Slipping Off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales

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Abstract:

Figure: a pale grey sealskin, lying empty. Ground: the shore of a cold sea. We are in Iceland, or Norway. In Scotland, or Ireland. We are in Shetland, or – half a world away – the South Shetland Islands of the Antarctic Peninsula. For those of us who study this multiple sealskin – who have heard the tales of the Seal Wife – a question arises, unmoored from the quotidian: to what body does the skin belong? Was it cut from a carcass for meat or fur, stripped seal flesh left bloody? Or did someone step from it, slipping naked and uncanny from the skin to walk upon the shore? Some seals are not what they seem, their eyes are too human. They are selch, selkies or silkies, from the Shetland and Orcadian for seal; fey creatures who can shed their sealskins, step from the water, and walk as humans on the shore. This essay examines a cluster of selkie folktales in order to study this sealskin, a locus where questions of gender, species, and kinship intersect. What can this shifting figure reveal about the Seal Wife topos, and the changing landscape of folklore in the twentieth century?

Caption: Stuffed with horsehair, armature, and two glass eyes: this taxidermy sealskin lying on fibreglass rocks in the Husavik Whaling Museum, Iceland, is both full and empty.

Prelude: The Empty Skin

> As soon as the seal was clear of the water, it reared up and its skin slipped down to the sand. What had been a seal was a white-skinned boy.
> - George Mackay Brown, *Pictures in the Cave* (41)

1 Figure: a pale grey sealskin, lying empty. Ground: the shore of a cold sea. We are in Iceland, or Norway. In Scotland, or Ireland. We are in Shetland, or – half a world away – the South Shetland Islands of the Antarctic Peninsula. Sites overlaid as one wave upon the next; one shore for another, one skin for another, one or another telling of a tale. Some details are lost, unique, but others build, composited. For those of us who study this multiple sealskin – who have heard the tales – a question arises, unmoored from the quotidian: to what body does the skin belong? Was it cut from a carcass for meat or fur, stripped seal flesh left bloody? Or did someone step from it, slipping naked and uncanny from the skin to walk upon the shore?

2 Some seals are not what they seem, their eyes are too human. They are *selch, selkies or silkies,* from the Shetland and Orcadian for seal; fey creatures who can shed their sealskins, step from the water, and walk as humans on the shore. This essay examines a cluster of selkie folktales in order to study this sealskin, a locus where questions of gender, species, and kinship intersect.

Introduction: Gender as Species – Dualism and Category Distinction

> If I self-identify as a cat, a feline, do I have to pay income taxes? I mean, I'm just wondering.
> - *Fox News* anchor Andrea Tantaros (quoted in Haraldsson)

3 During the recent furore over civil rights activist Rachel Dolezal's appropriation of another ethnicity, many commentators likened Dolezal's race to Caitlyn Jenner's transgender identity.[1] But another analogy consistently appeared alongside this equation of race and gender: species. Articles and comments, in tones of exasperated common sense, compared "#transracial" and transsexual identity – both seen as equally absurd – with the allegedly equivalent claim to being a different species.[2] These viewpoints were most explicitly expressed from a conservative Christian worldview, exemplified here by the Messianic Jewish author Michael Brown:

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[1] These claims bore striking resemblance to those employed by Janice Raymond in her notorious work, *The Transsexual Empire: the Making of the She-Male* (1979). As part of her elaborate argumentation against the moral validity of transgender identity, Raymond used race as an analogy for gender. Raymond asked whether we would conscience the actions of a Caucasian (male) who claimed membership of the Black community, and accordingly demanded medical intervention to change their appearance, full access to Black spaces, and public recognition as Black. Another example of the eerie phenomenon that Raymond's slim volume seems able to prefigure nearly every popular argument against trans identity, some thirty five years on. (150) This style of anti-transgender feminism is alive and well. In the ongoing debate in the British media about protests against Germaine Greer speaking at Cardiff University, Greer made a comment on the VictoriaLIVE show in response to the protests that re-hashes the conflation of gender and species in no uncertain terms: "Just because you lop off your d**k and then wear a dress doesn't make you a ******* woman. I've asked my doctor to give me long ears and liver spots and I'm going to wear a brown coat but that won't turn me into a ******* cocker spaniel" (Saul).

[2] "#transracial" seems to have originated in multiple locations, but particularly alongside the associated hashtag #WrongSkin as part of the satirical Twitter trolling of @GodfreyElfwick, whose tweets were taken as genuine by the

> Who's to say Bruce Jenner isn't a woman? […]
>
> Who's to say Rachel Dolezal isn't black?
>
> Who's to say that people suffering from species dysphoria are not actually part animal?
>
> […]
>
> I'm convinced that the LGBT war on gender will undermine itself, being part of the larger war on reality, and that soon enough, sanity will prevail in our society.
>
> […]
>
> …when we cut ourselves off from the one true God, the ultimate source of reality, we really do lose our bearings. ("Moral Relativism")

To this dualist mindset – which conflates sex, gender and sexuality, arguably combining misogyny, transphobia and homophobia – distinctions between male and female are as clear, as natural, and as unbridgeable as those between, say, people and seals. These distinctions are, moreover, eternal conditions of "reality", albeit conditions which paradoxically require 'upholding' ("Gay Deception").

4 This intersection of a sex/gender binary with species is by no means a twenty-first century novelty. Val Plumwood's ecofeminist work charts the development of dualism's denigration of the animal, the feminine and the corporeal from Plato via Descartes to the twentieth century. Plumwood argues that "[f]orms of oppression […] have left their traces in western culture as a network of dualisms, and the logical structure of dualism forms a major basis for the connection between forms of oppression" (2). To accept binary dualism on its own terms as an original, traditional or 'natural' conception of difference is mistaken, however; black-and-white thinking of this kind does not characterise worldwide pre-contemporary or non-Occidental thought (Watts 16–19). On the contrary, dualism must be understood as a 'network' in an advanced stage of development. This historically entrenched and predominantly Western onto-epistemology, championed by Cartesian mechanists and Enlightenment rationalists in the eighteenth century, extends its hegemonic, colonising reach through the capitalist nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to the present day (Plumwood 7, 12, 111, 132). The "network of dualisms" continues to progress, ramified and reinforced by "linking postulates" (64), cultural concepts which cross-link the hierarchical pairs, mapping the terms onto one another: truth–rationality–mind–culture–human–male are cross-linked in opposition to fiction–sensation–body–nature–animal–female. Overlap between these supposedly opposite categories is denied as ontologically impossible and/or ethically undesirable, resulting in a

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national press (eg. www.mirror.co.uk *"*#WrongSkin: Twitter campaign by white man who 'identifies as being black' goes viral", 12 June 2015) I use the hashtag here to distinguish this discussion from more serious discourse on the transracial identities of adopted children. The claim to identify as non-human, termed 'species dysphoria', is in fact not unknown, and is referenced and hyperlinked in the op-ed by Michael Brown, quoted below. Internet communities who self-identify as belonging to other (often mythological) species include Otherkin, Furries and Therians.

form of rigid black-and-white thinking Plumwood terms "hyperseparation". As anthropologist Philippe Descola argues, however, because the "world presents itself to us as a proliferating continuum, [...] one would have to adhere to a truly myopic realism of essences to consider it cut up in advance into discontinuous domains that the brain is designed, always and everywhere, to identify in the same manner" (86).

5 To borrow psychoanalytic Object Relations terminology originating with Ronald Fairbairn – returning Brown's dubious favour of pathologizing those worldviews that contradict one's own – dualist thinking is characterised by a schizoid 'splitting' of complex phenomena into categorical opposites of positive and negative qualities (for an overview, see Semply & Smyth 834–6). Fairbairn considered splitting a universal element of human thought – 'brain design', in Descola's terms – but one which can become pathological. For our discussion, the key element of Fairbairn's complex theory is that *a single entity* is split into the fundamental dualism *good/bad*, due to experiences of it which cannot be integrated into the self and must be repressed.[3] Indeed, for Fairbairn, splitting and repression are aspects of the same operation (Rubens 13). Plumwood also identifies repression as a key mechanism in dualism (49, 91). As the person is split into the human and the animal, the mind and the body, the rational and the emotional, these split elements of the self become increasingly difficult to integrate. The deepening "fault-line" which Plumwood observes "run[ning] through [Western culture's] entire conceptual system" (42) is not only a pathological, impoverished conception of the world but also serves "to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment" (102). This, Plumwood argues, is the *cultural function* underwriting the allure of Descola's "myopic realism of essences": hyperseparated dualism ratifies hierarchical master/slave relations, excluding the subordinated Other ontologically from "the privileged domain of the master" (3). The cultural motivation to continually re-inscribe a binary categorical split is thus twofold; dualism underwrites and legitimates power structures, and is a crucial aspect of repression both for society as a whole, and for the individual.[4]

6 Cross-linked dualism works to overwrite all heterogeneous difference with the same binary model, and it is in this way that the 'intersectionality' of gender and species becomes a key issue. In Michael Brown's exposition above of what he would likely not object to calling 'traditionalist' values, his argument's structure – with sequential line breaks between the statements on gender, race and species – forms an escalating scale of perceived absurdity. But what this format implies is

[3] Fairbairn's use of the concept of internalization is notoriously confusing, not least because he seems to have employed the term in two distinct senses, but never explicitly acknowledges this (Rubens, 18). Lacanian analysis, on the contrary, sees the original splitting of the self as the entry into language or 'speech'. This features in Cary Wolfe's sketch of the posthuman decentred subject (2010, 182, 189, 196).

[4] Plumwood's discussion of Plato's doctrine of self-mastery and its expression in the metaphor of the horse-breaking charioteer is relevant here (87–88).

that for traditionalists like Brown, such binary category distinctions are equivalent in kind, if not intensity. They follow according to a 'self-evident' mytho-logic. To respect Caitlyn Jenner's claim to be female is tantamount to respecting a claim to be feline, whether motivated by neurosis or tax avoidance as the case may be. A hyperseparated "unbridgeable crevasse" or "great chasm" – in Bart Ehrman's wording – lies between the human and animal, equivalent to that between male and female, man and God, truth and fiction, and between black and white (3).[5] To bridge these opposites, with their 'natural' gender roles, dislocates us from unitary reality, originating from "the one true God" (Brown "Moral Relativism"). Hybridity is monstrous, the gender-bending version of Doctor Moreau's 'playing God' with species. To claim legitimacy for transgender experience is to be 'at war with gender,' 'at war with reality,' and against God's natural order.[6]

7 But, following Ehrman (see endnote 5), the conceptual framework of this 'traditionalism' is not in accordance with its own stated origins. Traditionalist dualism projects itself back into the past, inscribing for itself a claim to natural and historical originary status.[7] Ehrman's historicization of this "black and white" paradigm implies that what I am terming traditionalism is a *retroactive* splitting, which overwrites the same categorical split onto multiple "continuums"; a hyperseparated mytho-logic which is therefore interminably wrestling with paradoxes of integration. Here discussions of the ontological and the mythological become entangled. Nineteenth-century folklorist Walter Traill Dennison, who collected several of the folktales this essay explores, claimed a similar process had formative effects on myths of animal shapeshifters:

> Man, in ignorance and pride, raised a huge barrier between the instinct of the lower animals and his own more God-like reason. And the slight attempt on the part of an inferior creature to cross this imaginary barrier was regarded as a proof of human intelligence. The possession of human intelligence by a lower animal could only be accounted for by assuming that such an animal was a human being in disguise. ("Orkney Folk-Lore" 172)

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[5] Bart Ehrman charts the development of Christian conceptions of Jesus's divinity, casting unexpected light on this contemporary fusion of binary race, gender and species. Ehrman's key observation is startling: the "black-and-white" paradigm of today's thought is a causal factor in scholarly disagreements on Christ's divinity. (3) Previous cultures did not believe "the divine and human realms [to be] categorically distinct, with a great chasm separating the two… [but] two continuums that could, and did, overlap." (4) Ehrman's research demonstrates the split thinking of many contemporary Christians – including scholars – is *not* in fact an original feature of this religion's worldview, but a comparatively recent paradigm. "Two continuums" with soft boundaries have become one split binary. Ehrman demonstrates that conceptual opposites – such a basic component of human thought – are culturally specific. Ehrman's use of "chasm" in this context recalls Heidegger's "abyss" between the human and animal, as it is discussed by Kelly Oliver (ch. 8).

[6] In a further hint of the astonishing mythic unity behind seemingly-opposed worldviews, this is remarkably similar in structure to Janice Raymond's apocalyptic RadFem conspiracy theory that "techno-science" is going against nature, and attempting to replace biological women with man-made transsexuals to create a patriarchal paradise. A gender-swapped version of this argument is deployed by "Men's Rights" activists, concerned about IVF, alimony without custody rights, and male exclusion from childcare: harbingers of a conspiracy to make fathers obsolete. Much could also be written on contemporary American usages of 'at war with___' and 'the war on___' and its appearance in this context.

[7] There is a clear link here to the extensive work of Michel Foucault and his successors on the retroactive production or projection of origins, and to Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* on the obsessive scientistic and moralist categorisation of sexuality, including the "discovery" of the species-like category of the homosexual.

The ‘savage’ and animalistic are to be repressed in ourselves and controlled in others. Thought, love and language are human and divine, categorically distinct from the animal.[8] These mores are also bound up with the fear and repression of sexuality uncoupled from procreation; particularly non-heterosexual expressions, flickering unsettlingly between ‘bestial’ and ‘unnatural’.[9] The irony of this conceptual splitting, however, is that such mutually exclusive categories require their ‘opposites’ for definition: hyperseparated opposites are ‘unbridgeable’ yet ineluctable. To borrow an image from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, dualist traditionalism might be termed a relentless schizoid splitting machine. As hyperseparation increases, so must repression: the split must be endlessly re-inscribed and re-enforced against the threat of undifferentiated, chaotic grey areas, hence longstanding anti-LGBT campaigns against a dystopian genderless future. Or, as Brown puts it: “Who can imagine what’s coming next if we don’t uphold the standard of God’s male-female creation?” (“Gay Deception”)

8 The logical or common-sensical tone of discussions such as Brown’s, which reify dualist ontological categories, belies their status as myth. In John Gray’s account, as in Mary Midgley’s, a culture’s worldview, rationality, historiography and myth are entangled, a mytho-logical structure that underwrites common-sensical factuality. Ironically, however, *contemporary* mytho-logic believes mythology to be “the relic of a barbarous past” (Watts 12),[10] forming a pervasive, exceptionalist mythology which doesn’t consider itself as such. As Midgley puts it, “many of the favourite fairy-tales of our age – the myths that actually shape our thoughts and actions – are ones which owe their force to having appeared in scientific dress” (xii). As Gray notes, the seemingly opposed contemporary worldviews of science and religion share a remarkably similar dualist

[8] Conversely, a similar rationale perhaps underlies the ‘pets in heaven’ trope: in many instances of this popular contemporary heresy, ‘loving’ pets have individual souls, while animals do not. See, for example, the fascinating discussions on this subject found on BibleInfo.com, christianity.about.com, ChristianityToday.com, WhatChristiansWantToKnow.com, and many other sites.

[9] Perhaps there is an explanatory link here with the otherwise baffling argument against homosexual marriage, made by various conservative Christian demagogues including Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, that it is a ‘slippery slope’ to bestiality and marriages with animals. The discursive or ideological links between sexuality, animality, and a debased femininity have been traced by many scholars, often with a focus on its emergence during the Renaissance (Schiesari, 8ff; Oliver). The equivalence of these categorical distinctions may also contribute to the distaste for racial mixing that is a common feature of the religious conservative, and which results in the ‘one drop’ school of racial purity. Likewise the surprisingly widespread occurrence of articles and discussions online about whether men and women are ‘different species.’

[10] It is, however, imperative that we do not seek to replace the split binary of dark past and bright future with its equally-mythic partner, the Edenic past and Fallen present. Myths of progress go hand-in-hand, in both roots and branches, with prelapsarian beginnings and apocalyptic endings: according to a 2002 Times/CNN poll, for example, 36% of Americans viewed current events in the context of biblical eschatology. (Brooks & Toth, 20) All too often, as Plumwood discusses with great lucidity, there is a temptation to simply invert the dualist structure. Raised in a culture in which dualist ‘with us or against us’ perspectives are endemic, deconstructing the dualism is a task of great intricacy, amounting to a “logical maze” (42).

mytho-logic (4–5).[11] British-Indian polymath J. B. S. Haldane, writing in the 1950s, argues that "the concept of a species is a concession to our linguistic habits and neurological mechanisms" (95-6). These habits and mechanisms – amongst which, following Fairbairn, we include splitting – are inevitably caught up with culture-bound paradoxes of category and duality. How a culture negotiates splitting underwrites its conceptualisations of duality, whether with regard to supposedly 'ontological' categories like gender, sex or species or epistemological issues such as the relationships between truth and fiction, or between history and myth.[12] Imaged as fault-line, abyss, unbridgeable crevasse or huge barrier, there is a distinctly spatial – or sculptural – element to these abstract conceptions, diverse differences which dualism recasts onto a single binary model.[13] Phenomena sited between these binary categories, or moving between them, thus appear uncannily unsettling and paradoxical, demanding mytho-logical narrative resolution. And whether in cultural productions or social interactions, such resolutions often entail violence.

9 Biological investigations into the concept of species distinction negotiate what Marc Ereshefsky describes as "vague" or fluid category division in the natural world (391). The pains Ereshefsky takes to reassure his readers that he is not *really* denying categorical truth is revealing: "suggesting that the divide between species and higher taxa is vague should not cause us to doubt the existence of those categories" (391). Here is the well-known intrusion of the folk (logic) into the formal: *but if categories are not absolutely distinct, how can they be categories?* We should not forget,

[11] The notion that the dualist globalized culture in which this essay is situated is necessarily 'advanced' in a moral, intellectual or epistemological sense due to its supposed position at the leading edge of history, or its scientific or technological developments, is itself a function of a pervasive contemporary belief system: the progress mythology of (post)colonial capitalism. This analysis is well-known from philosophers of science such as Karl Popper and Mary Midgley, as well as from posthumanist theorists such as Cary Wolfe. John Gray's recent work offers a perspective with special relevance to Human-Animal Studies: denying our animality is a causal factor in the braided myths of progress, human perfectibility, and the earthly paradise, touted by the seemingly opposed worldviews of global capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and the prophets of technocracy (see also Wolfe 2010, xv). As Gray explains: "For those who live inside a myth, it seems a self-evident fact. Human progress is a fact of this kind… the myth of progress is extremely potent. […] In the story that the modern world repeats to itself, the belief in progress is at odds with religion. [But]… the idea of progress is not at odds with religion in the way this modern fairy tale suggests. Faith in progress is a late survival of early Christianity" (4–5). It is far beyond the scope of this essay to provide any adequate analysis of the mythology of progress, its relationship with Christian eschatological beliefs, or begin to survey the various models of conceptualising dualism that cultures other than this have produced. For an introduction to dualism in world mythology, see Watts. In the context of a *progressively* dualist splitting, which this essay charts in selkie folktales, progress takes on a negative ethical sense.

[12] Another concept from the Object Relations school, D. W. Winnicott's 'transitional space', works well in this context: transitional space is the zone of culture, which exists between inner experience and the outer world, and cannot be reduced to either. For a discussion of transitional space in the context of gender and splitting, see Muriel Dimen. Wolfe (2003) gives in-depth exploration of the relations between gender and species binaries and the animal in American cultural works, undertaken from an alternative psychoanalytically-informed perspective.

[13] The controversial 'cognitive linguistics' work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, and their successors, provides some fascinating insights into this spatial, metaphoric aspect of seemingly-abstract thought. For an introduction, see their *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).

however, the opposite process, which Anthony Giddens termed the double hermeneutic[14]: dissemination of a culture's formal, philosophical investigations of category shape its folk beliefs. Plumwood would argue that it is our cultural history of dualist philosophy which makes notions of category and 'vague division' seem contradictory, even paradoxical (see also Plumwood, ch. 2). Giddens' double hermeneutic also applies to the study of folktale as a whole. For folktale types like "The Seal Wife", which this essay explores, finding a source who had never been influenced by any folktale collection would be a task for Diogenes, a task compounded in the search for 'oral origins' through textual scholarship. Likewise, euhemerist explanations – which attempt to establish causal origins for mythology and folktale rooted in fact – have been active since before the time of Euhemerus (3rd–4th C. BCE). A dualist-progressive view of mythology which links the mythic/fantastic with the past, and the factual/rational with the present, does not do justice to the material. The boundary between euhemerism and ætiological myths of origin is undoubtedly vague.[15] This is aptly expressed in *mythology*, a word which refers equally to the making of myth and to its study.

The Sealskin and "The Silver Cross"

10 Both the institution I work with, the John Affey Museum (JAM), and its eponymous founder, could stand accused of being partisan on the losing side of Brown's aforementioned 'war on reality.'[16] The work of John Henry Affey (1905–1969) as an amateur ethnographer, folklorist, and historian of whaling might generously be described as 'radically revisionist'. Affey's never-realised Transnational Whaling Museum project amounted to an archipelagic series of curios and snippets of dubious provenance, counter-factual speculations, and specious arguments that – though perhaps ironic – verged on the delusional. A "fabulation backed by congeries of improbable fact," to borrow Iain Sinclair's description of Patrick Keiller's *Robinson* films (57). Besides being an eclectic, autodidactic academic of the ragged fringes, Affey was what we would now call a conspiracy theorist. Affey fervently believed – or made every appearance of belief – in the existence of an

[14] "[T]he concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The 'findings' of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe" (Giddens 20).

[15] The 'purity' of Rev. Campbell's oral sources for folk beliefs (see below), as he is well aware, are absolutely in question. It is hard not to smile at his efforts to exclude the textual so thoroughly that he rejected any source material sent to him by epistolary means (ix–x), though in the context of his stated intent of focusing on beliefs then current among his source population this tactic makes good sense.

[16] My own research concerns *the fictive*: that troublesome area of human experience irreducible to either fact or fiction, but which admits and partakes of both. This usage follows Antoinette LaFarge's term *fictive art* for artworks which involve the creation of "realia" (214ff). My PhD research-by-practice in sculpture studies *fictive museums*: hybrid works combining qualities of museums, conceptual art, literature, and hoax, which operate in an unstable transitional territory between the factual and factitious. The fictive as a category is particularly relevant to folktale, which is a genre told *as-if* true. Research by practice has a strong anti-dualist tradition: Clive Cazeaux argues that 'cross-categoriality' is an intrinsic element of the fine art research discipline (111–122).

indigenous nomadic people of the Antarctic, the 'Whale Rider Culture,' all evidence of which was suppressed by the Establishment. But in addition to, indeed in service of, this fantastical side to Affey's researches, he amassed a unique ethnographic collection. Among the more evocative subsets of the JAM's surviving accessions are folktales and ballads Affey recorded from the men he worked alongside in the British/Norwegian Antarctic whaling industry, during the years before its closure in the early 1960s. Here we find category confusion between the objects of a museum collection, the practice of ethnographic collecting, and scholarly textual quotation; Affey viewed the innumerable quotations he gathered for his museum from texts and people as accessions, equivalent to artefacts. In my ongoing work charting the JAM archive, I came across one such accession, a quotation–folktale–artefact at the intersections of gender and species, fact and fiction, which led to my interest in folktales of the Seal Wife topos, and the mythic sealskin.[17]

11 Rather than deploy a scientistic argument on the 'true nature' of categories – refuting the analogical move equating binary categories of gender and species – this essay examines a cultural knot or locus, a densely interwoven ball of relationships, which attests to the existence of a systemic turbulence.[18] My point of departure is one such locus, a figure that recurs in the JAM's collection: the mythic sealskin. This sealskin is, with regard to the Dolezal/Jenner story discussed above, as seemingly unrelated as one could imagine to these high-profile American news items. Lying in the littoral zone of the shoreline, the skin crosses categories of nature and culture, human and animal. This trans-cultural, trans-temporal figure or site comprises a concatenated and entangled set of objects, texts, processes and events, which include a group of folktales concerning the selkies: the seal people. I propose this locus is influenced by the same mytho-logic – the categorical intersection of gender, race, species and sexuality – found at the juncture of the Dolezal and Jenner stories. In this sense, the sealskin is intimately connected with political, social and cultural life. It is examined here to unfold relations between gender, species, and the fictive: turbulent relations amid the ice-floes and currents of culture, underlying diverse contemporary debates on morality and the real. The dualist split which erases difference is hence refigured as a knot.

[17] In both rhetoric and literary theory, the term 'topos' (Greek: place) is used in a typological sense, describing a structure that is not unique to one text, but can be found in various iterations throughout a corpus or canon. There is an interesting link here with biological systems of taxonomy. Selkie myths of fictive heritage could be described as a genus, like the seal itself. In various local habitats, distinct species of the seal genus co-exist. We could therefore liken the Seal Wife topos discussed in this essay to an aggressively invasive species, which – much like the invasive species introduced by colonization – destabilize an ecosystem and critically endanger local biodiversity. The discipline of folklore as collection, study and – crucially – publication therefore becomes engaged with the biopolitics of diversity. Does the folktale collection, as a managed habitat, have an ethical imperative to preserve and encourage diversity? If so, collections such as Sherman's are cast in a less than favourable light.

[18] "[T]he peculiar motion of the current among ice-floes has woven the thousands of floating pine-needles into compacted balls, so intricately intertwined that their symmetrical shape is permanently retained. They can be lifted out of the water and kept for years, a botanical puzzle to those who have not been told the secret of their formation." (Shepherd, 33)

Caption: Affey's 1962 Hospital Diary. The words "Her Majesty's" have been excoriated.

12 Having recovered what remained of the JAM archive-collection from storage in Canongate, Edinburgh in early 2014, I began to explore it: a mass of unsorted and unlabelled materials, comprising 35mm slides, diaries, letters, typescripts and other documents, rough sketches of museum exhibits, and mid-twentieth century ephemera. One of my earliest real finds was an untitled story on a single typewritten sheet, which I have since referred to as "The Silver Cross", folded between the leaves of Affey's *1962 Hospital Diary*. It forms part of a wider trans-cultural corpus of selkie folktales, with strong links to Affey's native Shetland:

> It was still early in the season and there was the usual mad rush to fill the quotas. But the whales were few, and the ice floes were setting in thick. One catcher, the Southern Actor, ventured too far south and got herself trapped. The lads made camp on the ice, for they thought she was to be crushed like a tin. All hands set to with the hatchets, the blubber spades, anything, meaning to cut a channel out to the open water, or die trying.
> As they worked, the men noticed somethink [sic] near them on the ice. It was a white seal, seeming to follow them with its dark eyes. They had a young man with them called Michael, out on his first voyage, and the men began to joke that the seal was in love, for as it crept closer, it seemed to have eyes only for him.
> That night, as Michael lay in his cot, he dreamed a young woman was out on the ice by the stores tent, calling his name. He cursed himself for a fool for hearing voices on the wind, as many have, and tried to get his rest.
> The next day, all the channel the crew had cut the day before had frozen hard. The groans of ice under heavy pressure were loud all about them. The men set to again

> with heavy hearts, working now not from hope, but to warm their bones. As they worked, there was the white seal again. Again it crept closer to Michael over the ice, having eyes only for him, unmoved by the shouts and jokes of the men. 'Your seal wife is back again, Michael,' they said. And some whispered to themselves that it was Michael was the Jonah, whose bad luck had cursed them all.
> That night, Michael once again dreamed a woman calling his name. He dreamt he rose and went out into the freezing night to smoke. Outside, by the stores tent, he heard a voice calling 'Michael, Michael.' Thinking he was being made a fool of, Michael burst into the tent. But there, just inside the door, was a girl with black hair and snow white skin, naked as the day she was born.
> 'Do you love me, Michael?' the girl asked.
> 'Aye,' Michael said, without a thought. 'I do.' And he reached into his shirt, and pulled out the silver cross his mother had given him, and gave it to the girl.
> The next day, Michael could not find his silver cross anywhere, though he searched high and low for it. When he came out to begin work, he found the men gathered around, staring. The channel they had been working on had cleared, leaving a way near a mile long to the open water. And waiting in the channel was the white seal. As soon as Michael appeared, the seal turned its eyes on him in a speaking look, and dove down out of sight beneath the ice.
> When they returned to Leith, the men heard that the captain of the whale catcher had ordered the taking of seals on his next voyage to make up his losses, and as luck would have it they took a record number of them. A queer thing was reported about that, which was that around the neck of one of the skins, a prize fur as white as snow, they found a silver cross, which no-one would admit to having put there.

In Affey's retelling-quotation-collection, working on the assumption that Affey himself was not the original author, several aspects link this folktale to a wider corpus of selkie stories. Beyond the fact that the whalers themselves refer directly to the Seal Wife topos (discussed below), there are: the whiteness of the girl's skin, and of the sealskin; the darkness of eyes and hair; the presence of silver; and overlaid and overdetermined binaries: male/female; mundane/magical; civilized/wild; clothed/naked; human/animal; and land/sea. A potent example of Plumwood's cross-linking and hyperseparation, played out in a liminal, littoral space between land and sea. We can also join many folklorists in the observation that this and other selkie tales – particularly a subset that describe hunters who give up sealing[19] – betray a deeply conflicted relationship with the slaughter of seals for their skins. Few cultures, it seems, have been entirely immune to "the large, full, soft eye of the seal, with its appealing semi-human expression" (Macdonald, A. vi).[20]

13 As with many folktales, proper nouns – often place names – serve as an anchor to reality, seen here in the whaling station of Leith Harbour, South Georgia.[21] The additional name, the whale

[19] See, for instance, "Gioga and Ollavitinus" (Briggs, 255–6) and "The Seal Hunter" (Briggs, 317–9)

[20] The seal is an animal associated with innocence – particularly the white seal pup. In Inuit translations of the Bible, the word for seal pup is substituted for lamb, a creature alien to the Arctic landscape. Christ thus becomes the "Seal-pup of God." Many stories in the selkie corpus also describe the seal as shedding tears.

[21] As with much mechanised industry, whaling was strictly gender-segregated. Leith Harbour whaling station was an overwhelmingly male environment, the very few women present being wives and daughters of resident doctors or

catcher vessel Southern Actor, ties the tale not only to a place but to a time period, 'dating' the action of "The Silver Cross" between 1950 and 1962, when Affey left the industry.[22] The tale could, however, be an adaptation of an older version, retold to/by Affey with a familiar vessel's name. Regarding the question of the tale's authorship, and its legitimacy as a folktale, we might ask: At what point does a tale become a folktale? How many re-tellings shear a tale of individual authorship? Is it the case that, in some form, every folktale has an original telling? And if a tale is (mis)presented as being heard from someone else, or in a dream, rather than invented by the teller – as is common in oral traditions the world over – does this not make the 'folk' category itself fictive?[23]

The Seal Wife's Skin

> …because it is not separable from the body, the skin is always being imagined as breaking from it … [It] is not a part of the body, because it is the body's twin, or shadow…
> - Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (29)

14 Selkie tales have been collected in Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Shetlands, Orkney, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. (And, accepting Affey's status as an ethnographer, there is a trans-national corpus from the South Shetlands.) This is a living tradition, particularly in children's fiction, and includes Irish films like *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), *Ondine* (2009), and *Song of the Sea* (2014). In these, as in the overwhelming majority of contemporary re-tellings, selkie characters are not only almost exclusively female, but display a hyperseparated, dualist femininity (also see the brief discussion of selkies as sex-workers in the conclusion). These works develop a trans-cultural topos known as the Seal Wife. The following paradigmatic example was collected by the nineteenth-century Icelandic folklorist Jón Arnason, as quoted by Alexander Krappe at the opening of his 1944 paper "Scandinavian Seal Lore":

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officers. Jennifer Keys (25) reports that the men were actively against the presence of these women, going so far as to pointedly ignore them.

[22] The Southern Actor was operative from 1950 to 1975, when it was sold to the Spanish firm Industra Ballenera. In 1981, she was scuttled by Sea Shepherd activists and sold for ship breaking in 1989, but rescued by Norwegian whaling enthusiasts (Lardex). The Southern Actor now exists as a working museum ship as part of Sandefjord's Whaling Museum. There is a certain irony here, given Affey spent the final years of his life lobbying unsuccessfully to have the Southern Venturer – a whaling factory ship, and a far larger vessel – recommissioned as a "Transnational Whaling Museum" to mankind's whaling history.

[23] This question is also relevant to Triall Dennison's "The Play of the Lady Odivere", discussed in the following section, and indeed his entire collection, given that he claimed other 'outsider' mythographers would be unable to gather the evidence he discovered: "seek, and ye shall not find it" (Traill Dennison, 173). "The Play O' De Lathie Odivere" was ostensibly collected in fragmentary form by Traill Dennison over a forty year period in the mid-nineteenth century. Folklorist Alan Bruford argues on several points that the ballad is of Dennison's own making, merely an elaboration on the theme of Child Ballad 113, "The Great Selkie of Sule Skerry" (109). The ballad thus forms one of many parts of the corpus of selkie folktale – including Affey's "The Silver Cross" – for which any legitimate status as folktale is highly questionable.

> A man of Myrdal, in passing by a cave one early morning, noticed music and dancing going on inside, while a number of seal skins were lying outside. He took one of these home, locking it in a chest. On passing by the grotto, he beheld a pretty girl entirely without clothes and weeping bitterly. She was none other than the seal whose skin he had taken. He gallantly consoled her and took her to his house. Taking a liking to her, he subsequently married her, and they had many children; but she was often seen sitting near the window, looking yearningly out to sea. On going out, he was always careful to take with him the key of the chest, in which the seal skin lay safely locked up. One fatal day, however, he forgot the key and, returning home, found that his wife had disappeared: she had donned the skin and swum out to sea. Our farmer noticed a seal swimming near his boat, and he always had luck in his fishing. His children, too, often saw the seal, who presented them with multicoloured fish and seashells; but their mother never returned. (156)

As with "The Silver Cross", a place name anchors the folktale to a specific site, Mýrdal, familiar to its intended audience. Many versions – for example Traill Dennison's "The Goodman o'Wastness" from Orkney – follow largely the same structure, with an alternate place substituted, but also include an additional detail. It is the children who discover the selkie's skin – whether locked in a chest, hidden in the aisins[24] over the bed, up in the thatch, in a haystack, or above the lintel – and bring it to their mother.[25] In "Goodman", rather than merely looking in the locked chest out of curiosity as in certain tellings, the selkie searches for her sealskin whenever she is alone (173–175).[26] Also more explicit in "Goodman" and many other versions is that the Goodman (the male protagonist) takes the selkie's skin with the explicit intention of capturing her. The selkie as passive captive here contrasts with the dynamic role in Affey's tale, where it is the selkie herself who actively seeks Michael as a partner. However, the selkie's likely capture and death rather than escape as in the Seal Wife type, suggests that in "The Silver Cross", the selkie's active desire does not form a wholly different dynamic, but is instead an inversion of the same basic structure.

15 A comparatively early literary treatment of the Seal Wife is found in the title piece of little-known Victorian poet Eliza Keary's (1827–1918) mythology-inspired debut collection, *Little Seal-skin, and Other Poems,* of 1874:

> Then "How," said he, "can this thing be?
> A seal-skin, and no seal within?"
> […]
> The Fisherman stroked the fur
> Of the little white seal-skin,
> Soft as silk, and white as snow;
> And he said to himself, "I know

[24] Narrow roofing stones used as eaves in traditional Orkney buildings.

[25] In certain tellings, it is a coat, belt or hood rather than a skin which allows the selkie to shapeshift. This shows marked similarities with the Germanic tradition of the 'wolf belt' in werewolf folklore. In the version featuring the Mackay sept, it is a hood, hidden in a hay-stack, and unwittingly returned by the servants. (Macdonald, 191–2)

[26] The destabilizing effects of feminine curiosity is a common trope and plot device in folktale. See, for example, Caleb Sivyer.

That some little sea-woman lived in
This seal-skin, perhaps not long ago.
[…]
Ah! well, she never meant
        It for me,
That I should take it. But I will,
Home to my house upon the hill,"
(1–2)

Keary's take on the folktale predates its collection and publication by well-known folklorists including Traill Dennison, James Frazer, and Francis James Child. Keary adds three strikingly contemporary features: repetition of the whiteness and littleness of the skin, both signifiers of juvenile virginity and innocence; that the Fisherman, in eventual awareness of his wife's suffering, leaves the skin for her to find; and that in her escape, the selkie "didn't kiss" her children (6, 10). These last two features are – as far as I have found – unique, and give Keary's seemingly childish poem a strikingly ironic bite. Given Keary's childhood interest in mythology and folklore, and her location in Yorkshire, we may add the Seal Wife to Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill's conclusion that such tales were "in fairly wide circulation by the mid-nineteenth century" (407).

16 The Seal Wife is, of course, an explicitly gendered and sexualized tale; the male captures the female against her will, coercing her into sexual, domestic and childbearing roles. He steals and withholds a vital, magical part of his seal wife, without which she cannot return to the sea or to her people. In several accounts, the man is warned that destruction of the skin would cause her death. As Amy Hoff writes, the Seal Wife reads "like an allegory for abuse and possession". Jennifer Holladay – protesting the inclusion of Susan Cooper's 1986 'classic' *The Selkie Girl* in the USA's Common Core curriculum for early readers – goes further: the book "is essentially about a magical seal-woman who is kidnapped and raped repeatedly during her long captivity." Most versions make explicit the selkie's awareness that her husband is her captor. Without her sealskin, the selkie woman is naked – literally and metaphorically – and it is this that both attracts the man and gives him power, making her dependent on his clothing and housing. In many versions of the story, it is directly stated that the selkie woman is a "good" wife and mother. But it is also often explicit that the selkie is extremely distraught, staring longingly out to sea for hours, or searching repeatedly for her skin. A similar line recurs in several tellings, the only spoken by the seal wife: "Where have I to flee/ I have seven kids in the sea/ And seven kids on dry land".[27] This functions to explain any disparity between the seal wife as "good" mother, and her return to the sea and her folk. The

[27] These lines are from a contemporary retranslation of the same version (The Viking Rune). Møllegaard offers another version of this Icelandic legend, which also renders the lines in verse: "This I want, and yet I want it not,/ Seven children have I at the bottom of the sea,/ Seven children have I as well here above." Looked at in terms of structural binaries, this line is even more evocative, with a tremulous balance between desire and rejection, between the land and air above, and the waters below. The lines' presence as verse in both the versions of the Icelandic tales points to the possibility that these are surviving fragments of an earlier *saga*, and also links to the association between selkies and singing found in many selkie tales.

doubled use of *seven* – five in Susan Cooper's version, and two in Solveig Eggerz's – makes clear that though the selkie provided exemplary childbearing for her human husband, she had already done so equally for an unmentioned selkie mate. This makes clear that the seal wife by no means escapes her reduction to the functions of child-rearing, motherhood or domesticity. The land and sea children are equal in number, implying that the selkie's (super)natural draw to the sea tips the balance.

17 Within the tale, there is generally no commentary on the motivations or morality of the man's actions, beyond the fact that the selkie woman is beautiful, the object of his desire. While ellipsis is common in folktale – brevity and ambiguity characterise this primarily oral genre, providing ideal conditions to spark debate in the audience – in this instance it arguably also points to a broader cultural consensus regarding what Plumwood would see as the discourse of the master, a "multiple, complex cultural identity […] formed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination" (5. For a more detailed exposition of the seal wife as 'other', see Kirsten Møllegaard). Just as with the exploitation or killing of animals, in the sexual objectification of women and their subordination to male desire and agency, neither the man's actions nor their moral legitimacy require explanation. In Traill Dennison's "Goodman" however, the tale opens with a description of the Goodman's distain for 'womankind' as "only sent fur a trail tae man" and the consequent warning / prophesy of an old woman that he would be "bewitched" one day (1893, 173). This prelude explicitly references the Biblical Fall narrative, a structure which places the blame for man's troubles – and his desire – on woman. In attempting to reject 'natural' male desire, the Goodman falls prey to a 'supernatural' version of it. A century later, Holladay's account of her own young daughter's response to Cooper's *The Selkie Girl* is extremely distressing in this regard. The three "beautiful" selkies all have "gleaming white bod[ies]" and are distinguished by hair colour: "fair… red, and… black." The blonde is, unsurprisingly, "the most beautiful." Here gender, race and species intersect for Holladay's daughter, who explained this was proof that she (an African American preschooler) was "not pretty": for a young child, the tale's cross-linking of lightness with beauty (male desire) was unambiguous.

18 The number seven recurs elsewhere in the selkie mythos, in a group of tales concerning male selkies that point to a significant shift in gendered meaning. Hoff describes Scottish tales recorded in the nineteenth century alongside the Seal Wife type, in which a woman who was unhappy in love or sexually unsatisfied could cry seven tears into the sea, summoning a beautiful, long haired selkie man to be her lover:

> The woman could also steal his sealskin and bind him to her. He would be a devoted husband, and a wonderful father. However, due to her duplicity, their children would inevitably find the coat and ask 'why does mother keep a leather coat in the attic?' The selkie would then return to the sea and break her heart. However, the selkie could also fall in

> love with the woman, in which case, he would bring her to the sea and turn her into a seal so they could be together. Many selkie tales are tragic romances, but some are positive. They were also a way to explain away otherwise-unexplainable pregnancies in a close-knit community. Why lay blame on the local boy you love when you can claim 'the selkie-man seduced me'?

To Hoff's account of this vanishing 'Seal Husband' type, I would add that selkies thus also provided a fictive mask for rape and incest. A darker tale of this link between selkies and the ætiology of mysterious pregnancies is found in the Shetland tale "Da Selkie Boy o'Breckon," which "concerns a young girl who fell asleep at the shore and was impregnated by a seal."

> She had a son who was half boy and half seal; she was thrown out of the house by her father and was destitute. She had a dream that if she went to the place where she fell asleep by the shore, and scraped in the sand, she would find silver.
> The silver was for the boy and his wellbeing and when he went to the sea for good the girl was still as poor as ever but she never again found any silver no matter how much she scraped; but the geo, to this day, is known as Silver Geo. (*Shetland Times*)

Here, the union of a male selkie and female human produces a hybrid offspring, whose place is in the sea. In giving justification for a place name – Silver Geo, otherwise inexplicable since no silver is found there – this functions as an ætiological myth, explaining origins. Many selkie stories are ætiological, the most significant example for our reading of species, gender and the fictive being Traill Dennison's two tales of Orkney selkies, and the case of Clan MacCodrum of the Seals and the contemporary Scottish folktale "MacCodrum and his Seal Wife", discussed in the following section.

19 Hoff's positive account of 'original' male selkie myths, and her enjoyment of what she calls "a culture in which the idea of beautiful men was […] celebrated, and the idea of strong women with purpose was also a thing of joy and beauty," is contrasted with a later imposition of a violent, gendered hierarchy: altered Seal Wife tales that "seem more like an allegory for abuse and possession". In Hoff's historiography, in which a more complex construction of gender is replaced by (Victorian?) traditionalist splitting, where do we place "Da Selkie Boy o'Breckon"? The seal that rapes the sleeping girl, and later pays reparation for the child's rearing, is clearly a selkie. Reparation in silver is found several times in selkie lore, for example in Traill Dennison's Orkney ballad "The Play o' de Lathie [Lady] Odivere", which emphasises the payment of the nurse's fee in exchange for the selkie's child. Here, the selkie returns after six months with one of his hands full of gold and the other full of silver or "white monie" ("Play" 56).[28] Befitting Lady Odivere's status as high-born Norwegian nobility, and the selkie San Imravoe's rule over the thousand seals of Sule Skerry, this fee is far more than the poor unnamed girl of Breckon receives. Neither of the two,

[28] "When the six months were come and gane / He cam' to pay the noris fee / The tane o' his hands was fu' o' gowd / The tither fu' o' white monie."

however, receive pleasant treatment at the hands of their male relatives: the girl of Breckon is disowned by her father and Lady Odivere's relatives plan to burn her alive for infidelity. In each case, the hybrid offspring of a male selkie returns to the sea, unlike those of the Seal Wife. While our reading of these examples does not confirm Hoff's positive reading of male selkie myths, there is some evidence to support her observation that the gender structuring of selkie stories since the nineteenth century has been undergoing a radical shift. As examined below, the mere presence of a sexually potent male selkie contradicts two ongoing processes – hyperseparation and cross-linking – which accompany the dualist simplification of these folktales during the twentieth century.

Webbed Fingers and Horny Palms – Fictive Kinship and the Selkie

> Neither you nor any man here believes that foolish thing. How can a man born of woman be a seal, even though his *sinnsear* [ancestor] were the offspring of the sea-people, — which is not a saying I am believing either, though it may be…
> - Fiona MacLeod [William Sharp], *The Sin-Eater* (165-6)

20 Growing up in Shetland during the First World War, John Affey inherited the Shetlander's passionate nationalist sense of difference from both the Scottish, and the British. Selkie stories play an unexpected part in this cultural identity. For all that he was a Scot, the euhemerist theories of folklorist, antiquarian and ethnographer David MacRitchie (1851–1925) about the selkies' origins were enthusiastically adopted. They survived long after MacRitchie had lost academic credibility on the mainland, "with Shetlanders 'missing' the eventual conclusive rejection of this variety of euhemerism" (Grydehøj 108). Folk-historical accounts of national heritage – particularly regarding racial kinship – are passionately held constructions, and rarely correspond with the most recent or reliable research; another retroactive traditionalist mytho-logic bent on splitting and fictive racial purity. MacRitchie attempted a systematic euhemerist investigation of folklore, seeking historical – and particularly racial – roots for faery creatures such as selkies. MacRitchie's hypothesis for the selkies' origins was that they were 'Finns' or sea-going Inuit peoples, visiting the isles in their sealskin *kayak* and *annuraq*.[29] MacRitchie quotes the German revolutionary and mythologist Dr. Karl Blind (1826–1907), stating Seal Wife myths were given as personal genealogy: "Among the older generation in the Northern isles persons are still sometimes heard of who boast of hailing from Finns; and they attribute to themselves a peculiar luckiness on account of that higher descent"

[29] This seductive hypothesis is still current outside the academic mainstream, promulgated in both John MacAulay's *Seal-folk and Ocean Paddlers* (1998), and by Dr. Andrew Jennings in a public talk on "The Finnfolk" given at the Shetland Museum in 2010, transcribed on the University of the Highlands and Islands website. Jennings' talk is unusual in the fact that, though he mentions Karl Blind, Walter Traill Dennison and Shetland historian and folklorist Jessie Saxby, he neglects to mention MacRitchie at all. This is particularly unexpected as Jennings uses exactly the same two sources (Brand and Wallace) as MacRitchie employed to make the argument his *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890), quoting precisely the same passages, though in reverse order. (5–7)

(2).[30] Here again, we find the entanglement of gender, race, and species present in the Dolezal/Jenner commentary. The Seal Wife structure becomes a mythologized account of family heritage: the sexual enslavement of Inuit women – confused with animals as a result of their sealskins – by Nordic / Scottish male colonizers of the Shetland Isles.[31]

21 As well as becoming embroiled in conceptions of Shetland national identity, euhemerist-ætiological selkie stories therefore play another unusual role: fictive kinship in family heritage or clan origin myths. In the terminology of anthropology, and subsequently adoption law, *fictive kinship* describes voluntary or customary establishment of family ties other than those of blood and marriage: the 'auntie' who raises a child, but who – unless sanctioned by the legal status of 'fictive kin' or adoptive parent – has no rights to custody. The kinship structure is a 'fiction' which becomes 'real' though performance, and exposes the split binary of true and false – in this case at least – as utterly untenable.[32] Both in MacRitchie's euhemerist reading, and in many selkie tales themselves, an account is given of a 'fictive kinship' with (shapeshifting) animals. Many Seal Wife tales in contemporary Scottish folklore collections concern not only a specific place – the Isle of Uist in the Outer Hebrides – but also a specific family, the MacCodrums of the Seals. Here is Scottish national folk historian Donald Smith:

> Among the clan tales are many origin legends. Clan MacCodrum of the Uists, for example, is supposed to derive from a union between the clan's progenitor and a seal woman. As in most selkie stories, the woman finds the skin… [then returns to her] seal form and the sea,

[30] MacRitchie's argument relies absolutely on uniting the figures of the Finn, the seal, and the selkie. Traill Dennison explicitly denies this unity, stating that his Orcadian "old informants regarded the selkie folk as a wholly different race of beings from the Finfolk." (173) Traill Dennison's Orcadian folklore, in seeming opposition to Shetlandic and other traditions, splits the benign selkie from the malevolent Fin(n). Bizarrely, however, he himself makes this same confusion in describing the beings in both following tales as both "selkie" and "finfolk" interchangeably.

[31] There are two significant links here for gender–species–race intersectionality at the locus of the sealskin. The first is an account from 1654 of the kidnap and sale of several Inuit women, who were lured into the hold of a Danish ship while they were trading for sealskins (Jennings). The second is the #Sealfie campaign of 2014, in which Inuit people took selfies alongside seals they had hunted, in order to protest what they saw as the demonization of this practice by animal rights groups. The #Sealfie which Inuit musician Tanya Tagaq took of her baby next to a dead seal sparked widespread attacks on Twitter, in which Tagaq and her people were described as "savages." In a curious case of reversal, the Inuit became 'bestial savages' while the seals became 'innocent people': "If they have the mentality 2 murder a seal like that, they could easily murder humans." These and similar attacks were followed by a Photoshopped image of men clubbing and skinning Tagaq's baby (Dean).

[32] John Affey's efforts in this area might be described as those of a man trying to bridge Ehrman's aforementioned "great chasm" with any and all materials at his disposal; the hubristic effort not only to build a bridge by bricolage, but erect upon it a habitable structure. But rather than an integrative project of rehabilitation, Affey appears to be striking out into new, transgressive territory: instead of healing the rift, Affey cultures new flesh within it. Though Affey did not provide explicit commentary upon "the Silver Cross," the fact that he filed it alongside the works of David MacRitchie in his archive is suggestive. Did Affey, as a committed euhemerist, consider this folktale to constitute 'evidence' for the existence of his natives of Antarctica? At times, reading the notes Affey left behind, it seems as if those speculative natives of the Great White South – a nomadic, oceanic people Affey claimed husbanded whales as the Sámi do reindeer – were an attempt to construct a fictive kin for himself; a people far removed from the mechanized savagery of 'the whaling,' and the Second World War. (The link here between whaling and warfare is not coincidental. The same munitions and propulsion technologies – indeed many of the same vessels – were employed in both, and the use of the new militarized post-war whaling fleets devastated whale populations, hastening the industry's demise and doing incalculable damage to the Antarctic ecosystem).

> leaving her human offspring to become ancestors of the clan. Although folk tradition has shaped this story according to selkie convention, there is clear suggestion of a totemic clan animal which reflects the life sources of the tribe or sept. Members of Clan MacCodrum, it was believed, were men by day and seals by night. (42f.)

Smith notes the "folk tradition has shaped this story according to selkie convention". Contemporary folktale collections often include "MacCodrum and his Seal Wife" (e.g. H. Sherman, 14-15), and it is one of the most well-known selkie tales in Scotland. However, Frazer's seminal anthropological study of mythology and religion, *The Golden Bough*, gives this same origin myth (132) for the Mackays of Sutherland, referencing James Macdonald (191), but footnoting "a precisely similar legend" told of the MacCodrums by Rev. Campbell. Campbell's title page claims his material was "collected entirely from oral sources", much of it "before 1860" on the Isle of Tiree (v). Some of the earliest accounts of the MacCodrums are those of one John MacCodrum or Iain Mac Odrum (1693?–1779), an eighteenth-century bard and folk legend, with many riddles and tricks attributed to him. Already in his time the MacCodrums were known as *nan rón*, 'of the seals' (Macdonald, A., iv). But, though he relates several folktales concerning seals, Macdonald does not mention the Seal Wife topos. During the twentieth century, however, Scottish examples of the Seal Wife topos have come to be almost exclusively associated with the no-longer extant MacCodrums of Uist, perhaps due to the earlier association of seal lore with this legendary figure. Smith's 'conventional folk tradition', again, has followed the 'traditionalist' dualist model, overwriting difference and complexity. The MacCodrum males' uncanny ability to become seals has been largely erased, replaced by a simplified Seal Wife story in which gender and species are cross-linked. This recasting of the MacCodrum tales therefore supports Hoff's observation of the vanishing male selkie, and points to an ongoing dualist hyperseparation: the female, the animal (seals), and indeed the natural and supernatural realms are conflated into a simplified, exploitable identity formed in opposition to Man's agency as protagonist. As this hyperseparation increases, male selkie characters are excluded from the narrative frame.

22 The tale of the MacCodrums has also – at least in one instance – become fused with another ætiological myth of fictive kinship, but one that might be termed 'mytho-medical' ætiology:

> In this case, the sign of preternatural parentage was not beauty but an hereditary horny growth between the fingers that made MacCodrum hands resemble flippers. In what may have been the culmination of the fascination with the fairy bride ancestress, the Folk-Lore Society, in 1895, studied magic lantern slides taken of Baubi Urquhart of the Shetland Islands. On the basis of family stories and a seal-like appearance, Baubi claimed to be the great- great-granddaughter of a Selkie captured by her ancestor. (Silver 111)

For Baubi Urquhart, though perhaps not for the members of the Folk-Lore Society, the selkies were her fictive ancestors. Carole Silver's feminist contribution, however, appears to have confused the re-written MacCodrum origin myth with the "horny growth" from the tale which follows Traill

Dennison's "Goodman" in *The Scottish Antiquary*. In the passage immediately after Traill Dennison's version of the Seal Wife (discussed above), he tells of the pseudonymous "Ursilla," who determines to – as the author terms it – "indulge unlawful love" with one of the selkie folk (175). She accomplishes this by crying seven tears into the sea, as Hoff described. Ursilla is the very archetype of the transgressive female; she is "masculine," "determined […] to choose [her own husband]", marries across class boundaries, and is then unsatisfied, committing infidelity with a selkie. In consequence, her descendants are born with "web hands and webbed feet, like […] paws" (176). The midwife "clips" these webs repeatedly, and they do not grow 'naturally' but develop into horny growths on the palms and soles which still afflict the family in Traill Dennison's time:

> Another of the same family told me that when, through the growth of the horn, he was unable to walk or work, he would, with hammer and chisel, cut off large slices of horn from the soles of his feet. This growth is by no means confined to those engaged in manual labour. I have felt it on the hands of one of the same race who followed a profession where manual labour was not required.
> This curious phenomenon seems well worthy of careful investigation by the physiologist. Pity it could not be traced to the seal; we might then be in sight of the missing link.
> Many wild tales were told of the offspring of such strange parentage who had webbed hands and feet; but the foregoing will serve to illustrate a once popular belief. (177)

The family appear to have suffered from hereditary palmoplantar keratodermas, a rare condition which affects several genetically distinct families in Scotland to this day (Pöhler *et al*).[33] Fictive selkie kinship structures were, according to Traill Dennison, "once popular".

23 One can speculate that on island communities with restricted gene stock, fictive selkie heritage provided a powerful explanatory framework for deformity, and recessive genetic colouring besides (for an in-depth treatment of this hypothesis, see Susan Schoon Eberly). Carol Silver's mistake is significant, however, with regards to the intersectional mytho-logic of gender and species played out in the corpus of selkie myths: both species and hybridity are gendered constructions. As with "Da Selkie Boy o'Breckon," debilitating deformity is the consequence of a human female's "unlawful" intercourse with a male selkie. But for the midwife and Ursilla's repeated intervention – which kept the fins from growing "in their natural way" – we can surmise that Ursilla's children would have returned to their oceanic natural/paternal domain (Traill Dennison 1893, 176).[34] This is, therefore, a point *right on* the intersection of gender and species: an issue of determinative paternity. Hybrid features are occasionally present in nineteenth- and twentieth-century instances of the Seal Wife topos; webbed fingers are mentioned as the conclusion to the tale in the Irish "Tom

[33] In line with these naturalistic ætiologies for several features of selkie myths, Boria Sax (68) points to the fact that along with "large, wide eyes, which appear human and very amorous" – compare A. Macdonald's description, above – grey seals moult large patches of their skin annually. This forms a compelling link to a recurring detail; selkies are often said to only come ashore at specific times of year, particularly the spring tide.

[34] One is reminded here of Dr. Moreau's description of his battle with hybridity: "But somehow the things drift back again: the stubborn beast-flesh grows day by day back again" (Wells 69).

Moore and the Seal Woman" (H. Sherman 14). The Seal Wife's children are never fully hybrid, however; their place is on land, they cannot shapeshift, and their humanity is not in question. Later generations are much more likely to inherit unusual luck, immunity from drowning, fishing or swimming ability, or dark hair, eyes and skin – the "Finns" of Shetland, or the "dark ones" born "once in a generation" in *The Secret of Roan Inish*. This is a telling instance of the intersection of gender and species, namely that paternity produces species in the offspring: as in Plumwood's critique, humanity is associated with the male.[35] Children of a male selkie 'naturally' become selkies, a structure which takes part in the dualist mythology of paternity as the active principle, working on the female as passive 'vessel'. Cross-linking and hyperseparation therefore provide an intriguing explanatory model for the vanishing male selkie in so many collections of folktales and contemporary retellings, including the gradual disappearance of the Seal Wife's selkie husband, once a common feature of the topos. Comparing retellings of the older "Goodman o'Wastness" (Briggs 258–60) with the three near-identical Seal Wife versions given in Howard Sherman (13-16), it is only "Tom Moore" that includes a male selkie, who has now become a "brother", and there is no mention of the Seal Wife's selkie children.

Conclusion: Splitting Ice, Swan Songs, and Retroactive Traditionalism

24 In "The Silver Cross", we find a novel folktale drawing upon the Antarctic whaling community's Norwegian and Shetlandic traditions. The tale conforms both to that heritage, and to a conflation of gender and species, demonstrating no features to contradict what I have described as the ongoing splitting, hyperseparation and cross-linking of this body of folklore. "The Silver Cross" conforms to this trend particularly in the absence of male selkies, but arguably also in that the sole female presences are an absent mother and the would-be Seal Wife herself. Unlike the majority of contemporary selkie tales, the male protagonist is in peril, coinciding with a trend noted by Josepha Sherman: "As people became less fearful of the ocean, the power of the mermaid also waned" (307). Here the shoreline as border zone has been replaced by the ice floe, and it is tempting to read the life-or-death efforts to split the ice as intimately bound up with the dynamics of splitting. The seal's whiteness may signify youth and virginity, as in Keary's piece, but also serves to identify the selkie with the icy landscape, and highlights her potential value both sexually and commercially. Michael's inability to possess the sealskin, and its markedly impersonal fate as company-owned commodity, arguably point to contemporary male anxieties. The selkie's appearance in "Fae Gone Wild" (2011) – season two, episode seven of the Canadian TV series *Lost Girl* – for example, features a

[35] It is important to note that besides evidence of gender-species intersectionality, this is a pseudo-naturalistic detail: the sex of parents in 'interspecies' couplings may indeed determine the nature of the hybrid if the chromosomes in question are sex-linked. Such hybrid pairs – for example, the mule and the hinny – are often known as 'reciprocal crosses,' have strikingly different traits, and produce different species.

group of female selkies forced into sex work through the theft of their sealskins by a male nightclub owner. This recasting of urban selkies as trafficked sex-workers mirrors the young female protagonists' movement away from the urban in both *The Secret of Roan Inish* and *Song of the Sea*. In both these films, industrialised urban life is depicted as a dangerous and unwelcome intrusion into the female coming-of-age narrative.

25 Kirsten Møllegaard's Lacanian-feminist reading of selkie mythology opens with the well-referenced observation that animal spouse myths are often sex-segregated, with men telling tales of animal brides like the Seal Wife, and women telling animal bridegroom tales (93). We observe here that in contemporary folktale collections and popular culture, a simplified male-type Seal Wife structure appears to be overwriting the trans-cultural diversity of selkie myths. Smith's "folk tradition" and "convention" cited above do not entail continuity with origins. Nor – to return to Giddens' classic observation – should we imagine a purity of oral folk 'tradition' distinct from the 'history' of written scholarship. Carole Silver's discussion of the Seal Wife as 'fairy ancestress' takes part in the trend of typologically reducing selkie folktales to an notionally-original Swan Maiden topos.[36] This argument is central to the thesis of folklorists including Boria Sax (229), and Donald Haase:

> In its simplest and most direct form, the plot was perpetuated by giving it the function of the genealogical legend […] As the story was told in coastal areas of Scandinavia and Scotland, she was converted into a seal-woman, who was the ancestress of some local families; and in Ireland she was usually a mermaid. (934-5)

As noted at the start of this essay, at least three recent film plots in Ireland have indeed taken up the selkie, rather than the mermaid.[37] In this light, two charming Irish children's films are re-figured,

[36] The Swan Maiden topos has clear links with the Seal Wife: a man 'wins' for himself a supernatural bride by capturing her swan-feather garment, preventing her from escape by flight or swimming. After bearing the man children, the Swan Maiden recovers her garment and escapes. While Silver, Sax and Haase all attempt to reduce the mythical sealskin locus to a derivative local adaptation of an originary Swan Maiden folktale type, there are many elements that refuse this reduction. Not least among these is that the Swan Maiden "type" is itself problematic: "Clearly in neither type nor motif classification has the swan-maiden been able to find a secure place in Western scholarship: either it is virtually ignored (types) or it crosses so many lines of demarcation between categories (motifs) that it calls into question the usefulness of the system itself" (Miller 55).

[37] In two of the three recent Irish mainstream selkie films – *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) and *Song of the Sea* (2014) – the central protagonist is a young girl. Neil Jordan's *Ondine* (2009) is arguably a more layered, postmodern rendering of this folktale structure (see Møllegaard for a detailed reading). In *The Secret of Roan Inish*, the plot centres around the motherless girl's return to the countryside without her father, and her rediscovery of her lost younger brother through uncovering her family's selkie origins. In *Song of the Sea*, the girl has also lost her mother, and she and her brother are taken from their grieving father by a witch-like grandmother. On discovering her selkie heritage, her magical white sealskin, and thus her ability to sing, the girl and her (non-selkie) brother are able to escape the witch and be reunited with their father. In each of these tellings there is a strict gendering of the selkie; she is always female. By re-aligning herself with her selkie nature, the young female protagonist is able to take the place of the lost mother and heal a family trauma, often rescuing the male family members. This is also the case in *Ondine* where the selkie legend is explicitly female, and the arrival of the mysterious Ondine is somewhat redemptive for Syracuse, the male protagonist, who plans to marry her at the end of the film. In another inversion, Annie – the young girl who, again, is the centre of the selkie information – tells Ondine that selkies can cry seven tears into the sea in order to remain with a lover on land. The seven tears of the Seal Husband type are retained, as is the gender of the character who cries them (tears being themselves highly gendered). As a consequence of hyperseparation, however, this character must therefore be a selkie according to the mytho-logical of the revised folktale.

becoming retellings of the male form for a young female protagonist/audience. But if the Swan Maiden origin hypothesis is correct, while this homogenising, genealogical Swan Maiden/Seal Wife structure is undergoing substantial contemporary elaboration, it is overwriting the diversity of alternative selkie structures from Iceland to Ireland. Folktale collections and scholarship thus take part in a "double hermeneutic" feedback effect, assuming themselves to stand apart from an allegedly oral "folk tradition" while contributing to a dualist-traditionalist overwriting of diversity (see endnote 17). Given that one of the determining characteristics of folktale as a genre is its fictive 'origin-less' status – standing outside of specific historical authorship – an artificial air of timeless local tradition is generated by the mere fact of inclusion in a folktale collection.

26 This is particularly the case in Scotland, where the Seal Wife topos has become linked with a legendary patronymic long associated with seals, to the exclusion of previous MacCodrum seal tales. In this increasingly split structure, where several gendered binaries are cross-linked in a male-pattern tale of fictive heritage – not to mention allegorised kidnap and rape – the Seal Wife conforms with what I have described as traditionalism, rather than tradition. While we cannot join Hoff in her acclaim for the gender politics of male selkies, the process of overwriting that we have been tracing may thus be seen as a specifically gendered erasure of difference. However, making any clean categorical distinctions between purely oral folk traditions and the many popular and literary treatments of the same structures is highly problematic. As we have seen in the case of Eliza Keary's work, this has been the case since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and likely long before. Susan Cooper's standardisation of the tale for young children, for example, sits in this "vague divide" between oral and textual. But while contemporary fiction, folktale collections, and novel folktales like Affey's add variety and difference, they are in the main elaborations of a highly split Seal Wife topos which superimposes gender, race, and species onto a progressively cross-linked and hyperseparated binary. The mythic sealskin marks a point of intersection for traditionalist dualism; a site of sexualised beauty and violence, a locus where the supernatural, the irrational, the female, the racial and the animal are increasingly overlayed.

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