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## **Supernatural and Disembodied Experience in Victorian Arctic Exploration**

Arctic experience today is typically described as “enchanted,” and Arctic tourism promises that visitors will enjoy a “dreamscape.” Indeed, one commentator has highlighted the notion of an Arctic “spell” as being crucial to future research on the region (Sturm, 2000). The premise of this project is that the history of Arctic experience requires serious re-thinking because of a failure to take sufficiently seriously debates about the legitimacy of supernatural and disembodied experiences in nineteenth century narratives from British, American, and Canadian sources. My research focuses on three questions:

1. *To what extent did the disembodied categories of the supernatural and the spiritual play central roles in the cultural formation of Arctic exploration from the disastrous Franklin expedition to seek the North West Passage (1845-48)?*

The traumatic disappearance of the Franklin expedition caused the British public to engage with the disembodied categories of the supernatural and the spiritual in an effort to imagine and reconstruct what happened, and perhaps to make direct contact, physically or spiritually, with the lost sailors. This drive manifested itself in a variety of ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ ways, from naval expeditions to spiritualist séances to romantic poetry. In his 1875 epitaph to John Franklin, Tennyson invoked these categories when declaring that Franklin’s soul was heading “Toward no earthly pole.” Historians have traditionally misdiagnosed the notion of an “Arctic otherworld” as a sign of Victorian sentimentalism rather than taking seriously its implications for understanding the Arctic as a landscape rich with meanings of place. How were ideas of the Arctic as a dream-world, where one could become disembodied, articulated?

2. *How was Arctic place ‘learnt’ in the nineteenth century?*

By exploring the significance of dreamscaping in Arctic narratives, this project intervenes in cognitive questions about the conditions in which minds or spirits can serve as reliable technologies of travel capable of interacting with landscapes. A central area for examination is whether the structural binaries (e.g., delight and desolation) that defined aesthetic response to Arctic landscapes (c. 1795-1835), were unsettled by unauthorised disembodied agencies such as mesmerism (Scoresby’s equivalence of animal magnetism and polar magnetism in 1850s) and spiritualist interventions in the search for Franklin (1848-59). Such contested agencies as these complicated the existing range of emotional registers attached to Arctic landscapes. How did these new registers of place come into existence? How were they acquired and learned? For example, how did a strong fear of being alone co-exist with a growing awe of landscapes inhabited by spirits?

3. *In what ways was Victorian culture able to establish aesthetic precedents for more recent imaginings of the Arctic as a place of spirited dwelling?*

In this research, attention to what nineteenth century audiences began to count as meaningful responses to Arctic landscapes opens up new possibilities to think through the remarkable subsequent appeal of Arctic exploration to readers and museum visitors. Questions regarding the “haunting” nature of Arctic exploration serve this purpose in two ways. Firstly, this project asks how the metaphors of

haunting offer investigators invaluable tools for connecting the Arctic to the study of nineteenth century cultural history and its key place in contemporary culture. Secondly, through close readings of disparate sources, this project engages with a wide range of actual incidences of disembodied experience, from ghost stories set in the Arctic to spiritualist séances which sought to locate lost explorers. This research therefore involves tracing the experience and communication of psychological trauma (e.g., the Franklin disappearance in the narratives of British and North American searchers, 1848-59); the literary response to the disaster in Victorian culture; the upsurge in novels; and speculations regarding the events of the expedition.