

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The spectral Arctic: a history of dreams and ghosts in polar exploration*, by Shane McCorristine (2018). London: University College London Press. 265 pp. ISBN 978-1-78735-246-9.

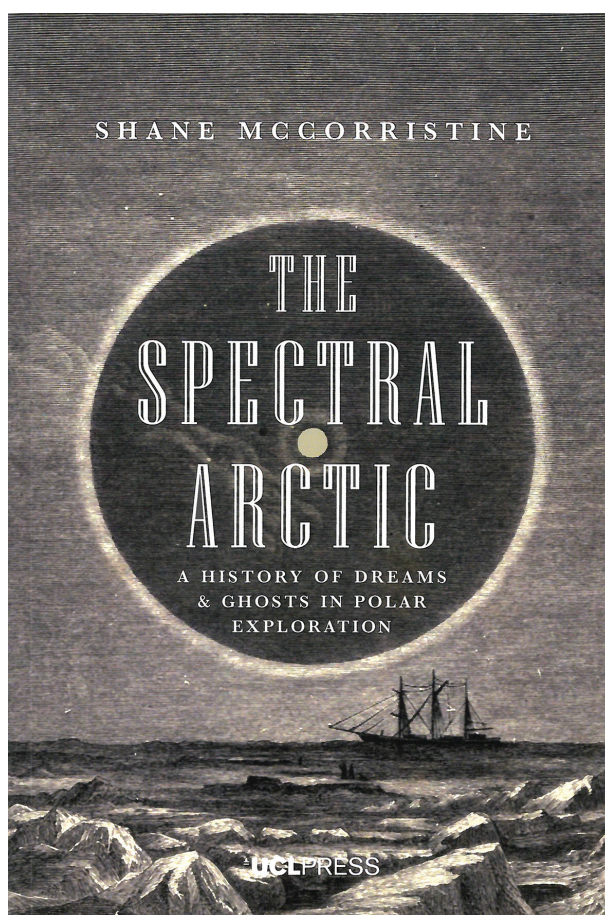
Shades of Freud, Benjamin and Derrida help shape Shane McCorristine's overarching claim that no history of British modernity is complete without a comprehensive revelation of its *spectral* dimensions. This claim holds especially true for British Arctic exploration history whose expeditionary catastrophes have long haunted the public imagination but whose role in spectral cultural production has never been taken seriously. *The spectral Arctic* launches a full-scale inquiry into the other, darker, occult dimensions of supposedly enlightened, Franklin-era culture. Its aim is not to demystify Arctic enchantment but to illuminate the full reach and power of its aura. For too long, the book argues, the myth of the resolute, brave, far-sighted expeditionary hero has dominated this history and limited our view of exploratory vision to a mere "tip of the iceberg." In place of men, maps and courageous reason, *The spectral Arctic* repopulates the heroic Arctic with dreams, ghosts and seers, including Inuit *qivituq* (wandering spirits), *angakuik* (shamans) and a host of British women clairvoyants.

Unsurprisingly, McCorristine focuses on the intensifying post-1848 production and circulation of Franklin-inspired phantoms and phantasies, after the *Terror* and *Erebus* mysteriously disappeared in the Northwest Passage. Exhuming all manner of archival and apocryphal material—letters, oracles, séance records, sensational news items, court transcripts, captains' chronicles and posthumously, ghost-written testimonies—McCorristine evidences society's passionate, if paranormal, desire to contact Franklin's hapless crew. In forensic detail, he traces Lady Jane Franklin's and her secretary-companion (also Franklin's devoted niece) Sophia Cracroft's correspondence to prove that they had at times resorted to consulting clairvoyants, and that Lady Jane directed at least one rescue mission to the area "charted" by a vision. Upon demonstrating how open to spectral speculation the cultural *zeitgeist* had become, McCorristine safely suspects the Admiralty, itself, of defaulting to the aid of seers.

McCorristine ascribes the British public's growing faith in clairvoyants and crystal ball gazers to several

Correspondence

Dianne Chisholm, Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2E5, Canada. E-mail: dianne.chisholm@ualberta.ca



factors: (1) the conduciveness of Arctic atmospherics (auroras and parhelia, crystalline airways, the mortuary and preservative powers of ice) to visions and visitations; (2) the breakdown of cultural authority, especially naval authority, in the midst of uncertainty regarding the crew's whereabouts and welfare; (3) new visual media's capacity to mesmerize mass audiences with Arctic phantasmagoria (panoramic, photographic, theatric and novelistic); and (4) new forms of public transport and communication, like railways and telegraphs, that mobilized in many a wish to be "transported"—spiritually, emotionally, sensually—to the faraway north, where the nation's heroes waited desperately to be found. If "hope," as McCorristine notes, became British Arctic romance's primary trope, we might attribute its more cryptic expressions to a repressed desire for expeditionary engagement as projected by the collective unconscious of those left behind (non-naval publics) and/or not wanted on the voyage (the entire class of women).

With Freud's *The interpretation of dreams* (1913) and, possibly, *Studies on hysteria* (1937) in mind, McCorristine organizes his chapters around *case studies*. After Chapters 1 and 2 set the stage with introductory arguments and historical background, Chapter 3 highlights the case of Emma L., "Seeress of Bolton," "the most celebrated case of Franklin-related mesmerism" (p. 87). He explains how Emma L., the domestic servant of a surgeon-apothecary-mesmerist, was able to locate Franklin, alive, in the vicinity of Prince Regent's Inlet once her employer put her into a clairvoyant trance and directed her to "see" her way to the missing ships. What intrigues McCorristine about this case is not the credulity of what Emma sees but the credulity with which the general public and eventually Lady Jane, herself, receive news of her "seeing," and their hope-beyond-hope of making uncanny contact with lost crew members. Chapter 4 follows up with the even stranger case of Weesy Coppin, the ghost of a recently deceased three-year-old girl, who, communicating through her sister Anne, was able to locate Franklin, alive, in roughly the same region that Emma L. "found" him. McCorristine takes pains to discover how a pair of opportunists—a disreputable ghost-writer and an ageing, amateurish spiritualist—managed to resuscitate public interest in Weesy's vision decades after the McClintock expedition reported on Franklin's death in 1859. The ghost of Franklin, he conclusively conjectures, has never been fully laid to rest. Being forever channelled by spurious media and mediums, it acquires an ever-looming afterlife.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from Franklin clairvoyants to mythic figures that start making an appearance in print culture after the *Terror* and *Erebus* depart for the Canadian Arctic in 1845. McCorristine ponders the case of two rising stars of Franklin-obsessed fiction: the "polar queen," a chimeric personification of the Arctic's/female sexuality's chillingly seductive lure, and the transfixed explorer who, like the protagonist of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The captain of the Pole Star* (1883), succumbs to the polar queen's mortifying embrace. Chapter 6 jumps ahead to Franklin's haunting of contemporary fiction where McCorristine makes the case for reading the eponymous monster of Dan Simmons's novel *The terror* (2007; also a movie made for American TV) and the eponymous rifles of William T. Vollmann's novel *The rifles* (1994) as exemplary projections of the colonial unconscious. He interprets Simmons's fiction as a postcolonial nightmare wherein a Frankenstein-/tupilak-ish monster of explorer-Inuit demonology terrorizes and destroys Franklin and his men as they abandon the ship and flee across the ice. Likewise, he reads Vollmann's fiction as a postcolonial ghost story wherein Franklin figures as a synecdoche of transhistorical "lead poisoning." If the leeching of lead

into canned meat is what, in the end, destroyed Franklin and his crew, it is the toxic exchange of rifles between Franklin and Inuit that initiated the destruction of traditional hunting life and culminated in a suicide epidemic involving lead bullets.

The spectral Arctic unveils a landscape less clearly historicized than interminably, irrepressibly re-mystified. Even now that Franklin's ships have been found, the case of Franklin's haunting resists closure and it continues to trouble the official story. As the "Afterword" points out, recent efforts by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Canadian government to use the Franklin findings as proof of Canadian sovereignty and colonial, geographic mastery were met less by public praise than outcry over the government's disregarding Inuit knowledge of the Franklin wrecks' whereabouts and its prioritizing costly search missions over Inuit health and welfare. By placing greater value on recovering Franklin's ships than on rectifying the unlivable conditions of colonial legacy, this case of imperial oversight raises the spectre of cultural genocide. It also calls to mind another, harrowing Harper story. Kenn Harper's *Give me my father's body* (2001) tells, as McCorristine explains, a true tale of bodysnatching by the shamelessly ambitious, American explorer, Robert Peary. Peary, in collaboration with the American Museum of Natural History, made a substantial fortune when he put on display the body of a Greenlandic Inuk who died in Peary's custody after the former persuaded the latter to leave home with his son. As McCorristine sees it, Harper relates the son's, Minik's, perspective with such intense, "clairvoyant" insight and intimacy as to invoke the deceased's anguished presence. In sharing the same demon of morbid indifference to Inuit self-preservation, one Harper's haunting could just as well be the other's.

McCorristine's main method of persuasion lies in accumulation. Yet the more he saturates the Arctic with Franklin's ghosts, the less convincing is his goal to alter the historic landscape. Now that these ghosts have been aired, the Arctic seems ever more occupied by imperial figures, both heroic and phantasmatic. The most central and original, and by far the longest, chapter (Chapter 3) compiles evidentiary detail from a wealth of minor and delegitimized sources to argue the case for reading Emma L. and Weesy Coppin as major players in Franklin's history. But for all that detail, the research neglects to consider the *specularization* of these women by their male handlers. Why are clairvoyants always women and their oracles so strictly focused on the fate of the Franklin men? To what extent are these female protégés directed to see what their Pygmalion mentors impel them to see? (How) did they come to mirror the desires—narcissistic, occultic, scientific, entrepreneurial—of the men who mesmerized them, directed their gaze, reported their

visions to high places and managed their publicity? Might we interpret their uncanny capacity to channel Franklin in inverse relation to, and as symptomatic of, the systemic severity with which patriarchal culture inhibited women's adventuring spirit and prohibited their more direct access to expeditionary enterprise? Instead of questioning women's relegation to the shadows of Arctic exploration, McCorristine spotlights their role as male phantasy's specular Other. Chapter 4 casts further light on the feminine figures of Franklin's possessed public, illuminating but not critiquing its enchantment with "the polar queen" and her polar opposite, Lady Jane "Penelope." McCorristine may view these fictional females as evidence of women's centrality to the Arctic imaginary, but he fails to see how obviously they reproduce mythic—whore/virgin—archetypes.

If stories and myths *about* women figure abundantly in these pages, women-authored stories are sorely lacking. McCorristine is careful to note the importance of Dorothy Eber's work with Inuit oral history concerning Franklin, as well as Adriana Craciun's work with Inuit renderings of the Franklin relics, as major, scholarly efforts to decolonize Arctic exploration history (Eber 2008; Craciun 2016). But by delimiting his archive to the epistolary, testimonial, (pseudo)scientific and novelistic writing of mostly British, and to a lesser degree American, men, he opens exploration history to spectral historiography only to marginalize the already minoritized, authorial constituencies.

Finally, it is not clear that *The spectral Arctic* succeeds in its quest to diminish Franklin's mythic hold on exploration history. By illuminating explorer hero worship's darker dimensions, does McCorristine not make it all the more fascinating? Should we continue to fixate on Franklin's haunting, when Arctic spectrality is far more encompassing? If the Arctic, as the book initially argues, has long been inhabited by Inuit spirits, then to see Arctic history's complete picture should we not redirect our attention to the spectral productions of Inuit culture? What case would McCorristine make of Annie Pootoogook's famously haunting drawings of everyday postcolonial life? (Reporting on a commemorative exhibit of Pootoogook's work, Murray Whyte observes, "Reality in the north, of course, contains hardly any of the mythic notions with which it was long associated, and Pootoogook's work was jarring. Alongside the mundane daily life of her interior worlds were scenes of real terror: a child smashing bottles of alcohol to prevent her parents from drinking, or a man rearing up with a bat to beat a woman recoiling in horror on a bed. Systemic issues ranging from suicide to domestic violence to substance abuse all made their way into her work, rendered with the same plainspoken pencil-drawn sharpness" [Whyte 2017].) Or of Tanya

Tagaq's uncanny, animistic, re-visionary performances of Robert Flaherty's ethnographic film classic *Nanook of the North*? (As Tagaq explains in a CBC News interview, she performs throat-singing while *Nanook* is screening to "reclaim" the spirit of the land from colonial stereotyping [Anonymous 2014].) Of Igloodik IsumaTV's and Arnait (Women's) Video Productions' fourth cinema, where spectrality functions as a medium of "survival"—that is, where the dead *outlive* colonialism's genocidal legacy and make their spirited *comeback* in Inuit revisionary history? An example is *Atanarjuat (The fast runner)*, which came out in 2000. As described by IsumaTV, "Atanarjuat is Canada's first feature-length fiction film written, produced, directed, and acted by Inuit. An exciting action thriller set in ancient Igloodik, the film unfolds as a life-threatening struggle between powerful natural and supernatural characters" (IsumaTV 2018). Also see Arnait (Women's) Video Production's *Before tomorrow* (2009). In this film, the dead come back to life to relive, retell and pass on their story of first contact and consequential extinction (Arnait Video Productions 2018).

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