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978-1-107-02082-5 - Antarctica in Fiction: Imaginative Narratives of the Far South

Elizabeth Leane

Excerpt

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Introduction

Presenting a study of the far south in fiction is a risky venture: Antarctica is, traditionally, unwritable. Sustaining this idea is the powerful trope of the continent-as-canvas, the 'wide white page'. Artists can make hopeful daubs on the canvas, writers can venture hesitant scribbles on the page, but the canvas or the page itself is essentially beyond representation. This Antarctica is ground, not figure – it is nothingness, and nothingness cannot, by definition, be depicted. Any attempt to do so, to describe the continent as something, or even *like* something, is then interpreted as a sullying of its purity. In the words of one late twentieth-century poet, Antarctica is 'A white blankness ... / ... that is only itself. / The last unwritten page in our planet's book', and 'Already ... our infection / And the stain of humanity begin to soil it'.¹ The poet's choice of metaphor itself gives the lie to the idea of the pure white continent – it is one thing to sustain the notion of continent-as-canvas when considering the interior plateau, another when faced with a noisy, smelly penguin colony – but the image has traction nonetheless. Even for those who recognize the internal diversity of the Antarctic region, who acknowledge that it is more than a white expanse, language still falls short. If it is not the continent's blankness that prevents its depiction, it is its extremity: the vertical sublime replaces the horizontal. The continent exceeds all attempts to contain it, the usual list of superlatives (highest, coldest, driest, windiest) gesturing inanely towards its inexpressible extremes.

Either way, marks on a page become like footprints or ski-trails in the snow: signs only of humanity's interference, of its pathetic attempts to master the continent's vastness. Confronted by Antarctica, writers become, as novelist and essayist Helen Garner observes ironically, 'control freaks, spoiling things for everyone else, colonising, taming, matching their egos against the unshowable, the unsayable'.²

If marks on the page, lines on the ice, can only ever be pollution, then the literature of Antarctica says nothing of the continent, and everything

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of humanity's futile efforts to find language equal to it. What for scientists might be a palimpsest of considerable complexity, an 'icy archive' in which natural history is preserved like nowhere else on earth, for creative artists offers only a reflection of their own inadequacies. 'The Ice ... was an esthetic sink, not an inspiration', observes environmental historian Stephen Pyne, 'Its landscape erased those elements which provided the artistic conventions that made other newly discovered worlds accessible, and its fantastic isolation seemingly defied any but self-referential attempts to assimilate it ... No representational art or literature could hope to express it'.³

Shoring up this view is not only the powerful spatial image of the plateau, with its seemingly unending white horizons, but also a corresponding temporal blankness: the knowledge of humanity's brief history of interaction with Antarctica and the aeons of untouched isolation stretching before. Other places, other continents – even the icy wastes of the Arctic – have supported indigenous human inhabitants. Not only have these communities had the luxury of millennia of continuous dwelling in which to develop a vocabulary equal to their environment, but their culture and language also have been shaped by that environment. In Marie Darrieussecq's Antarctic novel *White* (2005) one character, observing 'sparkling ridges of snow, with their granular crust', notes that 'Only Laplanders or Innuits would know the precise term in their native tongues for this nuance of snow, and shade of white. But here, no one has ever been born'.⁴ People have been born in Antarctica, for strategic nationalist reasons; but the observation is true in essence. No one has been raised entirely in the far south, let alone inherited the deep sense of place that generations of inhabitation bestow. And while words for particular kinds of snow might be transplanted from the far north, there are other words – words for specifically Antarctic features, processes and topographies – that can only come from intimate experience of the place itself.⁵

For this reason alone, the literature of Antarctica will always be distinct from that of the inhabited places of the world. Yet my starting point here is the recognition that the often-evoked image of the unwritable continent, the icescape that resists literary (or artistic) response, is only one of its many fictions.

It is a fiction, admittedly, that critics have themselves reinforced. While Pyne, in *The Ice* (1986), gives nuanced and thought-provoking analyses of a series of Antarctic texts (discussing works by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, James Fenimore Cooper, H. P. Lovecraft, John W. Campbell and Thomas Keneally), his overarching thesis is,

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ironically, the nullity of Antarctic literature. The continent, he emphasizes, 'has largely been a wasteland for imaginative literature'; it 'has never really known the full attention of high culture'; and created 'no Antarctic school of literature' (or art for that matter). Pyne gives a series of reasons for this absence: the lack of a 'preexisting esthetic for the interior ice terranes'; the minimalizing effect of its icescape, which 'relentlessly simplifies whatever ideas are brought to it'; science's (and science fiction's) dominance of human responses to the continent; twentieth-century creative writers' tendency to fixate on the Scott tragedy;⁶ bad timing, in that Antarctic exploration 'typically came at the conclusion of major epochs of discovery and intellectual ferment' and hence 'was a scene to which conventions were applied, not out of which new contentions were generated'; bad luck, in that the only literary and artistic mode equipped to handle its 'abstract, minimal, conceptual' landscape – modernism – had its attention focussed elsewhere; and, more simply, lack of access to the continent. After the efforts of Coleridge, Poe and Cooper, whose nineteenth-century worldview enabled them to construct a 'moral universe' around the Ice, Antarctic literature, according to Pyne, stagnated.⁷

Pyne raises important points, but he also raises suspicion. He protests too much; his narrative of the literary wasteland is overdetermined. Perhaps he simply raises the bar too high: the failure of the continent, which humans had been exploring on foot for less than a century at the time *The Ice* was published, to produce a coherent school of literature, to generate a startlingly new aesthetic style or to be wholeheartedly embraced by the twentieth century's most iconic writers, does not make it an imaginative desert, as my book aims to show. Pyne's analysis of Antarctic literature also itself suffers from bad timing: published in 1986, not long before Antarctic tourism began its rapid expansion, and just before fierce disputes over mineral resources brought the continent to the centre of environmental debates, his book could not take account of the massive expansion in Antarctic literature which has taken place since. But slightly later critics, such as Paul Simpson-Housley, William Lenz and Francis Spufford, have also focussed primarily on nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century Antarctic literary texts, inadvertently reinforcing the sense that after Coleridge, Poe and Cooper there is little to say about the fiction of the far south.

I began this project with a similar sense of entering sparse, barely explored terrain: a flat, white space punctuated here and there by a few nineteenth-century nunataks.⁸ I was soon divested of this convenient metaphor. Antarctica may not have had the full attention of high culture,

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but, in addition to those writers previously mentioned, the continent has certainly held the interest of well-established novelists, poets and playwrights such as Vladimir Nabokov, Georg Heym, Douglas Stewart, Ursula Le Guin, Dorothy Porter, Les Murray, Beryl Bainbridge, Pablo Neruda, Kim Stanley Robinson, Manfred Karge, Bill Manhire and Ann Michaels.

Admittedly, touted Antarctic appearances in prominent literary texts often prove fleeting or tangential. A few lines from T.S. Eliot's seminal modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) allude to Ernest Shackleton's *South* (1919). The patriarch of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) imagines himself as the Scott-like leader of a doomed polar expedition.⁹ An Antarctic journey becomes a useful device for delaying the appearance of a witness for two years in Agatha Christie's *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958). Jack Aubrey's ship collides with an Antarctic iceberg in Patrick O'Brian's *Desolation Island* (1991). A world-renowned botanist in Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) studies Antarctic lichens. A ship venturing into far southern waters has a close encounter with an ice-cliff in William Golding's *Fire Down Below* (1989). Captain Nemo is first to the South Pole in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1869–70). Herman Melville very likely read Charles Wilkes's *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition* (1845) while writing *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Antarctic images appear briefly in his famous chapter, 'The Whiteness of the Whale'.¹⁰ Doris Lessing added an essay on Antarctic exploration to her science-fiction novel set on an ice world, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982). A piece of Antarctica is dragged to Spain in Ariel Dorfman's *The Nanny and the Iceberg* (1999). A young girl obsesses over the Scott expedition in Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend* (2002). A valium-addicted housewife hallucinates an Antarctic idyll in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1993), and the continent itself briefly appears as one of the angelic Continental Principalities, bemoaning the despoliation of the earth.¹¹ In Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963) an old explorer who has been to the South Pole and found there only 'annihilation', offers ominous advice: 'You wait. Everyone has an Antarctic'.¹² None of these texts is set, in any sustained or substantial sense, in the Antarctic.

As any deconstructionist knows, however, a periphery can also be a centre. The South Pole is simultaneously the most marginal place on earth and the mid-point of the circles of latitude used to map the planet. Likewise, a seemingly incidental or minor Antarctic reference can bring with it connotations that reshape a text. Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* (1922) identify only a few lines as Antarctic in origin – and the event in question, a mysterious sense of an extra companion which some believe to be Shackleton's

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strategic retrospective invention,¹³ occurred not in the most stereotypical Antarctic context – the interior plateau – but on the mountainous subantarctic island of South Georgia. Yet as soon as the epic story of the *Endurance* is evoked, it is impossible for the Antarctic ice not to take its place as one of the wastes that merge together in Eliot's poem: the sterile interior icescape joins the barren desert and the empty sea. Once alerted to Antarctica's presence in the poem, readers begin to notice additional possible connections between *South* (1919) and *The Waste Land*: Shackleton's powerful evocation of 'a sense of wandering over an endless wasteland, absolutely lifeless and forbidding', as well as the famous exchange in which the explorer learns the world is at war;¹⁴ and the mirages that his men continually see in the Antarctic icescape, which seem to feed into Eliot's images of upside-down towers and fractured cities in the air.¹⁵ Even – perhaps especially – when Antarctica seems marginal to a literary text, it is worth exploring the meanings (themselves the accumulated product of previous representations) that the continent brings to the text, and the meanings that are in turn bestowed upon the far southern regions by each new literary context.

A literary text does not necessarily need to feature action set in the far south to make an important contribution to the Antarctic literary corpus. In Karge's Brechtian play *Die Eroberung des Sudpols*, translated into English as *The Conquest of the South Pole* (1988),¹⁶ five unemployed young men in the industrial city of Herne in western Germany re-enact Roald Amundsen's South Polar expedition in an attic. The expedition becomes, one critic writes, the characters' 'substitute for a productive life from which they have been forcibly exiled', and also, given the quixotic nature of a quest to reach an entirely blank space, 'a challenge to the very assumptions of productivity'.¹⁷ Thus, while the play may not be *about* Antarctica, the Antarctic nature of the journey re-enacted by the characters and the assumptions and images that this particular expedition evokes for the audience are pivotal to its meaning. The same applies to Chris Wheat's poem 'Antarctica' (1996), in which an unflinching, intensely personal account of a man's death from AIDS is unexpectedly juxtaposed with images of emperor penguins in a continent 'as silent as starched sheets'.¹⁸ Antarctica is no less important to a text when it is deployed primarily as a metaphor, rather than a setting.

There are fewer debates to be had about the strength of Antarctica's relationship with popular culture, where its embrace has been wholehearted. There is hardly a popular genre that cannot boast an Antarctic title. Action-adventure-eco-thrillers might predominate, but there is also Antarctic category romance, Antarctic chick-lit, Antarctic cyberpunk – even an

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Antarctic sitcom.¹⁹ The continent is a must-see destination for the heroes of science-fiction television, children's fiction and comics: Doctor Who, Mulder and Scully, The Phantom,²⁰ Doc Savage, G. I. Joe, Biggles, Tom Swift, the Hardy Boys, Scooby-Doo, Caspar the Friendly Ghost, the Avengers, the X-Men, Wonder Woman, Batman, Superman and even an alarmingly underdressed Tarzan have had their share of Antarctic adventures.

When strict criteria are applied – for example, that a title can only be considered 'Antarctic' if it is substantially set in the region (itself problematic to define²¹) or engaged with its history or politics – the body of imaginative texts dealing with the far south still remains large: hundreds of novels, hundreds of poems, and significant numbers of short stories, graphic novels, plays and feature films. The corpus is not only larger than expected, but it is also more diverse: a 'nautical drama' based on the Ross expedition of 1839–43, watched from the theatre's pits by sailors from that expedition; a semi-pornographic utopia of a female-dominated Antarctic kingdom, self-published in the 1880s; a 'Spectacular Pantomimic Extravaganza' from the turn of the twentieth century, which includes an Antarctic animal ballet and climaxes in a terrifying South Polar whirlpool scene; a long poem about a magnificent Christmas feast, both concocted on a sledging journey by the photographer Frank Hurley; a German opera based on the Scott tragedy, prematurely closed by the Nazis in 1937.²²

Alongside and directly connected with the identification of this large, heterogeneous body of work is an increasing critical interest in examining Antarctica from a cultural perspective. Since Pyne published *The Ice* in 1986, several extensive bibliographies of Antarctic literature have appeared; conferences devoted to Antarctic arts and culture have been held;²³ a special cultural issue of the new *Polar Journal* (itself a publication dedicated to polar research within the humanities and social sciences) has been released; an excellent anthology of Antarctic literature, Bill Manhire's *The Wide White Page: Writers Imagine Antarctica* (2004), has been published;²⁴ and Antarctic-related publications in the standard academic database of literary criticism, the Modern Languages Association database, which sat at three in 1985 (from a starting point of 1925), now number more than fifty. The 'cultural turn' in Antarctic studies has begun.

Integral to this 'cultural turn' is increasing access to the continent for artists, writers and non-scientific researchers. Although, as Pyne points out, 'a visit is hardly essential to make Antarctica a subject of artistic inquiry',²⁵ direct, immediate experience is a core component of writing creatively about place for many authors. While it was taken for granted that nineteenth-century creative writers and their readers had only indirect

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knowledge of the far south, by the turn of the twenty-first century, when cruises have made the continent a possible – if expensive – destination for tens of thousands of tourists annually, no such assumptions are possible. Frustration with science's domination of the continent is a common refrain in later twentieth-century Antarctic literature. Near the start of her travel memoir *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), novelist Jenny Diski recounts a particularly stark 'two cultures' experience:

... I called the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge.

'How can I get to Antarctica?' I asked.

'Are you a scientist?'

'No, I'm a writer.'

It sounded feeble next to the echo of 'scientist'. The woman at the BAS clearly agreed.

'You can't go if you're not a scientist engaged in specific research.' ...

'Why not?'

'Because the British Antarctic Survey is set up to protect the environment for serious scientific purposes.'

'What about serious writing purposes?'²⁶

An ice-covered continent can be figured as a laboratory in a way that an expanse of tropical jungle cannot. The qualities – literal and metaphorical – that are stereotypically attached to science are also those stereotypically attributed to the Antarctic: coldness (objectivity, neutrality); purity (altruism); sterility; distance from worldly affairs; a sense of unlimited vistas waiting to be explored. 'The scientists, it seemed, had wrapped up an entire continent for their own and only their own purposes', writes Diski: 'No one could go without their say-so, because their objectives were pure, and being pure they were entrusted with the last pure place on earth. The rest of us are frivolous despoilers ...'²⁷

Several years after Diski's failed attempt to go to Antarctica with her national programme (she ended up travelling on a cruise ship instead), the British Antarctic Survey officially acknowledged 'serious writing purposes' with the launch of an Artists and Writers Programme in 2001. The programme (which ran until 2009) had an explicitly interdisciplinary agenda: it aimed to 'bridge the cultural gap between the worlds of science and the arts'.²⁸ Similar programmes in the United States, Australia and New Zealand had been established in the preceding decades. In 1996, the twentieth meeting of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties (ATCP) had passed a resolution recommending the '[p]romotion of understanding and appreciation of the values of Antarctica, in particular its scientific, aesthetic and wilderness values', through educational activities and 'the contribution of writers, artists and musicians'.²⁹

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This rhetoric can only go so far: there has as yet been little attempt to spell out what Antarctica's 'aesthetic values' actually comprise.³⁰ There are also problems raised by a resolution that specifically requires interpreters to *promote appreciation* of the values associated with Antarctica, including scientific values. This could potentially see the arts and humanities providing public relations for the 'continent for science' rather than investigating the myriad possibilities of what the continent could or should be *for*. It allows little room for those who may want to interrogate, criticize or challenge existing Antarctic – or indeed aesthetic – values. It raises the question of how works that give a less than complimentary view of a national programme might affect the selection of later writers or artists. Writing more than two decades ago, Pyne recognized problems of this kind in the U.S. programme, which at that time asked applicants to avoid producing creative works that were 'excessively abstract, or not recognizable as having come from the Antarctic'.³¹ These days, the wording is less directive – the resulting works must be 'representative of Antarctica or of activities in Antarctica', but there is still a requirement to 'enhance programmatic goals – advancing knowledge and understanding of the U. S. Antarctic program'.³²

In addition, there is a certain artificiality in being required to artistically respond to a place within a particular time frame. In *Degrees of Separation* (2006), a novel by Laurence Fearnley (herself a recipient of an Antarctic writer's residency through the New Zealand programme), a sonic artist visiting McMurdo station muses on this difficulty: '[C]ompared with her, scientists had it easy. At least they knew what they were doing; they had a framework – a project – on which to focus, a particular location on which to concentrate, and material they could process using established scientific methods'. Artists, looking for inspiration in the environment, had a much vaguer task. Moreover, she reasons, scientists make regular Antarctic journeys, returning year after year, whereas she has thirteen days to complete her project: 'Bloody scientists, she wanted to say. You don't know how lucky you are!'³³ Yet, all of these constraints aside, access to the continent for non-scientists, through national programmes or through tourist ships, has increased markedly in the last few decades, and Antarctic fiction has expanded correspondingly.

It would be foolish to look for coherence, or even a shared symbolic language, in the large, heterogeneous group of texts that make up Antarctic literature. There are, unsurprisingly, many contradictory and competing versions of the continent that can be evident even within one text. Robert F. Scott's diary of his final polar journey – often recognized as the

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continent's most canonical document³⁴ – is a fitting demonstration of this point: returning to the Antarctic in early 1911, on a calm, brilliantly sunny day, Scott reflected that 'weather in such a place comes nearer to satisfying my ideal of perfection than any condition that I have ever experienced'; just over a year later, returning from the Pole, in overcast, windy, freezing conditions, he made his famous exclamation, 'Great God! this is an awful place ...'³⁵ What Antarctica looks like depends on where you stand, what the weather is like, what your prospects are and whether you are first or second to the Pole. Even critics, writing from the distance and comfort of temperature-controlled offices, come to strikingly different interpretations of the Antarctic's symbolic meaning in the same text. For one, the Antarctic icescape in Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798) functions as a place 'where Earth seems most like Heaven';³⁶ for others, it is a version of hell.³⁷ As Victoria Rosner has observed, everyone may have an Antarctic, but 'everyone's Antarctic is not the same'.³⁸ Similarly, not every text's Antarctica is the same. For example, the continent is a feminized landscape in some genres (particularly the gothic) and a masculinized one in others. There are patterns and traditions in Antarctic fiction, but they are tangled and sometimes contradictory.

A snatch of dialogue from Sara Wheeler's travel memoir *Terra Incognita* (1996) neatly expresses the unrealistic expectation that the far southern continent should produce a single meaning, a grand monolithic artistic vision. Travelling as part of the U.S. Antarctic Artists and Writers Program, she was asked,

'What's your impression, then? Of Antarctica?'

'Well', I said slowly, 'I have a million impressions.'

'Don't you have one overwhelming impression?'

I thought about that.

'I feel as if I'm getting to know a person. It's like having a love affair – I'm finding out more and more and more, it's all different and overwhelming and intoxicating, and I don't know where it's going to end.'³⁹

Getting to know the literature of the far south is a similar process.

Given the unmanageably large and diverse body of texts that could come under the rubric of 'Antarctic fiction', it is tempting to reach for overarching theoretical frameworks that could guide a winnowing process in which interesting and significant texts are separated from pedestrian, forgettable ones. With the escalating attention Antarctica is drawing within the arts and humanities, examinations of specific texts, events or issues are increasingly theoretically sophisticated. In particular, analyses built

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around questions of gender, postcoloniality, environment, modernity and globalism have begun to appear.⁴⁰ Yet there have been few, if any, attempts to theorize Antarctic cultural production in a general sense; this is unsurprising, as the continent is (like any other) a complex, heterogeneous place that needs to be understood from multiple perspectives.

Even if only one of the continent's characteristics is selected – for example, its unrelentingly cold, icy, hostile environment – there are diverse theoretical approaches that can be fruitfully brought to it. Fredric Jameson, for example, in an analysis of Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) – a text set on an ice planet and heavily influenced by Antarctic exploration narratives – begins his search for 'some essential structural *homology*' between the text's themes by focussing on climate.⁴¹ Jameson looks for the 'disguised symbolic meaning' of the planet's freezing weather by turning to the opposite extreme: the (Western) literary symbolism of the tropics. Drawing particularly on the work of J.G. Ballard, Jameson notes that tropical heat evokes a sense of dissolution between body and environment, 'a sense of increasing contamination and stickiness in the contact between your physical organism and the surfaces around it'. This 'loss of physical autonomy ... is then understood as a figure for the loss of psychic autonomy'. Le Guin's ice planet (Gethen) can be read in a reverse sense as a 'fantasy realization of some virtually total disengagement of the body from its environment or eco-system', a world in which humans experience 'free-standing isolation as separate individuals, goose-flesh transforming the skin itself into some outer envelope'. This makes Gethen 'an attempt to imagine an experimental landscape in which our being-in-the-world is simplified to the extreme, and in which our sensory links with the multiple and shifting perceptual fields around us are abstracted so radically as to vouchsafe, perhaps, some new glimpse as to the ultimate nature of human reality'.⁴²

While there are obvious differences between Le Guin's experiment and Antarctic actuality – not least, that Gethen is a world long-inhabited by beings very much like humans – Jameson's remarks resonate with other observations about the continent: Pyne's sense of 'the Ice' as an environment that 'relentlessly simplifies whatever ideas are brought to it'; the constant association of the continent with purity; the assumption, in both fiction and non-fiction of the far south, that Antarctica strips everything superficial from a person, leaving their core exposed.⁴³ As I argue in Chapter 2, however, there are also Antarctic texts which directly contradict any sense of the ice as an isolating element – texts in which the icy environment (which in both Le Guin's imagination and Antarctic reality