

A question of scale? Lázló Almásy's desert mapping and its postcolonial rewriting

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Abstract

In the wake of postcolonial studies, questions of power and space have gained pivotal significance and geography has become a powerful tool in cultural analysis. However, the simple and metaphorical use of spatial metaphors, such as the cultural appropriation of mapping and cartography, is problematic in so far as it presumes that space is not complex. The understanding of scale in this article thus does not pretend to be either simple or metaphorical, but rather it signifies a 'circulatory site', both a ratio used in cartographic practice and a useful tool to discuss the circulation of meaning among imperial and postcolonial discursive practices. Lázló Almásy was romanticized in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as a love-driven idealist against the backdrop of the somewhat blurred movement of imperial cartographic practice. By looking at Almásy's 1930s narratives of desert cartography (*Schwimmer in der Wüste* [*Swimmer in the Desert*] and *Mit Rommels Armee in Libyen* [*With Rommel's Army in Libya*]), particularly the quest for the Oasis Zarzura, as well as at the articles published by the *Geographical Journal* of the Royal Geographical Society from 1933 to 1952, a clear-cut image of a power-driven imperial cartography arises that clashes with Ondaatje's naive depiction. The article draws on the contradictory constellations of desert cartography to discuss the following themes: 1. the very notion of fluidity in the literary and cultural appropriation of cartography, that allows for a problematic blur between hegemony and emergence; and 2. 'scale' as a possible and useful analytical tool for the mediation between these two seemingly incompatible positions.

Keywords: geomodernity; scale; mapping; Almásy; Ondaatje

1. Modernity in the desert

If displacement is a condition of modernity, then moving into the desert has certainly been one of the most productive forms of inhabiting it. As Jean Baudrillard claimed in *America*, the desert as a metaphor has proved useful to display the nihilism of a certain modern and postmodern condition: 'Deserts [...] denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution [...]. They form the mental frontier where the projects of civilization run into the ground' (Baudrillard 1988: 63). As a place that denies the fixity of emplacement, as a fluid landscape changing at the whim of contingency, the desert embodies the elusiveness of what Zygmunt Bauman has referred to as the liquid condition of modernity (Bauman 2000: 5). This elusiveness inspires a disavowal of identity conceived as a *concept-in-*

becoming, drafted, erased and redrafted as the traces of travelling incisions over the changing dunes.

In Western modern cultural history, however, the desert was not only the metaphor for a certain intellectual condition but also a place where the hegemonic powers of geographical modernity were displayed. A metaphorical geography of displacement commingled with the literal geography of the desert in the very modern gesture of early twentieth-century explorers to traverse, map and thus appropriate, what was called in the first decades of the twentieth century the two last blank spots of the earth: the Arabian and the Libyan Deserts. Negotiating between imperial domination and counter-hegemonic appropriation, the desert narrative has become a privileged trope of postcolonial reflection; one where the tension between place and displacement suggests a productive expression of the postcolonial identity crisis and where, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin famously write, 'the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002: 8) is enacted.

Michael Ondaatje's *English Patient* (1992) recovers and parodies a modern narrative of exploration in a strategy simultaneously imprinted by colonial discourse and emerging with postcolonial subjectivity.¹ The novel remediates a story of imperial domination as put forward in the geographical descriptions of the several expeditions to the Libyan Desert led by competing European powers, particularly those organized by the Royal Geographical Society, whose findings are published in *The Geographical Journal* (1933–7). This small-scale narrative with wide impact is entangled with the controversial figuration of the Hungarian nobleman-*cum*-adventurer with Nazi sympathies, Eduard Ladislaus von Almásy. Then again, the catachrestic refiguring of the imperial persona that Gayatri Spivak has termed a key rhetorical device of postcolonial writing's hybridity (Spivak 1990: 228) is negotiated with subaltern positions in the narrative, disclosing in this contentious dialogue the possibility of re-placement, as a new strategy where the contingency of place both refigures and retraces former identity charts.

In Ondaatje's novel the desert becomes a privileged site for the renegotiation of identity and the reverse appropriation of hegemony: 'Here in the desert, which had been an old sea where nothing was strapped down or permanent, everything drifted' (Ondaatje 1992: 24).² Still, if the dissolution of identity, the disavowal of civilization in the desert represents one side of a strategy of fragmentation embodied in the love for the void, the move to deconstruct allegiances is accompanied by a simultaneous desire for a new integration and for new allegiances, even if beyond the borders of the nation and through the holophrastic reach for love and romance.³ The quest for a chartered space and the search for self are articulated in an adversarial narrative about modernity. Without engaging in an in-depth discussion on the political implications of the latent ambiguity of the Almásy historical persona in the patient's character,⁴ this article uses a geographical analytical tool, namely scale, to reveal the adversarial narrative of modernity. That is, it draws from an understanding of modernity as grounded on practices of space incision and appropriation to discuss its relationship to the subaltern subjectivities in Ondaatje's novel, and to writing as a supplementary

mapping, in order to discern how colonial strategy can be co-opted in reverse under postcolonial cover.

The exploration of the Libyan Desert in the 1930s and its refiguration by Ondaatje present the complex articulation of geography and representation as foundational not only for the master narrative of modernity but for a narration of an alternative modernity and its complex embeddedness in colonial and postcolonial practices as well (Huysen 2005: 8). *The English Patient* is both a love story and a travelogue of the search for one of the 'Last white spots in the map of the Libyan desert' (Almásy 2001: 284), as well as a chart of the geographical incisions over the blank space the Zarzura Oasis. On the textual level, I suggest, to use a term coined by Philippe Lejeune, a *palimpsestuous* reading (Lejeune 1986: 15), that is, a reading that looks at the interaction between texts as a palimpsest whilst graphing simultaneously a kind of incestuous interaction between overlapping textualities. Indeed the novel draws from the narratives of the multiple geographical surveys and their imperial mode, to disclose geography as a hypotext to the postcolonial hypertext, but it also allows for a reverse argument as Ondaatje's novel allows for a rereading of the Almásy travelogue, thus making the geographical hypotext a would-be hypertext,⁵ where representation foregrounds the desert survey and the mapping practices as well.

In fact, both Almásy's papers, the proceedings published in *The Geographical Journal* and other survey descriptions by Richard Berman and Ralph Alger Bagnold, reveal the search for the oasis as a move prompted by the return of a repressed tale told in Herodotus' *Histories*. As archaeologists in the nineteenth century had already done in other contexts, a Persian legend inspires the last entrenchment expedition of the twentieth century, that of the disappearance of King Cambyses' army in the moving sands of the desert while seeking the lost white city of Zarzura. *The English Patient* mimics this colonial desire for an imagined past emerging in the form of an ironic repetition, displaced by the narrative as supplementary to the imperial project. The patient reading Herodotus presents a 'supplementary' mode of charting out of narration which, albeit partial and limited, does present a counter-argument to the main mapping plot: 'But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him more as one of those men of the desert [...] piecing together a mirage.' 'This history of mine', Herodotus says, 'has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument' (Ondaatje 1992: 125–6). Thus Almásy's story, as told by Ondaatje, becomes a case in point of representation striking back, a complex instance of an imaginative geography (Said 1978: 71), marked by the contamination of geographical discourse with fiction and of the negotiation of factual scientific narratives within representation.

By welding together literal desert mapping and its imperial entrenchment with the textual fictional incision and the quest for revised traces and refigured space-identity models, *The English Patient* provides a complex surface that allows us to address the productivity and tensions of the 'spatial turn' for postcolonial representation theory. For this we must briefly discuss three major changes in theory: first, the socialization of space; secondly, the articulation between the domination of space and the self-identification of Western modernity; and finally, the structuralist appropriation of spatial practices, thus envisaged as texts traversed by utterances and acts of enunciation.

Instead of an essentialist surface determining the action of individuals, as Fernand Braudel famously contended in his *opus magnus La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949) [*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*], space came to be understood, in the wake of the studies of critical social geographers as Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Edward Soja (1989), both as a social practice and as a circulatory and dialogical site across which cultural energies are negotiated and identities redrafted. As Doreen Massey argues in *For Space* (2005), social practices produce geographies at the same time that geographies are the medium in which practices are embedded. Therefore space is to be understood as a set of interrelations, which contain an unbridgeable heterogeneity, and it is always under construction (Massey 2005: 9).

Secondly, the self-identification of modernity with the conquest of space enacted by the colonial narratives of the early modern age stress that, more than an experience of time, modernity is also an experience of space. Arguably, rational mathematical space has been produced by modern scientific and philosophical thought, with Newton's *Principia Mathematica* as its flagship, but the narration of modern imperialism draws further, not so much on the concept of modern space, but rather on the whole conquest and organization of locations occupied by European presence. In his book *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (1997), Walter Mignolo clearly brings modern geography and colonial power together by contending that not only were the rational discourse of modernity and its universality intimately dependent on the conquest of space, but also that modern mapmaking was indeed the epitome of the articulation of the power politics of modernity with its representational strategy (Mignolo 1997: 11). The rationalization, abstraction and containment of world geography within the limited parchment space used for early modern maps, expose an imaginative geography that builds from representation to manufacture power. Finally, if maps, as representations, are political acts, they are also utterances, acts of enunciation, as Michel de Certeau has suggested (Certeau 1990: 175), texts that assert a subject position within the wider frame of the web of culture. These three shifts in theory support what has been popularized in academic jargon as the linguistic turn in geography and the geographical turn in literary studies, where, by focusing on the representational dimension of geographic tools and on their linguistic materiality, geographers have stressed the contingent and ambivalent aspect of geographic utterances, while literary critics have brought new interpretative tools into literary criticism. Mapping, literally and metaphorically, has become, as we all know, the flagship of this happy encounter.

Yet the happy encounter has not been uncontroversial. Geographer Cindy Katz, for example, argues that this new 'geoculture' has not brought about in most cases a real knowledge transfer between two scientific fields, but rather rests on a metaphoric transfer of termini from one side to the other. What Mieke Bal has called a travelling of concepts (Bal 2002: 25), became for Katz and Neil Smith a simple metaphorical usage of geographic terms by non-specialists, a problematic move in so far as it essentializes space and presumes that space is not a complex, contingent, changing platform, invested with power structures, traversed by identity discourses, racialized

and genderized. Katz and Smith thus propose a conceptual shift, in order to articulate both the literal and the symbolical geographies into a 'relational geography, which is to say a shift away from the practice of viewing space as a kind of container, within which [individuals] act [...] toward the idea that it is the acting and the relating that literally produce the space' (Katz and Smith 1993: 75).

It is in the sense of a relational geography of modernity that I shall look at the kind of mapping the Almásy affair produces. For this, I shall suggest a *palimpsestuous* dialogical reading of its imaginative geography, inviting a discussion of both the literal and the symbolic, as they are negotiated in the geographical narratives of the Libyan Desert exploration, presented at the Royal Geographical Society and published in *The Geographical Journal* between 1929 and 1952, or in the travelogues drafted by Almásy (*Unbekannte Sahara* [*Unknown Sahara*]; *Récents explorations dans le désert libyque* (1932–1934)) [*Recent Explorations in the Libyan Desert* (1932–1934)], and refigured in Ondaatje's *English Patient*. For the discussion of these two orders of discourse, scale will be used as both a geographical and textual tool, a 'circulatory site' that is both a ratio used in cartographic practice and a useful tool to discuss the circulation of meaning among imperial and postcolonial discursive practices.

If a map is a conventional representation of objects, places and events in a limited space on parchment or paper, the relationship between the real and representation is enacted by means of the scale. A tentative definition by the *Oxford English Dictionary* presents scale as a ratio or a representative fraction that refers to the relationship between real distance and its representation on the map. Contrary to its name, one speaks of a *small-scale* relationship if the ratio between the representation on the map and the real distance is measured in tens of thousands or simply thousands of kilometres (1/20,000km). World maps are usually small-scale maps. The small-scale analysis hence obscures the particular for the sake of a wider enframing. *Large-scale* relationships, on the other hand, consider ratios of 1/100km or less. City maps may be displayed on a large scale. The large-scale approach then draws on detailed focus for a representative analysis which is taken out from the general picture. The scale is in fact a relational tool, one that allows the user of the map to focus on a certain object, to detach it from its surroundings or get the larger picture in relation to neighbouring traces. In cultural analysis, scale is an opportunity to articulate the geographies in which social and cultural practices are embedded; it is not a strict, arid mathematical tool but rather a 'circulatory site' that articulates the relationship between the subject of interpretation and its object, the relationship between adversarial subject positions marked by gender, age, class and race differences, as well as the relationship between different objects across space and time. This threefold work of scale is extremely useful to unveil the particular elements that make up Almásy's mapping project. In the discussion of the Libyan Desert cartography, or of the novel arisen from it, a relational geography allows traces to be articulated from differing positions and in different relationships, be they hegemonic or subaltern. Without blending conflicting views, scale is an analytical tool that permits the coexistence of diversity, of the opposing and the contradictory, as traces in the complex chart of geomodernity.

2. Geomodernity or on large-scale maps and small-scale pictures

The term geomodernity is a hybrid loan from Immanuel Wallerstein's notion of 'geoculture', as well as from Laura Doyle and Laura Winkler's concept of 'geomodernism'. Geoculture, according to Wallerstein, refers to the hegemonic culture of the world-system,⁶ well represented in Ondaatje's narrative by the Western elite culture of the desert Europeans. Geomodernism, on the other hand, is for Doyle and Winkler a way of expanding the Western boundaries of modernism into alternative settings, in an intersection of multiple and non-synchronous temporalities and spatialities (Doyle and Winkler 2005: 4). Focusing on both the hegemonic and the diverse, geomodernity, I suggest, conceives the adversary tendencies that inhabit the modern space and allows for the creation of places of exchange and negotiation, mediated by scale. The literary functions as one of these spaces of barter and trade, where disparate identities, antagonistic discourses, emergence and hegemony find an alternative resolution.

The English Patient presents a keen instance of the literary as a geomodern site of barter and trade. It is the patient himself, suspected to be the controversial Hungarian explorer Ladislaus Eduard von Almásy, who presents the geomodernist brotherly topia,⁷ transferred from the desert into the band of 'desert Europeans':

We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. [...] The desert could not be claimed or owned – it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones [...]. All of us [...] wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. (Ondaatje 1992: 147–8)

Although, embracing the denial of imperial inscription that marks the postcolonial attitude, the quotation reveals the pervasive tension between trace and defacement, the critique of power and hegemony, the postcolonial intent and the written mark of the colonial. The narrative presents the romantic imagined community of nationalists without nations, collective effacements of identity, dissolved in the sands of the desert (Sool 1999: 172; Zepetnek 1999; Piper 2002: 122).⁸ Notwithstanding the move towards nationlessness, the patient does not relinquish national marking. Be it in the particular designation of Germans, Hungarians, English or the abstract denomination of Africans, language still upholds the antagonism marking the modern explorer's positioning before a 'them', othered by action and discourse. Clearly, the silenced and traceless 'them' in this paragraph are the Bedouins, as in other instances, the Senussi, the Tebu, the Egyptians or the Arabs, and the many others are effaced within the modernist hegemonic project of an aporetic pan-nationalist Western identity.

To uphold creative tension without indulging in a temptation of homogeneity, a differential scale will enable an antagonistic reading of the exploration of the Libyan Desert, stressing the continuities and discontinuities among discourses, playing out the ambivalences without ever blending the small scale of the larger colonial mapping with the large scale of the small antagonistic literary picture.

3. Small scale and the larger picture of the geographical narratives

On the wider small geographical scale, the exploration of the Libyan Desert presents a map of colonial desire. Situated on the south-western border of Egypt with Libya and Sudan lay a small quadrangle, approximately 500 km², a place no European had traversed until the 1930s. It was within this tiny spot that the Gilf Kebir was situated, a place where the famous Zarzura Oasis was allegedly to be found, according to tales ranging from Herodotus' *Histories* to old Arabic texts. Herodotus' description of the disappearance of King Cambyses' army, ruler of Egypt between 525 and 522 BC, who departed with 50,000 warriors from the Kharga Oasis on his way to conquer the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon, added to Arabic narratives about a white magical city, emerging from the sand dunes and sighted by travellers lost in the desert. In *Unbekannte Sahara* [*Unknown Sahara*], published in Hungarian in 1934 and in German with an introduction by spy Hansjoachim von der Esch in 1939, Almásy names his Arabic sources in great detail (Almásy 1998: 100–2). From the oldest source, the report of bookkeeper Abd Al Aziz Ibn Marwan (700), he goes on to mention literary sources such as Al Bakri, in the eleventh century (1067) to travellers' tales and Arabic geographical references such as those of geographer Al Idrisi (twelfth century). Of particular interest for this legend is the reference book for treasure hunters in the Egyptian Middle Ages, the anonymous *Kitab Al Durr Al Maknuz* [*The Book of Buried Pearls*] from the thirteenth century. It is here that one of the most fantastic descriptions of Zarzura is to be found.⁹ As a fabled location, Zarzura is furthermore a site of extreme wealth and extreme danger, since descriptions of the spectacular city are equated with heart-wrenching reports of attacks on the local population by dark giants emerging from the site, no doubt a stereotyping of the black danger projected by the Arabic population onto Senussi and Bedouin tribes.¹⁰

Despite the fairytale environment and the fact that, as the Hungarian adventurer concedes, the old sources are by no means reliable, Almásy and his companions trust Herodotus. One of his partners, Austrian journalist Richard Berman, alias Arnold Höllriegel, who participated in the March 1933 expedition, mentioned in his address to the Royal Geographical Society on 8 January 1934, entitled 'Historic problems of the Libyan Desert', that 'the "Histories" of old Herodotus [are] the best Baedeker of the Libyan desert still existing' (Berman 1934: 458). Other references to some of the first Europeans to name the alleged existence of Zarzura are also mentioned both by Almásy and in the articles of *The Geographical Journal*. We read of John Gardner Wilkinson's, *Topography of Thebes and General View of Egypt* (1835), and Gerhard Rohlfs's *Drei Monate in der Libyschen Wüste* (1875) [*Three Months in the Libyan Desert*], two travelogues which contributed to place the location within that last spot of uncharted territory, the Libyan Desert, but nevertheless were unable to displace Herodotus as the reliable source of the venture.

Almásy's obsession with Zarzura was primarily an obsession with traces and incisions, both literally, on the geographical chart, and hermeneutically. The petty Hungarian nobleman seems at first sight to be an unlikely geographer-*cum*-interpreter. Yet he goes on a hermeneutical hunt for traces and marks on ancient texts, which are then transferred to the very material search for clues and traces of former expeditions

to that part of the southern Sahara. The search for Zarzura blends fiction and fact, the explorer's dream of a fantastic landscape and a geographically precise search for uncharted space. This search for an imagined landscape is precisely refigured in Ondaatje's novel, in the projection of 'the emptiness of deserts [where] you are always surrounded by lost history' (Ondaatje 1992: 144), even if this history was not diachronic, continuous or monumental, but rather appeared as sporadic fragments, compiled in order to allow for a new genealogy of humanity to be drafted by the traveller/historian/interpreter.

Almásy first became acquainted with the desert in 1926, when he organized a hunting expedition to the Sudan for Prince Antal Esterházy. Three years later, in 1929, he traversed with Prince Ferdinand von Liechtenstein the notorious slave route and caravan trail *Darb el Arbe'in* [The 40 Days Road] that had been the route from black Africa to the Nile Valley since the time of the pharaohs.¹¹ The search for Zarzura and the Gilf Kebir was a lure to both European and Arab explorers. Before Almásy, many others undertook the search for a still mythical location. It was, in fact, the Egyptian Prince Kemal el Din who gave the name Gilf Kebir to the uncharted area in an expedition dating from 1926, which surveyed the south-eastern scarp of the plateau. After el Din, came Bagnold and again in 1932 Patrick A. Clayton, who explored the west side of the Gilf. However, the most famous expedition to the Gilf Kebir took place in 1932 and was sponsored by the English Baronet Sir Robert Clayton-East-Clayton. The expedition comprised, apart from Almásy and Sir Robert Clayton, the latter's wife, Lady Dorothy Clayton-East-Clayton – who was never Almásy's lover – Squadron Leader Hubert Penderel and Patrick Clayton. Although the logistical support of the expedition is clearly stated in the participants' travelogues – technical support, after all, does matter – no mention is made of the 'human material': the local workers, drivers, clearly rendered invisible behind the imperial mechanics, epitomized in the three Ford T cars plus an aeroplane. Yet this is also an effacement, which is strangely followed in Ondaatje's postcolonial refiguration of the venture (Ondaatje 1992: 148). The group based the expedition on the data acquired by earlier efforts and other explorer's sightings of the Gilf, such as John Ball's 1917 travelogue (Penderel 1934: 451).¹² From the aeroplane, the party had a bird's eye perspective of a luxurious valley in the rocky plateau, which was immediately identified as the famous Zarzura Oasis. This was the first Western aerial sighting of the Kebir, the plateau where would-be Zarzura seemed to be located, but which unfortunately could not yet be reached by car.

The results of the 1932 survey with Clayton-East-Clayton were pivotal for Almásy's expedition in the spring of 1933, as described in *Unbekannte Sahara* and *Récentes explorations dans le désert libyque (1932–1934)*. Together with Bermann, Penderel, Lázló Kádar, Hans Casparius and three Sudanese – simply referred to as Mohammed, Abdullah and Fadlallah – Almásy discovers the last of the three valleys (*Wadis*) that, according to Wilkinson in 1835, made up the Zarzura Oasis. The referencing of the major expeditions is key to understanding the palimpsestic geographical incisions over the desert surface. The explorers improve their hermeneutical skills and become increasingly competent readers of the textual and material traces of the terrain.

Exploratory travel then becomes a hypertext, building on the former material incisions over the desert, drafted and redrafted for new readings.

A specific geological trait of the desert allows for a representative insight into the embeddings of geography and textuality, hence disclosing a relational geographical textual practice, where, beyond the metaphor, geography meets textual incision. Strange as it may seem for the lay observer, car tracks in the sandy desert soil are not easily erased and may last for years on end. The particular geology and the dry weather conditions of the desert allow traces of past tracks to be kept defiantly for future readers. In the descriptions of the 1926, 1932 and 1933 expeditions, Almásy clearly and obsessively refers to the importance of these past desert traces that help to materialize his imaginative geography and literally transform the desert into a page awaiting the explorer's reading skills. One photograph from *Unknown Sahara* shows Almásy in 1933 by the tyre tracks of Kemal el Din's 1926 expedition, and in another part of the description he refers quite clearly to one such intertextual and intergeographical encounter in the desert:

The tyre tracks are only one year old and in certain parts extraordinarily well kept. They come from the west, cross the Darb and lead towards a narrow valley in the east and from there towards a sideways valley in the south. We follow the tracks until they stop between a steep rock-wall. At the end of the Southwall there are four rock alamats (rocks that were planted along the way by the old Egyptians to mark the routes for the caravans) and by their side we see something flickering: empty petrol containers. (Almásy 1998: 74)

This passage is representative of the explorer's literal and symbolic obsession with traces. The tyre tracks, the alamats, the petrol containers act as trans-temporal markers, showing how desert travelling has been from early times a practice of incision and interpretation.¹³ The geographical narrative presents the desert as a practised space and turns space into a discourse negotiated in imperial fashion by the master explorer over both the desert's subaltern body and those of its inhabitants. Yet Almásy's narrative also enacts in this trace-hunting game the relational geography Katz and Smith defend, because the hegemonic gathering of traces allows for a reverse appropriation, which will be specifically articulated in the travelogue. And precisely because representation cannot be completely controlled, the trace-hunting game described by Almásy discloses mapping in the literal and symbolic sense as an antagonistic practice that brings to the fore conflicting power intentions – those of the British, the Italians and later those of the Germans – colonial and subaltern positions – those of the colonial masters and then the Sudanese, the Tebu and the Senussi, the dwellers in the desert – different rationalities and adversary cultures. Whereas for the Sudanese driver Fadlallah space and identity are part of an essential union that does not require the mediated power of maps or representation – 'I have travelled a lot in the desert, o Mohammed, but never on a piece of paper' (Almásy 1998: 82) – Almásy seeks first and foremost to rule over the symbolic and refers on several occasions to the tracks as 'deep traces over a virgin surface' (Almásy 1998: 83). He thus reveals that power over space is first and foremost symbolic and

representational. The traveller's imperial tale articulates the geographical survey as a struggle over narrative and identity, the essential sustainability of the driver versus the Westerner's delusional dream of hegemony over uncharted surfaces.

Since European cartography is closely linked to the development of abstract reasoning and European science, the hegemonic mapping models that have been championed since the Mercator projection and disseminated globally are as much a Western practice as embedded with Western values. Among these imperial practices, the erasing / defacing of non-dominated territories – termed virgin land – and of their inhabitants lumped into the pile of forgotten peoples without history, or the geographical orientation towards the European centre, are instances of how geography served the project of global entrenchment / domination. Henceforth, a small-scale *mappa mundi* is a rather spectacular performance of Western imagination and power, but this spectacularity is not a privilege of wider mappings, since a large-scale map of a small plateau, like the Gilf Kebir project is equally touched by this theatrical imperial imagination. The map-maker arguably projects onto the uncharted surface the desire for the void, the longing simultaneously to succumb to the nullity of the desert and the delusional longing for a fully traced world, filled out by the imperial imagination.

In *Unknown Sahara*, a title which is already a melancholic statement of lack, Almásy presents his utopia of space by making use of the imperial trope of incision:

I see before me, in my mind the endless surface of the desert, across which no one has yet found the way to Zarzura... I see a line stretching across this surface, winding and straightening like the trace along the markers of a map, as certain and mathematically accurate as the numbers, dictated by the theodolite and the compass.

Will this line ever become a tyre track and will it eventually lead to Zarzura, the lost city, 'white as a dove'. Reality and dream blend in my thoughts and I am overtaken by a melancholy departing from the memories of our desert trip. (Almásy 1998: 92–3)

The quotation is a statement of imperial desire, a search for the charting of space as the ultimate act of devirgination by means of a double incision, literally in the geographical crossing of the Gilf Kebir by car; and metaphorically, through mapping. Thus the inscribed Libyan Desert emerges as an adversarial colonized space, disclosing the geographical narrative as an antagonistic contact zone marked by a belated colonial melancholy. This colonial desire-*cum*-charting is transported into Ondaatje's novel where the small scale of the survey is mimicked by the large-scale narrative of the patient-adventurer. Just as the patient is an impersonator, quite like Almásy, but not the same as him, so does the latter's imperial geographical endeavour provide for a slate where the wish for colonial marking is reversely appropriated, that is taken to mean the opposite of its former significance, by means of a large scale embedding into the story of the novel's desert survey and the utopia of a desert space that 'could not be claimed or owned' (Ondaatje 1992: 147).

4. Large scale and the small story of the literary text

Within the novel's economy, the geographical narrative is further negotiated with the geography of the body. It is here, in the encounter between the bodies of the colonizer

(the patient) and the colonized (Hana and Kip) that the large-scale rendition of the melancholic territories of imperial maps is articulated with Ondaatje's postcolonial rewriting of Almásy. Geographical charts and embodied geographies unfold the literary as a relational map where postcolonial tensions between placement and displacement come to the fore.

Contrary to the wholesome adventurer occupying an imperial subject position in the travelogues, Ondaatje's literary character – the burnt patient – will not prefigure the advancement into the desert but will recall the past as an overloaded melancholic text. The patient's body is a space of contention where narratives collide. It is as much a blank space as the Zarzura Oasis, but whereas the latter is only constructed as virgin, empty land by the colonial imagination, the patient's body is uncharted and unchartable due to an excessive incision, since the burnt flesh defigures earlier traces and revolts against further inscription. Hence, simultaneously overburdened with traces and erased of all traces, it presents a counter-narrative of territorial domination. The imperial subject's body strikes back, truly erasing the delusion of a fully traced world. Therefore, it is the textual space that provides an alternative map, inscribed by the intersection of the diverse subjectivities figured in the novel. Almásy, the defaced adventurer, and Kip the effaced colonial subject, embody adversary geographies brought together through dynamic oscillation between authenticity and fiction. In the large scale map of human relations, the novel manages to 'make continents meet on a hilltown' (Ondaatje 1992: 239), and by bringing together the alluring persona of the notorious Almásy with three displaced subjectivities – the disenfranchised nurse Hana, the thief Caravaggio and Kip, the colonial sapper – it traces a relational geography of unstable identities coming together in a geomodern map where fixed traces and stable positions are impossible.

Having done away with the tale of a triumphant geography that supported the imperial project, the novel is not a clear-cut narrative of the subaltern's empowerment, but rather the draft for a traceless map, connecting identities in a circulatory and moving space, where continents meet and collide. Drawing from Paul Gilroy's notion of double-consciousness, the dialogue with webs of meaning which may be contradictory (Gilroy 1993: 127), I suggest that Ondaatje's novel provides a resistant reading of the literal excess of cartographic practice by using geography against the grain. Though indulging in a rose-coloured picture of ourselves, Western readers, as Karen Piper argues (Piper 2002: 127), the novel is certainly a problematic exercise in the ways in which the postcolonial inhabits the space of the colonial, albeit uttering the wish for a fluid cartography as a counter-narrative of colonial consciousness: 'I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. [...] All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps' (Ondaatje 1992: 277).

Almásy's dream of a fully traced world is brought together with Ondaatje's project for de-charting. The literal and the symbolic are welded over the large-scale story of the novel, projecting the literary as the heterotopical landscape of a relational geomodernist imagination.

In conclusion, the negotiation between geography, textuality and the postcolonial rests on three main points. First, one must be aware that although geographical tools, such as mapping or scaling, may be productive instruments for a postcolonial discussion of space and identity, they come with baggage. On the one hand, they come with imperial baggage. This may be stolen and refigured by the postcolonial novel, but nonetheless the imperial surface must not be silenced in the critical analysis. On the other, there is a disciplinary load. Geographical tools are useful in so far as they are relational and appropriated, not as simple metaphors, but rather as circulatory sites for a reading between space and representation. Secondly, I contend that Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is a compelling fiction, making use of a critical selection of traces of a militant imperial geography that may nevertheless be easily effaced behind the contentious romanticizing of the imperial persona. Yet, avoiding this danger, the novel's postcolonial task comes to the fore precisely in the metaphorical appropriation of the tools of empire. By stealing language from the master's house, Ondaatje discloses geography as an antagonistic surface de- and refaced under a resistant, though in this novel strongly utopian, reading. Finally, the novel proposes a literary geomodernity as a concept, bringing together the multiple modernities – hegemonic and emerging, Western and non-Western, colonial and postcolonial – meeting in the postcolonial text. These multiple geographies are socially constructed and they intersect and are intersected by diverse places and temporalities that meet across the surface of the literary text. Albeit avoiding consensual reunion, they preserve the dialogue across the difference of identity by means of a scaling mechanism, embedded in the written geography of the novel, which thus allows for the adversarial tendencies inhabiting the modern to be negotiated.

Notes

1. Karen Piper considers that Ondaatje fetishizes colonialism and proves to be ambivalent in his refiguration of an imperial subject: 'Ondaatje [demonstrates] the way in which a postcolonial author may occupy a colonial space' (Piper 2002: 122). The Almásy persona is certainly one of the most contentious elements in the novel, because the author draws authentic data from the life of the notorious adventurer Ladislaus Eduard von Almásy – termed in his epitaph in *The Geographical Journal* as 'a nazi but a gentleman' (Murray 1951: 254) – to create a romantic character that overlaps and disfigures the authoritarian traits of the real Almásy. See Zepetnek (1999).
2. On the tradition of desert representation as a location of disavowal and disruption, see Madany (2008: 136) and Schmitz-Emans and Lindemann (2000).
3. See Roland Barthes's assertion that love is a holophrase, a rhetorical device, devoid of essentiality (Barthes 1982: 76).
4. Particularly since its remediation in Anthony Minghella's film *The English Patient* (1996), with Ralph Fiennes in the title role, the Almásy character has acquired a new centrality. Not only were Ladislaus Almásy's travelogues from the early 1930s reprinted, but after Ondaatje's novel other epigonal and fictional re-enactments of the events came to the fore. Thus, Raoul Schrott edited in 1998 *Schwimmer in der Wüste*, the 1940 edition of Almásy's *Unbekannte Sahara* together with the controversial diary *Operation Salam* (1942). Other Almásy writings, such as the notorious *Mit Rommels Armee in Lybien*, were republished in Hungarian in 1999 and translated into English in 2001. The contentious cover clearly blends real authorship and Ondaatje's fictional character: Lázló Almásy and

- 'The English Patient'. Prompted by the Booker Man Award for Ondaatje's book and the later Minghella film, the travelogues written by Almásy's desert companions gained central ground during the late 1990s and early 2000s. R. A. Bagnold's *Sand, Wind and War* was republished in 1990 and Richard Berman's *Zarzura* came out in a full edition in 2003. In Austria, 2002 saw the publication of another Almásy fictionalization in Walter Grond's novel *Almásy*.
5. I draw from Gerard Genette's theory of the hypotext, as the surface or source location of a text, while hypertext designates texts that build from a source but are placed beyond and outside this same text (Genette 1982: 61).
 6. Walter Mignolo has perceptively pointed out that geoculture in Wallerstein's sense simply refers to the culture of the hegemonic world system, leaving world cultural diversity aside (Mignolo 2000: 41–2).
 7. Because 'our histories are multiple and interconnected in surprising, unforeseen ways', Doyle and Winkler propose that geomodernism is a plural term, so that it is always and already geomodernisms (Doyle and Winkler 2005: 14).
 8. Exploration presented in fact the same kind of colonial ecumene that Arjun Appadurai sees at work in the Indian appropriation of cricket, enabling a bonding beyond nations, but still very much anchored in a culturally hegemonic imagination (Appadurai 1996: 91).
 9. 'Description of a city and the way to reach it. It lies east of the Es-Suri Citadel. There you will find date palms, vine plantations and running water sources. Follow the wadi (valley) and climb towards the mountains until you find another wadi that lies between two hills facing the west. There you will find a path, follow it and you shall reach the city of Zarzura. You will find its gates closed. It is a city which is as white as a dove. Over the gate, you will see a bird sculpted in stone. Stretch to reach its beak and grab the key to open the gates and enter the city. You will see great treasures and the king and queen who lie sleeping in the castle. Do not go near them and take the treasures' (Almásy 1998: 106). All translations from the German are the author's unless otherwise noted.
 10. Almásy clearly differentiates in his travelogue *Unknown Sahara* between the several subaltern subjectivities he comes across. The mark of difference is often a mark of racism, as when he refers to 'my Sudanese' versus 'the blacks' (Almásy 1998: 145), or when he refers to Arab prejudiced notions about Wadi Halfa, located 'somewhere in the Sudan' where 'the people are all black and wild' (Almásy 1998: 85).
 11. Austrian cameraman Rudi Mayer accompanied the expedition and shot a short documentary film *Durch Afrika im Automobil* [*Through Africa in an Automobile*], which presents the dire colonial arrogance of the adventurer before the Sudanese tribes. The film was released in Vienna only in 1996, before the opening of Minghella's *English Patient*. Karen Piper (2001: 125) argues that Almásy appears camera shy, quite unlike the expected imperial persona. Yet, one of the most remarkable sequences in the documentary, and one where the explorer's imperial attitude is most striking, denies this assertion. A sequence shot at a native village depicts Almásy looking directly at the camera while measuring an antelope's horn, which he then compares to the dimensions of a native boy's head. Almásy appears sure of himself, using the camera to underline the colonial rhetoric. Film is, in fact, used by the explorer as a privileged medium of colonial symbolic exchange.
 12. In 1930, John Ball was the Head of the Desert Survey in Cairo, a British Geographical Agency that was to prove very important during the intelligence struggle in the war.
 13. In the travelogues collected in *Swimmer in the Desert*, there are numerous instances of the encounter of tyre tracks from previous expeditions; see, for example, the reference to Patrick Clayton's traces in 1933 (1998: 43, 184).

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