Spectral Arctic

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Published by University College London

McCorristine, Shane.
University College London, 2018.
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In 1893, while frozen in the Arctic ice aboard his expedition ship the _Fram_, the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen reflected on the environment around him:

Nothing more wonderfully beautiful can exist than the Arctic night. It is dreamland painted in the imagination’s most delicate tints; it is colour etherealised. One shade melts into the other, so that you cannot tell where one shade ends and the other begins, and yet they are all there. No forms – it is all faint, dreamy colour music, a far-away, long-drawn-out melody on muted strings (Nansen, 1897).

In popular myth Nansen is the archetypal Scandinavian polar explorer – a manly, no-nonsense hero with little time for the sentimentality or plodding amateurism of his British contemporaries.¹ However, Nansen’s account of this expedition, _Farthest North_ (1897), reveals someone with a deeply romantic outlook whose musings on the Arctic ‘dreamland’ have much in common with the thoughts and ruminations of other nineteenth-century polar explorers. Nansen’s was a book, moreover, that did not just appeal to other explorers, for it was massively popular too, selling some 40,000 copies shortly after its publication in English (Huntford, 1997, 442).

Some years later in a busy household in Vienna, the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud read the German translation of _Farthest North_ after noting that his family were ‘hero-worshipping’ Nansen: ‘Martha [Freud’s wife] because the Scandinavians obviously fulfil a youthful ideal of hers, which she has not realized in life, and Mathilde [Freud’s daughter] because she is transferring her allegiance from the Greek heroes she has hitherto been so full of to the Vikings’. Freud was in the midst of writing _The Interpretation of Dreams_ when he read Nansen,
and had recently begun an intense period of self-analysis. It was in this context that he thought he could make use of the ‘practically transparent’ polar dreams that Nansen wrote down (qtd. in Lehmann, 1966, 388).

Although they never met, Freud and Nansen shared more than an appreciation for dreams. Like Freud, Nansen was an early investigator in neuroanatomy and in his doctoral dissertation on the central nervous system – defended in 1888 – Nansen cited and challenged some of Freud’s ideas. While Nansen soon after launched a successful expedition to cross Greenland on skis, Freud was forced to shelve his neuroscientific research and earn a living as a specialist in private practice. As a psychologist he was fascinated by the motivations of polar explorers and was impressed by their heroic feats; but in the case of Nansen – a rival neuroanatomist who became internationally famous only a few months after graduating – his feelings were notably ambivalent (Anthi, 2016).

After reading Farthest North Freud described Nansen’s mental state as ‘typical of someone who is trying to do something new which makes calls on his confidence and probably discovers something new by a false route and finds that it is not so big as he expected’ (qtd. in Lehmann, 1966, 388). On a conscious level Freud identified with the polar explorer as a fellow pioneer and intellectual adventurer – someone whose theories about reaching the North Pole by drifting with the Arctic ice had been originally dismissed by incredulous scientific authorities in Britain. On an unconscious level, however, Freud conflated his own doubts about discovering something new with Nansen’s daring voyage into the unknown. In a materialisation of these feelings, Freud himself dreamt of being in a ‘field of ice’ with Nansen and giving ‘the gallant explorer galvanic treatment for an attack of sciatica from which he was suffering’. During this self-analysis Freud realised he had recovered a childhood memory of confusing Reisen [travels] with Reissen [gripes] and this awareness disclosed repressed anxieties he had about travelling (Lehmann, 1966, 389).

This is one example of the way that dreams travelled from the Arctic through narratives and were picked up by dreamers who then travelled back to the Arctic with them – a magical loop that mixed together cultural productions of the polar regions with actual experiences. In this book I argue that, just like the proverbial iceberg of psychoanalysis, the narratives of modern Arctic exploration we are all familiar with today are just the tip of the iceberg: they actually disguise the great mass of mysterious and dimly-lit stories that lie beneath the surface of the water. Nansen’s ‘dreamland’ musings and Freud’s fascination with polar
dreams were not isolated behaviours: rather, they indicate a core set of perspectives on the Arctic that drew upon actual experiences and cultural imaginings of dreams and other supernatural phenomena in the far North.

Nineteenth-century explorers and their audiences, of course, spent hours dreaming each and every night (see Figure 0.1). When awake, they lived in the everyday spiritual worlds that included religious reflection, creative imagination and supernatural belief. People's presence in the Arctic – whether real or imagined – inspired an outpouring of texts, images and performances that attempted to express the strangeness and magic of polar experience. Maddeningly, commentators were unable to pin down exactly how this experience might be described (in the first epigraph to this book several words were used: ‘fascination’; ‘spell’; ‘mystery’; ‘romance’; ‘attraction’). This book focuses on one pervasive mode of expressing the relationship between people and place in the Arctic – the spectral.

Throughout the nineteenth century, ghosts and shadowy interlocutors featured in the narratives of British explorers in the Arctic and their audiences back home. Taking the history of Sir John Franklin's last Arctic expedition from the 1840s as my central focus, in this book I examine how spectral experiences such as dreaming, clairvoyante travel, reverie, spiritualism and ghost-seeing informed ideas of the Arctic

and the searches for a Northwest Passage through the Arctic. The role of spectral experiences in this geographical quest has not been adequately addressed before and I argue that integrating them into the cultural history of exploration revises traditional accounts of polar discovery that focus mainly on ‘men and maps’. This book, then, is about the cultural production of the spectral in Arctic narratives and what this can tell us about Victorian exploration and its legacies.

* * *

Today people from western cultures who visit the Arctic enter places that have long been imagined as somehow dreamlike or magical. ‘Ice’, ‘wilderness’ and ‘sublime’ register as keywords in a Eurocentric vocabulary that continues to inform the way that we think about what is Arctic and what is not Arctic. Much of this can be traced back to the particular colonial and capitalist development of a few northern European states that looked north for riches in the early modern period. Despite the fact that our engagement with the Arctic has always been contingent – depending on how we see, move and reflect on the environment in a given historical context – long-held associations mean that its landscape is consistently imagined as enchanting and magical.²

So far this will not be news to most readers, but there is a large gap between recognising this as simply a descriptive vocabulary and putting forward arguments for its core importance in the cultural history of Arctic exploration. As humans we dream as we live, with our eyes and ears open to the world and there are social and material histories of the apparently immaterial – dreams and reveries of air, earth, water and the ghosts that haunt the Arctic. I came to this subject after realising that no one took seriously the fantastic icebergs that lurk under the surface of Arctic narratives – the ways in which Arctic explorations were historically represented by people in Britain as dreamlike or ghostly enterprises, whether in canonical sources (like the published journals of explorers) or peripheral sources (like poetry in periodicals or pulp fiction).³

Robinson notes that ‘stories, more than specimens or scientific observations, constituted the real currency of Arctic exploration’ (2006, 6). In contrast to oft-told tales of derring-do and disaster, this book aims to do something new for the cultural history of the Arctic. It looks at stories of dreaming and haunted explorers, of reveries and visits to Inuit shamans and of the entranced female clairvoyants who travelled to the Arctic in search of the lost expedition led by Franklin, which departed Britain in 1845 in search of a Northwest Passage. By
highlighting the oscillating movements between absence and presence, these ‘hidden histories’ of exploration (Driver, 2013) reflect the complex ways that men and women actually thought about the far North in the past. The Arctic is imagined here as a zone of loss, disappearance and fragility, but also of haunting, uncanny returns and frozen permanence (see Figure 0.2). 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. They also help us to make sense of current cultural and political concerns in the Canadian Arctic about the disappearance and reappearance of the Franklin expedition.

Therefore, my first key argument is that British Arctic explorers – such as those on the Franklin expedition – recognised and reflected on the spectral aspects of being in the Arctic. This included having strange dreams, reveries, hallucinations and other supernatural experiences. Highlighting their spectral stories complicates the pervasive idea that explorers were always, or always thought of themselves as, rational actors in a wild region. In doing so we are forced to think about Arctic exploration historically as a practice that involved supernatural experiences: this is an important revision given the power of Victorian exploration in current conceptions of the Arctic (in politics, geography and tourism for example).

My second key argument is that, for many people, the Arctic became so much more than an unknown, empty space waiting to be discovered and mapped by elite men. Rather, nineteenth-century audiences saw the Arctic as a dreamlike zone that overflowed the cartographic and literary space in which it was traditionally bounded by that tiny group of men who promoted and handled polar exploration. Because of the spectral power of the Arctic as an idea, it could be sensed remotely, dreamed about, imagined and consumed by people who were at a great distance from the Arctic geographically and politically (see Figure 0.3). This was especially so for British women: although they had no formal access to the exclusively male expeditions, from the 1840s women began to feature as ghostly presences in Arctic fiction and poetry, haunting the journeys of men and adding emotional dimensions to cultures of exploration. Alongside this literary development, young women were able to psychically travel to the Arctic in search of lost explorers through the popular techniques of clairvoyance, mesmerism and spiritualism. So where did ideas about a spectral Arctic come from?

British and Canadian travellers, writers, scientific collectors and policy-makers have long used a predetermined set of stereotypes, dreams and political strategies when discussing the Arctic – frequently termed
‘ideas of the north’. To take a poetic example, the Arctic was a place
where, as Robert Service suggested,

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold (1907a, 35).

Figure 0.3 ‘Map of the Diocese of Moosonee’. Source: Arthur Lewis.
_The Life and Work of the Rev. E.J. Peck Among the Eskimos_. New York: A.C.
Armstrong & Son, 1904.
Such ideas of Arctic strangeness, however, should be traced to their sources in culture – they are not simply given. In fact, there are many cultural-historical reasons for why people thought of the Arctic as an exceptional place, not least the sense of a geographic and aesthetic distance between Britain and the Arctic. The spatial and perceptual differences between the Arctic and other British imperial possessions meant that explorers could imply that voyages to the frozen north were ‘pure’ in a way that voyages to India, for example, were not. After all, on the face of it, Arctic exploration did not involve the warfare, women, or ‘weakening’ climate associated with Britain’s tropical colonies. Furthermore, unlike the southern regions of Canada, the Arctic was not a scene of settler colonialism or political integration during the period. As a space of radical difference in the British imperial imagination, the Arctic was therefore easily exoticised by explorers.

This exoticism was reinforced by the way that people wrote about the Arctic. The American explorer Elisha Kent Kane criticised others for speaking of the Arctic environment in ‘language as exact and mathematical as their own correction tables. It almost seems as if their minute observations of dip-sectors and repeating-circles had left them no scope for picturesque sublimity’ (1854, 67). However, accounts by Arctic explorers actually suggest that there was a lot of scope for this ‘picturesque sublimity’. Take the artist and photographer William Bradford, who travelled to Greenland in the 1860s and believed he had experienced ‘the revelation of a new world, a new phase of life and nature, which is accompanied by the feeling of being in the presence of the Eternal God’ (1885, 123). Kane would also have had no complaint with the narrative style of a fellow American, Frederick Cook, who described the ice fields he encountered on his North Pole expedition:

Through vapor-charged air of crystal, my eyes ran over plains moving in brilliant waves of running colors toward dancing horizons. Mirages turned things topsy-turvy. Invented lands and queer objects ever rose and fell, shrouded in mystery. All of this was due to the atmospheric magic of the continued glory of midnight suns in throwing piercing beams of light through superimposed strata of air of varying temperature and density (1911, 277).

Other explorers, writers and their audiences equally sought out examples of polar ‘glamour’, as Arthur Conan Doyle put it (2012, 319), but does this mean that they were anything more than literary devices? Explorers may have described some of the weird things that lay beneath
the surface of the ice, but how might this lay the groundwork for a revisionist historical account?

To start to take people’s accounts of the spectral Arctic seriously we must realise that, in any society, things like hallucinations, visions and dreams are more than just symptoms of mental disorder or irrational experiences. Rather, when they are used by people in describing feelings, beliefs, or experiences, they perform significant cultural work, just like the ‘psychic realities’ that Freud saw as the keys to the unconscious.

Polar explorers frequently used dreams and dreaminess to explain what motivated them to travel to the poles. Isaac Israel Hayes, an officer under Kane and then an Arctic commander in his own right, described an ‘intuitive feeling that my destiny would lead me to the North and under the influence of this feeling I set to work the harder and graduated a year earlier than I otherwise would have done’ (qtd. in Wamsley, 2009, 73). The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen wrote of how finding the Northwest Passage was a ‘dream’ of his boyhood (1908, I 5; II 125) and how reading stories of Arctic endeavour created a ‘strange ambition’ within him to endure the same sufferings as the lost explorer John Franklin (1927, 2) (see Figure 0.4). As a child, the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton was also well-read in the mysterious disappearance of the Franklin expedition, and he later claimed that a specific dream inspired him to think of polar exploration:

[S]trangely enough, the circumstance which actually determined me to become an explorer was a dream I had when I was twenty-two. We were beating out to New York from Gibraltar, and I dreamt I was standing on the bridge in mid-Atlantic and looking northward. It was a simple dream. I seemed to vow to myself I would go to the region of ice and snow and go on and on till I came to one of the poles of the earth, the end of the axis upon which this great round ball turns (qtd. in Huntford, 1986, 24).5

Strange coincidences like this pop up now and again, shimmering in the accounts of polar explorers, but it is important to note that whalers and ordinary seamen also dreamt of the Arctic and these accounts were occasionally also disseminated to wider audiences (see ‘Dream Fortunes’, *Western Times*, 1903; ‘Long Arctic Experiences’, *Daily Mail*, 1902). The widespread circulation of dreams and dream language in exploration narratives fed into constructions of the Arctic as a strange and spectral place.
These dreams could be thought of in a theatrical way, as simple enactments of desire or compulsion, but they could also be more place-specific and attuned to ideas of the north. In his unpublished memoirs the Scottish naval commander John Ross recorded some of the ‘amusing’

Figure 0.4 ‘The Late Sir John Franklin’. Source: Wellcome Library, London.
applications for positions he received while planning his Victory expedition in search of a Northwest Passage (1829–33). In one instance a man wrote to Ross telling him that:

a person appeared to me in a Dream and said ‘go with Captain Ross he will be crowned with Success' and not having the smallest thought of such things before, and reading of Dreams have led to great Discoverys [sic], I put some confidence in this and make [haste] to offer my services (SPRI, MS 655/3; BJ).

Ross wrote in his journal how he might normally have taken such a letter as a joke, but he actually needed a cook and, as the man provided a good reference, he arranged an interview. However, before this could take place Ross received another letter, this time from the man’s irate wife:

I have just found out that my husband have made an engagement with you to join your Expedition through a dream without consulting me, I must beg to tell you Sir that he shall not go, I will not let him have his Cloaths, he must be mad ever to think of leaving a comfortable home, to be frozen in with ice, or to be torn to pieces with Bears [sic throughout] (SPRI, MS 655/3; BJ).

Dreams and coincidences, as well as the ideas of polar glamour or of the ‘magnetic' North, were not just used by people as incidental justifications for voyages. Rather, they revealed important assumptions held about Arctic space that have been missed or downplayed by most scholars.

Dreams have many geographical characteristics but, as Freud argued, the particular maps dreamers use can be ‘worked at’ to improve waking lives. This thought echoes the way that some geographers now think about space, as something that is not solid and tied to a location, but is in motion, unbounded and worked into being by humans through a range of emotional practices (see Thrift, 2006, 143). The notion of relationality is important here – the idea that space is actually an assemblage, ‘a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence and absence’ (Amin, 2007, 103). Dreams of space, therefore, involve a dream-work that draws bodies together into relation with one another.

Although Ross’s tone was comic, the use of his dream narrative relates to my second key argument, that many people saw the Arctic as overflowing the maps and textual space in which it was traditionally bounded. Certainly, those who could afford to could share in the magic
felt by Arctic explorers by reading their expensive quarto narratives, but most people’s knowledge of the Arctic was mediated through newspapers, periodicals, poetry or ballads. This extended discursive field encouraged the idea that British people were, or should be, intimately linked with what happened in the Arctic. Even if they were not told about the strange things explorers sensed beneath the surface, they had more than enough raw materials to imagine it for themselves. For example, in February 1850 Jane Franklin received a letter from Southsea detailing a ‘remarkable dream’ which the correspondent believed could aid in the rescue of her husband:

I saw in my dream two Air Bloon’s a great distance off rising just like the moon. I said in my dream to myself [this is] Sir J. Frankland. I looket the second time as the Bloon’s [rises?] on their journey looking beautiful an as I looket all in a moment one Banishet like a Pillar of Smoke. The second Bloon still going on its journey it gets to a place where I saw the inhabitants living People I saw in the my dream a Lady beautiful Dressed looking at them I said in my dream their is Lady Frankland but with this dream I saw nothing but snow as it fell amongst the inhabitants of these two Bloon’s [sic throughout].

The correspondent, who signed off ‘a Humble and true dreamer’, explained that the balloons represented the ships and that the first one was destroyed. The second one ‘stands well’ and ‘Providence will bring them back again’ (SPRI, MS 248/335; D). Although the letter is a rare surviving example of the type of correspondence that Jane Franklin and her companion Sophia Cracroft were receiving at the time, this allegorical vision sent by a semi-literate dreamer shows how for many ordinary men and women, especially after 1849, the Arctic became more than a space of geographical exploration and imperial imaginings. It became a space where intense bundles of dreams, bodies and spirits gathered, were sensed and were then expressed emotionally and artistically in high and popular cultures.

Far from being disconnected or distant from reality, this sense of the dreamlike was actually bound up with the weird things that happened to the bodies of explorers at the poles. The idea of ‘sensed presences’ has received some attention from environmental psychologists looking at human experience in Antarctica (Suedfeld and Mocellin, 1987; Geiger, 2010), but there has been little attention given to the rich qualitative data on strange Arctic experiences. For British explorers weird, supernatural
or uncanny feelings were part of what it was like to be there, as it also was for other non-native inhabitants, such as whalers, missionaries and fur traders. Indeed, almost every nineteenth-century polar narrator touched on the subjects of mirages and illusions, whether referring to the shifting shapes of the ice or the strange way that sound travelled, or how small things in the distance seemed enormous (see Figure 0.5). It is clear from the sources available that the fantastic atmospheric phenomena in the Arctic put into question the reliability of human perception, especially that of commanders (see Belcher, 1855, I, 266; Huish ed., 1835, 2; Godfrey, 1857, 134; Rees, 1988; McCorristine, 2013; Simpson-Housley, 1996). As I will discuss in chapter 1, these doubts challenge the idea that explorers were somehow separate from, and sovereign over, the environments they passed through.

Figure 0.5 ‘A strange animal was bounding along within a cable’s length from the ship’. Source: Jules Verne. At the North Pole; or, The Adventures of Captain Hatteras. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1874.
What kind of strange things happened on polar expeditions? A classic case of Arctic phantasmagoria occurred on 6 April 1853 during Robert McClure’s *Investigator* expedition in search of the Franklin expedition in the region of the Arctic that is now part of Canada (and mostly comprising the federal territory of Nunavut, created in 1999). The expedition had been frozen-in for three winters at a place McClure named Mercy Bay and was in a woeful state. Having just dug a grave for their first fatality, the crew suddenly caught sight of a faint figure in the distance:

The stranger came quietly on, and we saw that his face was as black as ebony, and really at the moment we might be pardoned for wondering whether he was a denizen of this or the other world, and had he but given us a glimpse of a tail or a cloven hoof, we should have assuredly have taken to our legs: as it was, we gallantly stood our ground, and, had the skies fallen upon us, we could hardly have been more astonished than when the dark-faced stranger called out, – ‘I’m Lieutenant Pim, late of the “Herald”, and now in the “Resolute”. Captain Kellett is in her at Dealy Island!’ (McClure, 1857, 290).

Bedford Pim’s transformation from otherworldly demon to human and fellow explorer eventually led to the rescue of McClure’s expedition. After abandoning the *Investigator* in June, the crew made their way east to the *Resolute* and most survived to return home to Britain in 1854. For entering the Arctic from the west, and leaving it through the east (though not in the same ship), McClure and his expedition were, controversially, given the £10,000 parliamentary award for achieving a Northwest Passage.

But one did not even need to be outdoors for the ghostliness of the Arctic to be sensed and made manifest. An account by the French Oblate missionary Émile Petitot speaks of visual and auditory hallucinations in the Arctic and also of a persistent haunting throughout the 1860s at Fort Yukon, then a Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) trading post in Russian America (2005, 22, 36–9). Many years earlier the fur trader David Thompson memorably described playing draughts with the Devil while overwintering by himself at York Factory (1962, 43–4).

The logging of strange dreams and unaccountable events was something that Arctic travellers and explorers shared with those overwintering in Antarctica. Tryggve Gran, a Norwegian member of Robert Falcon Scott’s 1910–13 Antarctic expedition – known amongst
his colleagues as a believer in white magic – recorded a dream he experienced on 15 December 1911:

I dreamed I had a telegram reading: ‘Amundsen reached Pole, 15-20 December’. [I lay in the tent dozing in a kind of half sleep. Suddenly it appeared as though a picture materialized on the tent canvas of four men, at day-break, in front of a tent with two flags fluttering ... I jumped up and Taylor awoke ... ‘The Norwegians have got to the Pole this minute’ ... ] (1984, 153).

Struck by this, Gran’s colleague Thomas Griffith Taylor let him write it in his copy of Robert Browning’s poems (Taylor, 1916, 434–5). Amundsen and his men had actually reached the South Pole on 14 December, making Gran’s dream-telegram an amazing (if not entirely accurate) coincidence. As for Amundsen himself, in 1898, during the ill-fated Belgica expedition off Antarctica, he recorded hearing ‘three or four terrible, long screams’. Of the ship’s crew, two other colleagues said they also heard the noises, which remained a mystery. ‘I do not know what it was’, wrote Amundsen, ‘but I have recorded this incident as accurately as possible for a number of reasons’ (2009, 90–1). Amundsen kept these reasons to himself, but these kinds of experiences were meaningful in that they constituted a form of dream-work for explorers.

However, the Arctic differed from Antarctica in being an historically inhabited region that formed part of the economies and cultural imaginations of northern Atlantic states. Although it was a region well-visited by explorers, whalers and missionaries, 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. Remembering an 1880 whaling trip in The Strand, Arthur Conan Doyle tried to put some bones on this spectrality, writing of the ‘peculiar other-world feeling of the Arctic regions – a feeling so singular, that if you have once been there the thought of it haunts you all your life’ (2012, 333). Linear narratives of geographic achievement or failure, then, were only the beginnings of the cultural appreciation for Arctic exploration. Ghostly experiences meant a lot to explorers and their audiences. These stories, and the dream-work they represent, enrich our understanding of exploration as a complex set of practices that did not simply involve the activities of explorers in the field.

Today the Arctic is no longer merely thought of as a space of geographical distance and difference; rather issues of climate change, oil and gas resources and cultural loss dominate the way the region appears
in the international media. Yet the language of the magical Arctic, so prominent among narrators in the nineteenth century, has retained its allure among contemporary scholars, newspaper editors and writers. So it behoves us to look at what fertilised this language. Where does it come from and what does it mean for our historical understandings of Arctic exploration? What happens when we move beyond describing the consumption of Arctic enchantments and start to delve deeper into the actual dreams of explorers, archiving their ghost stories and mapping their reveries?

The overall aim of this book is to re-think some of the stories that explorers, readers and consumers told themselves about Arctic exploration. In researching the topic, I have visited relevant archives and libraries but I have also accessed newspaper and periodical materials that have only recently been digitised. This has uncovered a fresh range of sources that have allowed me to take quite a different approach to what has become relatively well-trodden ground. In what follows I move from well-known accounts of Arctic expeditions to lesser known stories, from events that took place in the Arctic to the imaginative forces travelling from different parts of the British Empire. Taken together, my explorations of the spectral Arctic present new ways of reading traditional accounts of exploration and resuscitate reports, stories and other neglected narratives about ghostly or dreamlike travel in the Arctic.

One inherent value in this approach is that it fundamentally questions the standard narrative of polar exploration, which recounts how a rational male hero either conquers or is conquered by an inanimate and alien nature. While this challenge might sound like old news, every week articles and books continue to be published that rehearse the familiar ‘heroic man versus harsh environment’ myth. Although this myth still influences commentary on Antarctica, such ‘whitewashing’ is more disturbing when it appears in work on Arctic exploration, where it is still common for indigenous people to be written-out of expeditions, or appear only as background actors in a Eurocentric drama. Such a pervasive dichotomy not only ignores the everyday dreaming and religious or ‘superstitious’ behaviour which explorers carried with them, but it also obscures the messy spiritual values that were sensed by people in polar landscapes, whether through atmospheric phenomena such as the Aurora Borealis or the embodied spiritual journeys of Inuit shamans and British clairvoyants across vast distances. Both Inuit oral testimonies and the published journals of explorers tell us that shamanism and spiritual forces played a key role in the encounters between strangers in the Arctic, as did Inuit guides, interpreters and map-makers.
It is high time that we start to ‘provincialise’ the types of behaviours, thoughts and emotions that British people had with regard to the Arctic. This might mean thinking of expeditioners as if they were tribesmen on wooden boats – people with extremely local habits, outlooks and assumptions who (by a kind of sleight of hand linked to colonial power) routinely managed to think of themselves as normal and civilised and to think of indigenous inhabitants as odd and uncivilised. Over the centuries expedition narratives told stories of ships and crews moving about the Arctic like chess pieces on a blank board, but readers of these accounts should never forget that there were plenty of witnesses to the arrival of these flagships, plenty of interlocutors with the men in woollen clothes who ate strange food and sought a sea route west.

Oral history records the inhabitants of Baffin Island thinking that the British strangers they encountered in 1576 were ‘dressed in rags’: ‘How come they dress like this?’ It’s very cold; their clothes are not fit for this kind of weather. They used to wonder … They were ghostly’ (qtd. in Eber, 2008, 4). Where were their women and children? Why were these pale men journeying to an unknown location? How could a commander explain his quest to an Inuk and not be thought of as strange? For too long we have looked at the encounter scene through the eyes of qallunaat [Inuktitut: white people] alone and this has blinded us to their trickery. For instance, it was common for British explorers to mention the smells and stinks coming from Inuit bodies, and how women spat in a disgusting manner. Yet if we were to depend only on official accounts, we might be forgiven for thinking that British expeditioners were perennially clean and never went to the toilet or suffered bowel disorders.

It is in unpublished diaries and journals that we get some indications of the everyday habits of this particular European tribe. For example, Arthur C. Horner, surgeon and naturalist on the Pandora Northwest Passage expedition of 1875, advised his ill commander against taking a warm bath:

It is a mistake to wash one’s body in this climate. It is much better to let the oily secretion + dirt remain for they are its natural protectives … A healthy person should be able when he digs his fingers into the skin of his chest … to feel his skin greasy & almost scrape off the grease. If the skin is dry and harsh you are not in good health (SPRI, MS 713).

Other people’s homes always smell different but it takes a certain mindset to believe that your home is the way that all homes should
smell. In another long-standing bit of trickery, European explorers had fun showing the Inuit their reflections in mirrors and looking-glasses for the first time (Huish ed., 1835, 201; Fisher, 1821, 56). But what if we could turn those mirrors around so that the explorers saw their own strangeness for the first time? Interestingly, Inuit oral history records how they refused the caribou meat offered to them by an explorer because of the ‘white man’s smell’ (qtd. in Eber, 2008, 47). White men’s excrement even looked out of place to locals: in recollections this anaq appears as the organic matter of strangeness (Woodman, 1995, 64).

Given these stories, in *The Spectral Arctic* I argue that we might think of Arctic exploration less as a stable, visible and slowly moving ship on the horizon – solid, manly and upright in its appearance. Rather, in the chapters that follow I show that it was more like a mutable, unpredictable and opaque force which shadowed the ship, occasionally revealing its hidden presence through the sound of repressed and ghostly voices. These dark, icy depths tell us how the Arctic haunted minds and bodies, stretching our concept of exploration beyond simply one of ‘boots on the ground’ and into the more dynamic realm of dreams and ghostly forces.