

**Colonialist Ideals in an Un-Colonial Place:
“Terra Australis Nondum Cognita”**

The southward aye we fled.

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—
The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
The Ancient Mariner, Section I

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Polar exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised...it is more lonely than London, more secluded than any monastery, and the post comes but once a year...a member of Campbell's party tells me that the trenches at Ypres were a comparative picnic...take it all in all, I do not believe anybody on earth has a worse time than an Emperor penguin.
Apsley Cherry-Garrard, Opening Paragraph of *The Worst Journey in the World*

"We achieved a first-rate tragedy," wrote Sir Robert Falcon Scott just hours before his death. "Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale" (542). After three years sledging through the Antarctic on low rations, facing ghastly conditions of unabated winds and biting colds, Scott reached the South Pole only to find that a party of Norwegians had gotten there first. Along the return march of 1766 miles, the five explorers of Scott's party watched one another become weaker, losing control of their minds and bodies. The first crawled along on frost-bitten hands and knees until comatose, and was not revived. The second voluntarily walked to his death in a blizzard, hoping his sacrifice would mean his companions' survival. Two others died, exhausted, side-by-side in their tent, snowed in by a ten-day blizzard while their Captain heroically awaited his own death.

The British have since romanticized this horrific tale, heralding it as a post-colonial achievement that justified the nation's previous 'adventures' and 'discoveries'. As Lisa Bloom writes in *Gender on Ice*, "the absence of land, peoples, or wildlife to conquer gave polar exploration an aesthetic dimension that allowed the discovery of the [Poles] to appear above political and commercial concerns" (2). Yet as we will see in

Apsley Cherry-Garrard's literary memoir, *The Worst Journey in the World*,¹ polar exploration was actually rife with colonial tendencies, impulses and desires. The exploration of the South Pole, I will insist, is one of the few moments in history in which colonialist motives and ideals have been expressed in a seemingly un-colonial place. This narrative, being set in a blank space without any colonial devices or instructions, displays the constructs of colonialism unobstructed. As result, the underlying political unconscious of colonialism can be seen through a study of the maps, literature and travel writings kept by these explorers. I will be looking at what happens when an exploration party, fueled by colonialist motives and intents, arrives at a place that can neither structurally uphold nor naturally provide the sacrifices necessary for colonialism. As A. Alvarez argues in *Ice Capades*, Antarctica was the stage upon which heroic failure emerged as a very British specialty that quickly became a national obsession: "the poles were England's Moby Dick—an impossible quest, a killer fantasy that demanded sacrifice" (15). Imbued with colonialism and exposed by the Antarctic, Cherry-Garrard's travel narrative functions as a paradigm of this heroic failure, and for the first time in history, the relationship between colonized and colonizer will be laid out in narrative form, contained within the same writer.

During the heroic ages of geographical discovery in the 15th-18th centuries, the darkest corners of the globe were gradually unfolded to European eyes. Exploration of the unknown was supported by the burgeoning capitalist nations of the Mediterranean and fueled by the large profits it brought them. By the dawn of the 20th century, only the great polar regions remained unmapped. On April 6th, 1909, American explorer Robert

¹ This travel narrative was an account of Robert Falcon Scott's second and final polar expedition between 1910 and 1913.

Edwin Peary claimed to have floated over the North Pole, leaving the Southern extremity as earth's last great geographical prize. With every other blank space but the South Pole explored and exposed, Cherry-Garrard remarked that "we knew more about the planet Mars than about a large area of our own globe" (xxviii). Although navigators slowly sailed closer to Antarctica between 1770 and 1895, "the twentieth century dawned with the Antarctic continent still largely 'Terra Incognita' after 125 years of spasmodic and ill-co-ordinated exploration" (215, King).²

With temperatures below -80 degrees, winds that exceed 100mph and an ice sheet that covers 95% of the total area, it was no surprise that Antarctica remained uncharted. Even in the 21st century, these spaces remain virtually uninhabitable, millions of square miles beyond the gaze and reach of man. Yet the presence of this expansive incognita had always instilled desire and fascination in the minds of Englishmen; the works of Shelley, Milton and Coleridge, among others, indicate imaginings of the unknown polar spaces. The power that drew these writers and explorers to this awful yet sublime geographical region is the same desire that promotes my own interest.

Although the existence of a continent at the southern extremity of the globe was purely fictional until its discovery in the 19th century,³ Renaissance maps often depicted a large landmass centered at the South Pole.⁴ Believing that all unknown territory was land until proved water, these early cartographers created an extensive continent in the

² Progress was slow in part due to the continent's position: 2500mi from South Africa, 2100mi from New Zealand, over 600mi from the southernmost tip of South America, and separated by the infamous Drake passage, the world's stormiest section of ocean.

³When the first mainland landing on Antarctica occurred in 1895, the Sixth International Geographical Congress in London declared Antarctica to be the "greatest piece of geographical exploration still to be undertaken" (208, King). Before 1895, all references to the continent were imaginary, as the existence of such a continent was purely hypothetical.

⁴ See French cartographer Oronce Fine's cordiform maps of 1531 or 1536 (exhibits 1A and 1B in endnotes).

southern hemisphere labeled ‘Terra Australis Nondum Cognita’ (Latin for ‘unknown south land’). In these maps, this imaginary landmass almost equaled the size of all known territories. Antarctica’s visionary beginnings, however, go further back than Renaissance cartography or literature.⁵ Expanding on an idea initially introduced by Aristotle, Greek philosopher Ptolemy argued that a massive southern continent must exist in order to preserve symmetry, that is, to balance all the known land in the northern hemisphere.⁶

Intertwined with myth and speculation well before their discovery and throughout the annals of history, polar regions have been fictitious spaces far longer than they have been known places.⁷ Because its main location throughout antiquity was the human imagination (human minds constantly projecting their own thoughts and images upon this space), the large empty place at the southern end of a map has hardly ever been an empty space. The polar regions have long provided a mythical home for writers who have used these spaces to help explain some extraordinary or un-human event. Mary Shelley’s romantic novel *Frankenstein*, for example, is narrated above the Arctic Circle; the isolation and paralysis that Captain Robert Walton experiences while his ship is frozen in the ice-pack opens him up for an extension of the imagination needed to believe Victor Frankenstein’s passionate and brutal story of creation.⁸ I will use *The Worst Journey in*

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer mentions the “antartik” in *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* (c. 1391).

⁶ The name Antarctica comes from the Greek word ἀνταρκτικός (antarktikos), meaning “opposite of the arctic” (OED).

⁷ For my purposes, a ‘place’ is an actual geographical location that exists physically. A ‘space’, conversely, is an unbounded fictional region that carries whatever characteristics are attributed to it. Haverford, PA is an example of a place. Heaven and death are examples of spaces. Before Antarctica became a known, physical place, it existed as an imaginary space (portrayed in literature, philosophy, maps, etc), in which it was constantly morphed and assigned various qualities.

⁸ The unknown polar landscape provides a space in which the human imagination can drift and hallucinate without constraint. Amid the endless “vast and irregular [mountains &] plains of ice” (17) which stemmed out in every direction, Captain Walton’s men are quite willing to believe they have traversed to some

the World to gain access to the heroic and abject world of polar discovery in the early 20th century. Drawing on recent scholarship about mapping impulses, literature, and travel writing, I will demonstrate how polar exploration functioned as a belated extension of the colonial imagination.

Having boarded the *Terra Nova* and left the green pastures of England on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Scott's exploration party was set on having "a real adventure on an uninhabited and unknown island" (11). For their exploits, they chose the "mysterious" South Trinidad, an island 680 miles off the coast of Brazil. Upon landing, the men set about collecting and extracting specimens, performing a thorough scientific survey of the island: "Everything was to be captured" wrote Cherry-Garrard, "alive or dead, animal, vegetable or mineral" (12). In their pillage, the men display the makings of science—and of colonialism; the natural spontaneity of their enthusiasm and passion of discovery was paradoxically enacted, and overshadowed, by the systematic manner in which they invaded the island. They split up by task, each man covering some particular detail, "so altogether [they] were ready to 'do' the island" (17). However, their revelry in their successful conquest was short-lived as most of the haul capsized on its way back to the ship.

While the impulse to explore and research the island was a natural one, impelled by curiosity, the deft, punctual completion of these desires was part of a larger construct manufactured by England. Although it is different to imagine polar exploration as a form of colonialism, because it lacks an interaction with an un-cultured other, it is important to note that the British antarcticists were filled with the same imperialist impulses as their

mythical land of "giants" (18). Shelley's plot is dependent upon the harsh un-humanness of the polar space for its own credibility. Polar exploration (like *Frankenstein*) is just as much of a story about the adventurer-creator's own exploits and turmoil as it is about the fantastic, brutal and un-human landscape.

colonialist predecessors. These men both systematized spontaneous acts and forwent further tropical conquest in order to map colonialist desires onto an uninhabited place.

Even the earliest histories of the Antarctic region are ugly ones, similar to colonialist practices in regard to their “systematic plundering of its only natural wealth, [seals]” (15, King). After Shackleton (1907-09 & ’14-17) and Scott (1901-04 & ’10-13) finally found their way to the heart of Antarctica and made territorial claims for England, no less than eight nations followed in carving out their own claims to the southern polar region. As if enacting Walter Benjamin’s suggestion from *The Arcades Project* that ‘every epoch dreams the one that follows it,’ the natural impulses and global mapping of the 16th and 17th century explorers were a defining characteristic in the 18th and 19th century’s territorial acquisitions and colonial masquerades, which in turn have engraved imperial reach in 20th century polar exploration. As Dan Jacobson explained in *The New York Review of Books*, the pioneering ideals that antarcticists wore as badges of heroism are now tarnished with the atrocities of colonialism:

The ideal of ‘discover[ing] new land and new life’ which Cherry-Garrard celebrates in *The Worst Journey in the World* has lost much of its allure since his day. In fact, because of its notoriously ‘hegemonic’ and ‘Eurocentric’ connotations, the word ‘discovery’ has become virtually unemployable in most fields of inquiry (41)

While accurate in noting the post-colonial connotations now attributed to the vocabulary of colonial discovery, Jacobson fails to note that the polar explorers of Scott’s journey did indeed embody and employ the full notorious and hegemonic practices of colonialism. The tarnishing that Jacobson describes actually began much earlier.

Although the Scott tragedy has been celebrated as a national historical event for almost a

century, the maps, literature, and travel writings of his expedition demonstrate the extension of colonial impulses and practices across three different epochs.

I. Mapping Blankness

As Marlowe recalls in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, blank spaces on a map foster thoughts of colonialist enterprise:

When I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up I will go there.' The North Pole was one of those places, I remember (7-8).

The practice of map-reading, which kindled desires of “exploration” and “invitation,” was the basis for many stories of heroic colonialist adventure. Maps have long been widely produced, disseminated and employed as versions of history and forms of knowledge. Yet early cartographers often relied upon their pictorial artistry to augment limited factual knowledge, writes Svetlana Alpers in *The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art*: “mapmaking [w]as a form of decorative art belong[ing] to the informal, pre-scientific phase of cartography. When cartographers had neither the geographical knowledge nor the cartographic skill to make accurate maps, fancy and artistry had free rein” (126). In attempting to remedy their lack of geographical knowledge, cartographers would craftily re-imagine the blank places on a map as exotic and eroticized spaces.

Maps and paintings are ideological presentations of illusionary accounts of the real landscape. As Ann Bermingham explains in *Landscape and Ideology*, a map alludes “to the actual conditions existing in it,” neither reflecting or directly mirroring reality, but also not completely dispensing with it (3). As a result, these blank polar places can be

used as extensions of the believable, transformed into spaces that the human mind can reconfigure in whichever way it pleases. Just what is the world like, asked Cherry-Garrard, “at the spot where the sun does not decline in the heavens, where a man loses his orbit and turns like a joint on a spit, and where his face, however he turns, is always to the North?” (544) Because of its physical immensity —“why, there are [crevasses on Cloudmaker] you could put St. Paul’s into, and that’s no exaggeration,” (460) — and its indefinable quality—“a black indefinite mist, which seemed to pervade everything,” (139) — polar space is the perfect place for this extension.

As Alvarez explains, the mapping impulse was useful in providing the initiative to get away when British society became overwhelming: British pen-pushers “represented the England [Cherry-Garrard] had gone south to escape from. And that, of course, is one of the attractions of places that are blank on the map. People go to get away” (26). Yet upon arrival, Cherry-Garrard found that the blank place on the map was indeed empty: “very cheerless...it is difficult to keep hope alive...uniform white sky...there could scarcely be a more dreary prospect for the eye to rest upon” (63).

The polar experience was the very opposite of civilization, a direct “polarization” of the complex and overwhelming cities of the Westernized world, a place without boundaries, without defined spaces or shaped identities: “The grey limitless Barrier seemed to cast a spell of cold immensity, vague, ponderous, a breeding-place of wind and drift and darkness. God! What a place!” (262). Cherry-Garrard and his companions entered a place whose whole history of space had still to be written. Nor did the immense mountains and limitless spaces of the Antarctic come with the sort of human guide who helped their forefathers shoulder the work, provided affirming company and recognized

identity.⁹ Not only was this southern continent physically terrifying and still un-coded at the time of Scott's expeditions, but the unknown blank space was capable of producing anything!— including expansions as yet unimagined in the minds of the explorers.

Lawrence Lipking notes that many authors used these blank spaces for colonial ends:

Many Renaissance authors shared similar territorial interests. In an age of expansion, poets, like nations, often defined what they wanted to be by artfully redrawing or reimagining the map. Nor is this hobby innocent; as recent scholarship has insisted, map reading kindles thoughts of ownership, of empire, of rules of trade and invasion (205)

Whether used for artistic or colonial purposes (as a place to forget, escape to or romanticize), the blank unknowns on the map have been constantly colored in before their discovery. These empty places have always been identified and filled with the imaginary, creating temporary illusions that replace the unknown with a fictional space.¹⁰ Yet the descriptive literary depictions of the polar party, unlike their blank maps, are illustrative and evocative in their portrayal of polar space. While the explorers of *The Worst Journey in the World* brought many maps and atlases with them (in which their desire to encounter this blankness is evident), the impulses that drove them southward were trumped by their actual encounter with the blankness.

II. The Double Embodiment of Literature

The chapters of *The Worst Journey in the World* are all prefaced by quotes, many from the paradigmatic canon of British literature. Cherry-Garrard evokes Herbert,

⁹ As first thought out by G. W. F. Hegel in "Lordship and Bondage": understanding the self in terms of the polarized other, any entity is dependent upon acknowledgement from another in the formation of their own self-consciousness.

¹⁰ Aetiological myths (stories that explain the origin of something: *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, for example, accounts for the existence of seasons) are good examples of this human compulsion to fabricate some fictional answer or belief to substitute for what the human mind cannot know or fathom.

Milton, Browning, Huxley, Tennyson, Shaw, Whitman, Wells, Stevenson, Spenser, and Shakespeare, among others. The Shakespearean passage concerns the British homeland:

This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall, ...
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings, ...
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land

Richard II (II, i), Chapter 18 of *The Worst Journey in the World* (527).

The other quotations are all directed towards the spirit of adventurous exploration.

Cherry-Garrard also draws occasionally on American Literature to capture the chutzpah that these Western explorers use in tackling the unknown world. For example, he quotes a section from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1900):

All the past we leave behind;
We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied world;
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labour and the march,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

We detachments steady throwing,
Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing, as we go, the unknown ways,
Pioneers! O pioneers!¹¹

Whitman's pioneers, who leave their past and limited boundaries behind in order to face an unknown expanse, do not do so in peace or tranquility—rather, they are 'conquering', 'venturing', 'pioneering' and 'seizing' this "new" world. Their desire to colonize, subjugate and dominate the unknown overshadows their natural spirit of adventure and discovery. As recent colonial theory has suggested, colonial manifestation in literature is not unique to Whitman:

Many great works of English literature promoted beliefs and assumptions regarding other geographic regions and other ethnic groups—from Shakespeare's

¹¹ Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" *Drum-Taps*, 1865, Chapter 13 of *The Worst Journey in the World* (408).

Caliban to Bronte's Mrs Rochester – that created the cultural preconditions for and no doubt enabled the work of empire (1072, Rivkin & Ryan)

Pre-colonial English literature provided more than the epigraphs for Cherry-Garrard's narrative. Many polar explorers carried classic literary texts with them to the Antarctic: as Cherry-Garrard testifies, "with regard to books we were moderately well provided with good modern fiction, and very well provided with such authors as Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, Bulwer-Lytton and Dickens" (198-9). These volumes became so well read they were soon "learnt by heart" and repeated during the blank hours of the daily march. The patriotic and imperialistic sentiments of these novels soon became ingrained in the mindsets of the explorers, who, fighting against colossal odds and unknown terrors, wanted to picture themselves achieving the same wondrous glories as their idolized novel-heroes. As C. C. Eldridge argues in *The Imperial Experience*, the celebrations of jingoism and belligerent expansionism in the works of British writers "contributed directly to discussions of the main imperial problems" of the late 19th century (1093). Eldridge directly cites the very same authors Cherry-Garrard mentions in his narrative, Thackeray, Bronte, Bulwer-Lytton and Dickens, as problematic in this respect. He later mentions other authors to whom Cherry-Garrard refers, Kipling, Tennyson, Carlyle and Coleridge, as contributors to the glories of imperialist practice.

The literature of English colonialism infiltrated the very text of *The Worst Journey in the World*, displaying a double imbeddedness: Cherry-Garrard imbedded within his text representative examples of the tradition in which his own text is imbedded. Cherry-Garrard used Browning to describe a fellow comrade, Bowers: "One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward; / Never doubted clouds would break; / Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph; / Held we fall

to rise, are baffled to fight better, / Sleep to wake” (210).¹² He twice quotes from Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* to describe the spirit of the landscape (232). And to emphasize their current plight, he observes that “Defoe could have written another Robinson Crusoe with Hut Point instead of San Juan Fernandez” (161). Instead of simply noting that their subsistence at main camp was dependent upon the only natural resource, seals, for food, fuel and light, Cherry-Garrard references the canonically colonialist novel *Robinson Crusoe* to explain his own situation.

Cherry-Garrard was not the only writer to recall the imaginative literature of the English canon in describing experiences with the polar landscape: “When the American explorer Charles Wilkes probed the coast of Antarctica around 1840” writes Alvarez, “he drew on Gothic romance and Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” to describe the marvels he had seen” (14).¹³ Cherry-Garrard’s own prose often takes up the styles of his English forebears. One passage eerily parallels Coleridge’s polar scene in first section of *The Ancient Mariner*:

Words cannot tell the beauty of the scenes through which we were to pass during the next three weeks. I suppose the pack in winter must be a terrible place enough: a place of darkness and desolation hardly to be found elsewhere. But forms which under different conditions can only betoken horror now conveyed to us impressions of the utmost peace and beauty, for the sun had kissed them all. (62)

In likening his own experience to Coleridge’s fictional passage, Cherry-Garrard displays his inability to move past known devices, tropes and imaginings when describing an unknown place. He seems dependent upon the dominating history of English literature to fill in and write the blank pages of his Antarctic journey. Reliance on English literature

¹² From Robert Browning’s poem “Epilogue” (1889).

¹³ “The bergs were of magnificent dimensions...exhibit[ing] lofty arches of many-coloured tints...recall[ing] the recollection of ruined abbeys, castles, and caves, while here and there a bold and projecting bluff, crowned with pinnacles and turrets, resembled some Gothic keep...massive and pure white walls. These tabular bergs are like masses of beautiful alabaster” (Alvarez, 14).

to describe sights, events, and as we shall see, deaths, became paramount to these explorers as they were unsure of how to act in the uncivilized, uninhabited, and undiscovered world. The English language, primarily in the form of excerpts from novels, provides the necessary protocol and touch of civilization needed to make meaningful acts in an uncharted world.

When confronted with death, the explorers drew on the Bible as well as English literature to mark the loss. Although Antarctica quickly covered up past remnants, absorbing and digesting any sign of human existence,¹⁴ the explorers felt strongly about providing a proper burial and service for their deceased comrades:

I do not know how long we were there, but when all was finished, and the chapter of Corinthians had been read, it was midnight of some day. The sun was dipping low above the Pole, the Barrier was almost in shadow. And the sky was blazing—sheets and sheets of iridescent clouds. The cairn and Cross stood dark against a glory of burnished gold (483)

The landscape, which caused the adventurers' deaths, fittingly played a dramatic part in their burial. Yet a natural marker was not enough—In addition to Corinthians, a Biblical extract was left over the bodies of the men: “The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (484). As they left the continent, the remaining members of the polar party constructed a great cross in memory of the deceased, a permanent fixture that attested to their human conquest rather than their submission to the desolate place. This time their inscription was the concluding line of Tennyson's “Ulysses”: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (566).¹⁵ Before sailing for home, they gave the cross representing their dead comrades “three cheers and one more” (567).

¹⁴ On page 109 of *The Worst Journey in the World*, the Antarctic Barrier has all but consumed the remnants of Shackleton's 1907-09 polar expedition.

¹⁵ Tennyson's poem was originally dedicated to the 19th century polar explorer Sir John Franklin.

When the existence and persistence of empty space became paramount, as in these passages of death and loss, Cherry-Garrard and his companions futilely did their best to fill them with literature, religion, physical edifices and thoughts of England. The explorers exemplified the human compulsion to fill in empty spaces ('horror vacui').¹⁶ They were left using the bare threads of civilization to cover up the "unknown waste" of empty space that endlessly stretched out in every direction. Their only solace was in writing of their own story onto this blank landscape, using inscriptions and remnants of literature and history to give their adventures (and deaths) weight and meaning. Ironically, this natural compulsion to fill in these blank spaces was exacerbated by the British nation-state—in fact, it was what brought these explorers from their 'blessed plot' of green valleys to face such horrible blankness in the first place.

III. Travel Writing

The place of writing was of particular importance to the colonialist enterprise. Not only did travel writing act as a medium through which the rest of the world could experience the foreign regions, but as Michel De Certeau argues in *The Writing of History*, writing itself is an act that conquers, using the "New World as if it were a blank, "savage" page on which Western desire will be written" (xxvi). In writing British nationalism and desire upon the blank space of the polar landscape, *The Worst Journey in the World* transformed Antarctica into a colonized place, making it a paradigmatic example of the travel narrative: "*The Worst Journey in the World* is to travel writing what *War and Peace* is to the novel or Herzen's *Memoirs* are to autobiography", writes

¹⁶ A term associated with Italian Mario Praz: the over-filling of an entire space with artwork, leaving no space unornamented.

Alvarez: “the book by which all the rest are measured” (23). Travel narrative works to fill up the empty space inherent in the polar landscape by projecting Euro-centric codes, customs, meanings, and ways of life upon the continent. Travel writing, resembling fictional literature and mapping in providing exotic fantasies and surreal depictions for a Western readership, also helps an author code a foreign place by placing a grid of Englishness and structure upon the wild, unknown landscape.

As Edward Said has suggested in *Orientalism* (1978), the colonial trends in popular novels represent a larger movement of European discourse that denotes other people as inferior and in need of European assistance. De Certeau also suggests that colonialist travel narratives have succeeded in forming a series of stable oppositions that work to separate primitive from civilized: The fantastical colonialist stereotypes that emerge through travel writing often build upon an ‘over here over there’ dichotomy, portraying the ‘cultured’ European in contrast to native peoples, ‘primitive’ others with animalistic desires feeding upon forbidden pleasures (228). Yet in the British excursions to the South Pole, perhaps for the first time in colonialism, the space that the colonized other normally frequents is left empty. With no native peoples to enact Western phantasms of cannibalism, bestiality, primitive festivities, and other ‘common’ acts of the other, the polar explorers are without colonialist counterparts. What becomes of their civilized acts and fine English manners, when there is no native son to upstage? The earlier European explorers relied upon their ‘cultured’ ethics to protect themselves from any vestiges of ‘primordial’ otherness. The polar explorers repeatedly relied upon similar principles to provide camaraderie and companionship against the harsh landscape:

They were gold, pure, shining, unalloyed. Words cannot express how good their companionship was...no single hasty or angry word passed their lips. When, later,

we were sure, so far as we can be sure of anything, that we must die, they were cheerful, and so far as I can judge their songs and cheery words were quite unforced (246)

Up until their cold end, the polar explorers remained cordial and proper in every aspect; both taking care to act civilized and abide by an ethical code while also writing these activities and mentalities down to historicize their gentlemanly manners and heroic actions. In using their Englishness to oppose the stringent conditions of the Antarctic, the polar explorers idolized their choice of defense: the British homeland.

Writing was one aspect of culture and civilization that colonial explorers could easily bring with them and use to set themselves apart from the un-civilized, un-cultured, even partially un-human native other. As philosopher David Hume argues in *Of National Characters*, “negroes and in general all the other species of men were ‘naturally inferior to whites’, on the basis that blacks in ‘our colonies’ and throughout Europe lacked the ‘civilized’ arts, in particular, of writing” (Walder, 1083).

The absence of writing is seen as a mark of inferiority and otherness, often used as justification to perform colonial acts. Travel writing allows the explorer to ‘save’ himself from the supposedly primeval landscape and from regressing towards the allegedly baser, more animalistic past. This impulse may well explain Scott’s compulsion to write up until his very death: an attempt to preserve himself and his companions as British gentlemen, who died in a civilized manner as any cultured Englishman might:

It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.
For God’s sake, look after our people (539)

Although Scott repeatedly commented, during his final few weeks, on the difficulties of writing, he kept his pen on the paper until the very end, always careful to record his exertion against the Antarctic continent. As De Certeau explains, speech never leaves the

place of its production, but writing can be detached and exported from its author (216). It became imperative for the polar explorers to keep literary accounts of their travels, both to partake in the colonial acts of naming and enunciation¹⁷ and to produce signifiers that would exist beyond their own collective body. Through their travel narratives and journals, the polar explorers were able to fill the blank place that opposed them, while documenting their travels and historicizing their adventures, leaving a physical record for the empire to later recognize their struggles.

As De Certeau asserts, it is writing that “produces history” (215). Through writing, we can see the colonialist tendencies becoming manifest. “The peak of Terror opened out behind the crater of Erebus,” wrote Cherry-Garrard, “and we walked under Castle Rock and Danger Slope until rounding the promontory, we saw the little jagged Hut Point” (107). These points of interest in the Antarctic landscape are described in a fantasy language, named by their colonial discoverers. Through travel writings such as Cherry-Garrard’s and expeditions such as Scott’s, the European explorers filled in the physically empty place of the south pole with definite, identifiable, named landmarks and their own adventure stories, as narrated by themselves.

IV. A Travel Writing Paradigm: *The Worst Journey in the World*

This is how Cherry-Garrard describes the experience: for two months the Cape Crozier party¹⁸ doubled sledged in complete darkness, carrying only “a naked lighted

¹⁷ This act of designation is similar to the mapping impulse described by Alpers in *The Art of Describing*. The Antarcticists’ acts of labeling, recording and referring to the phenomena of the continent parallels the desires of dominion that, according to Alpers argument, can be instilled by maps (which visually code and construct foreign places).

¹⁸ This exploration party had the task of collecting an embryo of an Emperor penguin (such an embryo was wrongly believed to be “the missing link between birds and reptiles” (234)). The party consisted of Bowers, Wilson and Cherry-Garrard, and their absurd travel across the Antarctic in midwinter (the egg-incubation

candle back with [them] when [they] went to find [their] second sledge. It was the weirdest kind of procession, three frozen men and a little pool of light” (240). These three men, alone on the Antarctic continent, stumbled single-file for miles through treacherous territory in complete darkness, steered only by Jupiter and a solitary candle flame. The sheer magnitude of blankness—thousands of miles of ice, four months of complete darkness, total bodily numbness, meant the lack of past or future thought:

Our conditions forced themselves upon us without pause: it was not possible to think of anything else. We got no respite. I found it best to refuse to let myself think of the past or the future—to live only for the job of the moment, and to compel myself to think only how to do it most efficiently. Once you let yourself imagine... (242)

It also meant that the inability to communicate was absolute: “Our breath crackled as it froze. There was no unnecessary conversation: I don’t know why our tongues never got frozen, but all my teeth, the nerves of which had been killed, split to pieces” (292).

Always surrounded by “an unknown waste of snow with no landmarks to vary the rough monotony” (xxxix), Cherry-Garrard began to welcome death as a good friend. For these polar explorers, even the unknown space of death seemed preferable to their unending march into an infinity of blankness: “Death comes for you in the snow, he comes disguised as Sleep, and you greet him rather as a welcome friend than as a gruesome foe” (188). The unknown blankness of death came to seem the only respite from the un-fillable Antarctic expanse.

“This journey had beggared our language” wrote Cherry-Garrard as he continued to drag himself across the inexpressible: “no words would express its horror” (298). The

period for the Emperors), became what Cherry-Garrard called “the weirdest bird’s-nesting expedition that has ever been or will ever be” (234).

suffering was not just physical, and the explorers' minds began to play tricks on their bodies, imagining their own tracks as hills standing in their path:

These holes became to our tired brains not depressions but elevations: hummocks over which we stepped, raising our feet painfully and draggily. And then we remembered, and said what fools we were, and for a while we compelled ourselves to walk through these phantom hills. But it was no lasting good, and as the days passed we realized that we must suffer this absurdity, for we could do nothing else. But of course it took it out of us (241)

Why did the explorers continue to suffer such physical exertion and mental absurdity?

They may have been falsely lured to this blank space by jingoist literature and the mapping impulse, but why did the antarcticists decide to continue their heroic fight when a peaceful morphine-induced sleep was readily available? (Cherry-Garrard imagined how nice his own death would be in this manner, 237.)

“The first object of the expedition had been the Pole”, Cherry-Garrard explained. “If some record was not found, [the dead explorers’] success or failure would for ever remain uncertain. Was it due not only to the men and their relatives, but also to the expedition, to ascertain their fate if possible?” (442). Just as it became a necessity for the search party to leave a record of their deceased comrades, they themselves needed a physical record of what they had been through and what they had accomplished. Cherry-Garrard explained that the memories of the explorers often blanked out. They did not ever want to recall their atrocious experience: “The horrors of that return journey are blurred to my memory and I know they were blurred to my body at the time...I had not cared whether I fell into a crevasse or not...we slept on the march” (295). The narrative of *The Worst Journey in the World* mimics the structure of trauma, recording the experience of the body and mind as it became permanently numbed by the journey. Given their faulty memories, they needed photos, drawings and diaries to encapsulate

where they had journeyed, what they had seen, and most importantly, why they had traveled where they did.

In leaving Cape Evans, Cherry-Garrard wrote that he had no regret, but “I never want to see the place again. The pleasant memories are all swallowed up in the bad ones” (565). Although the traumatic events drained the bodies and hampered the speech of the antarcticists, they continued to record their adventures in writing. Scott believed that a successful record of the journey would validate all the work done, securing a place for the expedition in history: “the scientific public, as well as the more general public, will gauge the result of the scientific work of the Expedition largely in accordance with the success or failure of the main object...with failure even the most brilliant work may be neglected and forgotten” (350). Yet the confirming and legitimizing aspect of the explorers’ writing is only a byproduct of the colonialist nature of the travel narrative, historically used to write itself (and Eurocentric ambition) upon the foreign landscape.

V. English National Project

Because of their complete emptiness, the explorations (and narrations) of the polar regions were presented not as a forms of colonialism, but as scientific endeavors. The explorations literalized by Cherry-Garrard and other antarcticists, became a post-colonial fantasy of a “tabula rasa where people, history or culture vanish” (Bloom, 2). The Antarctic had nothing material to offer the British explorers: Discovery was a deed distinguished by its pointlessness, a gratuitous act that carried no gain for Britain. For this very reason the colonialist nation was able to claim it was exploring and discovering not for imperialist desires, but rather for the noble pursuits of knowledge and science:

We traveled for science. Those three small embryos from Cape Crozier, that weight of fossils from Buckley Island, and that mass of material, less spectacular, but gathered just as carefully hour by hour in wind and drift, darkness and cold, were striven for in order that the world may have a little more knowledge, that it may build on what it knows instead of on what it thinks (228)

The English nation attempted to use polar exploration as iconic of their larger enterprise, an embodiment of adventure and science untarnished by the horrors of empire. The empty space of Antarctica allowed nations to reconstruct their self-images, reworking their past and celebrating empire without the troubles historically coupled with authentic colonialist endeavors. However, colonialist impulses undercut any desires for innocent adventure and science these men might have espoused, the natural ideals of the explorers having become imbued with imperialist desire.¹⁹ Colonialism was more than an ideology; it was a culture that dominated the British mindset, infiltrating the smallest aspects of the nation. English art and literature embraced, romanticized and advocated British colonialism.

“The wear and tear on our minds was very great,” wrote Cherry-Garrard. “We were certainly weaker” (275). Scott later echoed this sentiment when he explained that “no human being could face it, and we were worn out nearly” (538). In an attempt to find some sort of shelter from this onslaught, the explorers turned to the nationalist impulses that had initially carried them to this removed place. Many of the conventions of

¹⁹ This idea of *natural* adventure and science is important to distinguish from the later saturation of these impulses in a nationalist ideology. As Browning asked in *Andrea fel Sarto* (and Cherry-Garrard re-questions in his own narrative (230)), ‘what is heaven for but to allow a man’s reach to exceed his grasp?’ It should be reiterated that the polar explorers were driven by an impulse that was pure at its core, their quest for science and knowledge kept them going even though their journey had no rationale with the outside world. In his exposé on polar exploration, Fridtjof Nansen wrote that the struggles and desires associated with discovery, adventure and knowledge are what defines humankind: “The history of the human race is a continual struggle from darkness towards light. It is, therefore, to no purpose to discuss the use of knowledge; man wants to know, and when he ceases to do so, he is no longer man” (368, Cherry Garrard). Unknown to the explorers, the English nation thoroughly entangled these innocent spirits of adventure and knowledge with the nationalist colonial imagination.

European society didn't work in the polar space: "A twenty-four-hour day, we decided to carry on though such a convention did not exist; as in actual fact it did not" (235). The polar travelers relied on their staunch re-enactment of British mannerisms, turning their Englishness and British homeland into a savior from the oppressive landscape (and themselves): "We did not forget the Please and Thank you" wrote Cherry-Garrard, "which mean much in such circumstances, and all the little links with decent civilization which we could still keep going" (298). Just as cartographers re-imagined the world through polar space, authors used it for an extension of the imagination, and nations used it to re-structure their image, the polar explorers were faced with somehow transforming the blank, empty space that surrounded them. In a place of historical imagination, these polar explorers turned to the reality of the homeland they once knew.

The horrifying accounts of Cherry-Garrard show that no individual whim, financial promise or national craze could keep these men alive as they endlessly marched through the "unimagined cold and darkness" (xli) of the Antarctic. Were these forays into the polar unknown *acte gratuites* ("impulsive actions ultimately warranted by their pointlessness" (Jacobson, 39)), trivial in their physical gains but heroic in their conception, execution and intention? Just as the shooting of the albatross in Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* is a pointless act that holds deeper meanings than the bird's life, polar exploration became synonymous with heroic failure, a fruitless quest that demanded the best England had to offer.

Yet polar exploration, having emerged from the social and economic milieu of colonialism, was not an innocent quest for science or adventure. As the eras of unbounded prospect and endless conquest faded, it was no longer possible for a nation to

imagine its destiny through colonialist appropriations. The nostalgia carried over from this earlier epoch, however, still provided force to the later Antarctic movement. Shaped by the needs, tastes and desires its imperialist upbringing, the polar movement of the 20th century projected the deepest and darkest secrets of colonialism onto the vacuum that is Antarctica. On this blank slate, England's desire to maintain its dominion of the past while reinventing its image for the future came to the foreground, exposing the imperialist ideologies embedded in polar fascination.

VI. In the Absence of an Other: the Turn Inward

Beyond this flood a frozen Continent
Lies dark and wilde, bent with perpetual storms
Of Whirlwind and dire Hail, which on firm land
Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seems
Of ancient pile; all else deep snow and ice.

-Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II

What happened when the colonial movement carried humans to a place that was unable to support the existing colonial structure? As a non-fictional travel narrative, *The Worst Journey in the World* allows a study of the power and space in an abject landscape through the mind and body of Apsley Cherry-Garrard; his body acted as the recording instrument through which his audience could receive this foreign place. Cherry-Garrard and his companions adventured per se, traveling in an unknown space for an unknown amount of time for a possibly unknown purpose. Polar experts have suggested that these explorers journeyed for commercial advantage, private ambition, scientific knowledge and political one-upmanship (15, King), but I believe these men followed an impulse to discover and conquer that had been instilled in them by the literature, schooling and very orientation of English life. Upon their arrival, these men found that Antarctica harbored

“the most stringent conditions for life. It is the coldest, the highest, the windiest, the most isolated, and the least inhabited of all the continents. Here is the twilight of life with a delicate balance between habitable and uninhabitable areas” (351, Hatherhon). This expansive incognita offered the polar explorers nothing more than a liminal life in the twilight border space between their own will and the worst journey in the world. The polar explorers of Scott’s expedition were left without the classic colonial confrontation between colonizer and colonized. Mary Louise Pratt argues that these “contact zones” are imperative to the colonialist structure, working as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4).²⁰

The absence of a colonial interface may have been more crucial than it appears in *The Worst Journey in the World*; “to wait idly is the worst of conditions” (73), notes Cherry-Garrard as he and his fellow colonializer-explorers are left facing their own thoughts, which often turn to death. Stuck in his tent as “the earth was torn to pieces: the indescribable fury and roar of it all cannot be imagined” (276), Cherry-Garrard is so beragged and ruined that he happily turns towards death: “thus impiously I set out to die...not a bit heroic, and entirely true! Yes! Comfortable, warm reader. Men do not fear death, they fear the pain of dying” (281). Within this turn, the polar explorers *themselves* experience what Paul Gilroy suggests to be the defining trope of cultural production for the *other*: the replacement of identity with in-betweenness. That is, colonialism has been historically defined by the placement of the colonized in a space of almost but not quite.

²⁰ Michel De Certeau and W.J.T Mitchell also center their colonialist theory around this interaction between dissimilar cultures. Indeed, most of the colonial dialogue has existed in the complex interface between the colonizer and colonized—for good examples see Bhabha’s *The Empire Writes Back* or Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*.

Without a cultured other to provide this tumultuous and asymmetrical border space (in which the racialized other is subjugated by ambivalence, mimicry and other forms of suppression), the clashing/grappling/domination inherent in contact space was transferred in the Antarctic expeditions, onto the solitary minds and bodies of the polar explorers. The very same torque that drives the vibrant discourses that have emerged from this cultured border space ²¹ also drives *The Worst Journey in the World*.

In *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that landscape works as a medium through which identities are formed, a space in which humans lose or find themselves, through which evil is veiled or naturalized, and in which the human confronts himself: “landscape always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which “we” find—or lose—ourselves” (2). Since their own unwanted and uncivilized impulses could not be mapped out upon a colonized other, the explorers’ desires were reflected back upon themselves by the landscape. The endless “impenetrable gloom” (122) of Antarctica is a “pretty awful locality” (551) which forced the polar traveler to show both great physical and mental fortitude: “the monotonous march: the necessity to keep the mind concentrated to steer amongst disturbances” (377). Faced with this unending blank space, the polar explorers relied upon overt examples of their Englishness and culture to demonstrate their humanness in such an un-human place. If colonialism has normally functioned as a “systematic negation of the other person” (Walder, 1088), a denial of all culture, history and value outside the colonizer’s frame, then *The Worst Journey in the World* gives an articulate account of how this negation functions. The

²¹ Every colonized nation has attempted to deal with colonial ramifications by producing their own body of literature that deals with the cultural identity that emerges from the contact spaces: For examples, see the works of Americans Toni Morrison & Langston Hughes, Caribbeans Jean Rhys & Derek Walcott, and Africans Wole Soyinka & Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

overwhelmingly positive and cheerful tone in which the journal entries are written displays the polar explorers' own negation of the abject landscape. Rather than portraying an absence of culture, history or value in the other, the polar explorers are careful to outwardly display examples of their own history, ethic and civilization against the empty landscape, both as an answer to the unending emptiness and to satisfy the colonialist interaction that is necessitated by their expedition.

The Greek philosopher Hecataeus (c. 550-476 BCE), who was the first human to write in prose, is also credited as the founder of mapmaking. Since his time, blank spaces have been imagined and created through literature. While it is natural to be fascinated with empty spaces, the British nation cultivated these natural inclinations for their own benefit through such devices as canonical literature, the mapping impulse and travel writing. Using empty spaces as a trigger for these impulses, England was able to promote their national ideals through early forms of mass media.

Colonialism has long been traced through the transferal of these impulses on the earth and its people, and Antarctic exploration, functioning as a belated extension of the colonial imagination, is no exception. "Explorers are driven by the unappeasable need to peer over the next horizon," writes English biographer J.R.L. Anderson, a drive he called (with Tennyson in mind) "the Ulysses factor" (14, Alvarez). The British nation manufactured and filled empty spaces as systematic recreation, exacerbation and harvesting of natural impulses to adventure and discover. As a result, polar exploration was rife with colonial tendencies, impulses and desires, transferred onto a continent that was unable physically or socially to uphold the colonialist practice. As result of their non-encounter, the polar explorers were forced to turn inward; the continent mirrored

their colonialist practices back upon themselves. Sacrificed to their own national ideals, these British explorers were heroicized by the empire as the new emblem of England. Yet their tragic story reveals more about the English narrative and history of spaces than the nation supposed: Not only was polar exploration inherently colonialist, but because of the blank polar space, the constructs of colonialism appeared, perhaps for the first time, unobstructed. As result, the submerged ideas that had formed the political unconscious of colonialism became exposed in the narrative of a writer who was himself both colonized and colonizer.

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Exhibit 1A.

Above: Oronce Fine, 1536 map, from www.loc.gov/



Exhibit 1B.

Above: Abraham Ortelius, c. 1570, from <http://www.nla.gov.au/>