

[SLIDE] Introduction

I want to start today with a quotation from Robert McGhee's *The Last Imaginary Place*. Here McGhee describes a visit to various shorelines of the Svalbard archipelago, an island group half-way between Norway and the North Pole:

'Massive whale bones protrude from the muddy beaches [. . .]. In every valley flowers and lichen slowly cloak the fragile bones of reindeer. And then there are the walrus kills. For hundreds of meters the surface is carpeted with thick and heavy bones [. . .] impenetrable to decay. [. . .] The drifts of bones are thickest near the beach, where the hunters created a windrow of dead and dying animals to prevent their relatives from escaping to the sea.' (p. 189)

McGhee is describing the relics of practices of hunting on Svalbard, practices which, as you can see from the quotations on the slide, were characterised by both sadism and excess. Whaling, trapping and other kinds of hunting all but wiped out the profoundly abundant native mammal life in the archipelago over the course of three centuries between the early 1600s and the early 1900s, prompting Seton Gordon, an early wildlife photographer to describe the Svalbard he encountered in 1921 as 'so far as the eye can see, entirely devoid of life [. . .] everywhere was the silence that broods ceaselessly about the lands that approach the pole.'

[SLIDE] Introduction to Paver's Novel

It is in this deathly littoral landscape, 'so far north that "dead things" last for years', Michelle Paver sets her neo-thirties novel *Dark Matter*, which gothicises the 'Boys Own Adventure' genre in its narrative of Arctic exploration thwarted by supernatural intervention. On the one hand Paver's novel reproduces, through her first person narrator Jack, the conventions of literary representations of the Arctic in the 1800s and early 1900s ". . . as a space for virile, white male adventure in a harsh but magnificent, unspoiled landscape waiting to be discovered, charted, painted, and photographed *as if for the first time*" as Sherrill Grace puts it. On the other, *Dark Matter* participates in a trend in cultural representations of the Arctic whereby, to quote Grace again: "[t]he narrative that begins to emerge [. . .] is hybrid, heterogenous and unstable; the historical record where it is evoked, is fragmented, questioned, rescripted."

[SLIDE] Thesis Statement

In this paper I argue that a key element of Paver's gothicisation of the 'virile male adventurer' mode of literary engagement with the North are her depictions of animal cruelty, mutilation and death. I argue that these moments and motifs, rather than being secondary to the human suffering, implied and actual, in the novel, in fact make explicit a subsumed history of violence towards the non-human population of Svalbard which characterised human activity in this landscape for centuries.

Dark Matter teems with non-human life (following the archipelago being placed under Norwegian sovereignty in 1920, legislation to protect the islands' wildlife saw a modest ecological recovery) – sea birds, polar bears, walrus, reindeer, arctic foxes, whales and as well as domestic sled dog teams. For the purposes of this paper I am going to focus on Paver's use of the motif of the seal, a literally littoral creature, in order to argue that what is haunting the coast of Svalbard in this text exceeds the human and that this excess has specific ethical implications.

In doing so I explore how Paver's coastal gothic illuminates how sadistic acts of cruelty towards animals constitute an abjection of the non-human in an attempt to '[consolidate] a stable sense of

self' as Nathaniel Leach puts it, an attempt doomed by the 'nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced', and the disavowed knowledge that our animal selves remain vulnerable to the 'claimings and maimings' we erroneously assure ourselves only non-humans are at risk of.

[SLIDE] Seals and Folklore

Before exploring how the figure of the seal functions in Paver's novel, I want to flag up the broader cultural and folkloric associations which are in circulation around this animal, particularly in Northern Europe.

Seals are literally littoral, creatures of the shoreline, bridging the sea and the land, but they have other associations with liminality, particularly as creatures who, folklorically, bridge the division between the human and the animal. The narratives of 'selkies' or 'seal women' common to Ireland and the Shetland and Orkney Islands offer an image of a creature who is both seal and subject, human and non-human. Multiple strands of folk belief around seals position them as the origin point for humans as Martin Puhvel points out:

Setting aside the fleeting physical resemblances the seal might share with the human, it's clear that the seal frequently forms a hinge point between the human and non-human world, 'reminders' to quote Anne Collett 'of the other bodies to which we are kin and with whom we share the bloody brine of life and death.'

[SLIDE] Seals in *Dark Matter*

The image of the seal sinks and resurfaces at crucial points in the novel as you can see from the slide here. However the presence of this animal in the text exceeds mere zoological accuracy, appearing at the novel's outset in a way which both adverts to the legacies of violence and slaughter that have shaped Svalbard's shorelines and confirms a confusion between seal and human.

[SLIDE] In the first pages of the novel, Jack returns from an expedition planning meeting to see the corpse of a drowned man being pulled from the Thames. The description of the corpse, its grey rubbery skin and 'wet round head' begins to incubate a seal-like quality which is later confirmed in the text when Jack notices, for the first time, the presence of a seal's head in the foreground of a picture from the *Illustrated London News* he has pinned to his wall. The confusion between seals and humans present throughout is fostered in part, through Paver's return to the image of the 'wet round head'/'round, wet head' – this phrase reoccurs on multiple occasions, with the oscillating placement of the words 'wet' and 'round' linguistically performing a destabilising 'switching' between human and seal.

Seals and Sadism

So we've established the overdetermined presence of seals in this text, and the way they confuse the categories of being of human and non-human. This confusion remains present in the scenes of animal cruelty in the novel which re-activate and recognise the cruelty which characterised human interactions with the non-human on the Svalbard archipelago until relatively, recently while simultaneously prompting a recognition that these acts of violence are never as bounded by categories of being as they appear.

There are multiple moments when animals are subjected to or threatened with violence and pain in *Dark Matter*, however, the episode in which Jack's expedition partner Algie skins a seal alive is the most resonant for the current discussion, particularly when we consider how Paver characterises the malevolent presence apparently haunting the Svalbard shoreline.

[SLIDE] As you can see from the slide, initially the supernatural presence is figured as humanoid. However a second encounter positions this being as hybrid, it's crouching position and transition from the sea to the land combining with repetition of the phrase 'wet, round, head' to give the impression of both seal and man simultaneously [we might note too the breaking down of the syntax of this phrase, with the elements becoming increasingly grammatically separated with each usage, a breakdown which mirrors the profoundly gothic breakdown of categories of being at work here.]

[SLIDE] This breakdown reaches its apogee in the origin story for this malevolent presence, which is implied to be that of a trapper murdered by a mining syndicate who fraudulently took possession of his land. As you can see from the quotations on the slide, the implied treatment of the trapper (or the horrific shared fantasy that all explorers seem to access) reduces him to the status of the animals trapped, killed, skinned and dismembered as part of the economic activities which are undertaken in Spitsbergen.

The horror generated by this act of sadistic violence is not, I argue, generated through the human trapper's treatment *as an* animal but that his treatment rehearses and underscores the cruelty and the sadism which characterised much of the human relationship to the non-human world in this Arctic context.

[SLIDE] Abjecting the Animal

The trapper is described as having in life 'that abject manner which brings out the worst in people.' (p. 195). This reference to the abject is key when we bring place it in conversation with Nathan Leach's position, that 'the abjection of the 'Other' in a way that enables the consolidation of a stable sense of self' is accompanied, always, by a disavowed nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced'. In this context sadistic cruelty to animals in Paver's text is not simply or straightforwardly economically driven, it is expressive also of a desire to abject our 'animal' qualities, to shakily shore up our 'human' selves.

Claiming and Maiming.

To conclude then, in Paver's novel, this destabilisation of the human-non-human binary not only underscores how the capitalist operations at work in the Norwegian Arctic are underpinned by acts of cruelty which are not limited to non-human life, it does so in a way which recognises these operations as one element in a matrix of practices designed to secure human subject status through violent abjection of the animal. The confusion which abounds in the novel, between signifiers of economic claims, and memorials of bodily harm, resolves itself when we recognise their overdetermined nature. The claim sign Jack trips on among the 'man-like' bear skeletons and the 'unsettlingly human' seal bones *is* a grave marker, signalling the way that economic claiming is inextricably linked to non-human maiming.