselves reflect their writers' struggle to find and articulate a position.

Critics have lately been paying considerable critical attention to various kinds of travel and exploration writing, and this study will draw particularly on analyses of pioneer narratives because the situations and responses of women explorers were often similar to those of pioneers. Separated from homes and family, these women faced demanding travel and endured harsh and primitive conditions in an environment that often seemed hostile. Like the Western immigrants, women in the North wrote at least in part from what Lillian Schlissel describes as an awareness that what they were doing was of historical significance: because they expected their diaries to be read by families and often by neighbors as well, they included in them little that would not bear public scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> Josephine Peary's *Journal* is clearly a public narrative, published soon after the return of the expedition. Libby Beaman wrote both this kind of semi-public letter and a private journal (when she believed she might die in the winter, she revealed her intention to burn her diary, which contained the material she did not want made public). Despite similarities to pioneer narratives, however, narratives of Arctic exploration offer a considerably more simple construction of wilderness. This is because the economic and military motives for exploring the far north were not alloyed with the ambition to live there—to make it home. Explorers in the Arctic were looking for trade routes, they were seeking fame through discoveries, they were scouting for resources; but even those who spent years of their adult lives in the North did not conceive of it as a place to stay.

Annette Kolodny has argued that male writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries infused the American wilderness with the "fantasy of erotic discovery and possession."<sup>5</sup> Kolodny argues that while men described the American wilderness both as virgin territory awaiting ravishment and as the mother of heroic men, women pioneers provided alternative readings of the wilderness: first with the captivity narrative, which inscribed the hostility—the "otherness" of the wilderness and its Native American inhabitants; and later with

the image of the garden, which evoked the transformation of the landscape from wilderness to home.<sup>6</sup>

Like women immigrants to the American West, women in the Arctic wrote about facing physical hardship, separation from families and friends, and a natural environment over which they seemed to have no control. But for men and women both, the experience of the Arctic had at least one critical difference from the experience of the frontier. The Arctic was truly a wilderness, not a frontier in Frederick Jackson Turner's sense that the American frontier "lies at the hither edge of free land" and serves as "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization."<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the explorers was to reach and map new territory and to survive, not to settle and tame a new land, and so they did not need to "sell" the landscape or "civilize" the culture. Their narratives reflect this difference.

Furthermore, even when the Western frontier was closed, as Turner announced in the 1890's, the Arctic still beckoned—as it does yet today—as a scene for adventurous exploits. For the men exploring the Arctic, the North, cold and inhospitable, was no virgin who when ravished could yield a lush fertility; instead it was an ice maiden who had to be forced to yield any livelihood, and who lay in wait to destroy men with the painful and degrading tortures of cold and starvation.

The adversities of Arctic exploration were widely reported in newspapers and magazines, and the very difficulty of the obstacles made the men who faced them heroes. The journal of Lieutenant James Lockwood, for instance, who died in 1884 on the Greely expedition, makes no effort to temper the horror of his ordeal: "Cold, dampness, darkness, and hunger are our portion every day and all day." Death and dehumanization were always at hand, he writes: "Occupied some time this morning in scraping, like a dog, in the place where the moulded dog-biscuits were emptied. Found a few crumbs of small pieces, and ate mould and all."<sup>8</sup> The harshness of the environment only increased the heroism of the men who explored it. Thus, white explorers did not envision the North as a mother; instead, it was a fierce opponent against whom only expeditions—groups of men held together by male bonding and national traditions—could prevail.

Even Robert Peary, proponent of the idea that the Arctic could sustain expeditions if they remained small and adopted native Inuit methods and materials, clearly portrays the brutality of the land when he writes:

I wonder if any of my readers have experienced the sensation of tramping steadily for days and weeks apparently towards nothing? Is there a spot in the Sahara so utterly desolate, so void of every element of hopefulness in its surroundings, as that great plateau over which we were now to drag our wearied steps for a fortnight, with damp and clinging snow under our feet, and a thick, frozen fog choking us and hanging to our garments in milk-white frost-crystals? There was no oasis to

which we could bend our steps, and there recruit our courage and strength for further toil over the arctic waste.<sup>9</sup>

The only milk here chokes and chills, and there is no place of rest. Such a landscape, devoid of hope, beauty, and emotional sustenance, is pictured as lacking precisely those qualities that nineteenth century women were supposed to have. The Arctic as depicted by most explorers is a land devoid of feminine qualities.

Women writing narratives about Arctic experiences, then, faced the problem of how to portray themselves in such a landscape. Furthermore, this problem involved some touchy issues of gender roles because exploring—unlike pioneering—was simply not “women’s work”; it neither allowed for “home-making,” nor offered a community of shared female experience. The narratives of expedition leaders like Elisha Kent Kane, Adolphus Greely, and Robert Peary display the hearty exuberance of writings produced from the privileged position of men who were or expected to be accepted as representatives of their nations and cultures.<sup>10</sup> Robert Peary, for example, exults that “during seven years I have strained every energy, and devoted every dollar I possessed to my Arctic efforts, and during more than half that time I have kept the Stars and Stripes waving within the Arctic Circle.”<sup>11</sup> The narratives written by Josephine Peary and Libby Beaman, on the other hand, face the additional problem of explaining why they were there at all. Women were included not so that they could stake a claim on a permanent homestead, make the wilderness into a home, or keep the flag waving; they were there simply to provide comfort and company for the men they accompanied.

Robert Peary made his sense of women’s role in the North absolutely clear in this private journal entry written well before the expedition:

The whole history of attempts at colonization under circumstances of hardships and strange and untried dangers shows that though the result *may* be failure with women, it is *sure* to be without them. It is asking too much of masculine human nature to expect it to remain in an Arctic climate enduring constant hardship, without *one* relieving feature.<sup>12</sup>

Although she is silent on this point, it must have been clear to Josephine Peary that native women could provide such “comfort” as well as she could. Inuit women could and did sew for, cook for, and have sexual relationships with the explorers. And if Inuit women could not make a conventional American “home” in the wilderness, neither could she. Since women like Beaman and Peary had travelled to the North to satisfy the needs of their husbands, but were excluded from their conventional role of home-making, their position could seem—to others and to themselves—more like that of prostitutes than of wives. To be the sole American

lady in a social melange of single American men, native families, and not-always-clandestine relationships between American men and native women could have been easy for neither Peary nor Beaman.

Their narratives show their need not only to justify their encroachment on a masculine landscape, but also to identify an acceptable social role once they were situated there (a complicated variation of the problem that women faced in remaining ladies in the wilderness described by Kolodny).<sup>13</sup> Josephine Peary became the “lady” of the entire camp: she cooked for “the boys,” whom she sometimes called “my family,” and arranged dinner parties for birthdays and special occasions. Unexpectedly freed from housekeeping and cooking responsibilities, and faced with her husband’s fear of “sharing” her with the men in any way, Libby Beaman made plans to serve daily tea and to invite the native women to join her.

Finding a role was particularly important because, unlike pioneer women, who, Lillian Schlissel suspects, “judged the heroic adventure of their men as some kind of outrageous folly thrust upon them by obedience to patriarchal ritual,” women in the Arctic could hardly complain about the physical privations or social isolation they faced, since they were not supposed to be there in the first place.<sup>14</sup> As Libby Beaman realized on her first day on St. Paul Island: “*It is up to me to make the best of everything and to do so with good grace. We will never survive the two years and keep our sanity unless I do*” (her italics, 73). Instead of complaining, they try very hard to establish the normalcy of their adventures and to put a good face on their trials.

I have chosen to look at these two particular narratives because they suggest poles of response to this problem of finding and articulating a role in a strange and hostile wilderness: Beaman’s narrative offers a private view more akin to a pioneer narrative while Peary’s offers a woman’s version of an exploration narrative. Josephine Peary’s public journal clearly fits into the well-established genre of exploration narratives because she places herself in the same relation to nature already enjoyed by men. The narratives of such expedition leaders as Adolphus Greely, Elisha Kent Kane, and Robert Peary emphasize the effort to conquer natural hazards and to overcome natural barriers, activities depicted through metaphors of athletics, sport, and war. In these narratives, nature is represented as the provider of challenges and dangers to be endured and conquered. In overcoming these natural obstacles, the explorers bond together as men and identify themselves as heroes, often the best of their national kind, the embodiments of national virtues. Adolphus Greely, for example, repeatedly extols the loyalty, energy, and pluck of his men, even in the terrible privation of wintering in the Arctic without adequate food or shelter.<sup>15</sup> The bitter cold and rugged terrain of the Arctic provide explorers with opportunities to prove their leadership, manhood, and ability. Josephine Peary’s *Journal* offers a woman’s version of this conventionally masculine model; her experiences in the Arctic also offer her the challenges and confrontations that foster personal growth, although

she clearly demonstrates that her adventures did not diminish her position as a nineteenth-century lady.

Peary's *Journal*, in short, maintains the usual conventions of the exploration narrative but minimizes the dangers and hardships of the expedition.<sup>16</sup> Expedition journals were public documents, not private diaries, and explorers used them to explain and justify their actions and decisions as well as to record the details of their trips. Such journals, edited and adopted, provided the format for published exploration narratives, which were read both by the general public and by other explorers, and which were often carried in the travelling libraries of subsequent expeditions for purposes of information and comparison. By the end of the nineteenth century, as publically financed explorations gave way to private ventures like Robert Peary's, these narratives served not only to record finished journeys for posterity, but also to raise money for expeditions still in progress and to seek out potential backers for the next one. Thus, expedition leaders like Robert Peary not only shaped their own accounts of their expeditions, but also obtained by contract control over all writing by participants.<sup>17</sup> In writing the narrative for her husband, whose own account of this expedition appeared when he published *Northward over the "Great Ice"* in 1898, Josephine Peary stays well within the norms of the genre.<sup>18</sup> She starts with the conventional plot of such narratives—will the expedition be successful?—and adds her own story—will the lady survive and prosper in the Arctic?

The answer to both questions must, of course, be yes, and she shapes her narrative accordingly, describing what enhances the success and prosperity of the expedition, and leaving out what would be "inappropriate" in such a publication. There was, for instance, considerable tension among the explorers on the Peary expedition, particularly an escalating enmity between the Pearys and John Verhoeff, an expedition member who perished shortly before its return.<sup>19</sup> But such personal animosity has no place in an expedition narrative, the "official" story of the expedition, and Peary leaves it out. Whether or not Robert Peary exercised overt control over the story, Josephine Peary's representation of the expedition is colored by her privileged place on the expedition and by the exigencies of the leadership position she shared with her husband. Her descriptions of the beauty of the flowers, the abundance of the oceans, and the health and happiness of the native inhabitants serve both to support her husband's view of the Arctic as a land of plenty for those who knew how to tap it, and to justify her presence in it. The expedition house is "comfortable," the weather is often "fine," and "If some of our dear ones at home could look down upon us now they would be surprised to find how comfortable and contented we are" (85). Representing herself as her husband sees her, as a plucky but conventional American lady, Josephine Peary constructs her landscape from picturesque vistas and homely interiors, and her tone and attitude stress the normalcy and safety of the expedition and how well she fit into it. So hospitable an environment was the Arctic that she returned the following winter to give birth to her first child there—the obverse of Libby Beaman's flight from the Arctic when she learned she was pregnant.

Libby Beaman, on the other hand, writing a private narrative free from the constraints of public performance, was not obligated to demonstrate her husband's success, but needed only address the question of her own survival. Thus, her account has more in common with the pioneer narrative than the exploration narrative. Like many of the diarists of the westward expansion, she documented disasters that were not overcome and tensions that were not resolved—she could and did complain, on paper at least. Libby Beaman's journal has a fundamentally different purpose than Josephine Peary's, and because she was not writing for publication, she had the freedom to question the value of the seal killing that was the purpose of the outpost on which she wintered. She was also free to emphasize the tensions and strains that ensued from her presence as the only white woman on a sealing outpost inhabited by white men and Aleut families. Unable to find a position other than as a "relieving feature" for her husband, she ultimately rejected both the seal-hunting and her own decision to accompany her husband North.

Although the genre in which Beaman was writing offered her this room for complaint, it too is a constructed and corrupted text. Beaman's experience is filtered both through her own self-censorship and through the heavy editing of the granddaughter who prepared it for publication. In the preface, Betty John, her granddaughter and editor, admits:

... when I finally inherited her sketches and journal, many of Libby's sketches and even some pages of her journal had disappeared.

In Libby's book, therefore, I've had to fill in some gaps by conjuring up memories of the stories she told me and by doing research into her times. Her story, nonetheless, is the true tale of a very real woman who braved the hazards of the Bering Sea and life on our country's most remote outpost. (x)

Since the text was published without scholarly apparatus, it is impossible to know how accurately Beaman's written words, much less her oral stories, have been transcribed. It would be tempting to dismiss *Libby* as mere fiction, but there is, I think, some reason to trust the editor in augmenting the written text with the oral history. Considerable evidence suggests that nineteenth century women censored even their "private" writing; it was simply not appropriate for nineteenth century women to discuss sexual matters on paper, at least in part because letters and even journals were often expected to have at least a semi-public reading. There is, however, evidence that they discussed "such things," perhaps in hushed tones, among other women.<sup>20</sup> The memories of these stories told among the women may be one of the few windows we have into this discourse. Thus, although the version that is transmitted to us may be suspect as an authoritative text, it is the only version we have of this experience.

Indeed, it is tempting to dismiss both of these texts because of the meddling of outsiders; neither offers the completely unmediated experience of the writer. We must maintain a certain skepticism about the heroism that Robert and Josephine Peary attribute to each other and the harmony they describe in their camp. Similarly, we must remain skeptical about Libby Beaman's depiction of the melodramatic relationship between John Beaman and his Senior Agent and about her perceptions of the sexually-charged atmosphere of the sealing camp. But this skepticism should not entirely thwart our reading of these texts. Contemporary criticism suggests that all texts are mediated, and it is widely known that many exploration narratives in particular have been edited and adapted by others—wives, expedition leaders, ghost-writers—either before or after the death of the journal-keeper. Taking a kind of middle ground, we should be able to read these texts, albeit cautiously, for the insight they offer into the evolving relationships among man, woman, and nature at the end of the nineteenth century.

Josephine Peary's *My Arctic Journal* describes her experiences during the winter of 1892, which she passed with her husband and five other men in a hut on McCormick Bay, in Greenland, half way between the Arctic Circle and the North Pole. It is not to herself or her family that Peary must justify her presence in Greenland in this narrative, but to a public reeling from a series of disastrous Arctic explorations, including the recent Greely expedition to Lady Franklin Bay, which had ended in 1884 at nearby Cape Sabine with nineteen out of twenty-five men dead and with well-publicized charges of cannibalism. An essential element of this justification is Robert Peary's preface to the *Journal*, which ratifies his wife's account of the expedition. He justifies her accompanying him on the twin grounds of her "desire to be by my side" and his "conviction that she was fitted physically as well as otherwise to share with me a portion at least of the fatigues and hardships of the work" (3). Because he legitimates her role as helpmate, her heroic acts become part of her wifely duties—not unwomanly aberrations. But his ultimate justification of her presence, his wife's "pluck" notwithstanding, is that thanks to *his* improvements in Arctic methods, her spending a year in the Arctic was no longer unthinkable. Peary draws our attention to the fact that "this tenderly nurtured woman lived for a year in safety and comfort" (5) less than eighty miles from where such other explorers as Kane, Greely, and Isaac Israel Hayes—all of whom Peary mentions by name—suffered or perished. Her very presence on this expedition seems like a rhetorical move, offering physical testimony to her husband's confidence in the safety of polar work as he conceived of and directed it.

Josephine Peary's place on the expedition was not, however, merely ornamental. She gained a greater role on the expedition than she had expected because Robert Peary broke his leg in a freak accident en route to Greenland. With her husband immobilized, Josephine Peary became not only his nurse, but also his eyes and ears, allowing him to continue functioning as leader of the expedition.



His disability left her with such real responsibilities as selecting the site of the hut and overseeing the unloading and storage of supplies. Later, she supervised the native women who were preparing fur clothing and bedding for her husband's spring push North. Because she had these opportunities to wield authority among the men and because she shared some of their experiences exploring and hunting, she could feel herself to be a member of the expedition and could share in its success. Thus, as she takes a final look at the expedition hut, she reflects:

Could the walls talk they would tell of some very pleasant hours spent there by the members of the North Greenland Expedition of 1891-92, and of many months of real solid comfort and happiness enjoyed by the woman who, when she left home and friends, was told over and over again that she must expect to endure all kinds of hardships, to suffer agony from that dreaded Arctic enemy, scurvy, etc. (204).

Josephine Peary's *Journal* not only documents her adventures and domestic arrangements but also records her increasing confidence in her own judgment. Her growing self-confidence and self-reliance and the increasing strength of her voice make Josephine Peary's *Arctic Journal* resemble a *Bildungsroman*. Perhaps the high point of her growth in independence is her decision to await her husband's return from his expedition North, even if it meant remaining after the departure of the relief ship and thus spending another year in the Arctic. "It will go hard to remain," she observes dispassionately, without the comforts of home and friends, but she can do it. "As for cold, hardship, and hunger, that is nonsense. Of course, if I feel so inclined, I can go out and sit on an iceberg until I freeze to it, and let the wind and snow beat upon me, even starve myself; but my tastes do not run in that direction" (178). The nature that she envisions by the end of her *Journal* is not terrifying, for she has seen its potential to sustain as well as to destroy, and it has provided her an opportunity to grow more confident in her mental and physical capacities.

But although Josephine Peary found a place on the expedition, her account scarcely deviates from the conventional male representation of the North through a "man against nature" narrative. Like the men she accompanied, Josephine Peary saw nature through the eyes of an explorer and a hunter. This can be seen most clearly when she depicts her participation in a fight with a herd of walrus soon after her arrival in the Arctic. In relating this encounter, Peary shows that she feels entitled to her Arctic adventure and fully capable of playing her part. Excitement and involvement dominate her description, and she conveys the sheer exhilaration of battling with forces of nature as he writes:

There were at least two hundred and fifty [walrus] around us at one time, and it seemed as if it would be impossible to keep the

animals from attacking us; but by steady firing we managed to hold them at oar's length. This kept me busy reloading the rifles. I thought it about an even chance whether I would be shot or drowned.

I cannot describe my feelings when these monsters surrounded us, their great tusks almost touching the boat, and the bullets whistling about my ears in every direction. Whenever a volley of shots greeted them, the whole bunch jumped into the air and then plunged under water, leaving us in doubt as to where they would reappear. If they should happen to come up under the boat, we should probably be the ones to take the plunge; this uncertainty was very exciting, especially as the brutes went down and came up in bunches, leaving us seventy-five or a hundred to fight while the rest plunged. (58)

Josephine Peary both demonstrated and reinforced her place in the expedition community by joining in its battle against the walrus. But although in this scene we can see how well Peary fits into the expedition, we can also see her reiterating a well-established narrative pattern: the old story of men exerting their dominance over nature, with Josephine Peary allowed to be "one of the boys." This is one of the scenes that Robert Peary singles out in his preface as arousing in him "a thrill of pride and admiration for her pluck" (5). In his own account of the assault on the walrus in *Northward over the "Great Ice,"* he calls walrus hunting "sport,"<sup>21</sup> reinforcing the sense of the expedition as a men's game. Even in Josephine Peary's version, the male-dominated discourse of conflict and domination prevails, although it is voiced by a woman.

Like Josephine Peary, Libby Beaman faced the need to justify her presence in the North and to articulate her experience of finding a place there. For Libby Beaman, these issues were more problematical, at least in part because her husband did not have the same authority as Robert Peary to ensure his wife's place. At the same time, her journal, as a private narrative, is better situated than Peary's to focus on her personal feelings and on her perception of conflict and dissonance. It is, indeed, possible that we owe at least some of the candor of her account to the editing of her granddaughter, who would not have been as constrained as Libby Beaman by the nineteenth century expectations that women should not be self-centered or self-engaged and that they should be silent on matters of sexuality.<sup>22</sup> Beaman does not resolve the issue of justifying her presence in the Pribilofs, an issue operating from the beginning of her journal, as easily as Peary resolved it. Unlike Peary, who was instrumental in supporting her husband's theory about the bounty of the Arctic and who was given definite responsibilities on the expedition, Beaman could justify her presence only by appeals to her character, her motivation, and her family connections. Her journal begins with the representation of a thoroughly respectable young lady of good

family, who had been faithful to the man she loved throughout a ten-year secret courtship and several post-marital separations. Unwilling to endure yet another separation, she justified her travels literally from the top: she called at the White House to solicit from President Rutherford B. Hayes, an old family friend, permission to accompany her husband to his post as Assistant to the Senior Revenue Agent in the Pribilof Islands, north of the Aleutians.

Despite her receiving permission from the President, the story that dominates Beaman's narrative is the continual opposition to her presence by the islands' Senior Revenue Agent. She quotes him as saying that the life was so rough, the accommodations so small and cramped and primitive, and the work—supervising the slaughter of vast quantities of seals—so “bestial” that “no lone white woman should ever be permitted on the islands” (58). She attributes his hostility to his sense that a white American woman would upset the order that the men had constructed in this world; his hostility is “his self-defense against me, not as Elizabeth Beaman, but against me as a woman coming into his exclusively male world” (58-59). Libby Beaman tells a story of continual struggle; she did not win his acceptance of her presence on the island, nor did she cease to feel that she was encroaching on alien land.

Much of the account documents her search for a role on the island. The indigenous population of the island lived in a culture that combined Aleut beliefs and practices with those of the Russians who had owned the islands for the previous hundred years. The men of the sealing company belonged to that nineteenth century American culture to which Libby Beaman had always belonged and whose values and beliefs she shared. That culture, which clearly distinguished men's and women's “spheres,” offered her few possible roles on the island outpost, and none was satisfactory. Despite her attempts to assume the roles of hostess, nurse, and school teacher, her diary reflects her consciousness that she remained always an outsider. She felt particularly a failure as a schoolteacher: her Aleut pupils attended school only when they had nothing better to do, and she brooded about their lack of interest in what she had to teach them. She writes, “I've tried to think up other ways to capture their attention and their interest long enough to teach them something, anything, to justify my salary and to justify the company's faith in me. Nothing works” (175). Libby Beaman shared neither their religion—Russian Orthodox—nor their habits, and she knew full well that “they could teach me more about the wildlife here than I could begin to teach them” (174-75). She could take the role neither of an American man nor of an indigenous Aleut woman, and there was indeed no place for an American lady at that place and time.

As the only white woman at the base and as a woman whose sole purpose on the island was as a companion for her husband, it seems almost inevitable that her presence would be construed sexually and that she would be aware of the sexual construction that was made of her presence. Indeed, even before they reached the

island, this awareness dominated the Senior Agent's concern for dividing the house they were to share:

“Oh, we'll manage to get the house patched up to suit Mr. Beaman. He seems to think he is going to have to share you with me,” he said in a coldly dispassionate way but in a tone that implied (I am sure it implied) share me in everything! I blushed. I could not hide the blush or my confusion. (60)

Although as a well-connected American lady she was probably not subjected to comments more overtly suggestive than this, her diary indicates her awareness of the sexually charged implications of her presence on the island. Reluctant to disturb the men's “privacy as gentlemen” (85), she monitored her actions carefully; for instance, when dancing began after a dinner party, she sat out the mazurkas: “I wished to preserve my dignity but felt like a prude for doing so. But what alternative do I have? If I had romped through a mazurka, I would have been exhibiting an abandon that might lead to anything” (163). When one of the company men commented on her discouragement about the school, she saw how carefully her actions were monitored: He told her “Every breath you draw is subject for conversation. It's a rare experience to have one of our own women come to live among us” (175-76).

Her presence created an unrelenting hostility between her husband and the Senior Agent based on what she immediately recognized to be her husband's jealousy and the Senior Agent's physical attraction to her. Aware of the potential problems involved in living in such close proximity to so many men, she had not even the comfort of a home of her own: In addition to sharing a house with the Senior Agent, in which she felt as if the walls “have ears” (87), she and her husband dined at the company lodge, where even the well-intentioned efforts of the men to show respect for her as a lady reinforced their—and her—consciousness of her gender. Although she was the local representative of the American lady, it was obvious that she had little function other than as her husband's sexual partner. It is the very “unspeakableness” of her situation—and the ways in which some of those silences were broken—that makes her experience so noteworthy.

The oppressiveness of this social milieu was extended to the natural landscape. Libby Beaman continually tried to imagine the island as an inviting and hospitable landscape, and she could find a little raw material for her imagination to work with in the light on the sand dunes and the flowers of the summer. But the vision that dominates her narrative is a hostile natural environment in which killing seals and collecting taxes on their pelts was the purpose of the American presence. Libby Beaman soon learned that she was not entitled to any unmediated or unchaperoned experience of nature. In a scene that offers an uncanny parallel with Josephine Peary's encounter with the walrus herd, Beaman demonstrates not entitlement and belonging, but the extent to which she was forced to retreat from

and reject her own experience of nature. Her most profound moment of connection with nature was immediately undermined and reconstructed by the sexual and racial interpretations the Senior Agent brought to it. During her husband's first overnight absence from the island, Beaman ventured on a solitary walk to the seal rookeries, where she was entranced with the spectacle of seals mating—a sight from which she had been previously “spared” by the men on the island:

They fondled each other more and more excitedly. The expressions in their eyes were all too human expressions of passion and desire. I could not help myself. I had to watch, with not even a scientist's impersonal interest or an artist's justification, but with frank curiosity and a sense of personal involvement. (134)

To her horror, after watching this consummation, she found herself face to face with the Senior Agent, who mockingly observed, “Interesting, isn't it, Elizabeth?” (134).

He had caught her in a moment of connection with these natural creatures, probably in a state of sexual excitement, and her pure and spontaneous engagement with nature gave way to embarrassment. She was further estranged from her immediate experience when the Senior Agent explained that he had followed her to protect her from two Aleut workers, missing from work and suspected to be dangerous. Embarrassment at the pleasure she had taken in the sexual encounter of the seals gave way to fear of rape—the fear that rests at the edges of many colonial narratives—and to shame that she had ventured alone into the landscape. She falls back into the conviction that she has no right to this experience of nature—and recognizes that she is tolerated only as long as she makes no claims upon the operant construction or on the men who exert their authority over it. Her response to the lightning storm that broke out as she stumbled home from this encounter shows that she has learned her lesson: “Lightning illuminated the peak, which looked like a finger of God pointing a warning to all those who would break the rules” (135).

By the following spring, having endured over seven weeks icebound by winter storms, having suffered from scurvy, having learned that she was pregnant, and having seen the hostility between her husband and the Senior Agent break out into open warfare, she retreated from the Pribilofs, feeling that she was required to leave not just by the social milieu and the natural environment, but also by “human nature.” She writes:

We will be leaving these islands soon—never, I am sure, to come back. These have not been entirely lost months of our lives. We have learned much of human nature along with all we've learned about a strange part of the world. . . .

If I have learned anything of great worth to take with me out of this cold and miserable ice-locked world, it is that I would not have done otherwise but go through all the hardship, terror, and unhappiness again to have had this much time to know my husband. I no longer shall be so rebellious against the everyday strictures placed about my sex. We can throw them off only gradually and not all at once, as I should have liked to do. They become insignificant before the great truth that we were created first to bear children, and only after that do we take our places in the affairs of the world. It is worth rebelling occasionally, perhaps, to learn this truth. (216-217)

Libby Beaman embraced this patriarchal construction of human nature and of the meaning of her experience, even as she earlier accepted the Senior Agent's reconstruction of her visit to the seal rookery. Like many of the heroines of captivity narratives, to which she might very well be compared, Beaman found no place for herself in the landscape to which she had travelled, and she defined her experience in a way that ratified the claims of the culture that she had left. But this ultimate renunciation does not completely obliterate the self-confident and precedent-breaking Libby with which the book opened. Despite her conscious rejection of her attempt to "rebel" against the conventional restraints on women, the residual energy of that rebellion is what makes the text worth reading a century later.

Both Josephine Peary and Libby Beaman faced a natural wilderness that had been for generations imagined almost solely in terms of what men could discover in it and take from it, and both women left their own imprint on how it was described. In writing their experiences, they were attempting to enter a discourse dominated by the story of man fighting nature, assaulting the landscape, and overcoming the environment. Trying to find stories suitable to their own experiences, they told of enduring and surviving rather than of struggling, and they described expeditions as social milieux rather than athletic events. It was, however, a firmly-entrenched view of nature in which they were trying to find room, and their success was at best limited.

There was little place for women in the construction of nature that dominated exploration narratives, and it is hardly surprising that women were not entirely successful in establishing an alternative vision of nature in the Arctic—or even that they could not always see the possibility of an alternative vision. Their very presence in the North violated the expectations of American culture about the proper roles and natural capacities of women, and necessitated attempts to explain and justify their encroachment onto this masculine terrain. In the face of this very masculine construction of the Arctic, however, the narratives of both Peary and Beaman articulate some possible alternatives. Josephine Peary, in trying to support her husband's work, shows that women as well as men could find inner

strength in the North, a strength that she would need as the long-distance wife of a life-long explorer. Her *Journal* inscribes not only an Arctic that can sustain human life, but also a woman who could endure and flourish in the Arctic environment. Libby Beaman's narrative, on the other hand, opens a private dialogue with the masculine exploitation of the Arctic, suggesting the possibility that the Arctic could be a place of generation as well as of death, a place more properly imaged by the mating than by the killing of seals.

## Notes

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1. Polar exploration narratives were, in my estimation, a recognizable genre of nineteenth century popular nonfiction. Women's accounts of encounters with the North, with the exception of Josephine Peary's, seldom fit into that genre, because exploration was seldom an option for women at that time. As women began to move into the North, particularly after the American acquisition of Alaska in 1867, they began to re-imagine the North in genres that were more available to women, such as letters, journals, travel narratives, missionary narratives, and other accounts of their experiences. Accounts by Army officers' wives include Emily McCorkle Fitzgerald, *An Army Officer's Wife on the Frontier: The Letters of Emily McCorkle Fitzgerald from Alaska and the Far West, 1874-78* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1986.) Missionary accounts include Julia McNair Wright, *Among the Alaskans* (Philadelphia, 1883); and Eva McClintock, ed., *Life in Alaska: Letters of Mrs. Eugene S. Willard* (Philadelphia, 1884). Other women's narratives of travel to the North include Luella Day, *The Tragedy of the Klondike* (New York, 1906); Ella Higginson, *Alaska, The Great Country* (New York, 1908); Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North: An Account of a Woman's 1908 Journey through Canada to the Arctic*, 1909, ed. David Richeson (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1986); and May Wynne Lamb, *Life in Alaska: The Reminiscences of a Kansas Woman, 1916-1919*, ed. Dorothy W. Zimmerman (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1988).

2. Libby Beaman, *Libby: The Alaskan Diaries and Letters of Libby Beaman, as Presented by Her Granddaughter, Betty John* (Boston, 1989). All quotes from this text will be located by page number within my text.

3. Josephine Diebitsch Peary, *My Arctic Journal: A Year Among Ice-Fields and Eskimos* (New York, 1893). All quotes from this text will be located by page number within my text.

4. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York, 1982), 11, 15.

5. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1984), 4.

6. Kolodny, 33-34, 53-54.

7. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 3-4.

8. Adolphus W. Greely, *Three Years of Arctic Service: An Account of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition of 1881-84 and the Attainment of the Farthest North* (New York, 1894), 560-61.

9. Robert Peary, *Northward over the "Great Ice": A Narrative of Life and Work along the Shores and upon the Interior Ice-Cap of Northern Greenland in the Years 1886 and 1891-1897*, 2 vols. (New York, 1898), vol. 1, 366.

10. In addition to the works by Greely and Peary noted above, see also, for instance, Elisha Kent Kane, *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin: A Personal Narrative* (New York, 1854) and *Arctic Explorations: The Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853, 54, 55*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1856); and Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 Under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* (New York, 1910). For bibliographies of expedition narratives see Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909* (New York, 1988) and Alan Edwin Day, *Search for the Northwest Passage: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1986).

11. Peary, *Northward*, lviii.

12. Wally Herbert, *The Noose of Laurels: Robert E. Peary and the Race to the North Pole* (New York, 1989), 62.
13. Kolodny, 60-62.
14. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*, 15.
15. Greely, 718-19 and *passim*.
16. Josephine Peary did not participate in the most difficult part of the expedition, which was the Spring push toward the Pole by her husband and a few of his men.
17. Herbert, 63.
18. Robert Peary wrote the preface to *My Arctic Journal* and also appended a twenty-page description of his Northward expedition entitled "The Great White Journey: From McCormick Bay to the Northern Shore of Greenland and Return" under his own name.
19. Herbert, 84, 88, 97-98.
20. See, for example, Elizabeth Hamsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women 1880-1910* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1982), which discusses how women distinguished public from private elements of their letters. In my own research on a different project, a study of Elizabeth Agassiz's *A Journey in Brazil* (1868), I have found that in the manuscript letters she repeatedly says that she cannot write certain things, that her mother and sisters (her primary, but not her only audience in these letters) must wait for her return to *hear* them.
21. Robert Peary, *Northward*, 142.
22. For a discussion of some of the constraints on women's voices, see, for example, Vera Norwood, "Women's Place: Continuity and Change in Response to Western Landscapes," in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, ed. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1988), 162-66.