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## Haunted Ice, Fearful Sounds, and the Arctic Sublime: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic Space

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4 Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic Space  
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6 Abstract

7 This article considers a unified polar Gothic as a way of examining texts set in Arctic and  
8 Antarctic space. Through analysis of Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner',  
9 Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, the  
10 author creates a framework for understanding polar Gothic, which includes liminal space, the  
11 supernatural, the Gothic sublime, ghosts and apparitions, and imperial Gothic anxieties about  
12 the degradation of 'civilisation'. Analysing Verne's scientific-adventure novel *The*  
13 *Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866) with this framework, the author contextualises the  
14 continued public interest in the lost Franklin expedition and reflects on nineteenth-century  
15 polar Gothic anxieties in the present day. Polar space creates an uncanny potential for seeing  
16 one's own self and examining what lies beneath the surface of one's own rational mind.  
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20 Keywords: polar exploration, imagined geography, Arctic, Antarctica, ghosts, Gothic  
21 literature  
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25 In 1772 James Cook set out on a scientific expedition at the behest of the Royal Society, who  
26 believed that a massive continent must exist south of New Zealand and Australia. In search of  
27 the hypothetical *Terra Australis*, Cook entered the Antarctic Circle and explored the frozen,  
28 foggy seas surrounding Antarctica for nearly a year. In a journal entry from 1775 he reflects:  
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36 I can be bold enough to say that no man will ever venture farther than I have done [...]  
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38 Thick fogs, snow storms, intense cold, and every other thing that can render navigation  
39 dangerous, must be encountered; and these difficulties are greatly heightened by the  
40 inexpressibly horrid aspe[ct] of the country; a country doomed by Nature never once to  
41 feel the warmth of the sun's rays, but to lie buried in everlasting snow and ice.<sup>1</sup>  
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49 Cook's description begins with the adverse elements expected on a polar voyage – thick fog,  
50 snow, intense cold – but Gothic language dominates his discussion; he calls the space  
51 'inexpressibly horrid', 'doomed'. For Cook, an experienced naval officer, and representative  
52 of the best of British science, this frozen land comes to symbolise something beyond  
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3 experience, knowledge, or even expression. His language gives rise to what we might term  
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5 polar Gothic.  
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7  
8 Imagined polar space in nineteenth-century fiction is predicated on extreme,  
9  
10 terrifying, treacherous, and yet awe-inspiring conditions: the polar is therefore a natural  
11  
12 setting for the Gothic, as the number of Gothic works that venture into the Antarctic or Arctic  
13  
14 attest. Here, I discuss three: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'  
15  
16 (1798), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur*  
17  
18 *Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) – alongside Jules Verne's ostensibly non-Gothic *The*  
19  
20 *Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866), which draws on a polar Gothic framework in its  
21  
22 imagination of polar space. Although on opposite sides of the earth, as vast frozen regions  
23  
24 with limited familiar landmarks for travellers, imagined Arctic and Antarctic spaces possess  
25  
26 similar characteristics. In addition to their disorientating alien quality, the presence of ice  
27  
28 makes differentiating sea from land challenging even for seasoned explorers. The enormity  
29  
30 and hostility of polar space pushes beyond the capacity of the so-called civilised mind, and,  
31  
32 in so doing, becomes Gothic space.  
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37 This article has two aims. In the first part, I argue that the imagination of polar space  
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39 generates a unifying polar Gothic. Critical discussion theorising Arctic and Antarctic Gothic  
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41 has focused typically on one pole or the other; beyond the latitudinal difference, the key  
42  
43 scholarly distinction made between the two is that Antarctic Gothic focuses on the antihuman  
44  
45 as a source of fear, while Arctic Gothic dwells on the human. Yet Coleridge, Shelley, and Poe  
46  
47 all engage with the same generic tradition, a way of writing about the extreme and uncanny  
48  
49 space at the end of the world. In their texts, ice creates a negative space, which gives rise to  
50  
51 supernatural beings that reflect the self: the albatross, Frankenstein's creature, the Polar  
52  
53 Spirit. Ultimately, understanding polar space as Gothic space generates an awareness of self,  
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55 arguably allowing subconscious anxieties to come to the surface.  
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3 In the second part, I use that polar Gothic framework to examine Verne's *Captain*  
4 *Hatteras*. While this novel is predominately a scientific adventure set on an Arctic voyage  
5 and dwells very little on the psychologies of fear and dread that fascinate Gothic writers,  
6 examining it in a Gothic context gives voice to its underlying anxiety: the tension between  
7 'civilisation' and nature, between empire and other. In Patrick Brantlinger's formulation,  
8 'Imperial Gothic combines the seemingly scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of  
9 imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult.'<sup>2</sup> Brantlinger argues that in imperial  
10 Gothic 'Western rationality may be subverted by the very superstitions it rejects'.<sup>3</sup> In  
11 imagined polar space, however, Western rationality is confronted by its irrational obverse.  
12 This is visible in the way that Hatteras and his crew traverse waters haunted by previous  
13 expeditions, a reflection of self with a gloomy hint of fatalism, particularly given the  
14 prominent discussion of the tragic final expedition of explorer John Franklin. The Franklin  
15 expedition set off in 1845 with much fanfare to sail through the Northwest Passage and  
16 mysteriously disappeared; the search for the missing ships and crew led to reports of  
17 cannibalism, which shocked the British public.

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36 For the nineteenth-century British public, the anxious awareness of self brought about  
37 by the imagination of polar space exposes the fallacy of ideals such as heroism, civilisation,  
38 and progress. Although the native population is for the most part absent in the texts I will  
39 discuss, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century polar exploration was an empire-building project,  
40 an attempt to fill in and claim the last 'blank' spaces on the globe. In polar Gothic, instead of  
41 the imperial Gothic encounter with the native population, the explorer encounters an  
42 exaggerated reflection of his repressed, 'uncivilised' self. Considering the twenty-first  
43 century's fascination with polar space as a site of energy resources, geopolitical cooperation,  
44 and scientific study, we might do well to ask ourselves why the Gothic influences our  
45 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.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen describes the Arctic landscape in 1895 as an 'empty waste of white'.<sup>6</sup> The explorers perceive the unfamiliar frozen landscape in terms of absence; for them, ice and snow becomes simply blankness, 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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, a supernatural being that seeks vengeance for

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2  
3 the albatross's death: 'The lonesome Spirit from the south-pole carries on the ship as far as  
4 the Line, in obedience to the angelic troop, but still requireth vengeance' (gloss for V. 377-  
5 82).<sup>8</sup> The fact that the albatross and the Polar Spirit both come from the mysterious 'land of  
6 mist and snow' (II. 134) further reinforces the supernatural potential of the polar space.  
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11 The connection between the supernatural and the unknown parallels the link between  
12 the alien and the uncharted. Eric G. Wilson postulates that the South Pole represented a 'dark  
13 other' for European travellers: 'the alien planet – the antihuman, the monstrous'.<sup>9</sup> In 'Rime',  
14 this alien quality of polar space is emphasised in Coleridge's glossing of the poem; the world  
15 is a 'land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen' (gloss for I. 55-  
16 62). Coleridge's poem imagines the icy waters near Antarctica in much the same way Cook  
17 describes them. The ice that surrounds the Mariner's ship creates an uncanny space, in which  
18 sensory experience is distorted and disrupted. Describing the ice, the mariner relates: 'And  
19 through the drifts the snowy cliffs / Did send a dismal sheen: / Nor shapes of men nor beasts  
20 we ken— / The ice was all between' (I. 55-58). Known figures are not visible, but the third  
21 line of this quatrain is ambiguous. Are there no figures, or only unknown figures, blurred and  
22 unrecognisable through the ice? The 'snowy cliffs' compound the liminality of the third line;  
23 openings in the ice seem to be the only tangible visual element, emitting an uncanny 'dismal  
24 sheen', but by their nature, they are ephemeral, empty space. While the ice defines the space,  
25 statically entrapping the sailors, it seems to be alive: '[The ice] cracked and growled, and  
26 roared and howled', (I. 61). Although audible, and recognisable, the ice sounds are beyond  
27 sensory experience, 'Like noises in a swoond!' the mariner concludes (I. 62). This  
28 soundscape is so otherworldly that the mariner's only point of comparison for it is  
29 unconsciousness, harkening to Cook's experience of a feeling so horrid he is incapable of  
30 expressing it. Pyne describes Cook's discovery as an anti-discovery, a 'negative discovery'.<sup>10</sup>  
31 Like Cook, Coleridge's mariner experiences a negative sublime, an unexpected nullification.  
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3 Both Poe and Coleridge focus on isolated individuals threatened in an unknown  
4 environment to explore the juxtaposition of rational and irrational human consciousness.  
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6 William E. Lenz discusses this tension by comparing the Gothic and sea adventure genres,  
7  
8 naming points of convergence, which include ‘the journey from innocence to experience’,  
9  
10 ‘the isolation of the self in a threatening environment’, ‘the dramatic rendering of nature as  
11  
12 hostile and superhuman’, ‘the voyage as a personal test resulting in discovery’, and ‘the  
13  
14 location of the individual in an alien, or “other”, human community’.<sup>11</sup> Lenz argues that the  
15  
16 exaggeration and intensification of these conventions through Gothic writing enable Poe to  
17  
18 make a larger philosophical point about American transcendentalism, namely that ‘to strip off  
19  
20 all convention is to stand naked and vulnerable [...] to transcend the limitations of the senses  
21  
22 is to become senseless’.<sup>12</sup> Although Lenz’s argument focusses on the Antarctic, it applies as  
23  
24 well to Arctic space, as my reading of *Frankenstein* demonstrates. Polar Gothic allows for  
25  
26 indeterminacy, the potential for a new definition of self, both for the individual and for the  
27  
28 state he represents. Coleridge’s mariner, entering the liminal space through his experience of  
29  
30 the ‘negative sublime’, discovers only senselessness and grief.  
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36 Shelley’s *Frankenstein* famously responds to Coleridge’s poem, juxtaposing his  
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38 poem’s negative sublime with the Romantic hubris of her polar explorer Robert Walton.  
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40 While Coleridge’s mariner enters Antarctic space with fear and returns cursed, Shelley’s  
41  
42 explorer sets out for the Arctic with optimism and a light heart, even gently mocking  
43  
44 Coleridge’s polar curse: ‘I am going to unexplored regions to “the land of mist and snow”;  
45  
46 but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety.’<sup>13</sup> *Frankenstein* opens  
47  
48 with Walton’s letters; he writes that he should ‘be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost  
49  
50 and desolation’, but describes the chill breeze on his cheek as ‘the wind of promise’ (13). His  
51  
52 hopes for the voyage north are suffused with the language of Romantic fervour: ‘[the pole]  
53  
54 ever presents itself to [his] imagination as the seat of beauty and delight’ (*Ibid.*) and his ‘heart  
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3 glow[s] with an enthusiasm that ever elevates [him] to heaven' (14). He describes the long  
4  
5 polar summer as a time of 'perpetual splendour' and possibility, for, as he asks, 'What may  
6  
7 not be expected in a country of eternal light?' (13). This opening passage serves to associate  
8  
9 the scientific voyage to understand magnetism with the sublime, and even to outweigh the  
10  
11 negative aspects of the difficult journey north. Walton has fallen into a generic trap,  
12  
13 projecting the trope of the Romantic North onto his experience. Angela Byrne establishes the  
14  
15 North as a productive European Romantic space with its own colonial assumptions and  
16  
17 tropes, 'uncivilised and wild, yet also the perfect location for scientific enquiry'.<sup>14</sup> The  
18  
19 Romantic North further developed as a concept through increased travel northward facilitated  
20  
21 by the pursuit of new astronomical, geological, and biological knowledge. Walton idealises  
22  
23 Arctic space, which carries no terror for him. He dismisses Coleridge's mariner, but he has  
24  
25 not yet experienced the liminality and destructive potential of polar gothic space.  
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29  
30 When he encounters Frankenstein, the scientist's woeful tale shifts Walton's  
31  
32 perception of polar space significantly; he begins to describe his experience as one of fear  
33  
34 and dread, engaging not just with a Romantic ideal, but with the 'Arctic sublime' which  
35  
36 draws on Edmund Burke's categorisation of sublime landscapes (1757).<sup>15</sup> Critical discussions  
37  
38 of the Arctic sublime rely on Gothic tropes; for example, Diana Donald describes 'the terror  
39  
40 arising from darkness, solitude, obscurity and confusion; a sense of great undefined spaces  
41  
42 stretching beyond the lateral limits of the picture; ferocious beasts, which, like the Arctic  
43  
44 itself, convey a sense of uncontrollable and menacing power.'<sup>16</sup> For Walton, the beauties of  
45  
46 the ice field become menacing craggy mountains of ice that trap the ship and drive the sailors  
47  
48 nearly to the point of mutiny (205). In his theorisation of the Gothic sublime, Vijay Mishra  
49  
50 places the Arctic sublime within its historical context, noting 'its emphasis on the European  
51  
52 sense of disempowerment in the face of the Arctic void and the kinds of knowledges, both  
53  
54 human and barbaric, the voyages in search of the Northwest Passage symbolized.'<sup>17</sup> In  
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3 *Frankenstein* ice serves metaphorically for the limits of civilisation, empire, and science.  
4  
5 Frankenstein's eloquence in urging the men onward centres on their relationship to ice: 'This  
6  
7 ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you, if  
8  
9 you say it shall not' (207). For Frankenstein, ice, like death, can be overcome through the  
10  
11 sheer power of will. The scientist projects his own hubris onto the explorer in this speech, and  
12  
13 the expedition is doomed. Like the supernatural terror that emerges from liminal Antarctic  
14  
15 space in Poe's novel to undermine the ideal of American transcendentalism, Arctic space in  
16  
17 *Frankenstein* destabilises the notion of empire, equating imperial conquest with a Romantic  
18  
19 hubris fated to fail.  
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22  
23 Frankenstein and Walton share a Romantic vision of scientific inquiry that resonates  
24  
25 with a hero quest. However, extraordinary scientific discovery – the revivification of a corpse  
26  
27 through electric current or achieving the magnetic pole – allows the brave scientist to touch  
28  
29 the sublime. Frankenstein's moment of creation begins with a spark and ends in horror (56),  
30  
31 just as Walton's idealistic vision of Arctic space at the beginning of the novel transforms into  
32  
33 dread by the end. Frankenstein's Romantic hubris results in his death in the Arctic, the  
34  
35 creature standing over his 'white and cold' corpse (214), but the Polar Spirit makes a subtle  
36  
37 entrance earlier in the novel. Both Frankenstein and the creature feel chilled after the  
38  
39 revivification scene (57, 59; 99, 100, respectively). This chill, however, is not the 'wind of  
40  
41 promise' Walton feels setting out on his voyage, but the icy hand of fate, binding creator and  
42  
43 creature together. Frankenstein's flight from the vivification scene even includes an excerpt  
44  
45 from Coleridge's 'Rime', reinforcing this connection: 'Like one, on a lonesome road who, /  
46  
47 Doth walk in fear and dread, / And having once turned round, walks on, / And knows no  
48  
49 more his head; / Because he knows a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread' (58). A  
50  
51 parallel can be drawn between Frankenstein and Walton: before encountering Frankenstein,  
52  
53 Walton idealised his polar voyage, just as Frankenstein idealised his creation before  
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3 vivification. After each of these events, recognition dawns, and terror emerges, just as it has  
4  
5 for the Mariner, plunged into a gothic nightmare.  
6

7  
8 Before Walton meets Frankenstein, ice and fog move to surround the ship, as in  
9  
10 Coleridge's poem before the albatross appears. Despite his earlier mockery of the ancient  
11  
12 Mariner's imagined terrors, Walton observes the 'vast and irregular plains of ice, which  
13  
14 seemed to have no end' and admits that '[his] own mind began to grow watchful with anxious  
15  
16 thoughts' (23). Frankenstein's creature appears to Walton and his men as an unexpected  
17  
18 apparition; they watch him through telescopes, wondering at his 'gigantic stature' (23). As in  
19  
20 Coleridge's 'Rime', ice distorts perception. Despite their scientific tools, they cannot make  
21  
22 him out (seeing only that he has 'the shape of a man') and cannot estimate his distance: 'this  
23  
24 apparition seemed to denote that it was not, in reality, so distant as we had supposed' (23).  
25  
26 Further reinforcing the mystery of polar space, in the end of the novel, the creature disappears  
27  
28 into the icy darkness, heading northward. The bulk of Frankenstein's story does not take  
29  
30 place in the ice, but the novel's Gothic atmosphere is enhanced by the engulfing darkness,  
31  
32 bleakness, inhospitable climate, and even the creaking of both ship and the ice that frames  
33  
34 it.<sup>18</sup> Polar Gothic as a cultural construct provides a contextualising frame through which to  
35  
36 consider manifestations of anxiety – both on the individual and on the broader imperial level  
37  
38 – that emerge in the juxtaposition of self and other, and the reflection of the other in the self.  
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43 In these texts by Coleridge, Shelley, and Poe, polar Gothic conventions – extreme  
44  
45 weather, harsh climate, ice and snow, poor visibility, creaking ship sounds, an eerie, muffled  
46  
47 silence – create an atmosphere of fear priming both reader and protagonist for an encounter  
48  
49 with a supernatural other, an external source of terror. Polar Gothic additionally relies on  
50  
51 destabilisation and disorientation through aural and visual distortion. These elements work  
52  
53 together with the unknown frozen landscape to create a liminal negative space that has  
54  
55 supernatural potential, and the beings that emerge from it reflect the self.  
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3 Finally, Verne's scientific adventure novel *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* also  
4  
5 rewards consideration as polar Gothic, which I use as a frame to explore its representation of  
6  
7 polar space as an extension of empire. Central to my discussion of Verne is the history of the  
8  
9 final Franklin expedition, a source of fascination and trauma for the British public in the late  
10  
11 1840s and early 1850s. In a departure from the earlier polar Gothic texts, in *Captain Hatteras*  
12  
13 – inspired by the Franklin expedition's grim fate – supernatural terror appears as a  
14  
15 manifestation of an uncivilised, hidden self, latent within each individual.  
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### 20 21 The Haunting of Captain Hatteras

22  
23 Published in 1866, *Hatteras* tells of an expedition to the North Pole and was predicated on  
24  
25 the most up-to-date scientific theories about the magnetic poles. The novel's hero, Captain  
26  
27 John Hatteras, is determined to claim the North Pole for the British Empire. Because of his  
28  
29 reckless reputation, he hires another man to outfit a ship, the *Forward*, to head north; the  
30  
31 initial mystery of the missing captain colours the voyage, creating discord among the crew.  
32  
33 When one of the sailors reveals himself to be Hatteras in disguise, tensions mount. The  
34  
35 malcontented crew mutinies and blows up the ship before fleeing across the ice, and Hatteras  
36  
37 and a handful of loyal officers find themselves stranded in the Arctic. The novel features  
38  
39 well-drawn characters placed in extreme situations solved through a combination of bravery  
40  
41 and scientific knowledge. For example, as the stranded men winter in an icehouse they have  
42  
43 built, they are menaced by a polar bear. While the bear poses a significant threat and the men  
44  
45 have exhausted their ammunition, they persevere using science: knowing the solidification  
46  
47 temperature of mercury, they freeze a thermometer bulb to create a bullet, which they use to  
48  
49 kill the bear. This adventure is even fortuitous as the meat replenishes their dwindling food  
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51 supply, allowing them to continue their journey to the Pole.  
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3 Richard Phillips has outlined two opposing strands of Verne scholarship. Some  
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5 readers consider the French writer's works to be 'conservatively confident in the *zeitgeist* of  
6  
7 Victorian Britain: confident in progress, enthusiastic about science and committed to  
8  
9 imperialism.'<sup>19</sup> However, Verne's *oeuvre* has also been read as anarchist and anti-imperialist  
10  
11 – in Phillips's formulation, 'The geography of Verne's adventure can be read as a space of  
12  
13 anarchy.'<sup>20</sup> Intriguingly, reading *Hatteras* as an adventure novel showcases the imperialist,  
14  
15 Victorian Verne, but reading the novel through the lens of polar Gothic reveals the  
16  
17 alternative, anti-imperial Verne.  
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20  
21 *Hatteras* gives the pretence of a factual account through details such as date, time,  
22  
23 temperature, and degrees of latitude and longitude woven into descriptions of the changing  
24  
25 seascape and weather conditions. This pseudo-ship's log enables an authoritative, fact-based  
26  
27 narrative voice to frame the journey, while the strong impression of the landscape on the  
28  
29 feelings of the crew is described in a series of individual reflections. For example, as the  
30  
31 *Forward* approaches the natural feature called the Devil's Thumb, the fear of the men is  
32  
33 palpable in the text:  
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38  
39 The weather was horrible that day; the snow, plucked up in dense flurries, enveloped the  
40  
41 brig in an impenetrable veil; sometimes the storm tore the fog open and in the direction of  
42  
43 land frightened eyes would then spot Devil's Thumb erect like a ghost [...]  
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45  
46 At a time when the storm's violence was getting even worse, Devil's Thumb seemed to  
47  
48 loom up beyond measure through the torn-open fog.<sup>21</sup>  
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51  
52 The effect of the stormy weather on the crew in this description echoes the ending of Poe's  
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54 *Pym*, which influenced Verne.<sup>22</sup> The 'impenetrable veil', the Devil's Thumb 'erect like a  
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3 ghost', and even the 'torn-open fog' recall the chaos and enormous white figure encountered  
4  
5 by Pym in the end of the novel.  
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8 While Poe's novel ends with a mystery, Verne begins with one, which allows the  
9  
10 supernatural to enter this scientific adventure novel. Items from newspapers and letters from  
11  
12 the ship's mysterious captain punctuate the unfounded speculation of crew and public. Rather  
13  
14 than revealing answers, however, these documents fuel even wilder suppositions, which  
15  
16 become increasingly irrational as anxiety builds. A prevailing theory is that the *Forward* is  
17  
18 captained by a mysterious, and potentially supernatural, black dog, a Gothic trope. The  
19  
20 suggestion of supernatural events enters into the narrative entirely through the crew's  
21  
22 rumormongering, and as the journey continues, comes to infect the crew's experience of  
23  
24 natural dangers, as demonstrated in the Devil's Thumb episode.  
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27  
28 One significant source of anxiety in Verne's novel is the failure of previous expeditions.  
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30 As the *Forward* travels northward, its sailors ruminate on the possibility of their own deaths;  
31  
32 the mortality rate on polar expeditions between 1770 and 1918 was considerable – estimated  
33  
34 at fifty per cent – and the men who signed for an expedition to the Arctic or Antarctic would  
35  
36 have been aware of the danger, if not the specific figure.<sup>23</sup> The thought of polar routes  
37  
38 defined by those who have passed before in the same pursuit, never to return, is a powerful  
39  
40 one. In *Hatteras* the ship's doctor contemplates the history of polar exploration, resulting in a  
41  
42 spectral vision:  
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47  
48 The strange history of these lands appeared to the doctor's imagination as, leaning over the  
49  
50 rail, he followed the brig's long wake. The names of these brave mariners crowded into his  
51  
52 memory, and in the frozen archways of the pack ice he thought he glimpsed the pale  
53  
54 ghosts of those who had never come back. (38)  
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3 While earlier literary expeditions into polar space – Coleridge, Shelley, Poe – emphasise the  
4  
5 terror of the unknown, resulting in encounters with the supernatural and the monstrous,  
6  
7 Verne’s expedition covers territory already charted by other expeditions, and as a result is  
8  
9 haunted by humans. Shane McCorrstine observes that ‘in all Arctic exploration there was a  
10  
11 sense of crossing an ontological boundary into a non-historical realm.’<sup>24</sup> McCorrstine refers  
12  
13 to spectral potential, but his statement also speaks to the perceived atemporality of polar  
14  
15 space. Although dates and times are carefully recorded in ship logs, polar explorers seem to  
16  
17 exist outside of time, just as the ghosts do. The practice of explorers to leave messages in  
18  
19 cairns, often undiscovered for long periods, sometimes not until years after the sender’s  
20  
21 death, creates an uncanny space that blurs the boundaries between life and death.<sup>25</sup> The  
22  
23 capacity of ice to preserve contributes to this liminality. Long buried corpses seem freshly  
24  
25 dead, or even just asleep. In a space defined by absence there is great capacity for  
26  
27 introspection; polar space becomes a refraction of each human mind that ventures into it.  
28  
29 While the Devil’s Thumb encounter is described as frightening, more akin to the  
30  
31 phantasmagoria in ‘Rime’ or *Pym*, the doctor’s vision of pale ghosts trapped in the ice is  
32  
33 contemplative, like Frankenstein’s Romantic melancholia, warning about the dangers of  
34  
35 hubris.  
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40 Previous expeditions inform and inspire Hatteras’s voyage, central among them the  
41  
42 lost Franklin expedition – a significant point of trauma in the imagination of polar space. In  
43  
44 May 1845, Franklin’s ships the HMS *Terror* and HMS *Erebus* set sail to gather magnetic data  
45  
46 in the Canadian Arctic and break through the Northwest Passage for the first time.<sup>26</sup> The  
47  
48 ships represented the best of British progress and innovation, and when they did not return  
49  
50 after the three years planned for the expedition, a massive search was mounted.<sup>27</sup> In 1854  
51  
52 explorer and doctor John Rae sent the first extensive news of the Franklin expedition’s fate,  
53  
54 describing a ‘fate as terrible as the imagination can conceive’ for Franklin and his men: a  
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3 slow, torturous, and hopeless death in the Arctic wilderness beset by disease, exposure to the  
4 harsh elements, and starvation.<sup>28</sup> Beyond this, when Inuit hunters found the corpses of the  
5 Franklin party, they observed signs that some of the men had resorted to cannibalism.  
6  
7 Drawing from Inuit accounts, Rae reported, 'From the mutilated state of many of the bodies,  
8 and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to  
9 the last dread alternative as a means of sustaining life.'<sup>29</sup>

16 The Franklin expedition fascinated the public because of its mysterious  
17 disappearance, and because each small discovery evoked and evokes a sense of horror, from  
18 Rae's report in the mid-nineteenth century to the exhumation and published photographs of  
19 corpses in the late twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> When the Admiralty released Rae's report to the press,  
20 notable figures including Charles Dickens and Franklin's widow, Lady Jane Franklin, openly  
21 censured Rae's account, arguing that Royal Navy men would never resort to an act so  
22 unnatural as cannibalism. Indeed, echoing common sentiments, the virtues of the polar  
23 explorer are articulated by Henry Morley: 'Let us be glad, too, that we have one unspotted  
24 place upon this Globe of ours; a pole that, as it fetches truth out of a needle, so surely also  
25 gets all that is right-headed and right-hearted from the sailor whom the needle guides.'<sup>31</sup>  
26 Dickens went so far as to argue (without any evidence) that 'no man can, with any show of  
27 reason, undertake to affirm that this sad remnant of Franklin's gallant band were not set  
28 upon and slain by the Esquimaux themselves.'<sup>32</sup> For him, as for many others, the Franklin  
29 party was a symbol of empire, and the thought of cannibalism in connection with it was  
30 simply incomprehensible, a dreadful and intolerable reflection.<sup>33</sup> As if to underscore this  
31 point, Dickens and Wilkie Collins wrote a play based loosely on the Franklin expedition that  
32 put forward a more acceptable narrative, *The Frozen Deep* (1856). In the play neither  
33 cannibalism nor Inuit appear; instead, Rae's gruesome report becomes the soothsaying of a  
34 nursemaid who dooms the expedition in a reported vision in order to exact revenge on a  
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3 virtuous young lady. In the ice floes, however, the explorer's noble nature is triumphant, even  
4  
5 as he dies: Collins's later novelisation of the play concludes, 'He has won the greatest of all  
6  
7 conquests—the conquest of himself. And he has died in the moment of victory. Not one of us  
8  
9 here but may live to envy his glorious death.'<sup>34</sup>  
10

11  
12 Like *The Frozen Deep*, *Hatteras* was another of the earliest fictional works inspired  
13  
14 by Franklin's fate. Verne was fascinated by the story, which prominently featured in the  
15  
16 French press of the time.<sup>35</sup> In the novel, the Franklin expedition serves as a frame for the trip  
17  
18 to the pole. On the voyage north, the ghosts appear in the text immediately after the doctor  
19  
20 reflects on the lost expedition. Additionally, an entire early chapter of the novel is devoted to  
21  
22 the tale of Franklin's travails. More substantially, after the trauma of the Pole – which causes  
23  
24 Hatteras to sink into madness – the small surviving party finds the corpses of the mutinous  
25  
26 crew:  
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32 Not long previously, this valley had been the scene of a last battle against time, against  
33  
34 despair, against hunger; and from certain horrible remains, it could be understood that the  
35  
36 wretches had fed on human bodies, perhaps living bodies ... Whatever the truth, the crew  
37  
38 had clearly experienced a thousand tortures and a thousand despairs, before encountering  
39  
40 this terrifying catastrophe; but the secret of their misery is buried with them under the  
41  
42 snows of the Pole forever. (345-6)  
43  
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47 Where the ice-bound ghosts haunt the novel with their melancholy failure in the line of duty,  
48  
49 the grisly physical remains of the crew emphasise transgression, violence, and terror, acts that  
50  
51 exist only through the imagination of those discovering the bodies. Verne's description of  
52  
53 cannibalism points to the destabilising truth that Dickens and others could not face: namely  
54  
55 that civilisation is only a veneer for humans' basic, primitive, animalistic survival mode. The  
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3 ice is ambivalent, concealing both ghosts and corpses, while preserving the truth of heroism  
4 and barbarism. In *Hatteras* and elsewhere, exploring polar space becomes a harrowing  
5 exploration of self, mobilising the anxiety of what lies beneath the surface; as Lenz observes,  
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13 ‘like the Gothic mode itself, [polar space] is a doorway into the deepest regions of our  
primitive imagination.’<sup>36</sup>

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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.’<sup>37</sup> The discovered corpses of Verne’s novel and  
Franklin’s expedition speak to a deeper anxiety, one that undercuts the veneer of civilisation  
and forces confrontation with a primitive instinct for survival at any cost. Dickens blames the  
native Inuit, but they are as horrified as he; Inuit oral history records that malignant, restless  
spirits have haunted King William’s Island since Franklin’s men perished.<sup>38</sup>

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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

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3 [...] the *inhuman* [...] silent, frigid emptiness'.<sup>39</sup> Mapping this shift onto the imagination of  
4  
5 polar Gothic space shows a distinct change between pre-Franklin and post-Franklin texts.  
6  
7 Early polar Gothic texts like *Arthur Gordon Pym*, 'Rime', and *Frankenstein* evince anxiety of  
8  
9 the unknown, while *Hatteras*'s inherent anxiety is of the known. Yet the ghostly apparitions  
10  
11 of all the works are manifestations of imperial anxiety, the result of venturing into space  
12  
13 defined by its otherness.  
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16  
17 Here Michel de Certeau's connection between haunting, place, and memory proves  
18  
19 useful: 'There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence,  
20  
21 spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.'<sup>40</sup>  
22  
23 Understood in this light, the ghosts that emerge from the ice represent not only the spirit of  
24  
25 the place, and the anxiety of failure, but also a mirroring of the self, a potentiality for a future  
26  
27 failure embedded in the past and kept alive through memory. Coleridge's and Poe's travellers  
28  
29 encounter manifestations of a Polar Spirit. Shelley's explorer is not haunted *per se*, but meets  
30  
31 monsters that fulfil the role of a ghost, both the creature and, in *Frankenstein*, his own double.  
32  
33 In parallel, Verne's explorer meets his predecessors, but then encounters them in his own  
34  
35 shipmates' cannibalism, revealing the potential for horror within each 'civilised' individual.  
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38  
39 Like Poe, I conclude with a question: what anxiety does our imagination of polar  
40  
41 Gothic space reveal? Polar space continues to hold an imaginative fascination, one that unites  
42  
43 imperial conquest and ecological concern based in stories of extreme survival and doom, the  
44  
45 excavation of the past, and a drastically changing climate.<sup>41</sup> I have examined polar Gothic in  
46  
47 terms of empire, but in an increasingly globalised world, ecological concerns are now  
48  
49 paramount. In Catherine Lanone's ecoGothic examination of Arctic Gothic texts, Franklin's  
50  
51 expedition 'becomes the paradigm of colonial misappropriation, trying to cut through the ice  
52  
53 for the sake of trade and capitalist consumption rather than paying attention to place itself and  
54  
55 its nature or function.'<sup>42</sup> As human intervention in polar space in the name of national pride,  
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3 natural resource exploitation, or, increasingly, leisure, significantly impacts ice melt and  
4  
5 temperature, we must ask ourselves why the recent discovery of the Franklin ships or the  
6  
7 centenary of the Scott expedition to the South Pole caused such a degree of public interest,  
8  
9 and why the details of these doomed expeditions continue to preoccupy us today.  
10

11 Perhaps the answer lies in the line quoted earlier, but read through the prism of polar  
12  
13 Gothic anxiety: ‘This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable and  
14  
15 cannot withstand you, if you say it shall not’ (207). In Frankenstein’s speech, we read the  
16  
17 fatal hubris of conquering that which seems impossible, and yet, in the twenty-first century,  
18  
19 we have discovered that polar ice cannot withstand us. The dwindling mutable ice still  
20  
21 conceals and preserves – but as it melts and our world becomes increasingly destabilised,  
22  
23 what will it reveal? And how will it reflect our own selves back to us?  
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31 <sup>1</sup> James Cook, *A voyage towards the South Pole, and round the world. Performed in His Majesty’s Ships the*  
32 *Resolution and Adventure. In the Years 1772, 1773, 1774, and 1775* (Adelaide, Libraries Board of South  
33 Australia, 1970), vol. 2, p. 231.

34 <sup>2</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca, Cornell  
35 University Press, 1990), pp. 227-53, (p. 227).

36 <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

37 <sup>4</sup> Janice Cavell, *Tracing the Connected Narrative: Arctic Exploration in British Print Culture, 1818-1860*  
38 (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 213.

39 <sup>5</sup> John Ross, *Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of a Northwest Passage; and of a Residence in the Arctic*  
40 *Regions* (London, Webster, 1835), p. 241.

41 <sup>6</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, *Farthest North; being the record of a voyage of exploration of the ship ‘Fram’ 1893-96, and*  
42 *of a fifteen months’ sleigh journey by Dr. Nansen and Lieut. Johansen* (London, Constable, 1897), p. 389.

43 <sup>7</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, Vintage Books, 1975), p. 882.  
44 All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

45 <sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, in Carl Woordring and James Shapiro (eds.),  
46 *The Columbia Anthology of English Poetry* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 455-74, V: 378-  
47 410. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Stanza and line numbers will follow in brackets.

48 <sup>9</sup> Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination* (London, Palgrave  
49 Macmillan, 2003), p. 145.

50 <sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. 75.

51 <sup>11</sup> William E. Lenz, *The Poetics of the Antarctic: A Study in Nineteenth-Century American Cultural Perceptions*  
52 (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), p. 38.

53 <sup>12</sup> Lenz, *Poetics of the Antarctic*, pp. 42-3.

54 <sup>13</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York, Penguin Books, 1992), p. 19. All subsequent quotations are taken  
55 from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

56 <sup>14</sup> Angela Byrne, *Geographies of the Romantic North: Science, Antiquarianism, and Travel, 1790-1830*  
57 (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

58 <sup>15</sup> Chauncey Loomis first theorised the Arctic sublime in ‘The Arctic Sublime’, in U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G.  
59 B. Tennyson (eds.), *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977), pp.  
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95-112. Francis Spufford discusses the concept in detail in *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 16-40.

<sup>16</sup> Diana Donald, 'The Arctic Fantasies of Edwin Landseer and Briton Riviere: Polar Bears, Wilderness and Notions of the Sublime', *Tate Papers*, 13 (Spring 2010),

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/13/arctic-fantasies-of-edwin-landseer-and-briton-riviere-polar-bears-wilderness-and-notions-of-the-sublime>, accessed 12 December 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1994), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> On the novel's polar subtext and influences, see Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2008), pp. 53-69.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: Geographies of Adventure* (New York, Routledge, 2013), p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> Jules Verne, *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, translated by William Butcher (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 65. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

<sup>22</sup> See Marie-Hélène Huet, 'Winter Lights: Disaster, Interpretation, and Jules Verne's Polar Novels', *Verniana*, 2 (2009-2010), pp. 162-8.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Moss, *Scott's Last Biscuit: The Literature of Polar Exploration* (Oxford, Signal Books, 2006), p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Shane McCorristine, 'Mesmerism and Victorian Arctic Exploration,' in Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, Danielle Marie Cudmore, and Stefan Donecker (eds.), *Imagining the Supernatural North* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2016), p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> On cairns, see Adriana Craciun, *Writing Arctic Disaster: Exploration and Authorship* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 73-9.

<sup>26</sup> Much has been written about the Franklin expedition. For a recent account, see Paul Watson, *Ice Ghosts: The Epic Hunt for the Lost Franklin Expedition* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> See Watson, 57-145. See also

<sup>28</sup> John Rae, 'Report to the Admiralty', in P. L. Simmonds (eds.), *The Arctic Regions and Polar Discoveries During the Nineteenth Century* (London, George Routledge and Sons, 1875), p. 251.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> See Catherine Lanone, 'Monsters on the Ice and Global Warming: From Mary Shelley and Sir John Franklin to Margaret Atwood and Dan Simmons', in Andrew Smith and William Hughes (eds.), *Ecogothic* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 30-2.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Morley, 'Unspotted Snow', *Household Words*, 8 (1853), pp. 241-6 (p. 246).

<sup>32</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers' (Part One), *Household Words*, 10 (1854), pp. 362-5 (p. 362).

<sup>33</sup> See Hill, *White Horizon*, pp. 130-2.

<sup>34</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Frozen Deep; and Other Stories* (London, Richard Bentley and Son, 1874), vol. 1, p. 219.

<sup>35</sup> Verne also owned a copy of Joseph-René Bellot's *Journal d' un voyage aux mers polaires exécuté à la recherché de Sir John Franklin* (1854). On Verne's Franklin fascination, see Huet, 'Winter Lights', p. 156, pp. 161-2, pp. 175-6 n13.

<sup>36</sup> Lenz, 'Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym and the Narrative Technique of Antarctic Gothic', *CEA Critic* 53 (1991), pp. 30-8, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Hill, *White Horizon*, p. 44. I quote Hill analysing Franklin's 1823 account. For her full analysis, see pp. 40-52.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Watson, 'Ship Found in Arctic 168 Years After Doomed Northwest Passage Attempt', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/12/hms-terror-wreck-found-arctic-nearly-170-years-northwest-passage-attempt>, accessed 27 March 2017

<sup>39</sup> Cian Duffy, *The Landscapes of the Sublime, 1700-1830: Classic Ground* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 102-3.

<sup>40</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> See Benjamin Morgan, 'After the Arctic Sublime', *New Literary History*, 47:1 (2016), pp. 1-26.

<sup>42</sup> Lanone, 'Monsters on the Ice', p. 41.