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Beaches of Bones: Non-Human Hauntings and Legacies of Animal Cruelty in Michelle Paver's *Dark Matter*

Lucy Arnold

ABSTRACT

Michelle Paver's selection of Spitsbergen, a place 'so far north that "dead things" last for years' (p. 39), as the setting for her neo-thirties novel *Dark Matter* (2010), demands of the novel's readers an immediate engagement with the environmental and ecological. A key but hitherto unrecognised element of Michelle Paver's gothicisation of this 'virile male adventurer' mode of literary engagement with the North, its landscapes, flora and fauna, are her depictions of animal cruelty, mutilation and death. In this article I argue that these moments and motifs, rather than being secondary to the implied and actual human suffering which plays out in the novel, in fact make explicit a subsumed history of violence towards the Greenlandic non-human which characterised colonial activity in this landscape for hundreds of years. Through an examination of Paver's use of the motif of the seal, a littoral creature, and the proposition that what is haunting the Greenlandic coast in this text is specifically non-human, I offer a new critical approach to *Dark Matter* which makes clear how the coastal ecogothic at work here functions to illuminate (in this landscape of semi-perpetual darkness) how sadistic acts of animal cruelty constitute an abjection of the non-human in an attempt to '[consolidate] a stable sense of self' as Nathaniel Leach (2011) puts it. In closing, I demonstrate how such an attempt is ultimately shown to be doomed by the 'nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced' (p. 24), 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.

Key Words: Michelle Paver, Dark Matter, 'Arctic Gothic', seal, abjection, Svalbard, Arctic, littoral

In the far-right-hand corner of the Pitt Rivers Museum is a display case containing what at first appear to be a set of three voluminous, off white, translucent garments collected from Arctic communities in the eighteen-hundreds.[8] In the dim light of the museum cases, mounted to appear as though they are being worn, the two parkas and a raincoat take on an uncanny, ghostly quality as they delineate the absent presence of their wearer. What makes the garments more remarkable is the fact that they are constructed, in part, from seal intestines, the animals' 'insides' adapted to clothe the human exterior in a blurring of the boundaries between human and non-human which has frequently characterised the presence of the animal within European gothic literature, despite the sometimes vehement protests of protagonists to the contrary.[9] Seen in their contemporary museum context, these objects gain a profoundly gothic resonance, underscored by their acquisition from indigenous communities by European explorers and collectors, and their disarticulation from the cultures and contexts in which they were designed to be used, and within which this gothic quality is absent.[10] Moreover, perhaps more so than fur and leather garments, the construction of the objects from intestines—material taken from inside the body of the animal and exposed to view—makes more readily legible the processes of hunting, gutting, skinning, and tanning involved in the conversion of animal into garment, in this case a prosthesis capable of allowing the human wearer to 'inhabit' the animal, and thus survive in the Arctic conditions which would normally be fatal to them.

Figure 1:Hooded seal skin jacket, Pitt Rivers Museum (1925.11.3)

[8] Online catalogue records for these holdings can be found here.

[9] This pressure which gothic writing frequently places on this 'alienation of the human from the animal' as Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson put it (2020, p. 2), forms a through line in a significant body of contemporary ecogothic criticism, as evidenced in Heholt and Edmundson's *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out.*

[10] The catalogue records for all of these items state that they were purchased from the indigenous communities involved; however, even if this is the case, the complexity of the relationship between the European purchaser, and the communities from which these garments were obtained, must be recognised.

Figure 2:Hooded coat made from seal intestine, Pitt Rivers Museum (1908.73.1)

These objects sit at an intersection of European exploration of the Arctic, the slaughter and processing of animals by humans—both those indigenous to Arctic landscapes and those who are not—and a gothic aesthetic which invokes spectrally present-absences. This intersection is likewise present in Robert McGhee's description of a visit to various shorelines along the Svalbard archipelago, an Arctic island group half-way between Norway and the North Pole. McGhee (2008) describes how:

> '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).

What McGhee is describing are the relics of practices of hunting on Svalbard by Danish, Norwegian, English and Russian Pomor trappers and traders, practices which were characterised by both sadism and excess. Sir James Lamont's *Seasons with the Sea Horses, Or Sporting Adventures in the Northern Seas* (1861) provides numerous anecdotes which attest to this, ranging from the minor tormenting of a pet walrus, by pulling its whiskers and threatening to hit it with a rope (pp. 26-7), through to the wholesale torture and killing of a wealth of wild animals. One of the most striking examples in Lamont's text is contained in an account given to him by one of the crew of his sealing ship, of the killing of hundreds of walrus located on an ice floe, an account characterised by gothic excess through its accumulation of synonyms linked by repetitious 'ands': 'they slew, and stabbed, and slaughtered, and butchered and murdered until most of their lances were rendered useless and themselves were drenched with blood and exhausted with fatigue''. (p. 188). The whaling, trapping and other kinds of hunting described in *Seasons with the Sea Horses* 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.

It is in this deathly littoral landscape, 'so far north that "dead things" last for years' (2010, p. 39), that Michelle Paver sets her neo-thirties novel *Dark Matter*, which itself gothicises the 'Boys' Own Adventure' genre in its narrative of Arctic exploration thwarted by supernatural intervention. Paver's novel depicts a scientific expedition to the fictional cove of Gruhuken in the Svalbard archipelago in January of 1937, an expedition which is beset by disaster from the outset and whose team (comprised of aristocratic Gus Balfour, Algernon Carlisle, Teddy Wintringham and Hugo Charteris Black, and the lower-middle class Jack Miller) are forced to leave the archipelago one by one, until only Jack remains to face the malevolent supernatural presence which appears to inhabit Gruhuken.

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 (2001)

puts it (p. 174). On the other, *Dark Matter* participates in a trend in cultural representations of the Arctic whereby '[t]he narrative that begins to emerge […] is hybrid, heterogenous and unstable; the historical record where it is evoked, is fragmented, questioned, rescripted' (p. 174).

McGhee's description, quoted above, and the Arctic seal skin garments on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum capture, implicitly and explicitly, the violence inherent in the interactions between the human and the non-human which have defined European colonial and expeditionary endeavours in the Arctic. Together, they contribute to an acknowledgement of the European construction of Arctic spaces as frequently finding their locus in the interactions between the human and the non-human which also preoccupy Paver's *Dark Matter*. It is important to note here that, the seal skin garments in the Pitt Rivers collection come from the Aleutian Islands and the North Baffin Islands, not the culturally and geographically distinct Svalbard archipelago, though their associations and resonances, when looked at within the museum context in which they are now held, are nonetheless pertinent to our understandings of the historic practices of hunting and trapping on the islands, and Paver's gothic treatment of them. Likewise, it should be noted that while the Aleutian and North Baffin Islands both possess indigenous populations, the Svalbard archipelago has never had an indigenous population, its remote position meaning that migrant Paleo-Eskimos didn't travel that far north. To quote McGhee (2008): 'Only Svalbard, the adjacent Franz Josef archipelago to the east, and a few of the most isolated islands of the Canadian Arctic archipelago, were not discovered and used by [the] ancient explorers and hunters of the Arctic' (p. 175). As such, Svalbard was and is not subject to an existing indigenous framework for how non-human life should be conceptualised or interacted with, only a colonial and latterly capital-driven model.

In this article I understand the haunting presence at the heart of the novel to exceed any straightforwardly human post-mortem status, instead positioning them as marking the insistent remains of the historical slaughter McGhee and others detail. 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, depictions which confirm the ecogothic politics and poetics of Paver's novel. 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 constituted

human activity in this landscape for centuries. *Dark Matter* teems with non-human life: sea birds, polar bears, walrus, reindeer, arctic foxes, whales and as well as domestic sled dog teams, reflecting the fact that, following the archipelago being placed under Norwegian sovereignty in 1920, legislation to protect the islands' wildlife saw a modest ecological recovery. Shifting the critical focus away from the human protagonists, in this reading I recognise the significance of the animal in Paver's work, and its status within this littoral landscape defined by non-human suffering and death, in order to argue that what is haunting the coast of Svalbard exceeds the human and that this excess has specific ethical implications.

In doing so I explore how Paver's coastal gothic illuminates both how sadistic acts of cruelty towards animals constitute an abjection of the non-human other in an attempt to '[consolidate] a stable sense of self' as Nathaniel Leach (2011) puts it, an attempt doomed by the 'nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced' (p. 21), 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. Paver's use of the ecogothic mode therefore positions the suffering and deaths of animals as constitutive of these littoral spaces, beyond which her characters, and many of the historical explorers and trappers upon whom they are based, seem unable to progress. Spitsbergen's shoreline comes to act as a mass grave, and a recognition of them as such subsequently demands that we pay them sustained ethical attention, in order to more fully comprehend the ecogothic political economy of Paver's text. Two key contexts inflect this analysis of *Dark Matter*: the period of intense hunting referred to by Robert McGhee as the Rape of Spitsbergen[11] and the European literary traditions which have grown up around representing Arctic spaces.

The Rape of Spitsbergen refers to the process whereby the 'immense herds of walrus', 'colonies of harp and hooded seals […], ringed and bearded seals, […] pods of white, beluga and single-tusked narwhals', 'sei, minke, blue, humpback, right and bowhead' whales, 'white bears and black orcas' who thrived on the archipelago four centuries ago as well as herds of reindeer and flocks of sea birds, were hunted to the verge of extinction over a period of four centuries by Russian Pomors, and Dutch, English and Norwegian traders (McGhee, 2008: pp. 174-5). The scale of this economic activity and the ecological devastation it resulted in is

[11] For clarity, it should be noted that Svalbard refers here to the archipelago to which the island of Spitsbergen belongs.

difficult to describe. In a single voyage to the archipelago 'the crew of the *Amitie* killed 120 walrus, 51 reindeer and 30 bears' (p. 178). In a period of six hours, the crew of the Muscovy Company's *Speed* killed between 600 and 700 walrus (ibid). By the summer of 1921 Seton Gordon (1921), an early wildlife photographer, described the Svalbard he encountered 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' (Seton, 1922: p. 27).

In economic, anthropological and ecological terms, the Rape of Spitsbergen is well documented. What is perhaps less frequently explored is the cruelty, verging on sadism, which characterised much of this hunting activity. Stephen Bennet, master of the *Speed*, describing a 1604 walrus hunt details how:

> 'Some [walrus], when they were wounded in the flesh, would but looke up and lye downe againe. Some were killed with the first shot; and some would goe into the sea with five or sixe shot; they are of such an incredible strength. When all our shot and powder was spent, wee would blow their eyes out with a little pease shot, and then come on the blind side of them, and with our carpenter's axe cleave their heads' (quoted in McGhee, 2008: p. 178).

Over two decades later, James Lamont recorded a further walrus hunt, a sporting trip this time:

> 'Upon looking closely at the walrus when she came up to breathe, I then perceived that she held a very young calf under her right arm, and I saw that he wanted to harpoon it, but whenever he poised the weapon to throw, the old cow seemed to watch the direction of it and interposed her own body, and she seemed to receive with pleasure several harpoons which were intended for the young one' (pp. 62-4).

Lamont's account continues by explaining that the most effective 'dodge' used by walrus hunters, was to capture a baby walrus and torture it so that the rest of the adult animals would be drawn to the hunters by the juvenile's cries of pain. He praises this strategy for its '*humanity* and ingenuity' (p. 64) in a description which places significant pressure on the contemporary definition of humanity which conflates both the state of being human and quality of being

humane and constructs an Arctic 'humanity' around the ill treatment and exploitation of that considered 'non-human'. These descriptions go beyond the slaughter of animals for food and resources, suggesting the scale of the violence and cruelty which was imposed on the non-human population of Spitsbergen. The legacies of this ecological violence on a mass scale, which can still be observed in the skeletal remains of the walrus kills and in the material traces of the furnaces and kettles used for rendering whale blubber, are, I argue, powerfully at work in Paver's novel.

Likewise, Paver's novel is informed by a number of literary traditions around representing the Arctic, both in fiction and non-fiction. First, it is important to note that Paver's situation of the ghost story genre within the space of the Arctic constitutes a continuation of the trend in writing on the Arctic for including ghostly or spectral experiences. Shane McCorristine (2018) cites numerous examples of such hauntings in his monograph. Particularly striking incidents include J.A. Grant's account of the ghost of a mummified Inuit woman smuggled on board the 1876 *Pandora* exhibition by its surgeon, which can only be laid to rest once her remains are buried at sea ('Ghost Story of the Arctic', *Western Morning News*, 1934), the spectral fiancé haunting the protagonist of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Pole Star* (1912) and polar explorer Frederick Cook's belief that the ghosts of deceased explorers accompanied him on his Arctic voyages (*My Attainment of the Pole,* 1911). As McCorristine argues, 'a good part of being in the Arctic meant experiencing spectral moments, of seeing the familiar become the strange and of having to work out how absent people seemed to have presence. […] Ghostly experiences meant a lot to explorers and their audiences' (p. 15). McCorristine continues, pointing out how, in

> 'canonical sources (like the published journals of explorers) or peripheral sources (like poetry in periodicals or pulp fiction) […] [t]he Arctic is imagined […] as a zone of loss, disappearance and fragility, but also of haunting, uncanny returns and frozen permanence […]. Stories of Arctic dreams, ghosts and haunting are not just literary decorations: they force us to question who had cultural authority over the Arctic during the nineteenth century' (pp. 4-5).

Moreover, Paver's novel explicitly picks up on the description of Arctic landscapes as essentially oneiric, spaces of dream and fantasy. As protagonist Jack puts it: 'There's no dawn

and no dusk. Time has no meaning. We've left the real world, and entered a land of dreams' (pp. 18-9), a description which reproduces what McCorristine (2018) terms '[t]he widespread circulation of dreams and dream language in exploration narratives fed into constructions of the Arctic as a strange and spectral place' (p. 9).

Both of these contextual details hinge upon the human interaction with the non-human landscape and inhabitants of the Arctic, a relationship which was particularly potent on Svalbard due to its lack of indigenous inhabitants. This aspect of Svalbard's character was commented upon by Sir Martin Conway, who asserts in his 1906 study of the archipelago that it 'never had any inhabitants' (p. vii). For Conway, the implications of Svalbard's 'uninhabited' status are far reaching, going as far as to conclude that this means it can 'therefore, in a sense, can have no true history of its own' (p. 1). However, Conway's perspective here is exclusively anthropocentric, and fails to recognise the 'inhabitants' of Svalbard, and their uniquely non-human histories (or indeed to recognise the interactions between human and non-human life on Svalbard *as* history in the first place) in favour of dubbing it, as does the title of Conway's book, 'no man's land'.

Such a categorisation is borne out through the ways in which Paver's characters struggle to domesticate the wilderness and insistently refuse the claims of the animals who already inhabit it. When Paver's protagonists, Jack, Gus and Algie land on Svalbard, their attempts to fashion a reproduction of an English domestic space are detailed and extensive, having brought with them a variety of objects and provisions which bespeak a quasi-colonial importation of upper-class English values into the Arctic landscape, including 'a crate of Oxford Marmalade, and two bottles of champagne for Christmas […] a crate of books and a gramophone player, and even a set of Royal Doulton china, donated by Algie's mama' (pp. 21-2). This domesticating behaviour is not limited to the explorer's use of specific supplies and commodities but also extends to the use of the non-human population of Svalbard. In a passage describing how the men are left alone on Svalbard for the first time, Jack describes how 'Algie clapped his hand to his forehead, then turned and raced up the beach. When he reached the bear post, he hoisted the "flag" he'd almost forgotten: a dead fulmar which he'd shot that morning. He strung it up by one wing, and the wind caught it and made it flap, a parody of flight. Out in the bay, the *Isbjørn* dipped her ensign in reply'. (p. 84) Not only does this scene see the corpse of an animal native to Svalbard substituted for a flag, an object symbolic of ownership,

dominion and in the context of the English origins of the three men and the period in which the book is set, of empire, it also sees that 'flag' recognised as such by the crew of the *Isbjørn*. On one level then, Algie's clumsy ensign serves as a concrete metaphor for the kinds of human domination over the non-human world which have historically characterised the settlement and economic exploitation of Svalbard. However, the choice of the dead fulmar as the 'flag' for the expedition also possesses another significance, its 'parody of flight' hinting at a reanimation and suggesting that the true 'banner' under which Svalbard exists is not human but 'no man's'.[12]

This concept of Svalbard as 'No Man's Land' is articulated in the novel by Jack who remarks that:

> 'The books say the golden days of trapping were when Spitsbergen was a "no-man's-land". I still can't get over that. The idea that until a few years ago, a wilderness not far from Europe belonged to *no one*: that a man could literally stake his claim wherever he liked, without seeking permission from a living soul. It sounds wonderful' (p. 22).

This is a position, repeatedly articulated by Jack in the novel, which has historical precedent. As Roald Berg (2014) notes, **'**[s]overeignty over the [Svalbard] archipelago in the Arctic Ocean was granted to Norway by the great powers at the Versailles/Paris peace conference in 1920. During the preceding centuries, the archipelago northwest of Norway had been regarded as a no-man's-land—terra nullius' (p. 154). However, I wish to re-inflect this assessment of Spitsbergen as represented in Paver's novel, emphasising the idea that, as Jack unwittingly acknowledges, the island here belongs to no *one,* that it is the human who is excluded from ownership and possession of this space. Such a reading is re-enforced through an analysis of Paver's depiction of the sounds made by the sea ice surrounding Spitsbergen: 'an odd, rapid, popping sound; a brittle crackling, very low but continuous' which makes the ice sound 'as if it's talking to itself' (p. 33), 'weird creaks and groans, as if a giant were hammering to get out' (p. 38). This is a landscape which speaks its narrative in languages which the expedition team

[12] Such an interpretation is further strengthened when placed in conversation with Paver's earlier description of the fulmar as 'a serene grey bird […] first cousins of the albatross' (2010: p. 57), a connection which ties Algie's shooting of the bird to that of the killing of the albatross in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1834), which brings fatal bad luck down on the entirety of the mariner's crew.

cannot or will not comprehend despite Jack's sense that, upon seeing Spitsbergen for the first time, '[i]t made humanity irrelevant' (p. 37).

Jack's assessment is indicative of the extent to which Paver's gothic project can only be fully appreciated in the wider context of the animal life which her characters encounter on Spitsbergen. Paver accurately reflects the semi-reparative effects of laws passed by the Norwegian government following its gaining of sovereignty of the archipelago in 1920. The landscape Paver's explorers encounter is one which appears, contrary to the 'man made silence' Seton encountered in 1921, teeming with life. Jack describes

> 'Great flocks of gulls perching on icebergs, rising in flurries, diving after fish. An Arctic fox trotting over a green plain with a puffin flapping in its jaws. Reindeer raising antlered heads to watch us pass. Walruses rocking on the waves; one surfaced right beneath me with an explosive, spraying *huff*! And regarded me with a phlegmatic brown eye. The sleek heads of seals bobbed on the surface, observing us with the same curiosity with which we observed them' (p. 38).

During the journey to Spitsbergen, and throughout their time on its shores, the expedition team, and Algie in particular, spend time shooting or attempting to shoot the archipelago's wildlife. However, it is not only wild animals who are vulnerable to acts of human violence and cruelty in Paver's narrative. The pack of huskies who accompany the team on the expedition also attract Algie's attention, as Jack recounts:

> 'For days he's been trying to prevent the dogs from chewing their harnesses, and this afternoon he declared that enough's enough, and grabbed his geological hammer.
>
> "What the hell are you doing with that?" I said.
>
> "Don't worry, old man", he said breezily. "It's just an old Eskimo trick I know. You break their back teeth. Works a treat".
>
> Gus and I stared at him, appalled.
>
> Algie rolled his eyes as if we were imbeciles. "It's practically painless. You simply hang them up till they pass out, then tap away with a hammer.

> They're a tad woozy for a while, but they soon pick up. Huskies are tough as steel, don't you know' (p. 97).

Algie's plan to semi-strangle and mutilate the dogs to avoid them causing him further inconvenience is thwarted by the other members of the expedition. However, his intention to do it at all, combined with his 'breezy' attitude towards such acts of violence, resonates with other historical accounts of the ease with which non-human pain, suffering and death was dispensed and responded to on Spitsbergen. Algie's attitude is underscored by the reduction of non-human life to a material resource to be exploited, present in his comparison of the dogs to inert and insensible 'steel'.

Phoca-lisation: The Seal as Liminal in *Dark Matter*

While various animals are subject to cruelty and violent death in Paver's novel, the animal most frequently its object, and the primary figure through which the gothic resonances of Spitsbergen's history of animal cruelty takes place, is the seal. Seals are littoral, creatures of the shoreline, bridging the sea and the land. They have other associations with liminality, too, particularly as creatures of folklore who 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 humans as their origin point, as Martin Puhvel (1963) points out:

> 'A varied body of traditions ascribes human origin to the seal. On the German Baltic island of Riigen the animal has been believed to be descended from drowned human beings. Concerning the same tradition in the Orkneys it was reported late in the last century that the belief that drowned people turn into seals is since a generation extinct' (p. 326).

Puhvel goes on to recount the Norwegian folkloric belief that seals evolved from the soldiers of the Egyptian Pharaoh, drowned by the Red Sea, stating: '[m]any thought that they were sometimes able to discard their animal form and assume human shape. A similar superstition prevailed on the Faeroe Islands, where it was thought that the seals each Twelfth Night turn

into humans' (p. 328). Setting aside the fleeting physical resemblances the seal might share with the human—the likeness which exists between seal flippers and human hands, the possibility that, as Anne Collett (2009) puts it '[a] man's head might look like a seal's head as much as a ball or kelp'—it is clear that the seal frequently forms a hinge point between the human and non-human world, 'reminders of the other bodies to which we are kin and with whom we share the bloody brine of life and death' (p. 122).

The image of the seal sinks and resurfaces at crucial points in Paver's novel. Seals slide 'through the water and [vanish] under the ice' (p. 36). Their heads bob above the surface of the water, observing the ingress of the human into the 'no man's land' of Spitsbergen (p. 38). Frequently though, the seals which the reader encounters are dead, slaughtered by the human characters and present only as an absence. The seal Algie shoots from the team's boat '[sinks] before the men [can] retrieve it' (p. 38) and the animal Algie 'bags' later in the novel, to feed to the huskies, is present only in 'the amount of blood spattered over the rocks' (p. 59). Moreover, the *Isbørn,* the ship which takes the expedition team to Svalbard, is a 'sealing sloop', on board which Jack's cabin 'stinks of seal blubber and [is] only slightly bigger than a coffin' (p. 24).[13] This description, in which the remnants of the dead seals appear to permeate the very fabric of the ship itself, and which substitutes Jack for the hunted seals in the 'coffin' that the sealer becomes for them, points to the ubiquity of this animal in *Dark Matter*. 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.

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:

> 'There was a crowd on the pavement, so I stopped. They were watching a body being pulled from the river […] Leaning over a parapet, I saw three men on a barge hauling a bundle of sodden clothes on to the deck. I made out a wet round head and a forearm which one of the gaffs had ripped open. The flesh was ragged and grey, like torn rubber' (p. 11).

[13] Tellingly, in this passage Jack compares the *Isbørn* to the ship 'in *Moby Dick*' (p. 24), invoking a further narrative in which the hunting of a wild animal results in injury, illness, madness and death, fates which come to befall the entirety of the Spitsbergen expedition.

In the description of the corpse, its grey rubbery skin and 'wet round head' begin 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:

> 'Tacked above the mantelpiece is a picture called "A Polar Scene" that I cut out of the *Illustrated London News*. A vast, snowy land and a black sea dotted with icebergs. A tent, a sledge and some husky dogs. Two men in Shackleton gear standing over the carcass of a polar bear. […] I've just noticed. There's a seal in the foreground. All these years and I thought it was a wave but actually it's a seal. I can make out its round, wet head emerging from the water. Looking at me' (pp. 13-15).

Jack's encounter with being 'looked at' by the seal, should more properly be understood as a being 'looked at' by the ultimate other, as Jacques Derrida outlines in his text *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), wherein he states: '[s]ince so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other' (p. 3). It is an encounter which, when read alongside Derrida's text, puts pressure on the apparent 'abyss' (p. 31) which has been instituted between the human and the animal, one which is rife with confusion.[14]

The confusion between seals and humans present throughout the novel is fostered in part through Paver's return to the image of the 'wet round head' or 'round wet head'. This phrase recurs on multiple occasions, with the oscillating placement of the words 'wet' and 'round' linguistically performing a destabilising 'switching' between human and seal. At certain points commas interpose an apparent distance between certain elements of the phrase, while at others the commas disappear, further unsettling the stability of the phrase, and the related stability of the epistemological categories of being constituted by the human and non-human, by seal and man. 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

[14] The usefulness of Derrida's thinking around the apparently entirely discrete but ultimately collapsing categories of 'human' and 'animal' for eco-gothic analysis are developed in a number of different directions in Heholt and Edmundson's *Gothic Animals*, particularly in terms of considering the 'real' animal within the gothic text, rather than focussing only on the monstrous or supernatural animal (p.6).

the non-human on the Svalbard archipelago until relatively recently. Moreover, these incidents simultaneously prompt a recognition that these acts of violence are never as bounded by categories of being as they appear.

Of these, an 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. Jack recounts how:

> 'Yesterday I went with [Algie] in the canoe, and I got lucky and shot a seal. We rowed like hell and gaffed it before it sank, then dragged it back to shore. The dogs were going frantic at their stakes. Gus ran down to help cut up the carcass. Algie was chief butcher, because of course he's the expert after six weeks in Greenland. So there he is, skinning—or I should say 'flensing' it—with his nasty great "flensing knife" (why can't he just call it a knife?). But as he's slitting the belly, the creature shudders. Its guts are spilling out, its blood soaking the snow, that hot-copper smell catching at my throat, but its eyes are big and soft as plums—*alive.* "Christ, it's not dead!" I croak as I scrabble for a rock to finish it off. Gus has gone white and he's fumbling for his knife. Algie calmly goes on skinning. It's only when he reaches the bit over the heart that he sticks in his knife and ends it' (pp. 96-7).

Algie's skinning of the seal alive possesses an uncanny resonance with Lamont's description of the 'flensing' of a seal, wherein he observes that:

> 'The "flensing" of a seal or walrus is, in one respect, a most horrible sight, for immediately the skin and blubber is stripped off the carcass begins to shrink and quiver so violently, as even to seem as if it was struggling under the hands and knives of the operators. This shocking appearance is owing to the contraction of the muscles, caused by the sudden cold' (pp. 162-3).

In Paver's novel Lamont's imaginative reanimation of the seal post-mortem is horrifyingly literalised, in a move which mirrors the transition from a metaphorical confusion between

animal and human which Lamont indulges in[15] to a textual blending of the human and the animal which Paver undertakes in her construction of Svalbard's supernatural presence, who, as is explored below, hovers indeterminately between these categories of being.

Algie's calmness, mirroring his 'breezy' approach to mutilating the huskies earlier in the novel, renders the passage particularly disturbing. However, it also draws attention to the perverse littorality which characterises the fur and skin trade for which Spitsbergen was a hub. To quote Collett (2009): '[s]kin is itself littoral—the border area between worlds—that which distinguishes and separates and that which allows communion between inside and outside, seal and human, sea and land. It has a dual purpose' (p. 128). If we read Collett's statement in the context of Algie's torture of the seal then the grotesque transgression of the skin's littorality upon which the trade in skins and pelts relies becomes visible. In this passage the boundary between the self and the world, the human and the animal and between the land and the sea gain a shared bloody significance, particularly when considered alongside the way in which Paver characterises the malevolent presence apparently haunting Gruhuken.

Initially that which haunts the Spitsbergen coastline is figured as humanoid, as Jack misidentifies him at first as a member of the crew of the now-departing Isbørn: 'He turned to face me, a dark figure against the glare. Fleetingly, I saw that his hands were at his sides, and that one shoulder was higher than the other. There was something about the tilt of his head that I didn't like' (p. 82). However, a second encounter positions this being as hybrid, its 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:

> 'Thirty yards away on the rocks, something moved. […] It crouched on the edge of the rocks. It was streaming wet. It had just hauled itself from the sea. And yet the stillness was absolute. No sound of droplets pattering on snow. No creak of waterproofs as it rose. Slowly. Awkwardly.

[15] Lamont is guilty of this throughout his text, but a striking instance of this anthropomorphisation occurs in a passage describing how a seal appeared to watch Lamont skinning a polar bear he has shot: 'we took hold of the bear, and dragged him to an iceberg to flense him. While we were doing so a seal came capering about in the water, popping up his head close to us and looking at proceedings exultantly, as if he was thinking with Charles IX that "the smell of a slaughtered enemy was sweet". I punished him for indulging in such unchristian-like emotions by shooting him through the head' (p. 183).

> It stood. It faced me. Dark, dark against the sea. I saw its arms hanging at its sides. I saw that one shoulder was higher than the other. I saw its *wet, round, head*' (p. 104, my italics).

Further appearances of the presence occur in locations with importance for the human exploitation of animals: at the bear post, a structure used to lure large carnivorous prey within the range of guns, and finally, in one of the *Isbørn*'s sealing launches. In both of these appearances though, the same phrase emerges:

> 'In one appalling heartbeat I took in its *wet round head* and its arms hanging at its sides, one shoulder higher than the other. I felt its will coming at me in waves. Intense, unwavering, malign. Such malevolence. No mercy. No humanity. It belonged to the dark beyond humanity. It was rage without end' (p. 171, my italics).

> [T]here are seven men in the boat. Next to Gus – a *wet round head*. […] Flailing I strike a body. It isn't Gus. My hand clutches something soft as mouldy leather' (p. 234, my italics).

This final appearance of the malevolent presence who has persecuted Jack throughout his time on Spitsbergen resurrects the rubbery flesh of the victim of drowning that Jack encounters earlier on in the novel while also removing the commas which, initially, kept the elements of this key phrase 'wet round head/round wet head' grammatically separate. The breaking down of the syntax of this phrase mirrors the profoundly gothic breakdown of categories of being at work in the novel. This breakdown reaches its apogee in the origin story for this figure, which is implied to be that of a trapper murdered by a mining syndicate who fraudulently took possession of his land.

Gus's diary reveals that Algie has been subject to intrusive thoughts and images implying the horrific fate of the trapper: '*And once, on those rocks, I had the most dreadful thought. Or rather not a thought, but an image in my head. I saw knives. I don't want to say anymore. And I smelt paraffin, I swear I did*' (p. 152). Jack on the other hand has a vivid dream in which he imagines himself in the position of the tortured man:

> 'Now I'm tied to the bear post. Now I'm afraid. I can't see. I can't speak. I have no tongue. I smell paraffin. I hear the crackle of flames. I know that someone nearby is holding a torch. Now I hear the clink of metal dragged over rocks. […] That's when I remembered what I'd forgotten before: the rusty relics which we found when we first came to Gruhuken. We buried them to make the place safe for the dogs. Wire. Gaffs. Knives. Big, rusty knives: the sort you use once you've gaffed your seal and dragged it to shore. […] After they'd finished with the knives, that's when the paraffin came in, and the torches' (pp. 218-220).

These quotations demonstrate that the implied treatment of the trapper (or the horrific shared fantasy that all of the explorers seem to access) reduces him to the status of the animals trapped, killed, skinned, rendered down, and dismembered as part of the economic activities which are undertaken in Spitsbergen. This is particularly evident both in the recognition by Jack that the knives which it is implied are used to torture the trapper are the same kind of knives designed to flense seals, and in the juxtaposition of the rendering of the space of Spitsbergen 'safe' for the dogs with the sadistic treatment of the trapper. The horror generated by this act of sadistic violence is not, I argue, generated through the human trapper's treatment *as an* animal but by the fact 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.

Having established both the cruelty and violence which shaped Spitsbergen as a location between the 1600s and 1900s, and the way in which Paver's novel both re-activates this dynamic between the human and the non-human world in *Dark Matter*, while also constructing a supernatural presence which symbolically and syntactically disorganises the categories of human and animal, the question remains of what significance these acts of animal cruelty, and the malevolent spectres they generate in this text might have, both in the novel and beyond. The use of cruelty—towards animals or otherwise—as a way of creating and stabilising an acceptable self has been studied by Arnold Arluke (2006), who acknowledges how:

> 'Using cruelty to create a self is an emergent and reflective process that often occurs in subcultures (Prus 1997) and in the course of situated activities (Blumer 1969). Unwanted identities imputed by others can be replaced when members

> of subcultures assert more favorable ones. For example, people who belong to a disfavored group, perform low-status work, or commit illegal or morally questionable deeds might use an encounter with cruelty to refashion their sense of self and present it to others in a positive light' (p. 7).

For Arluke, mutilating or destroying literal animals may be undertaken in order to allow for a disavowing of the animal we repudiate in ourselves.

Bearing Arluke's assessment in mind, the significance of the violence and cruelty which pervades Paver's novel becomes clearer when we attend to the detail that the trapper who refuses to give up his claim to land in Spitsbergen, and is therefore slaughtered, is described by a fellow hunter 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 place it in conversation with Nathan Leach's (2011) 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' (p. 24). In her writing on abjection, Julia Kristeva (1982) explores the relationship between abjection and animality, stating that:

> 'The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the *animal.* Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to separate it from the frightening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder' (p. 324, my italics).

Precisely how shaky these separations are, how proximate these 'fragile' animal states, is repeatedly gestured towards in Paver's novel. Following Jack's simultaneous decision to go on the Spitsbergen expedition and apparent recognition of the previously unseen seal in his Arctic image taken from the *Illustrated London News*, Jack recalls how immediately '[a]fterwards, I went back to my room and threw up' (p. 17). This literal abjection, a bodily rejection of something experienced as foreign to it, is not commented on by the narrator and this textual silence figures a rejection of the bodily, and thus the animal, in the face of the prospect of 'rational' scientific exploration. Such a rejection continues later in the novel when Jack is repulsed by Algie's body: 'Algie is using his collapsible safari bath, and I'd rather not watch,

all that wobbly, freckled flesh. His feet are the worst. They're flat pink slabs, and the second and third toes protrude way beyond the big toe, which I find repulsive' (Paver, 2010: p. 77).

Jack's reaction dramatises a tendency in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing on Arctic exploration, acknowledged by McCorristine, to ignore or occlude the physical body of the explorer and the pain, indignity and disfigurement it was at risk of suffering in this extreme environment. As McCorristine (2018) states, '[w]hile it is dangerous to assume that all journalists and naval authorities were enamoured of Arctic exploration […], where commentators were positive about the benefits of northern expeditions a rather disembodied mythology of heroism predominated. Less well publicised were the bodily and ignoble incidents that lurked beneath the epic stories' (p. 32). One explanation for this is that the body in its naked, ill or injured state can be considered to be occupying the kinds of 'fragile state […] where man strays on the territories of the animal,' which Kristeva (1982) understood as provoking a compulsion towards abjection (p. 324). Furthermore, the presence of Jack and his fellow explorers on Svalbard's shoreline, and the presence of the hundreds of hunters and trappers before them, can be considered within the ecogothic political economy of this novel as precisely a '[trespass] on the territory of the animal' which renders the shoreline itself a theatre of abjection in which the human and the non-human become uncannily enmeshed. Compelled by Spitsbergen's climate and landscape to become littoral creatures in their own right, negotiating a fragile existence on the borderline between the sea and the land, Paver's explorers are repeatedly confronted by their own animality, and the collapse of the notion, articulated by Timothy C. Baker (2020), that the non-human animal can act as 'a marginal being against whom men define themselves, [. . .] through acts of violence' (p. 291).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is productive to turn to an instance of the kinds of 'refuse and corpses' which Kristeva (1982) likewise understands as abject, as constituting that which we 'thrust aside in order to live' (p. 314), inscribed in the confusion which abounds in the novel between signifiers of economic claims, and memorials of bodily harm and death. On arrival at Spitsbergen, Jack is disappointed to see:

> ‘less picturesque remains. Abandoned mines, and the broken down cabins of prospectors long gone. In an inlet I saw a post rising from a cairn of rocks with a plank nailed across the top. I assumed it was a grave, but one of the seamen told me it was a claim sign’ (pp. 62-3).

However, such a confusion between graves and claims resolves itself when we recognise the overdetermined nature of these structures, as illustrated in the following passage:

> ‘When we got back to the hut, Gus, the inveterate biologist, paused to identify the bones. Many are scattered, the disembodied skulls of walruses and reindeer, but others are recognisable skeletons. Gus pointed out foxes, fine and brittle as porcelain; and the big, man-like frames of bears. And smaller ones with short limbs and long toes that look unsettlingly like human hands, which he said are seals. I tripped over a claim sign lying on the ground. A posh one, of enamelled tin with emphatic capitals punched out in English, German and Norwegian: PROPERTY OF THE SPITSBERGEN PROSPECTING COMPANY OF EDINBURGH 1905. “And now there’s nothing left”, said Gus, chucking the sign away’ (pp. 62-3).

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 in Svalbard is inextricably linked to non-human maiming. 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, a shoring up which *Dark Matter*’s haunting presence consistently proves always already compromised. Here, the destabilisation of the human-non-human binary takes place primarily on the littoral boundary of the shoreline, a location conventionally understood as a point of arrival, and as such an arena pregnant with the potential for cross-cultural encounters and violence. The ecoGothic treatment of this shoreline space compels the reader to recognise the specific ways in which Svalbard’s coast has historically been constructed as a landscape evocative of capitalist potential.

Moreover, Paver's novel utilises its Arctic setting in order to demonstrate that the operations of capitalism, the hunting, trapping, and mining which drew people to Svalbard over the course of four centuries, do not limit their exploitation to the non-human. Such a position is obliquely announced in the implication that the drowned man who Jack sees at the novel's opening constitutes 'another poor devil who couldn't find work' (2010: p. 11), but is overtly signalled in an encounter Jack has in Longyearbyen, prior to his arrival on Svalbard. He recounts how:

> 'On our way back to the ship, we passed a group of miners heading for "town". One turned his head and stared at me. His face was black with soot, his eyes angry and inflamed. He looked scarcely human. Capable of anything. I felt obscurely menaced, and ashamed' (p. 45).

This passage dramatises the ease with which the apparently abjected animal returns to look, in Derrida's sense, at the human, to provoke in them a shame and unease which is powerfully associated with the abject, the process by which, to quote Kristeva (1982), '[t]he clean and proper […] becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame' (p. 320). Crucially, however, in the miner's interrogatory gaze is captured the integral relationship between capitalist operations at work in the Norwegian Arctic and a carefully co-ordinated slippage from the status of human subject to abjected animal which permits the resource extraction and exploitation upon which capitalism is predicated. Ultimately though, Paver's novel demonstrates how these substitutions and abjections are always inadequate, always incomplete, the 'figure' of the animal-as-other perpetually 'stands watching on the shore' (p. 234).

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Lucy Arnold is a specialist in Contemporary literature, with particular research interests in contemporary gothic, narratives of haunting, contemporary women's writing and psychoanalytic criticism. Her published work to date has concerned the writing of Booker Prize winning novelist Hilary Mantel, with her monograph, *Reading Hilary Mantel: Haunted Decades*, published with Bloomsbury in 2019. She is currently working on her second monograph project—*Little Strangers: The Spectral Child in Contemporary Literary Culture.*

Outside of her research and teaching, she is presently exploring the use of psychodynamic theory in higher education teaching and has established a Homeless Reading Group project, working with individuals with experience of homelessness and precarious housing in Worcester and beyond.

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