Introduction

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1. Off the Map[1]

The recent "Spatial Turn" in the Humanities has contributed to focusing academic attention on both how places shape literary texts, and how literary texts in turn shape places. Against this backdrop, the investigation of the relationships between *extreme* places – i.e. the outermost, farthest, most *exterior* places – and their representations, aims to develop a new direction of research. The articles collected in this issue of *Textus* suggest that the representation of extreme places, real or imaginary, generates specific linguistic and literary constructions and offers challenging narrative possibilities. That is precisely why extreme places are mentioned or depicted in romances and novels, exploration accounts and travel writings, in Gothic tales, utopian/distopian constructions, science fiction and fantastic literature: they stimulate narrative and linguistic creativity and foster a sense of wonder. Inevitably, the Anglophone world's colonial and postcolonial history and culture is a privileged area of study[2], which accounts for our further assumption here, namely that "the ends of the world" have a crucial function in defining self and other and their multi-faceted relationships, as well as in shaping the connections between centre and periphery (Regard 2009).

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[1] My heartfelt thanks to Frédéric Regard, Professor of English literature at Paris Sorbonne University, the outstanding coeditor of this volume. Not only was he an authoritative and always friendly critical voice but he also played an essential role in offering most valuable suggestions for the introduction.

[2] In Brazzelli (2012: 19-97) a theoretical framework on the complex relationships between space and text is presented and discussed.

Cultural studies and literary critical studies are of course what we remain interested in. But the theoretical frame which informs our approach includes postcolonial theory and its numerous re-workings and reformulations (Loomba 1998; Ashcroft 2001), environmental studies involving ecological issues (De Loughrey, Didur, Carrigan 2015; Erin 2015), interdisciplinary approaches in the analysis of representations of place and space (Tuan 1977), and cultural geography (Cosgrove 2008). Our central concern, however, is with the relationships between representational strategies and the materiality of environment, between natural environments and their literary (re)configurations.

Places "at the end of the world" are indeed "off the map", and as such are not simply remote geographical goals, but also – and perhaps primarily – literary and symbolic spaces. They call for their narrativization, *naturally*, so to speak, for the simple reason that they represent what has not as yet been written down. For centuries, at the centre of the British imagination, the extreme sites of the earth have been the object of explorers' and adventurers' enterprises, always strongly associated with physical and psychological danger. But if they continue to be sources of fascination, it is because primitive forests and deserts, remote islands, the North and South Poles, the highest mountain peaks, the deepest parts of our oceans, and the confines of our universe, are implicitly perceived as extraordinary spaces for the imagination, craving narrativization and by the same token inviting references to legends and myths, thus weaving together various narrative forms and classic, universal tropes – Ultima Thule, El Dorado, Desert Islands…

As Boehmer (2005) argues, colonial readings of places beyond the borders of the Western world were indeed produced (and reproduced) through a layering of different texts. The rhetoric used by colonizers and travellers was meant to picture and frame the unknown through a process of metaphorical transformation; literary conventions were then recovered as strategies aimed at making sense of inaccessible, incomprehensible spaces. Blank spaces were filled with words. The representation of distant and dangerous places, and of unchartered spaces, was made possible by the deployment of direct and indirect quotations, of images and figures of speech, which made the appropriation and domestication of the radically Other a possibility, if only in linguistic and literary

terms. It is common knowledge that Samuel Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) constituted an outstanding model in the invention of the North and South Poles as a cultural phenomenon, and that Romantic aesthetics – notably its cult of the "sublime", literally the *sub-limen*, that which is beyond the limits of the known – fuelled the Westerner's desire for extreme places.

Of course, in different times extreme places take on different forms, exhibiting either Edenic features – like the South Pacific in the eighteenth century – or Satanic ones – like the Arctic in the second half of the nineteenth. Although one may be tempted to categorize extreme places as falling into two or three major groups – the mountainous zones, the desert areas and the polar regions –, it is always more than a question of scale, altitude or latitude, as Cosgrove and Della Dora (2009) point out. It is first and foremost a matter of frontiers (horizontal or vertical). The poles are indeed the places where the earth ends, as are the highest mountains, which therefore came to be regarded as frontiers open to a full range of political, economic, and personal concerns (Ellis 2001).

But again, the "sublimity" of such places, reinterpreted from antiquity to at least the beginning of the twentieth century, has always been what caused man's fascination, a fascination for an unknown physical reality, but also, inextricably linked to this, a fascination for the *terrae incognitae* of the mind, and thus for a form of mental "dis-orientation" (Bonnett 2014). The Victorian Age is supposed to have worked energetically to eradicate the unknown, but in truth this was an age that consistently stressed the need for inaccessible places of great imaginative power, as is amply illustrated by the Franklin myth and its "story of a 165-year search" (Potter 2016). By the end of the First World War, the two polar extremities had been reached and mapped, the geographical mysteries that had so appealed to Conrad's heroes had been solved, but Everest came to be called the Third Pole, which is to say, the last abode of the unknown.

Surely, it is understandable in this respect that the North came to symbolize the very idea of extreme places. For the Arctic's alienating landscapes have this immense ability to encourage the bridging of both physical and epistemological categories. According to Davidson (2005), the North is a goal rather than a destination, for it is a place of revelation that remains elusive, absolute and austere, in fact eternally out of reach. The North has been considered as an

escape from the limitations of civilization, a space for engagement and collaboration, excitement and adventure, but also a field for thought and experimentation, creativity and artistry. So that when the Arctic lost much of its enigmatic aura once the famous "Northwest Passage" had been found (Regard 2013), Antarctica, the Himalayas and everywhere above the snowline became the new "norths".

Interestingly, despite the curiosity elicited by modern space flights to the Moon and now to Mars, it seems our ideas of extreme places are still firmly rooted in our planet. Antarctica is now considered the last remaining end of the world, and the most extreme of all[3]. The explanation for this may be found in the stories of the expeditions of Robert Falcon Scott, Ernest Shackleton or other explorers, which are all fundamentally stories of humans struggling to survive and complete their tasks against an unforgiving and harsh environment. This holds true even today, when operations have become more routine and take the form of large-scale scientific endeavours. An extreme place remains one in which humans struggle to overcome a hostile environment. Macfarlane (2008) explores the connections between places and human responses to them, and argues very interestingly that mountains, like all sites of wilderness, challenge our deep-rooted conviction that the world has been made for humans. One forgets that there are environments that have their own rhythms and orders of existence, but by speaking of greater forces than we can possibly experience, and by confronting greater spans of time than we can possibly envisage, mountains challenge our trust in a man-made universe. Perhaps this is the great lesson to be learnt from all extreme places, the secret heart of darkness at the centre of all narratives concerned with the ends of the world.

2. Writing on the edge

The following articles trace a chronological, thematic and methodological route. Lidia de Michelis in "By a Course Never Sailed Before" starts by examining Defoe's last novel, *A New Voyage*

[3] On Antarctica and its representations, between utopia and dystopia, see Brazzelli (2015).

round the World (1725), from a specifically literary point of view: after discussing the authorial stance of the anonymous narrator, the article focuses on the most innovative section of Defoe's work, which is the narrative of an unprecedented overland trek across the Andes to the Atlantic coast, marked by the invention of a strangely domesticated 'Andean sublime'.

Attention is then drawn to the nineteenth-century colonial ideology by Ian Marten Ivo Klaver, who looks at the way R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) used (or even copied) descriptions of nature by other authors, and how an uninhabited island, an extreme place in the South Pacific, far from British civilization, assumes an ideological role in his depiction of a Christian ideal of masculinity in an England in miniature.

The North and its exploration is Catherine Lanone's focus: in her article she addresses the way in which letters are part of the legend of Arctic exploration. Beginning with Scoresby's letter (1817) to the Admiralty, the article engages with the proliferation of messages during land expeditions, and the buried notes beckoning to explorers at sea, before switching to the Gothic fragment found in a cairn, the last news of Franklin's lost expedition. Indeed, letters frame the fiction of heroic explorations, leading back to the narrative threshold of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819).

Raffaella Antinucci's article investigates Anthony Trollope's 'domestication' of Iceland in the interplay between the Victorian novelist's humorous travel account, revolving around the adventures of the sixteen passengers invited by Burns whom he renames 'the Mastiffs', and the essay "Iceland" he wrote in the same year for the *Fortnightly Review* (1878). Trollope's 'dual' perspective questions Iceland's two-faced construction as an alien and barbarous country and as a mythical place.

Sub-Saharan Africa, in the nineteenth century, is like "the end of the world", as Luisa Villa points out. In the 1870s Samuel White Baker and Charles George Gordon wrote accounts of their explorations and military campaigns in the Upper Nile while in the pay of the Egyptian Khedive Ismail. Temperamentally they were very different and came from different backgrounds, but, in the impervious Central African regions they were supposed to "civilize", they were placed in roughly the same predicaments, and construed them by drawing, generally speaking, on the same

ideological baggage. The overcoming of natural obstacles aimed at taming the alterity/extremity that had so attracted the explorers.

In her article on Patagonia, Heidi Liedke discusses the "phantasy of disappearance" mirroring W.H. Hudson's (1893) and Bruce Chatwin's (1977) travel accounts. While W.H. Hudson observes that the Patagonian landscape causes him to transcend his usual mindset, which requires an excuse for being inactive, eighty-four years later, Bruce Chatwin finds Patagonia the ideal stage for enacting his obsessively flighty engagement with landscape and people. What Hudson's and Chatwin's works have in common is that they play with the idea of idleness and absence: influenced by the empty landscape, both narratives enact the connection between empty space, idleness and textual fragmentation.

According to Laura Giovannelli, the South African land of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort in Desolation* (1935) invites closer consideration in the light of the environmental crisis and the 'ecologically-sensitive' mind. Hence we see the compelling relevance of the land-degradation motif and the image of an abused landscape located at the lowest point of the Western world, waiting for its natural resources to be revitalized and the ecosystem to be redressed by the ideals of preservation and continuity in a half-forgotten corner of the Empire.

The Australian desert is at the core of Patrick White's *Voss* (1957). On the one hand, Annalisa Pes investigates the meaning and function of the desert as an extreme place in White's novel, whose eponymous protagonist, a German explorer possessed by a god-like delirium, attempts to cross the Australian continent from East to West. By using the narrative frame of the exploration journey, White reworks and reassesses the colonial figure of the conqueror of an alleged *terra nullius*, showing how the exploration of the inner Australian continent is actually an exploration of the mind of the protagonist, who is finally possessed by the land he had strived to dominate. On her part, Miriam Potter aims at following the traces of White's early environmental and social awareness. *Voss* endeavours to bring the extra-literary to the surface in order to identify the consequences of colonial expansion on the Aboriginal people and the land.

Tania Zulli also focuses on the desert. In "The desert is mute" she analyses Nadine Gordimer's representation of the desert as an

extreme site located at the margins of her habitually fictionalized South African world. By exploring the hermeneutical meaning of a space beyond the edges, Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) describes the heroine's reconfiguration of her own place in the new Islamic lands she inhabits. Julie Summer's struggle for personal integration is strictly connected to communication and language, whose ultimate meaning is conveyed through the desert.

In order both to examine the persistence of the colonial Victorian imagination of distant lands and to deconstruct the stereotyped imagery of the North, Claudia Gualtieri focuses on the presence of Inuit peoples in northern lands, and on the cultural function of the museum as a re-activator of the relationship between people, land and objects. In her article, the colonial perspective is challenged by indigenous peoples' representations of themselves. Different stories are revived and narrated giving names, identity and cultural significance to the artefacts in the Manitoba Museum of Winnipeg.

Canada as an extreme place is also at the centre of Adele Tiengo's article on the Mackenzie Mountains as sites of ecological exploration: in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013) the Canadian mountain range between Yukon and the Northwest Territories provides a literary niche for the representation of the changing climatic conditions of the Canadian North. Atwood also uses it as a symbolic field to undertake a postmodern exploration of the altered conditions of wild places as opposed to anthropic places.

Finally, the apocalyptic dimension connected with extreme places is investigated by Claire Larsonneur in her "Archipelagos of Apocalypse". In two of his novels, *Cloud Atlas* (2006) and *The Bone Clocks* (2014), David Mitchell introduced apocalyptical worlds situated either just before the catastrophe or sometime after. Islands such as Ireland, Iceland, Hawaii and England feature prominently in Mitchell's plots, where they spell out both entrapment and refuge; together they build up an archipelago of interconnected narratives and symbols. A specific psychogeography of those extreme islands is thus developed, focusing on their value as experimental space and mirrors of the self. Time cracks up on these islands, where chronology is disrupted, while nostalgia for the origins is rife and myths are revisited. Extremity here has more to do with standing on the brink of destruction, being shoved to the shoreline, than with proper geographical location.

Ranging from colonial to postcolonial, from environmental to dystopian approaches, this issue of *Textus* aims at starting a new investigation of extreme places and the British imagination, employing theoretical perspectives and analysing rhetorical and narrative strategies. Geography matters and does not matter at all.

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