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Book Review of Dane Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia*

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DANE KENNEDY. *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 368. \$35.00 (cloth).
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Mid-nineteenth-century British exploration, particularly the stories of the “heroic” individuals who carried out this exploration, remains a topic of worldwide interest, as most recently evidenced by the many events in Britain and Africa celebrating the 2013 bicentenary of David Livingstone’s birth. Dane Kennedy’s intriguing study takes issue with such readings of the historical record by foregrounding an epistemological tension that lies at the heart of nineteenth-century British exploration discourse and practice. The book examines the collision—as it played out in the exploration of African and Australia—between metropolitan scientific protocols and non-Western quotidian realities.

Nineteenth-century explorers, argues Kennedy, left home with complex, institutionally determined objectives, but once abroad they found their goals impeded by local and regional circumstances and came face-to-face with their own helplessness in non-Western contexts. In fact, the methods of nineteenth-century exploration resulted in extended encounters with indigenous populations and compelled the explorers to rely on intermediaries, to use local information in producing scientific data, and to support the agendas of gateway states such as Zanzibar, Tripoli, and Egypt—practices that all ran at odds with metropolitan expectations. The experiences of explorers in the field became the basis, ultimately, of an alienating knowledge that had to be withheld from accounts published in the West, lest the explorers fail to gain the validation and celebrity status that so many of them craved. Kennedy explains: “It was a hard-won knowledge, the product of dislocation, danger, and desire. It was an intimate knowledge, derived from long periods of contact with other people. It was perforce a secret knowledge, incommunicable to countrymen back home” (262).

Kennedy links these developments to a transformation in scientific practice from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries led by luminaries such as naturalist Joseph Banks and explorer Alexander von Humboldt. At the core of this transformation lay the redefinition of valid scientific data. Data that Europeans would once have used in formulating their understanding of places like Africa—“Arab reports, classical texts, African slaves’ oral accounts, and various other sources”—became “hearsay.” Instead, specialists came to recognize only the data captured through “direct observation” or as embedded in other sanctioned forms of evidence such as field notes, physical specimens, and astronomical and metrological readings (14).

This new mode of scientific practice, Kennedy suggests, in effect, applied naval exploration techniques to the terrestrial context. Over the nineteenth century, the process resulted in

previously mapped or partly known continents, such as Africa and Australia, being fully remapped as “oceans, essentially blank spaces,” which European interests then reinscribed yet again, with little concern for local, on-the-ground realities (261). Nineteenth-century explorers became caught up in this process, occupying a fraught intersection between two radically different ways of knowing the world: Western and non-Western, metropolitan and local, abstract and particular. Although the guiding premises of metropolitan science required the exclusion of local knowledge, explorers found that in practice such separation was nigh impossible. To get the job done, explorers not only had to collaborate, often in an intimate manner, with local populations, but also had to depend on those populations to do their work for them. Hence the ultimate epistemological alienation of the explorers from the European societies and scientific bodies they served.

Kennedy’s book makes several key contributions to the critical literature on European exploration, beyond its principal arguments. Most important, the book takes a comparative approach to its topic by considering, in depth, the practices of exploration and scientific representation in two geographically distinct locales during a single century. This approach distinguishes this work from studies whose geographical or chronological sweep prevents sustained analysis. In discussing two continents, Kennedy likewise steers clear of the contextual constraints or occasional hagiography that marks recent scholarship on exploration in just Africa or Australia. Kennedy, like critics before him, begins with a discussion of the shared “sociological, ideological, and institutional” frameworks of nineteenth-century British exploration, but finds that these frameworks, surprisingly, also produced a common result: despite facing radically different power dynamics, African and Australian explorers were compelled to confront, in similar ways, their vulnerability as explorers working beyond the reaches of empire (4–5).

Another of the book’s key contributions lies in its comparative discussion of intermediaries, those individuals who often mediated the encounters of explorers with local populations. Despite (usually) being non-Westerners, these figures occupied an estranged position in the regions through which expeditions passed. The intermediaries “often possessed far more power than explorers were prepared to admit,” because of their access to “secret knowledge,” linguistic skills, and other cultural insights, but they had gained these advantages through being “deracinated figures, wrenched from their families, friends, communities, and localities by traumatic events such as war, slave raids, colonial conquest, and other forms of social violence” (163–64). Intermediaries have long held the gaze of critics and historians—one might cite, alternately, classic works like Donald Simpson’s *Dark Companions* (1976) or the recent Royal Geographical Society exhibition *Hidden Histories of Exploration* (2009)—but Kennedy combines superb archival diving with a series of fascinating case studies to outline both the context-specific backgrounds and roles of these figures *and* the general continuities among them, despite the separation of hundreds or even thousands of miles. In fact, the discussion of the relationships (and parallels) between intermediaries *and* African and Australian explorers, who themselves became “culturally deracinated figures” through the experience of exploration (194), represents one of the book’s most original and fascinating critical turns.

In its narrative structure, *The Last Blank Spaces* maps the ideological and material arc of the typical expedition, an approach that complements the subject under study. Successive chapters examine the epistemological climate and personal backgrounds that shaped the ideas of individual explorers, the regional politics and logistical practicalities that influenced expeditions (often in ways that the explorers themselves did not anticipate or desire), the layers of mediated and unmediated encounters with local populations inherent in exploration, and, finally, the metropolitan celebrity culture to which explorers returned to promote their “discoveries.” Throughout, meticulous attention to textual detail, spirited recourse to published and archival sources spanning both African and Australian exploration, and a refreshing attentiveness to the cultural particulars of non-Western regions (an element often absent from comparable studies) informs the book. Moreover, Kennedy writes in an accessible and entertaining manner,

alternating sophisticated analysis with a series of fascinating anecdotes from the nineteenth-century record of exploration— anecdotes that can seem as gripping to the modern scholar as the popular narratives of explorers were to their audiences.

If there is a failing of the book, it's that it should have gone on longer, despite its full length, and covered additional colonial contexts. Kennedy's skills have produced a work that promises to have an impact on a range of specialists, not just those most immediately concerned with the regions under discussion here. The book's final pages indicate that Kennedy has also written with another intention in mind. Popular culture in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere, of course, continues to lionize individual explorers and celebrate their achievements, often in ways that mirror the exceptionalist accounts found in the nineteenth-century press. In highlighting the shared "fear, bafflement, and helplessness" of explorers in the field and, indeed, their "dependence on indigenous intermediaries," Kennedy assails this "nostalgic view of African and Australian exploration" at its roots (267–68) and so positions his book, finally, in a manner that will resonate far beyond the academy.

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