

# Polar Bear Narratives from Gendered and Post-human Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article discusses the corpus of polar bear narratives in Iceland, which are only to a limited extent based on human-bear interaction. It approaches polar bear narratives as a forum for the exploration of human-animal relations and the behavior expected by men and women in the communities that anticipate the bears' arrivals. It takes into account sources ranging from medieval literature to published folk tales to recent field work, identifying continuity and change in bear narratives through time. It investigates aspirations eyed by real and imagined polar bears in both solidifying and subverting social norms and offering counter narratives to the modern grand narratives of the nature-culture binary. They offer a forum for exploration of spatial boundaries, human and non-human animal boundaries, and gender-specific (un)desirable behaviour. Bears are bound up in imaginaries and gendered discourses that both sustain and challenge cultural views of animals and society. These narratives highlight and tie together the role of folk narrative and the ongoing cultural categories that influence daily discourse and behaviour. Going beyond a designation of polar bears as a distinct and apart of the human world they can be seen as actors within society, not only as harbingers of climate catastrophe and appropriated cultural symbols of regionalism, but also as a trigger of gendered social action, supernatural beliefs and post-human discourse.

## Keywords

folk narrative; post-humanism; gender

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## Introduction

At the kitchen table of the farm Hraun in the summer of 2020, we, the authors and fieldworkers, intermittently ask questions, sip coffee and fidget with the sound recorder and mounted camera. Its focus is drawn from a bright blue milk carton on the table to the farmers sitting across them

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and/or standing further behind by the kitchen island. They have just seen off the visiting team's co-researchers who had required car service on the rough roads of Skagi, what those of us from the city see as a relatively remote coastal farm community in North Iceland. The farmers do not share our sense of remoteness. They are at home within a close-knit society where they receive us. They are welcoming, generous, and talkative and just about to recount the tale that had brought these visitors in the first place; a story of an altogether less welcome guest, which had arrived a few years prior, only meters away.

This temporal and spatial significance of a recent polar bear encounter in the vicinity has become a familiar feature of our fieldwork stretching from the West Fjords to the northeastern tip of Iceland and its northernmost island of Grímsey. The meaning is not only experienced intellectually, it is met with a certain set of behaviors and cultural practices, e.g. a purchase of "polar bear shots" in Strandir or the presence of large assemblies of onlookers as in Skagi. It is embodied with feelings of awe, fear, or unease, e.g. in the shudder of a Grímsey Islander as she hangs clothes out to dry overlooking the beach landing. The significance of polar bear encounters is also narrated and thus reinforced in conversation, print, and media both social and traditional.

Iceland is not a natural habitat of bears but through the centuries polar bears on occasion come ashore in Iceland. Numerous narratives have been told and recorded of the Icelanders' interaction, or conflict, with the white bear (in Icelandic: hvítabjörn / plural: hvítabirnir), often simply referred to as bear (Icelandic: bjarndýr [literally, *bear-animal*]), or more recently ice-bear (Icelandic: ísbjörn). Considered vagrants, their arrivals have historically been associated with cold winters and drift ice floes their most recent sightings are connected with declining ice in bear's habitat around the Arctic Ocean (Skirnisson 2009, 43–4). From the year 2000, five bears have come ashore in Iceland and all have been killed. Narratives of the encounters between humans and bears have been known and told since the time of human settlement in Iceland, in the late 9th century. They appear in medieval literature, folk narrative and other accounts throughout Iceland's history (see overview of polar narratives in Iceland in Schram, Kristinn and Jón Jónsson, 2019).

In this work we approach polar bear narratives as a forum for the exploration of human-animal relations and the behavior expected by men and women in the communities that anticipate the bears' arrivals. We take

into account sources ranging from medieval literature to published folktales to interviews recorded during our fieldwork, identifying continuity and change in bear narratives through time. By including first-hand narratives in our analysis we illustrate how pre-established narrative conventions are integrated into personal narratives, which express the roles played by real and imagined polar bears in solidifying and subverting social norms. Moreover, we aim to place Icelandic bear narratives within the context of yet emerging gendered and post-human perspectives on human-polar bear interaction in Iceland and its interconnected place in a precarious Anthropocene.

### **Fear, Storytelling and Gender Roles**

A recurring narrative motif in the bear legends is the absence of an able-bodied male at the point of a bear's arrival at the homestead. In some cases, the absence provides an opportunity for an unlikely hero to present themselves and the bear is either killed or warded off by an adult woman, a male child or in one case an elderly, disabled man.<sup>2</sup> In others, however, the bear's arrival has devastating consequences. Legends of bear attacks on those considered ill-equipped to defend themselves betray, first and foremost, a vulnerability experienced by storytellers living within communities exposed to possible bear arrivals. Attitudes expressed towards bears in these tales are primarily informed by fear, unease and insecurity. Yet they tell us about more than humans' relations with real and imagined bears — they are also a forum for exploration of the behavior expected by men and women in the communities that anticipate bears' arrivals.

When we are to consider the influence that ideas about gender have on tales of devastation inflicted by these unwelcome guests, a common thread is the implication that the presence of an able-bodied man would have helped secure a better outcome. The idea that women are reliant on men for protection against polar bears is not exclusive to Icelandic folklore. D'Anglure writes that many Canadian Inuit stories “told how women were attacked, mutilated, and devoured by hungry bears that unexpectedly appeared in camp when the men were away hunting, or which intercepted solitary and defenseless women along the paths” (d'Anglure 1990, 184).

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<sup>2</sup> Tales of adult female heroes are to be found in Ólafur Davíðsson 1978-1980, II, 292-3; Jón Árnason 1954-1960, IV, 5-6; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964-1965, III, 189 and Sigfús Sigfússon 1982-1993, IV, 227-228. Child heroes are found in two tales, Jón Árnason 1954-1960, IV, 6 and Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964-1965, III, 190-191. One example of a blind old man in this role is to be found, in Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954-1959, 3, f.hl., 37.

Although Icelandic legends of bear attacks on women and others considered vulnerable certainly enforce the idea that a man should not neglect his duty to protect his household, an interesting feature of these narratives is a clear difference in the respective level of criticism expressed in legends towards male and female characters who fail to protect those more vulnerable. When an explanation is given for the men's absence, they are characterized as caring for their families and working hard to provide. In the tale of the bear at *Ánastaðir*, attributed to Sólveig Þorlákisdóttir (b. 1815, d. 1892), the man was accompanying a priest home after the christening of his newborn (Jón Árnason 1954-1960, IV, 3). In the legend of *Þeistareykir* farm, the wife was killed when her husband had to make a trip due to a lack of provisions (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964-1965, III, 189-190). In one version of the tale of the bear at *Reyðará* told by Óli J. Björnsson (b. 1884, d. 1927), it is stated that the man had to go to *Siglufljörður* as they had no provisions at the cottage, but was "very scared for his wife and child because of bears, yet no other people were home" (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978-1980, II, 293). In another legend about *Reyðará* told by Grímur Grímsson (b. 1882, d. 1954), the husband was returning from sea when he came across the terrible scene (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson, 1964-1965, III, 188). In a third legend told on tape by Jón Oddsson (b. 1903, d. 1994) about the same farm, the husband is seeking a midwife for his wife while she is in labour (Jón Oddsson 1970). The gruesome ends met by the most vulnerable in these legends send a clear message that a man should be at the home in the role of protector. Nonetheless, the justification narrators afford to these men raises questions, particularly when they are compared to their female counterparts.

The same narrators do not attempt to excuse the behavior of women who are absent at the scene of a polar bear attack. In all legends about women who flee, the actual or potential victims are pregnant or childbearing women and their infants. This re-enforces the message that the able-bodied have a duty towards the physically vulnerable. In the tales of the bear at *Ánastaðir* and the third legend about *Reyðará*, a midwife and female farm worker are said to have fled the scene while the women and their newborn children were killed by bears (Jón Árnason 1954-1960, IV, 3; Jón Oddsson 1970). Narrators do not provide them with excuses. In another tale told by Óli J. Björnsson, the sympathy he afforded to the farmer at *Reyðará* is noticeably lacking when he tells of a woman who left her pregnant counterpart vulnerable to a bear attack. The two women took a shortcut across an ice-filled bay. When they had reached the middle of the ice, they

saw a bear making its way towards them. They became scared and started running, but one of them was pregnant and found herself lagging behind. In this tale, the bear takes mercy on the pregnant woman and kills her companion. The final resolution of this narrative, of the child being named after the bear, is not unique in Icelandic legend tradition (Níels Árni Lund 2016, II, 118), but its position in the text betrays a lack of grief surrounding the killing of the other woman:

*Dví næst sneri það aftur til vanfæru konunnar, en gerði henni ekkert mein, heldur lagði það aðeins höfuðið í kjöltu hennar og fór svo leiðar sinnar. Konan komst heim til sín heil á húfi og ól sveinbarn skömmu seinna; lét hún það heita Björn, því að hún hugði, að hjarndýrið hefði verið að biðja sig að láta heita eftir sér, þar sem hann lagði höfuðið í kjöltu hennar*

It turned next to the pregnant woman, but did not harm her. Rather it lay its head on her lap and went on its way. The woman returned home safe and sound and gave birth to a boy shortly afterwards. She named it Björn, as she believed that the bear had been requesting she name the child after it when it lay its head on her lap (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978-1980, II, 291).

This comparatively explicit moral judgment of women in bear legends which end in tragedy is in keeping with trends identified in wonder tale scholarship. Comparing the explicit social persecution by the stepmothers of the Grimms' fairy tales with the relative lack of direct depiction of erotic persecution by fathers, Tatar writes that fathers "either absent themselves from the home or are so passive as to be superfluous" (Tatar 1987, 151-152). In the examples studied above, fictional male legend characters are presented as victims of circumstance, while their female counterparts can only be described as self-interested and negligent. The overarching message—that we should look out for those weaker than ourselves—is the same, yet we see a greater scrutiny of women's conduct. In the context of Icelandic legend and folk belief scholarship, the spatial aspect of the transgression of the woman on the sea-ice cannot be ignored. Women in Icelandic legend who transgressed the boundary between the social and the wild were under threat from the latter (Hastrup 1990a, 277). This can be seen most clearly in legends about *huldufólk* (e. hidden people) and *álfar* (e. elves) but also appears to hold true when the boundary crossed is from land and onto frozen sea.

Only a minority of polar bear narratives occur on the bears' territory and this tale is the only one known to us in which the humans are women. Two tales of men walking out onto the ice, by contrast, end with an impressive story of endurance and survival and a friendship formed between bear and man respectively (Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Helgi Guðmundsson, 1933-1949, II, 173; Jón Árnason, 1954-1960, I, 606-607).<sup>3</sup>

### Gender in Portrayals of Bears

In contemporary and historic accounts from Iceland, ideas about sex and gender often inform portrayals of bears themselves. The Eddic poem *Völundarkviða* contains the sex-specific noun *bera* (e. she-bear), which is used to describe a dead bear whose flesh *Völundur* roasts as he sits on a bear's pelt (*Eddukvæði* 1999, 144). In *Vatnsdala saga*, a bear spotted by early settlers is described only as "one she-bear (icel. *birna*) and with her two cubs" (*Vatnsdala saga* 1939, 42). A version of this encounter also appears in the Icelandic book of settlement, *Landnámabók*, containing the word *bera* (1968, 2, 219). *Landnámabók* details Iceland's settlement during the 9th and 10th centuries, and we can date this particular text to at least the 13th century.<sup>4</sup> Another encounter between a settler and a polar bear is to be

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<sup>3</sup>The second tale, of a friendship forged between man and bear, was analysed in Bower & Schram 2023. The bear provided the man with shelter, helped him return home and a relationship of reciprocal gift-giving ensued.

<sup>4</sup>The narrative of the female bear and the cubs originates from the now lost *Sturlubók* manuscript of *Landnámabók*, written by Sturla Þórðarson (b. 1214, d. 1284). A 17th century copy made before the manuscript's destruction still exists (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, l). The tale of Arngeir and Oddur also originates from *Sturlubók* and both narratives appear in the manuscript *Hauksbók*, written in Haukur Erlendsson's (b. c. 1260, d. 1334) own handwriting, likely shortly after 1300 (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, l; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997, 12). A passage in *Hauksbók* claims that Ari fróði Þorgilsson (b. 1067/8, d. 1148) and Kolskeggur hinn vitri Ásbjarnarson (b. 11th century, d. c. 1130) first wrote *Landnámabók*, followed by Styrmir hinn fróði Kárason (d. 1245) (*Landnámabók* 1968, 395, 397; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997, 12-14). This early version attributed to Ari and Kolskeggur was likely written around 1100, while Styrmir's text was written in the first half of the 13th century (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997, 12, 14). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has argued that many narratives of individuals preserved in *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* could indeed come from the works of Ari fróði (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997, 31). Whether this is the case for any of the material discussed here is, however, very difficult to ascertain, as both Sturla and Haukur are said to have also taken material from fictional 13th century texts (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, liii; Jón Jóhannesson 1941, 8). Early 20th century scholarship points to Sturla having taken his discussion of the settlement of Vatnsdal, including Húnavatn, from *Vatnsdala saga*—albeit in an earlier form than we have access to now (Jón Jóhannesson 1941, 109; Einar Ólafur

found in *Landnámabók*, which appears, at a glance, to be of a similar age. This encounter had much more serious repercussions for the humans and bear involved. It tells of Arngeir, who settled the Melrakkaslétta plains of northeast Iceland. He had gone off with his son Þorgils to look for sheep, but did not return. Another of his sons, Oddur, found a polar bear eating them. Oddur killed the bear to avenge his father and proceeded to eat it to avenge his brother. The meat had the effect of making Oddur “an evil man, very hard to deal with” (Icel. *illr ok óðall við at eiga*), as well as a shape-changer (Icel. *hamrammr*) (*Landnámabók* 1968, 286; trans. *The Book of Settlements* 1972: 109). The latter of these new properties gave him the ability to travel to Þjórsárdalur in the southern highlands over one night— a distance of more than 300km over Iceland’s treacherous interior. This is likely the oldest narrative we have about properties being transferred from polar bear to Icelander— an idea which is by no means exclusive to Icelandic folklore (Pentikäinen 2007, 44; Kochneva 2007, 55). Narratives about the transferal of properties from bear to human are of particular interest when we consider the impact of ideas about sex and gender on the representation of bears. When we study the tale of Arngeir, Þorgils and Oddur alongside others from medieval literature and later folklore, we see that the recipients of bears’ properties are either male or unspecified, yet female biology plays an interesting role in facilitating these transferals.

In the legendary saga *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it is a woman, the aptly-named Bera, who is forced to consume the meat of a bear. The bear in question is in fact her husband Björn who has been changed into his namesake by his stepmother Hvít. But Bera is pregnant with three sons and is not the recipient of the animalistic properties. Rather, she enables the transmission and proceeds to give birth to three sons with animalistic properties. She is forewarned of these effects with the words “it will be obvious from their appearance if you have eaten any of the bear’s meat” (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1960, 58; *The saga of King Hrolf Kraki* 1998, 38). Two of the triplets partially resemble an elk and a dog respectively, while the third, Böðvar Bjarki, had no obvious effects at birth but would become associated with the bear later in life. He becomes a great warrior in the court of Hrólfur and in what turns out to be Hrólfur’s last stand, Böðvar Bjarki appears to be

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Sveinsson xxxvii–xxxviii). In his study of *Landnámabók* manuscripts, Jón Jóhannesson argues that Styrmir *binn fróði* Kárason’s text would not have been influenced by sagas such as *Vatnsdæla* (Jón Jóhannesson 1941, 144).

sitting idle but is actually in the field of battle defending his king in the form of a bear. Only when Böðvar Bjarki is awakened from his trance-like state does the bear leave battle (*Hrólfs saga kraki* 1960, 116–119).<sup>5</sup> In the much later poetic rendition *Bjarkarímur*, we see that the story has adapted further to Icelandic conditions as a hvítabjörn or white-bear, the common Icelandic term for the polar bear, is described running into battle in Böðvar Bjarki's absence (*Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur* 1904, 161).

Underpinning the tale of Bera's meat consumption is the idea of sympathetic magic working on a pregnant woman through the foods she consumes. This has been observed in narratives and accounts of folk belief from various cultures and time periods (Tye & Greenhill 2020, 103). In the Icelandic context, the idea that a pregnant woman's contact with animals can pass their properties to the unborn child is seen in, but not limited to, beliefs about food (ÞP 630/1963-2; 750/1963-2; 1686/1963-2; 705/1963-2; 670/1963-2; 690/1963-2; 649/1963-2). Such beliefs not only afford full responsibility to the mother for certain pregnancy outcomes but are also often informed by ableist bodily ideals. Yet female biology also plays a significant role in other types of bear lore which deal with transformations and the transferal of properties. These are the ideas of *bjarnylur* (e. a bear's warmth), which is passed onto a child born on a bear's pelt at the moment of birth and *bjarnarafl* (e. a bear's strength) obtained by those who drink bear's milk as children (Jón Árnason, 1954-1960, I, 605; 608; *Hávaðar saga Ísfríðings*, 1943, 294; Jóhannes Friðlaugsson, 1935: 389). In all cases known to us, human recipients of the bear's properties are either male or children of unspecified sex. Transferals are often facilitated by female biological functions of humans and bears such as childbirth and lactation. In a work about Icelandic nature from the late 16th or early 17th century, the language

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<sup>5</sup>The tale of Böðvar Bjarki should not be viewed in isolation from the concept of the *berserker* warrior mentioned elsewhere in medieval Icelandic literature. Some scholars have argued that the etymology of the word *berserker* points to the warriors wearing a bear shirt, but this has been the subject of lively debate with others interpreting *ber* as bare (Güntert 1912, 19–20; Noren 1932; Kuhn 1949, 107; von See 1961, 132–135; Liberman 2005, 410; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2001, ccxii–ccxiii; 2007, 281). Among those who argue that bears play a prominent role in representations of *berserker* is Schjødt. He writes about Böðvar Bjarki's battlefield scene in the context of *berserker* narratives and argues that to be *berserker* has to do with ritual or symbolic transformation (Schjødt 2006, 888). Another interesting aspect of Böðvar Bjarki's battlefield appearance that scholars have drawn attention to is possible parallels with Sámi bear myths (Ellis Davidson 1978, 128–129; Tolley 2007, 7–15). We have discussed this in Bower & Schram 2023.

used by the author Jón lærði Guðmundsson puts an emphasis on the transformative properties of polar bear milk. He writes that bear cubs assume a great and quick change (icel. *umskipti*) when they drink their mother's milk and that they "resemble their kind" with every sip they take (Jón Guðmundsson 1924, 14; 1590–1634, 29v–30r). Another narrative of a mother bear acting as an agent in her own cub's transformation is to be found in the 19th century legend from Grímsey "Bear births a child" in which she changes her biological child, born with a human appearance, back to its true form as a cub (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606).<sup>6</sup>

### **Gendered human-animal transformations**

The shifting and assertive aspect of storytelling is fully on display in polar bear narratives exploring layers of gender and other sociocultural politics. Polar bear narratives belong to a narrative tradition which sometimes runs counter to official discourse. Counternarratives, as defined by Amy Shuman, build on the possibility of critique of the master narrative, and thus, to some extent, on empathy, providing redemptive, emancipatory, or liberatory possibilities (2005, 19). Master narratives appropriate the polar bear as a tool in regional identification and representation. Iceland's reputation as a desirable tourism destination is intertwined with Arctic identification (Bailes et al. 2014), which can explain the polar bear's prominence in Icelandic tourism and general Arctic exotification or borealism (Katra Kjartansdóttir and Schram 2020; Schram 2011). While this exotification is seldom countered, examples such as the student art project Fooled by Iceland, lampooning the Inspired by Iceland tourism campaign, states: "Polar bears do not live in Iceland. Sometimes they travel from Greenland on an iceberg. When they do, we kill them" (n.d.).

The polar bear is currently one of the primary non-human actors in the discourse of climate catastrophe drawing out the Arctic region as a canary in the coalmine (see for example Bjørst 2011, 256; Jón Jónsson and Schram 2019). Despite being a figurehead of environmental catastrophe, the bear lacks agency within narratives and imaginaries alike. Certain tales, not least in their current context, suggest a level of empathy and even affinity for the bear, which warrants a closer look. These include motifs dealing with human and non-human animal transformation, the bear's cunning, and bear

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<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, the bear's child in this legend is female. It appears that when bears are the subject of transformation, our observation that the assumption of properties from a bear is more greatly associated with the male gender does not apply. We discuss "Bear births a child" in greater detail in Bower & Schram 2023.

naming traditions.<sup>7</sup> A legend that has migrated to various mountain tracks across Iceland tells of the cunning of polar bears encountering travelers armed with either halberds or, alternatively, alpenstocks, a mountaineer's staff (*broddstafur*). The bear sniffs the weapon and, after realizing its threat, allowing the rambler to continue on his way unharmed. On his way down the mountain pass the armed traveler meets another wanderer and lends him the weapon for protection. When the bear sees a second traveler carrying the same weapon he runs down the mountain and attacks the initial, and now defenseless, rambler, killing and eating him (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1979, III, 191–192; Jón Árnason 1954, I, 607–608; Jón Árnason 1956, IV, 4; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 369–370; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982-1993, 203–204; Jóhannes Friðlaugsson 1935, 392).

In this narrative, and its many variants, the bear's recognition of an individual weapon is coupled with an ability to distinguish between the first and second rambler. The attribution of intelligence, personhood, and even consciousness, is often denied to animals, and particularly wild animals, in modern western discourse. Yet, as Tok Thompson notes in his seminal work *Posthuman Folklore*, “the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness (Thompson 2019, 39).” Thompson further traces the constructions of various cultural views of animals in a way that ties together the role of formative sacred stories and the ongoing cultural categories that influence daily discourse. Comparing Abrahamic and Native American mythological traditions he points to the latter's widespread acceptance of the personhood of animals.

One could argue that in the narrative of the cunning polar bear, the role of stories in constructing and reconstructing cultural views of animals is not limited to sacred narrative or indigenous worldviews. While the narrative features a form of gallows humor, a particular set of values may be found in the tale's appropriate incongruity, to use Elliott Orings' terminology on the interrelationships of elements that are generally regarded as incongruous (Oring 1992, 2). Here these elements include the bear's narrated ability to discern between the two rambler and identify the singularity of the weapon. But it is also the initial rambler's underestimation of the intelligence of the animal that in turn seals his dreadful fate. While

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<sup>7</sup>The idea that bears are humans under a spell appears early in Icelandic sources, for example in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Jón Guðmundsson (1924, 14–15) and 19<sup>th</sup> century Jón Árnason (1954-1961, I, 606).

such tales may be chalked down as anthropomorphic aspects of bygone oral traditions, their practice today, as demonstrated in our fieldwork, may be understood as a post-human counter-narrative to the modern master narratives of the nature-culture binary. Within it the human animal is bested and outwitted by the non-human and thus opens space for interpretations that give agency to the animal. Within the narrative genre of the legend, the bear is an actant, an integral structural element upon which the narrative revolves (see Latour 1996). Yet it is not used to create an arctic context within Iceland but to offer an alternative localized view of the bear.

### **The Afterlife of Polar Bears**

Another example of the reconstruction of cultural views of animals can be found in a contemporary legends and recent *memorate*, defined as an oral narrative from memory relating a personal experience, especially as precursor of a legend (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1974, 232). They are narrated by one Guðjón Kristinsson (b. 1954), a gardener and storyteller originated in the northern Strandir region of Northwest Iceland, which is a common backdrop to polar bear narratives that has seen its share of arrivals.<sup>8</sup> While Guðjón's ancestral farmland Drangar was abandoned in 1960s, the family still summers in the area attending to eiderdown and driftwood collection. His late namesake and great-uncle Guðjón Guðmundsson of Eyri (1890–1972), served as a district officer in the region and was a polar bear slayer himself. In an interview during a particularly cold winter he characterized the unarmed farmers in the region's past as having good reason to fear encroaching ice flows. Such fear had to his mind become unnecessary due to the proliferation of rifles and shotguns (Jónsson 1968, 107). Nevertheless polar bear narratives continued to be of keen interest in the area and sightings, real or not, are still quickly reported or even distributed on social media, indicating a lingering social anxiety.

Guðjón Kristinsson grew up within this storytelling tradition and with the telling tales of how his close ancestors had encountered and slain bears - one during the cold winter of 1918. Yet his narratives are not all akin to the masculine white-knuckle accounts of close calls that have featured in legends news reports and often appear in literature, film and television.

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<sup>8</sup> Within networks of heritage preservation, set-design and landscaping Guðjón is known for his storytelling and depictions of the Strandir region. (see e.g. Schram 2002). The narratives presented here were told during an interview in Guðjón's home in South Iceland, conducted by Kristinn Schram, Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson July 26, 2020.

Many account for the more subtle presence of the bears as experiences through sights and sounds, smells, markings and behavior, or disappearances, of other animals that are contextualized within the polar bear narrative tradition. His narratives may also refer to the afterlife of the bear both material and spiritual: how its meat was boiled and eaten; its innards boiled and cured “defying the laws of nature” (“og þá var öllum náttúrulegumálin snúin við“); also how their remains brought fortunes but also ill fortune that hint at the bears revenge. One such humorous legend tells of the fate of the buyer of a bears pelt - sold by Guðjón’s grandfather:

*Hann var svoldið ölkær. En svo færðist það í aukana. Hann var alltaf með feldinn á stofugólfíð og þeir sögðu hann hefði skálað við björninn og það endaði með að hann drakke sig í hel. Hann fannst dauður fyrir framan bjarnarfeldinu. Því hann hafði oft skálað við, sko, hausinn var gapandi þarna á gólfinu. Og þeir sögðu að þeir fóru til hans og drukku stundum með honum. Og þeir skáluðu alltaf við björninn. En þeir sögðu að björninn hafði drukkíð hann undir bordið. [hlær] En þarna hafði björninn betur [...] að hann var að drekka frá sér vit og rænu fyrir framan líkamsleifar hans*

He was already a drinker. But it got worse. He had the pelt on the living room floor and they said he raised his glass to the bear. But he ended up drinking himself to death. He was found dead in front of the bear’s pelt. He had raised his glass too often to the gaping mouth there on the floor. They said they had often visited and sometimes drank with him. And they always raised a glass to the bear. But they said the bear drank him under the table [laughs]. So there the bear won [...] and he drank away his senses before his physical remains.

Guðjón also speaks of his admiration for polar bears, emphasizing its intelligence and how they “read their environment better than the wisest men have ever been able to do.” Indeed Guðjón’s respect for bears is reflected in his craftsmanship and it is in explaining his many driftwood carvings of polar bears that he narrates the following memorate.

*Ég var að labba frá Seljanesi, þá sá ég ísbjörn. En það var ekki ísbjörn samt. Við vorum að labba frá Seljanesi í gegnum Ingólfssjörð og attluðum að vera tvo tíma, þrjá tíma á leiðinni og hérna það var svo ofbodsleg ofærð að við vorum*

*færð yfir á Melur, ætluðum svo út í Stóru-Ávík. Og þá hérna, komið niður Fossabrekkurnar þá, ég var með haglabyssu með mér á bakinu. Þá snarstoppa ég og sé ég tröllstóran ísbjörn. Bara, það var ekki raunverulegt bara. En þá sá ég hann, hann var að sleikja á sér; þessi mynd er ennþá ljós (?) sleikja á sér (?) og horfir svona á mig. Ég tók byssuna af bakinu og miðaði en mér datt samt ekki í hug að skjóta, það var bara, það var skot í byssunni.*

I was walking from Seljanes through Ingólfsvörður and we planned for a two to three hour journey. But the conditions were so terrible we had to be transported to Melar and planned to go to Stóra Ávík. And then, as we were coming down Foss hills, I had a shotgun on my back. I come to a sudden standstill as I see a gigantic polar bear. Only, it wasn't real. But I saw it. It was licking its [paws]. The sight is still clear, and its watching me. I took the gun off my back and pointed it, but couldn't bring myself to shoot. Even though there was ammunition in the gun.

When asked what he made of the apparition, he replied, “I just saw a bear ghost, didn't I?” (*“Ég sá bara bjarnardrang, er það ekki bara?”*)

The corpus of polar bear narratives in Iceland is only to a limited extent based on human-bear interaction. Within this buffer zone of imagination some may present post-human aspirations played by real and imagined polar bears in both solidifying and subverting social norms and offering counter-narratives to the modern grand narratives of the nature-culture binary. Academic attempts at transcending human-centered approaches all face their limitations. As Tok Thompson points out, much post-human work has, ironically, “focused on how humans have thought about non-humans—which is to say, still taking the human as the appropriate venue of inquiry, albeit destabilizing the assumptions of essential separation between humans and animals” (2019, 41). In that vein, these polar bear narratives, and their analysis, can only be considered post-human in the sense that they may strive to take the more-than-human into account.

In some cases, the narratives destabilize assumptions of the human-animal divide. The stories' modus operandi derives not only in narrating past encounters with bears, both real and imagined, but also the anticipation of arrivals in the future. They offer a forum for exploration of spatial boundaries, human and non-human animal boundaries, and gender-specific

(un)desirable behavior. The bear's role in these tales is to disrupt. In communities that experience real-life bear arrivals, ideas expressed in older legends are integrated into personal narratives, speaking to or undermining living individuals' characters as informed by hegemonic gender norms. Bears are bound up in imaginaries and gendered discourses that both sustain and challenge cultural views of animals and society.

These polar bear narratives highlight and tie together the role of folk narrative and the ongoing cultural categories that influence daily discourse and behavior—on the shores of Strandir, Skagi and Langanes or embodied in a slight quiver while hanging clothes on the island of Grímsey. Going beyond Hastrup's designation of polar bears as a distinct and apart of the human world (1990b, 254) they can be seen as actors within society, not only as harbingers of climate catastrophe and appropriated cultural symbols of regionalism, but also as a trigger of gendered social action, supernatural beliefs and post-human discourse. Of course, many of the narratives exhibit a striking absence of representation of non-human animals, gender equity and the vulnerability of both bear in an unsustainable environment. Despite these apparent problems further analysis reveals how human society is interconnected with the non-human and how reevaluations of that interconnectedness may find form, however fleetingly, in folk narrative.

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