

A sculpture of a mammoth, rendered in a light, almost white color, stands on a snowy, flat landscape. The mammoth is shown in profile, facing right. The background is a clear, bright blue sky. The overall scene is minimalist and evocative of the Arctic environment.

ARCTIC SPIRITS:

OUTSIDER AND INSIDER RELATIONS
TO THE ARCTIC ENVIRONMENT
DEPICTED THROUGH MEDIA

CONTACT ZONES

What do I mean by 'Contact Zones?'

In literary criticism, contact zones are sites where different cultures meet and clash with each other. These meetings are also often contextualized by uneven power relations.

The Terror is, at its core, a narrative about contact zones; European contact with the Arctic environment and European contact with the Indigenous Peoples. However, both the novel and the AMC series are also cultural contact zones in themselves, as pieces of art and media.

Both conceptions of *The Terror* can be viewed as 'outsider media' as the AMC series is American-produced and the novel is American-authored. Both versions of the story are non-Indigenous creations about the Arctic region, which borrow motifs from Inuit culture. The Tuunbaq is a character which exemplifies this, as it is a creation of author Dan Simmons, based on Inuit traditions and folklore.

The representations of the figure of the Arctic spirit and monster, Tuunbaq, in the drama series and book are of particular interest when looking at historical and contemporary outsider relations to the Arctic environment as well as outsider relations to the Indigenous insider populations.

My poster will analyze both depictions of the Tuunbaq in *The Terror* AMC series and the novel alongside depictions of Arctic spirits in Inuit author Tanya Tagaq's novel *Split Tooth* to see what the depictions of these two figures say about human relations to the Arctic.





Sedna, Appetites, & Balance

Although omitted from the AMC series, we learn at the end of Simmons' novel that Tuunbaq was created by Sedna, the sea goddess figure from Inuit folklore. In the novel and in Inuit folklore, Sedna is mistress of sea creatures—an important role in an Arctic environment where food is scarce. If humans displease her, she is able to take away the sea animals, leaving people to starve.

This tale makes her a figure that embodies the Arctic environment and its harshness and the delicate balance of its ecosystem. The tale seems to say: treat your environment with care, keep balance, or starve. Interestingly, while she is the embodiment of the Arctic environment, her ability to control humans' ability to hunt (and therefore eat) also ties her to appetites. This connection between environment, balance, and appetites is a theme that reemerges throughout all three pieces of media I will explore.



SEDNA & TUUNBAQ

Sedna creates the Tuunbaq in the novel to get rid of the other two major spirits: the Air Spirit and the Moon Spirit. In this sense, the Tuunbaq is a manifestation of the destruction of environmental balance, but also of Sedna's greed to be the only powerful spirit.

After the Tuunbaq's defeat and banishment to the Arctic region, it falls to the shamans (sixam ieua) to maintain balance through the containment of the Tuunbaq and its appetite for human souls. They are able to reach an agreement where the sixam ieua will bring the Tuunbaq food to sate its hunger and keep humans off its land, and in return, the Tuunbaq won't devour human souls.

However the sixam ieua foresee a future where the Tuunbaq's domain will be invaded by the 'pale people,' which would signal the beginning of the "End of Times." The pale people would poison the Tuunbaq which will cause it to get sick and die. The death of the Tuunbaq is foretold to cause the ice to melt, which will cause all the Arctic animals to die.

Here, the Tuunbaq seems to also embody the Arctic environment itself. There is a nod to how European colonialism and colonial greed is a causal factor for global warming and environmental destruction. We see hints of this type of colonial environmental destruction throughout the novel, especially in Goodsir's diary entries on the topic of polar bears.

The expedition is shown killing polar bears multiple times throughout the novel, negatively affecting the balance of the Arctic ecosystem. They slaughter the bears for reasons other than food and are also shown to kill whales for sport early on in the expedition as well. This ties into the Sedna tale, as these creatures are all her animals. It can be presumed the slaughtering of her animals for sport would upset her, and may provide a supernatural explanation as to why the expedition later is unable to find any animals to hunt. In a less supernatural view of the event, the men overhunted, leaving nothing to eat later on for themselves or the Tuunbaq.

TUUNBAQ - NOVEL

The Tuunbaq haunts the narrative in Simmons' novel. It is rarely described in detail but reports of its tracks and carnage are littered throughout the pages. When compared to the AMC series, the novel's Tuunbaq has a more spectral quality. It shifts forms, appearing out of nowhere to cause death and destruction.

Best on witnessing Tuunbaq killing Lieutenant Gore:

"The ice just rose up. Like when you can see the pressure ridges building all of a sudden. Only this was no ridge — no ice — it just rose up and took on a ... shape. A white shape. A form. I remember there were ... claws. No arms, not at first, but claws. Very large. And teeth. I remember the teeth" (Simmons 151).

In this quotation, the monster is depicted as being a part of the ice itself. It is one with the Arctic environment, not a separate being. This line of thought is echoed by the shamans' predictions which depict the Tuunbaq as being the embodiment of the Arctic environment.

However, even with this prophecy, at the end of the novel, the Tuunbaq still survives and the Arctic environment has won. European contact with the Arctic is shown to be deadly. To develop a positive relationship with the Arctic environment through the Tuunbaq, Crozier must become indigenised, taking on a stewardship role himself as a shaman.



TUUNBAQ - SERIES

The Tuunbaq of the AMC series differs a little from Simmons' original Tuunbaq. This Tuunbaq is more solid, appearing as a large polar bear with human-like eyes and ears and shorter snout. It is also shown visibly deteriorating as the series progresses due to its consumption of the expedition's men.

For the series, the view of the Tuunbaq as a symbol of appetites and the destruction of environmental balance is more apt. There are multiple appetites at play, the main two being the literal appetite for food as the men are starving, but also the colonial appetites of the men on the expedition to conquer the Arctic environment. In an attempt to chase these appetites the men bring destruction to themselves and the environment.

The Tuunbaq's human-like features and deterioration seem to point to it being more connected to the men than the Arctic environment. Furthermore, Crozier calls it "our creature" implying that it is a representation of the men's destructiveness. This is even furthered when strong parallels are drawn between Tuunbaq and Hickey in episode 8.

TUUNBAQ - SERIES

Crozier tells Hickey that the creature is sick from what it is eating [the men], which has the double meaning that Hickey is also sick from what he is eating [also the men]. It does not help that both the Tuunbaq and Hickey are depicted throughout the show as being creatures of appetite without conscience. Tuunbaq slaughters the men but is rarely shown actually eating them in full. Hickey on the other hand, is a man of many appetites. He kills to get what he wants, he lusts after power, and is the leader of the group who descends into cannibalism. Hickey attempts to gain control over the Tuunbaq by offering it his tongue, however, the Tuunbaq ultimately consumes him.

Hickey's greed and hubris in thinking he can master the Tuunbaq reflects the European colonial hubris of believing in their own ability to master nature but instead its nature and their own greed that is master of them.



OUTSIDER MEDIA & ARCTIC ENVIRONMENT

Tuunbaq's depiction in both versions of *The Terror* shows that outsider contact with the Arctic environment is deadly for both sides. Both narratives depict an Arctic environment that is harsh and near uninhabitable. It seems to critique the hubris of Arctic outsiders believing they can gain a mastery over the Arctic environment. It is only the people indigenous to the Arctic who are able to cultivate a positive relationship with the environment. The only way for an outsider to live within the Arctic environment is to shed their outsider identity and become an insider (as seen with Crozier).

SPLIT TOOTH

Split Tooth is a novel that follows an Inuk girl as she grows up and gains shamanistic abilities that allow her to interact with the spirit world.

Like *The Terror*, Tagaq's novel explores the themes of environment and appetites through a narrative rife with Arctic spirits. Through her narrative, she shows how the colonial contact with the Arctic environment and colonial contact with her people has led to both environmental destruction and intergenerational trauma.

Sedna makes an appearance again in this novel. The goddess is described as a figure who dislikes humanity and must be coaxed by shamans to allow some of her animals to be hunted. However, the speaker also holds some of the same contempt for humanity as Sedna:

"I need to talk to Sedna and tell her to keep her treasures. Humans have damned themselves and it has nothing to do with Satan, it has only to do with greed. What will Sedna do when she hears the seismic testing?" (Tagaq 87).

This quotation shows that the protagonist, like the shamans in *The Terror* novel, foresees humans destroying the Earth. Her reference to "seismic testing," puts blame on arctic outsiders who have disturbed the arctic environment.

T A N Y A

T A G A Q



S P L I T

T O O T H

SPLIT TOOTH



However, the protagonist does not hold herself above the appetites of other humans that have led to environmental destruction: “ I want to be a blood lover, an oil spewer, someone with a great wingspan, a spirit sipper, a flesh licker. I want it all” (Tagaq 61). Tagaq is more ambivalent about insider relations to the environment than *The Terror* narratives. She doesn't present her main character as lacking an appetite for destruction, however those desires are tied up with her intergenerational trauma caused by colonial violence. Her respect and love for the arctic environment still shines through in other parts of the novel:

“Land protects and owns me. Land feeds me. My father and mother are the Land. My future children are the Land. You are the Land. We destroy her with the same measured ignorance of a self-harming teenager...I want to save the land as much as my mother wants to save me” (Tagaq 132).

Here she directly ties herself to being a part of the land, showing a different ethos to the outsider narratives shown in *The Terror* novel, where the land is an opponent separate from the protagonists. Tagaq and her protagonist show an awareness that humans cannot be separated from the environment and therefore cannot be separated from the damage that they cause to it.

FURTHER VIEWING



Unfortunately, the scope of this project does not allow me to dive deeper into Tagaq's narrative. I highly recommend reading the novel for yourself and/or watching Tanya Tagaq reading an excerpt of her novel, [Split Tooth](#).

For more Inuit media, I also recommend these two short films:

[Qalupalik](#)

[Lumaajuuq](#)

SOURCES



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Tagaq, Tanya. *Split Tooth*. Penguin Random House, 2018.