

Haunted Ice, Fearful Sounds, and the Arctic Sublime:

Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic Space

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Abstract

This article considers a unified polar Gothic as a way of examining texts set in Arctic and Antarctic space. Through analysis of Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, the author creates a framework for understanding polar Gothic, which includes liminal space, the supernatural, the Gothic sublime, ghosts and apparitions, and imperial Gothic anxieties about the degradation of 'civilisation'. Analysing Verne's scientific-adventure novel *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866) with this framework, the author contextualises the continued public interest in the lost Franklin expedition and reflects on nineteenth-century polar Gothic anxieties in the present day. Polar space creates an uncanny potential for seeing one's own self and examining what lies beneath the surface of one's own rational mind.

Keywords: polar exploration, imagined geography, Arctic, Antarctica, ghosts, Gothic literature

In 1772 James Cook set out on a scientific expedition at the behest of the Royal Society, who believed that a massive continent must exist south of New Zealand and Australia. In search of the hypothetical *Terra Australis*, Cook entered the Antarctic Circle and explored the frozen, foggy seas surrounding Antarctica for nearly a year. In a journal entry from 1775 he reflects:

I can be bold enough to say that no man will ever venture farther than I have done [...] Thick fogs, snow storms, intense cold, and every other thing that can render navigation dangerous, must be encountered; and these difficulties are greatly heightened by the inexpressibly horrid aspe[ct] of the country; a country doomed by Nature never once to feel the warmth of the sun's rays, but to lie buried in everlasting snow and ice.¹

Cook's description begins with the adverse elements expected on a polar voyage – thick fog, snow, intense cold – but Gothic language dominates his discussion; he calls the space 'inexpressibly horrid' and 'doomed'. For Cook, an experienced naval officer and representative of the best of British science, this frozen land comes to symbolise something beyond experience, knowledge, or even expression. His language gives rise to what we might term polar Gothic.

Imagined polar space in nineteenth-century fiction is predicated on extreme, terrifying, treacherous, and yet awe-inspiring conditions: the polar is therefore a natural setting for the Gothic, as the number of Gothic works that venture into the Antarctic or Arctic attest. Here, I discuss three: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) – alongside Jules Verne's ostensibly non-Gothic *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866), which draws on a polar Gothic framework in its imagination of polar space. Although on opposite sides of the earth, as vast frozen regions with limited familiar landmarks for travellers, imagined Arctic and Antarctic spaces possess similar characteristics. In addition to their disorientating alien quality, the presence of ice makes differentiating sea from land challenging even for seasoned explorers. The enormity and hostility of polar space pushes beyond the capacity of the so-called civilised mind, and, in so doing, becomes Gothic space.

This article has two aims. In the first part, I argue that the imagination of polar space generates a unifying polar Gothic. Critical discussion theorising Arctic and Antarctic Gothic has focused typically on one pole or the other; beyond the latitudinal difference, the key scholarly distinction made between the two is that Antarctic Gothic focuses on the antihuman as a source of fear, while Arctic Gothic dwells on the human. Yet Coleridge, Shelley, and Poe all engage with the same generic tradition, a way of writing about the extreme and uncanny space at the end of the world. In their texts, ice creates a negative space, which gives rise to supernatural beings that reflect the self: the albatross, Frankenstein's creature, the Polar Spirit. Ultimately, understanding polar space as Gothic space generates an awareness of self, arguably allowing subconscious anxieties to come to the surface.

In the second part, I use that polar Gothic framework to examine Verne's *Captain Hatteras*. While this novel is predominately a scientific adventure set on an Arctic voyage and dwells very little on the psychologies of fear and dread that fascinate Gothic writers, examining it in a Gothic context gives voice to its underlying anxiety: the tension between 'civilisation' and nature, between empire and other. In Patrick Brantlinger's formulation, 'Imperial Gothic combines the seemingly scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult'.² Brantlinger argues that in imperial Gothic 'Western rationality may be subverted by the very superstitions it rejects'.³ In imagined polar space, however, Western rationality is confronted by its irrational obverse. This is visible in the way that Hatteras and his crew traverse waters haunted by previous expeditions, a reflection of self with a gloomy hint of fatalism, particularly given the prominent discussion of the tragic final expedition of explorer John Franklin. The Franklin expedition set off

in 1845 with much fanfare to sail through the Northwest Passage and mysteriously disappeared; the search for the missing ships and crew led to reports of cannibalism, which shocked the British public.

For the nineteenth-century British public, the anxious awareness of self brought about by the imagination of polar space exposes the fallacy of ideals such as heroism, civilisation, and progress. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century polar exploration was an empire-building project, an attempt to fill in and claim the last 'blank' spaces on the globe, yet the Arctic's indigenous people are for the most part absent in the texts I will discuss. In polar Gothic, instead of the imperial Gothic encounter with the native population, the explorer encounters an exaggerated reflection of his repressed, 'uncivilised' self. Considering the twenty-first century's fascination with polar space as a site of energy resources, geopolitical cooperation, and scientific study, we might do well to ask ourselves why the Gothic influences our imagined polar space and what anxieties may hide beneath our collective subconscious.

The Polar Spirit, or Theorising Polar Gothic

In the traditional polar meta-narrative, a journey to the Arctic or Antarctic pits the human individual against the elements, the landscape, and his own frailty.⁴ A Gothic register often emerges when the individual tries to articulate this experience. Cook's Antarctic journal describes dread, gloom, and terror of the unknown, potentially supernatural landscape. Later, British explorer John Ross described the Arctic in 1835 as 'a nature void of everything to which the face of a country owes its charms'.⁵ Similarly, Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen describes the Arctic landscape in 1895 as an 'empty waste of white'.⁶ The explorers perceive the unfamiliar frozen landscape in terms of absence; for them, ice and snow become simply blankness, generating a liminal space with supernatural potential. In Coleridge's poem and the works influenced by it – Poe's novel set in the Antarctic and Shelley's novel set in the Arctic – we can identify similar polar Gothics, and *which pole* becomes less important.

Both Coleridge's 'Rime' and Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* exploit the Gothic potential of liminal polar space. Poe's novel recounts the adventures of the title character who stows away on a whaler and experiences a shipwreck, a mutiny, and even cannibalism; only the last pages are set on polar seas as Pym and a companion sail towards the South Pole. Approaching Antarctica, Pym mysteriously dies and the natural world splits, chaotically rent between light and darkness. From this chasm, a giant supernatural figure appears, 'the perfect whiteness of snow'.⁷ The ending is intentionally ambiguous, its mystery arising directly from the uncharted continent. Poe's fatal snow spirit has its predecessor in Coleridge's 'Rime', in which the liminal polar icescape gives rise to the appearance of the famous albatross. Coleridge's bird is a potentially supernatural being whose death results in a curse that brings torment and death to the sailors, and a fate worse than death for the Mariner. In the 1817 glosses, Coleridge discusses the Polar Spirit, an apparition that seeks vengeance for the albatross's death: 'The lonesome Spirit from the south-pole carries on the ship as far as the Line, in obedience to the angelic troop, but still requireth vengeance'

(gloss for V. 377–82).⁸ The fact that the albatross and the Polar Spirit both come from the mysterious ‘land of mist and snow’ (II. 134) further reinforces the supernatural potential of the polar space.

The connection between the supernatural and the unknown parallels the link between the alien and the uncharted. Eric G. Wilson postulates that the South Pole represented a ‘dark other’ for European travellers: ‘the alien planet – the antihuman, the monstrous’.⁹ In ‘Rime’, this alien quality of polar space is emphasised in Coleridge’s glossing of the poem; the world is a ‘land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen’ (gloss for I. 55–62). Coleridge’s poem imagines the icy waters near Antarctica in much the same way Cook describes them. The ice that surrounds the Mariner’s ship creates an uncanny space, in which sensory experience is distorted and disrupted. Describing the ice, the Mariner relates: ‘And through the drifts the snowy clifts / Did send a dismal sheen: / Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken – / The ice was all between’ (I. 55–8). Known figures are not visible, but the third line of this quatrain is ambiguous. Are there no figures, or only unknown figures, blurred and unrecognisable through the ice? The ‘snowy clifts’ compound the liminality of the third line; openings in the ice seem to be the only tangible visual element, emitting an uncanny ‘dismal sheen’, but by their nature, they are ephemeral, empty space. While the ice defines the space, statically entrapping the sailors, it seems to be alive: ‘[The ice] cracked and growled, and roared and howled’, (I. 61). Although audible, and recognisable, the ice sounds are beyond sensory experience, ‘Like noises in a swound!’ the Mariner concludes (I. 62). This soundscape is so otherworldly that the Mariner’s only point of comparison for it is unconsciousness, harkening to Cook’s experience of a feeling so horrid he is incapable of expressing it. Stephen J. Pyne describes Cook’s discovery as an anti-discovery, a ‘negative discovery’.¹⁰ Like Cook, Coleridge’s Mariner experiences a negative sublime, an unexpected nullification.

Both Poe and Coleridge focus on isolated individuals threatened in an unknown environment to explore the juxtaposition of rational and irrational human consciousness. William E. Lenz discusses this tension by comparing the Gothic and sea adventure genres, naming points of convergence, which include ‘the journey from innocence to experience’, ‘the isolation of the self in a threatening environment’, ‘the dramatic rendering of nature as hostile and superhuman’, ‘the voyage as a personal test resulting in discovery’, and ‘the location of the individual in an alien, or “other”, human community’.¹¹ Lenz argues that the exaggeration and intensification of these conventions through Gothic writing enable Poe to make a larger philosophical point about American transcendentalism, namely that ‘to strip off all convention is to stand naked and vulnerable [...] to transcend the limitations of the senses is to become senseless’.¹² Although Lenz’s argument focusses on the Antarctic, it applies as well to Arctic space, as my reading of *Frankenstein* demonstrates. Polar Gothic allows for indeterminacy, the potential for a new definition of self, both for the individual and for the state he represents. Coleridge’s Mariner, entering the liminal space through his experience of the ‘negative sublime’, discovers only senselessness and grief.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* famously responds to Coleridge's poem, juxtaposing his poem's negative sublime with the Romantic hubris of her polar explorer Robert Walton. While Coleridge's Mariner enters Antarctic space with fear and returns cursed, Shelley's explorer sets out for the Arctic with optimism and a light heart, even gently mocking Coleridge's polar curse: 'I am going to unexplored regions, to "the land of mist and snow"; but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety'.¹³ *Frankenstein* opens with Walton's letters, in which he writes that he should 'be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation', but describes the chill breeze on his cheek as 'the wind of promise' (13). His hopes for the voyage north are suffused with the language of Romantic fervour: '[the pole] ever presents itself to [his] imagination as the seat of beauty and delight' (*Ibid.*) and his 'heart glow[s] with an enthusiasm that ever elevates [him] to heaven' (14). He describes the long polar summer as a time of 'perpetual splendour' and possibility, for, as he asks, 'What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?' (13). This opening passage serves to associate the scientific voyage to understand magnetism with the sublime, and even to outweigh the negative aspects of the difficult journey north. Walton has fallen into a generic trap, projecting the trope of the Romantic North onto his experience. Angela Byrne establishes the North as a productive European Romantic space with its own colonial assumptions and tropes, 'uncivilised and wild, yet also the perfect location for scientific enquiry'.¹⁴ The Romantic North further developed as a concept through increased travel northward facilitated by the pursuit of new astronomical, geological, and biological knowledge. Walton idealises Arctic space, which carries no terror for him. He dismisses Coleridge's Mariner, but he has not yet experienced the liminality and destructive potential of polar gothic space.

When he encounters Victor Frankenstein, the scientist's woeful tale shifts Walton's perception of polar space significantly; the explorer begins to describe his experience as one of fear and dread, engaging not just with a Romantic ideal, but with the 'Arctic sublime' which draws on Edmund Burke's categorisation of sublime landscapes (1757).¹⁵ Critical discussions of the Arctic sublime rely on Gothic tropes; for example, Diana Donald describes 'the terror arising from darkness, solitude, obscurity and confusion; a sense of great undefined spaces stretching beyond the lateral limits of the picture; ferocious beasts, which, like the Arctic itself, convey a sense of uncontrollable and menacing power'.¹⁶ In Walton's case, the beauties of the ice field become menacing craggy mountains of ice that trap the ship and drive the sailors nearly to the point of mutiny (205). In his theorisation of the Gothic sublime, Vijay Mishra places the Arctic sublime within its historical context, noting 'its emphasis on the European sense of disempowerment in the face of the Arctic void and the kinds of knowledges, both human and barbaric, the voyages in search of the Northwest Passage symbolized'.¹⁷ In *Frankenstein* ice serves metaphorically for the limits of civilisation, empire, and science. Frankenstein's eloquence in urging the men onward centres on their relationship to ice: 'This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you, if you say it shall not' (207). For Frankenstein, ice, like death, can be overcome through the sheer power of will. The scientist projects his own hubris onto the explorer in this

speech, and the expedition is doomed. Like the supernatural terror that emerges from liminal Antarctic space in Poe's novel to undermine the ideal of American transcendentalism, Arctic space in *Frankenstein* destabilises the notion of empire, equating imperial conquest with a Romantic hubris fated to fail.

Frankenstein and Walton share a Romantic vision of scientific inquiry that resonates with a hero quest. However, extraordinary scientific discovery – the revivification of a corpse through electric current or achieving the magnetic pole – allows the brave scientist to touch the sublime. Frankenstein's moment of creation begins with a spark and ends in horror (56), just as Walton's idealistic vision of Arctic space at the beginning of the novel transforms into dread by the end. Frankenstein's Romantic hubris results in his death in the Arctic, the creature standing over his 'white and cold' corpse (214), but the Polar Spirit makes a subtle entrance earlier in the novel. Both Frankenstein and the creature feel chilled after the revivification scene (57, 59; 99, 100, respectively). This chill, however, is not the 'wind of promise' Walton feels setting out on his voyage, but the icy hand of fate, binding creator and creature together. Frankenstein's flight from the vivification scene even includes an excerpt from Coleridge's 'Rime', reinforcing this connection: 'Like one, on a lonesome road who, / Doth walk in fear and dread, / And having once turned round, walks on, / And knows no more his head; / Because he knows a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread' (58). A parallel can be drawn between Frankenstein and Walton: before encountering Frankenstein, Walton idealised his polar voyage, just as Frankenstein idealised his creation before vivification. After each of these events, recognition dawns, and terror emerges, just as it has for the Mariner, plunged into a gothic nightmare.

Before Walton meets Frankenstein, ice and fog move to surround the ship, as in Coleridge's poem before the albatross appears. Despite his earlier mockery of the ancient Mariner's imagined terrors, Walton observes the 'vast and irregular plains of ice, which seemed to have no end' and admits that '[his] own mind began to grow watchful with anxious thoughts' (23). Frankenstein's creature appears to Walton and his men as an unexpected apparition; they watch him through telescopes, wondering at his 'gigantic stature' (23). As in Coleridge's 'Rime', ice distorts perception. Despite their scientific tools, they can neither make the creature out (seeing only that he has 'the shape of a man') nor estimate his distance: 'this apparition seemed to denote that it was not, in reality, so distant as we had supposed' (23). Further reinforcing the mystery of polar space, in the end of the novel, the creature disappears into the icy darkness, heading northward. The bulk of Frankenstein's story does not take place in the ice, but the novel's Gothic atmosphere is enhanced by the engulfing darkness, bleakness, inhospitable climate, and even the creaking of both the ship and the ice that frames it.¹⁸ Polar Gothic as a cultural construct provides a contextualising frame through which to consider manifestations of anxiety – both on the individual and on the broader imperial level – that emerge in the juxtaposition of self and other, and the reflection of the other in the self.

In these texts by Coleridge, Shelley, and Poe, polar Gothic conventions – extreme weather, harsh climate, ice and snow, poor visibility, creaking ship sounds, an eerie,

muffled silence – create an atmosphere of fear, which primes both reader and protagonist for an encounter with a supernatural other, an external source of terror. Polar Gothic additionally relies on destabilisation and disorientation through aural and visual distortion. These elements work together with the unknown frozen landscape to create a liminal negative space that has supernatural potential, and the beings that emerge from it reflect the self.

Finally, Verne's scientific adventure novel *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* also rewards consideration as polar Gothic, which I use as a frame to explore its representation of polar space as an extension of empire. Central to my discussion of Verne is the history of the final Franklin expedition, a source of fascination and trauma for the British public in the late 1840s and early 1850s. In a departure from the earlier polar Gothic texts, in *Captain Hatteras* – inspired by the Franklin expedition's grim fate – supernatural terror appears as a manifestation of an uncivilised, hidden self, latent within each individual.

The Haunting of Captain Hatteras

Published in 1866, *Hatteras* tells of an expedition to the North Pole and was predicated on the most up-to-date scientific theories about the magnetic poles. The novel's hero, Captain John Hatteras, is determined to claim the North Pole for the British Empire. Because of his reputation for recklessness on previous voyages, he hires another man to outfit a ship, the *Forward*, to head north; the initial mystery of the missing captain imbues the text with suspense and creates discord among the crew. When one of the sailors reveals himself to be Hatteras in disguise, tensions mount. The malcontented crew mutinies and blows up the ship before fleeing across the ice, and Hatteras finds himself stranded in the Arctic with a small party of loyal officers. The novel features well-drawn characters placed in extreme situations solved through a combination of bravery and scientific knowledge. For example, as the stranded men winter in an icehouse they have built, they are menaced by a polar bear. While the bear poses a significant threat and the men have exhausted their ammunition, they valiantly persevere using science: knowing the solidification temperature of mercury, they freeze a thermometer bulb to create a bullet, which they use to kill the bear. This adventure is even fortuitous as the meat replenishes their dwindling food supply, allowing them to continue their journey to the Pole.

Richard Phillips has outlined two opposing strands of Verne scholarship. Some readers consider the French writer's works to be 'conservatively confident in the *zeitgeist* of Victorian Britain: confident in progress, enthusiastic about science and committed to imperialism'.¹⁹ However, Verne's *oeuvre* has also been read as anarchist and anti-imperialist – in Phillips's formulation, 'The geography of Verne's adventure can be read as a space of anarchy'.²⁰ Intriguingly, reading *Hatteras* as an adventure novel showcases the imperialist, Victorian Verne, but reading the novel through the lens of polar Gothic reveals the alternative, anti-imperial Verne.

Hatteras gives the pretence of a factual account through details such as date, time, temperature, and degrees of latitude and longitude woven into descriptions of

the changing seascape and weather conditions. This pseudo-ship's log enables an authoritative, fact-based narrative voice to frame the journey, while the strong impression of the landscape on the feelings of the crew is described in a series of individual reflections. For example, as the *Forward* approaches a natural feature called the Devil's Thumb, the men's fear is palpable in the text:

The weather was horrible that day; the snow, plucked up in dense flurries, enveloped the brig in an impenetrable veil; sometimes the storm tore the fog open and in the direction of land frightened eyes would then spot Devil's Thumb erect like a ghost [...] At a time when the storm's violence was getting even worse, Devil's Thumb seemed to loom up beyond measure through the torn-open fog.²¹

The effect of the stormy weather on the crew in this description echoes the ending of Poe's *Pym*, which influenced Verne.²² The 'impenetrable veil', the Devil's Thumb 'erect like a ghost', and even the 'torn-open fog' recall the chaos and enormous white figure encountered by Pym in the end of the novel.

While Poe's novel ends with a mystery, Verne begins with one, which allows the supernatural to enter this scientific adventure novel. Items from newspapers and letters from the ship's mysterious captain punctuate the unfounded speculation of crew and public. Rather than revealing answers, however, these documents fuel even wilder suppositions, which become increasingly irrational as anxiety builds. A prevailing theory is that the *Forward* is captained by a mysterious, and potentially supernatural, black dog, a Gothic trope. The suggestion of supernatural events enters into the narrative entirely through the crew's rumormongering, and as the journey continues, comes to infect the crew's experience of natural dangers, as demonstrated in the Devil's Thumb episode.

One significant source of anxiety in Verne's novel is the failure of previous expeditions. As the *Forward* travels northward, its sailors ruminate on the possibility of their own deaths; the mortality rate on polar expeditions between 1770 and 1918 was considerable – estimated at fifty per cent – and the men who signed for an expedition to the Arctic or Antarctic would have been aware of the danger, if not the specific odds of survival.²³ The thought of polar routes defined by those who have passed before in the same pursuit, never to return, is a powerful one. In *Hatteras* the ship's doctor contemplates the history of polar exploration, resulting in a spectral vision:

The strange history of these lands appeared to the doctor's imagination as, leaning over the rail, he followed the brig's long wake. The names of these brave mariners crowded into his memory, and in the frozen archways of the pack ice he thought he glimpsed the pale ghosts of those who had never come back. (38)

While earlier literary expeditions into polar space – Coleridge, Shelley, Poe – emphasise the terror of the unknown, resulting in encounters with the supernatural and the monstrous, Verne's expedition covers territory already charted by other expeditions, and as a result is haunted by humans. Shane McCorristine observes that

‘in all Arctic exploration there was a sense of crossing an ontological boundary into a non-historical realm’.²⁴ McCorristine refers to spectral potential, but his statement also speaks to the perceived atemporality of polar space. Although dates and times are carefully recorded in ship logs, polar explorers seem to exist outside of time, just as the ghosts do. The practice of explorers to leave messages in cairns, often undiscovered for long periods, sometimes not until years after the sender’s death, creates an uncanny space that blurs the boundaries between life and death.²⁵ The capacity of ice to preserve contributes to this liminality. Long buried corpses seem freshly dead, or even just asleep. In a space defined by absence there is great capacity for introspection; polar space becomes a refraction of each human mind that ventures into it. While the Devil’s Thumb encounter is described as frightening, more akin to the phantasmagoria in ‘Rime’ or *Pym*, the doctor’s vision of pale ghosts trapped in the ice is contemplative, like Frankenstein’s Romantic melancholia, warning about the dangers of hubris.

Previous expeditions inform and inspire Hatteras’s voyage, central among them the lost Franklin expedition – a significant point of trauma in the imagination of polar space. In May 1845, Franklin’s ships the HMS *Terror* and HMS *Erebus* set sail to gather magnetic data in the Canadian Arctic and break through the Northwest Passage for the first time.²⁶ The ships represented the best of British progress and innovation, and when they did not return after the three years planned for the expedition, a massive search was mounted.²⁷ In 1854 explorer and doctor John Rae sent the first extensive news of the Franklin expedition’s fate, describing a ‘fate as terrible as the imagination can conceive’ for Franklin and his men: a slow, torturous, and hopeless death in the Arctic wilderness beset by disease, exposure to the harsh elements, and starvation.²⁸ Beyond this, when Inuit hunters found some corpses from the Franklin party, they observed signs that some of the men had resorted to cannibalism. Drawing from Inuit accounts, Rae reported, ‘From the mutilated state of many of the bodies, and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last dread alternative as a means of sustaining life’.²⁹

The Franklin expedition fascinated the public because of its mysterious disappearance, and because each small discovery evoked and evokes a sense of horror, from Rae’s report in the mid-nineteenth century to the exhumation and published photographs of corpses in the late twentieth century.³⁰ When the Admiralty released Rae’s report to the press, notable figures including Charles Dickens and Franklin’s widow, Lady Jane Franklin, openly censured Rae’s account, arguing that Royal Navy men would never resort to an act so unnatural as cannibalism. Indeed, echoing common sentiments, the virtues of the polar explorer are articulated by Henry Morley: ‘Let us be glad, too, that we have one unspotted place upon this Globe of ours; a pole that, as it fetches truth out of a needle, so surely also gets all that is right-headed and right-hearted from the sailor whom the needle guides’.³¹ Dickens went so far as to argue (without any evidence) that ‘no man can, with any show of reason, undertake to affirm that this sad remnant of Franklin’s gallant band were not set upon and slain by the Esquimaux themselves’.³² For him, as for many others, the Franklin party was a symbol of empire, and the thought of cannibalism in connection with it

was simply incomprehensible, a dreadful and intolerable reflection.³³ As if to underscore this point, Dickens and Wilkie Collins wrote a play based loosely on the Franklin expedition that put forward a more acceptable narrative, *The Frozen Deep* (1856). In the play neither cannibalism nor Inuit appear; instead, Rae's gruesome report becomes the soothsaying of a nursemaid who dooms the expedition in a reported vision in order to exact revenge on a virtuous young lady. In the ice floes, however, the explorer's noble nature is triumphant, even as he dies: Collins's later novelisation of the play concludes, 'He has won the greatest of all conquests—the conquest of himself. And he has died in the moment of victory. Not one of us here but may live to envy his glorious death'.³⁴

Like *The Frozen Deep*, *Hatteras* was inspired by Franklin's fate. Verne was fascinated by the story, which prominently featured in the French press of the time.³⁵ In the novel, the Franklin expedition serves as a frame for the trip to the pole. On the voyage north, the ghosts appear in the text immediately after the doctor reflects on the lost expedition. Additionally, an entire early chapter of the novel is devoted to the tale of Franklin's travails. More substantially, after the trauma of the Pole – which causes Hatteras to sink into madness – the small surviving party finds the corpses of the mutinous crew:

Not long previously, this valley had been the scene of a last battle against time, against despair, against hunger; and from certain horrible remains, it could be understood that the wretches had fed on human bodies, perhaps living bodies . . . Whatever the truth, the crew had clearly experienced a thousand tortures and a thousand despairs, before encountering this terrifying catastrophe; but the secret of their misery is buried with them under the snows of the Pole forever. (345–6)

Where the ice-bound ghosts haunt the novel with their melancholy failure in the line of duty, the grisly physical remains of the crew emphasise transgression, violence, and terror, acts that do not appear in the text and exist only through the imagination of those discovering the bodies. Verne's description of cannibalism points to the destabilising truth that Dickens and others could not face: namely that civilisation is only a veneer for humans' basic, primitive, animalistic survival mode. The ice is ambivalent, concealing both ghosts and corpses, while preserving the truth of heroism and barbarism. In *Hatteras* and elsewhere, exploring polar space becomes a harrowing exploration of self, mobilising the anxiety of what lies beneath the surface; as Lenz observes, 'like the Gothic mode itself, [polar space] is a doorway into the deepest regions of our primitive imagination'.³⁶

Polar Gothic is a way of understanding imagined polar space, and takes root in cultural imagination, going beyond the literary text. However, it is predicated on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European colonial expansionism and exploration. In this vein, the anxiety that manifests in polar Gothic articulates broader social concerns. In the example of *Frankenstein*, Walton is left with incomplete knowledge and an unsettling feeling that exploration and pushing the boundaries of human endurance in the name of science is a questionable enterprise. Similarly, in Dickens's

reaction to Rae's report, we understand his anxiety that 'civilisation' is inadequate; a British expedition with the latest technology and advances goes into the liminal polar space and the end result is unthinkable cannibalism, or, in Jen Hill's formulation, 'the fear [...] that Coleridge's "self-annihilation" might be realised in a breach of the limits of the sturdy, resistant bodies of Franklin and his men, necessarily revealing the end of British character'.³⁷ The discovered corpses of Verne's novel and Franklin's expedition speak to a deeper anxiety, one that undercuts civilisation and forces confrontation with a primitive instinct for survival at any cost. While the literature examined in this article is by nineteenth-century European writers, and Dickens blames the native Inuit, I note here that in their testimony they are as horrified as he; indeed Inuit oral history marks the transgression, recording that malignant, restless spirits have haunted King William's Island since Franklin's men perished.³⁸

Cian Duffy observes that 'the cultural history of the polar regions during the late eighteenth century and Romantic period is the history of the transformation of the place that the Arctic and Antarctic occupied in the European imagination', and postulates that the shift in perspective caused by the expeditions during this period leads to a discovery of 'absence [...] the *inhuman* [...] silent, frigid emptiness'.³⁹ Mapping this shift onto the imagination of polar Gothic space shows a distinct change between pre-Franklin and post-Franklin texts. Early polar Gothic texts like *Arthur Gordon Pym*, 'Rime', and *Frankenstein* evince anxiety of the unknown, while *Hatteras*'s inherent anxiety is of the known. Yet the ghostly apparitions of all the works are manifestations of imperial anxiety, the result of venturing into space defined by its otherness.

Here Michel de Certeau's connection between haunting, place, and memory proves useful: 'There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in'.⁴⁰ Understood in this light, the ghosts that emerge from the ice represent not only the spirit of the place, and the anxiety of failure, but also a mirroring of the self, a potentiality for a future failure embedded in the past and kept alive through memory. Coleridge's and Poe's travellers encounter manifestations of a Polar Spirit. Shelley's explorer is not haunted *per se*, but meets monsters that fulfil the role of a ghost, both the creature and, in *Frankenstein*, his own double. In parallel, Verne's explorer meets his predecessors, but then encounters them in his own shipmates' cannibalism, revealing the potential for horror within each 'civilised' individual.

Like Poe, I conclude with a question: what anxiety does our imagination of polar Gothic space reveal? Polar space continues to hold an imaginative fascination, one that unites imperial conquest and ecological concern based in stories of extreme survival and doom, the excavation of the past, and a drastically changing climate.⁴¹ I have examined polar Gothic in terms of empire, but in an increasingly globalised world, ecological concerns are now paramount. In Catherine Lanone's ecoGothic examination of Arctic Gothic texts, Franklin's expedition 'becomes the paradigm of colonial misappropriation, trying to cut through the ice for the sake of trade and capitalist consumption rather than paying attention to place itself and its nature or

function'.⁴² As human intervention in polar space in the name of national pride, natural resource exploitation, or, increasingly, leisure, significantly impacts ice melt and temperature, we must ask ourselves why the recent discovery of the Franklin ships or the centenary of the Scott expedition to the South Pole caused such a degree of public interest, and why the details of these doomed expeditions continue to pre-occupy us today.

Perhaps the answer lies in the line quoted earlier, but read through the prism of polar Gothic anxiety: 'This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable and cannot withstand you, if you say it shall not' (207). In Frankenstein's speech, we read the fatal hubris of conquering that which seems impossible, and yet, in the twenty-first century, we have discovered that polar ice cannot withstand us. The dwindling mutable ice still conceals and preserves – but as it melts and our world becomes increasingly destabilised, what will it reveal? And how will it reflect our own selves back to us?

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Notes

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- 37 Hill, *White Horizon*, p. 44. I quote Hill analysing Franklin's 1823 account. For her full analysis, see pp. 40–52.
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- 41 See Benjamin Morgan, 'After the Arctic Sublime', *New Literary History*, 47:1 (2016), 1–26.
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