

The Atopic Arctic in Lost World Novels

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Abstract: The article examines two Lost World novels that depict the discovery of a civilization beneath the North Pole: William R. Bradshaw's *The Goddess of Atvatabar* (1892), and Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1889). While previous criticism has focused on the imagined lands and the contrasts it provides with which to criticize or negotiate structures in the real world, this article addresses the brief sections in each novel that describe the travelers' journeys through the Arctic. Siobhan Carroll's definition of atopic spaces in *An Empire of Air and Water* (2015) is a point of departure for examining the function of the arctic landscape. "Atopias," she writes, are "'real' natural regions falling within the scope of contemporary human mobility, which, because of their intangibility, inhospitality, or inaccessibility, cannot be converted into the locations of affective habitation known as 'place'" (6). In contrast to the nowhere of the utopia, atopias are reachable but situated in both literal and figurative peripheries, and they are commonly only visited temporarily. The atopic Arctic resists visitors' attempts to control, structure and colonize, disorients both the visitor and the outsider's perceptions and functions in both novels as a space of transition between real and imagined.

Keywords: *The Goddess of Atvatabar*, *Mizora: A Prophecy*, Arctic, atopia, lost worlds

The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries saw the publication of a large number of anglophone novels depicting a traveler's (or group of travelers') discovery of a civilization at, or commonly below, the North Pole. These non-mimetic, speculative fictions are aligned with an even greater body of works commonly referred to as Lost World novels (after Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 novel), that focus on actual places as yet undiscovered or comprehensively mapped in the Western imagination, such as the interior of the African continent or the Amazon basin. As Geoffrey Winthrop-Young observes, "the more the *terrae incognitae* are mapped, the more the lost kingdoms, races or species run out of hiding places" (WINTHROP-YOUNG, 2009: 111). In step with European and American exploration, as well as the publicity around geological and archaeological discoveries, the civilization of the Lost World is consequently relocated to mythical places such as Shangri-La or Atlantis or situated in underground sites; the latter giving rise to the subgenre of Hollow Earth fiction. The area around the North Pole, however, retains the status of *terra incognita* well into the twentieth century and makes it well suited as a setting in speculative fiction.

At focus in this article are two novels that depict the discovery of a lost civilization beneath the North Pole: William R. Bradshaw's *The Goddess of Atvatabar* (1892), and Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1889).¹ When critics address these novels, focus is foremost on the imagined lands and the traveler's relation to encountered individuals and phenomena. In *Atvatabar*, intrepid explorer Lexington White encounters a world in which physical laws as the reader knows them are upset: there is lessened gravity, prolonged youth, even resurrection. Descriptions of the *Atvatabarese* also help establish the Otherness and opulence of the discovered world. King Aldemegry Bhoolmakar has a "complexion [the] colour of old gold," facial hair "of a serpent-green tint" and is dressed in precious metals and emeralds; Lexington's love interest (the titular goddess) has a long "sapphire-blue" hair and her attire is "studded with gems" (BRADSHAW, 2010: 77, 95). The *Mizoran* society in Lane's more politically motivated novel is also characterized by an excess of colors and variety, except when it comes to gender and physical traits. The all-female civilization, which traveler Vera Zarovitch encounters, has through Science (capitalized throughout the novel) eliminated men in processes of procreation and created a highly educated and inventive society, populated by intelligent pale-skinned and blond women.²

Although the fictional subterranean societies provide useful contrasts with which to criticize or negotiate structures in the real world, I will here address the brief sections in each novel that describe the travelers' journeys through the Arctic.³ Siobhan Carroll's definition of atopic spaces is a source of inspiration for how I view depictions of the arctic landscape. "Atopias," she writes, are "'real' natural regions falling within the scope of contemporary human mobility, which, because of their intangibility, inhospitality, or inaccessibility, cannot be converted into the locations of affective habitation known as 'place'" (CARROLL, 2015: 6). In contrast to the nowhere of the utopia, atopias are reachable but situated in both literal and figurative peripheries, and they are commonly only visited temporarily. In Carroll's discussion, the Arctic is to the outside observer and visitor perceived of as "immune to permanent settlement" even though attempts were made to explore and at least figuratively colonize (CARROLL, 2015: 20). Explorers left their mark on the landscape (erecting cairns,

¹ *Mizora* was initially serially published in the *Cincinnati Commercial* 1880-81. The version of the text used in this article is the 1889 Dillingham edition, digitized by Project Gutenberg, and the author's name is given as Mary E. Bradley. Later editions of the novel as well as critics refer to the author as Mary E. Bradley Lane and, despite my use of primary source, I align with this practice.

² I bypass discussions about the problematic aspects of Lane's renditions of eugenics and social engineering. For useful viewpoints, see: BROAD, 2009, and MAHADY, 2004.

³ There are eight Arctic nations with widely differing histories, sociocultural structures, and indigenous cultures. The encompassing term "the Arctic" downplays the complexity resulting from these differences, but I am here concerned with how this generalized space is imagined.

writing on rocks), on the popular imagination through their travelogues, and on the history of exploration, but there is a transitory nature to all these forms of inscription. “Signs were torn down by the elements; discoveries were challenged by other explorers; and the histories of expeditions were lost along with the men who perished,” Carroll observes (2015: 20). There is, then, a resistance emanating from the Arctic that preserves its atopic characteristics: it remains a space that cannot and should not be inhabited for long and that actively disorients both the visitor and the outsider’s perceptions. The atopic Arctic - uninhabited in *The Goddess of Atvatar*, inhabited in *Mizora* - functions in both novels as a space of transition between real and imagined.

The grounding of texts in real events takes several forms in Lost World fiction broadly, among them paratexts. When novels extrapolate the fate of expedition survivors, for example, it is not uncommon to find a preface or foreword which connects to known historical events. The pseudonymously authored novella “The Extraordinary and All-Absorbing Journal of Wm. N. Seldon” (1851), for example, relates adventures of three members of Sir John Franklin’s crew and opens with a non-fictional biography of the commander and a description of missions to rescue the expedition once they were presumed lost. Leon Lewis’ *Andree at the North Pole* (1898) is similarly prefaced by an “introductory” which details the known preparations of the Swedish North Pole expedition of 1897. As in Henry Clay Fairman’s *The Third World* (1895), also following the fate of a survivor of the Franklin expedition, the narratives proper then start where “history retires and fiction takes up the pen” (FAIRMAN, 1895: 6). And this pen writes predominantly in a form that highlights that the narratives are eye-witness accounts, heightening the sense of immediacy. Paratext and narrative perspective are consequently “familiar literary-utopian conceit[s]” that ostensibly produce a semblance of authenticity (CARVER, 2017: 176). Neither novel at focus here contains lengthy non-fictional paratexts, but the title page of *Mizora* illustrates another common conceit: the text at hand is said to be an autobiographical manuscript “[f]ound Among the Private Papers of the Princess Vera Zarovitch” which presents “a true and faithful account of her Journey to the Interior of the Earth.”⁴

Neither *The Goddess of Atvatar* nor *Mizora*, then, are explicitly connected to actual Arctic expeditions, but the former takes as inspiration the late nineteenth-century intense interest in claiming the North Pole. In the same year as the novel was published, Robert F. Peary undertook his second expedition to Greenland with the aim to establish that the island stretched further north than

⁴ The title page information is not included in later editions of the novel, for example in the one published by University of Nebraska Press in 1999. This edition also replaces the original subtitle “A Prophecy” with the spoiler “A World of Women.” The omission of the information that the narrative has been found Vera Zarovitch’s personal papers of course lessens the semblance of authenticity and leaves the reader with no answer to the question of the work’s dissemination.

believed, thus giving the traveler a possibility for an overland trek to reach the Pole. As David Standish notes, “Bradshaw’s polar framing for his hollow earth novel was quite timely” (STANDISH, 2006: 205). Bradshaw’s hero, Lexington White, is presented as deeply absorbed by earlier accounts of arctic exploration, and by the glory bestowed by the individual (undoubtedly a man) who will be the first at the Pole. Perplexed by the fact that modern explorers “armed with all the resources of science and with the experience of numerous Arctic voyages to guide them” have been unsuccessful, Lexington is determined to “to stand, as it were, on the roof of the world” and from there “survey the frozen realms of death” (BRADSHAW, 2010: 19, 18). The Pole, situated in this last unconquered, hostile space, is the remaining prize for a man of daring. With a fully equipped, steel-sheathed ship, the *Polar King*, and in the company of a 109-man strong crew, Lexington sets out.

The history of arctic exploration, the construction and equipping of the ship, and the description of the first stages of journey north are narrated in a style that will come to separate the surface world from its subterranean counterpart. In the enthused introduction to the novel, Julian Hawthorne remarks that “when events are occurring within the realm of things already known or conceived of,” the style mimics “reports of an arctic voyage as recounted in the daily newspaper; there is the same unpretentiousness and directness of phrase [...] and the same candid portrayal of wonder, hope, and fear” (HAWTHORNE, 2010: 8). In the depiction of *Atvatabar*, by contrast, “the style rises to the level of the lofty theme and becomes harmoniously imaginative and poetic” (LANE, 1889: 8). There are elements, however, that signal a level of speculation already present in the rendition of the actual world, demonstrating what Standish terms “the novel’s deep eccentricity” (STANDISH, 2006: 206). On board the ship is a “terrorite gun” of Bradshaw’s own invention, a significantly enhanced steam engine, and a “triumphal outfit” fashioned for the men on board which includes “a Viking helmet of polished brass surmounted by the figure of a silver-plated polar bear,” thought to be appropriate for any celebrations and encounters during the voyage (BRADSHAW, 1892: 21, 22).⁵ Even the names of some of the officers onboard evidence the eccentricity of the first chapters of *The Goddess of Atvatabar*: the naturalist is named Goldrock, the astronomer Starbottle.

To an extent, these inventions and whimsies undermine the realism of the narrative, but as Lexington and his crew move into the transitional space of the Arctic, explanations for both successes and failures come in a form recognizable from Jules Verne’s “responsible scientific speculation, extrapolating from contemporary social and scientific trends” (SMYTH, 2000: 2). Latitudes and longitudes are carefully noted, and what is hypothesized to be an earthquake releases the frozen-in

⁵ All formatting in quotations corresponds to the original.

ship. The “enormous upward pressure,” Goldrock concludes, “split open the range of ice resting thereon” and creates a pathway further north (BRADSHAW, 1892: 14). There is nothing supernatural here, instead, the effects of the submarine movement are presented and accepted as plausible and underline that human will and ingenuity are to no avail in the Arctic.

The agency of the arctic climate and landscape is demonstrated throughout the first chapters with storms blowing the ship off course, and re-forming open leads of water alternately catching and releasing the men from a “terrible ice prison” (BRADSHAW, 1892: 13). The effect is an unstable environment which leaves the men disoriented and in which ice floes materialize to provide only temporary ground for animals and birds. At the edge of what is seemingly a continent of ice, the agency becomes embodied as “the scepter of the Ice King waved over us with the command, ‘Thus far and no further’” (BRADSHAW, 1892: 29). This prohibition does not last, however, and the earthquake allows them to move further north, towards open water. Here, the Otherness of the Arctic, particularly as regards the absence of human life, increases even further as does the fear of the leads closing and forever imprisoning them near the Pole. “[W]holly cut off from the outer world,” even birds circling overhead appear “almost human in their movements” and come to be seen as the last connections to home (BRADSHAW, 1892: 30).

Given Lexington’s “polar homework,” these events and emotions produced by the atopic Arctic are to be expected; they confirm what has been gleaned from previous exploration narratives and newspaper accounts (STANDISH, 2006: 20). But of course, as this is a tale about successful adventures, he also experiences having an island named after himself (as its discoverer) and on 10 May the crew joyously take note of “the double event of having reached the furthest north and of having discovered an open polar sea” (BRADSHAW, 1892: 17). Ideas of an open polar sea have circulated since at least the sixteenth century, but experienced a revival in the mid-nineteenth century, and this imagined ice-free body of water features into a large number of novels in the subgenre at focus here, especially since it holds out increased possibilities for a conquest of the North Pole. At this point, consequently, Lexington has his goal, to be “monarch over an empire of ice” and have his name entered into the annals of arctic history, within reach (BRADSHAW, 1892: 18). And it is also at this point, teetering at the edge of the speculative open waters, that the narrative veers into the fantastic with the Pole being an opening into the underworld.

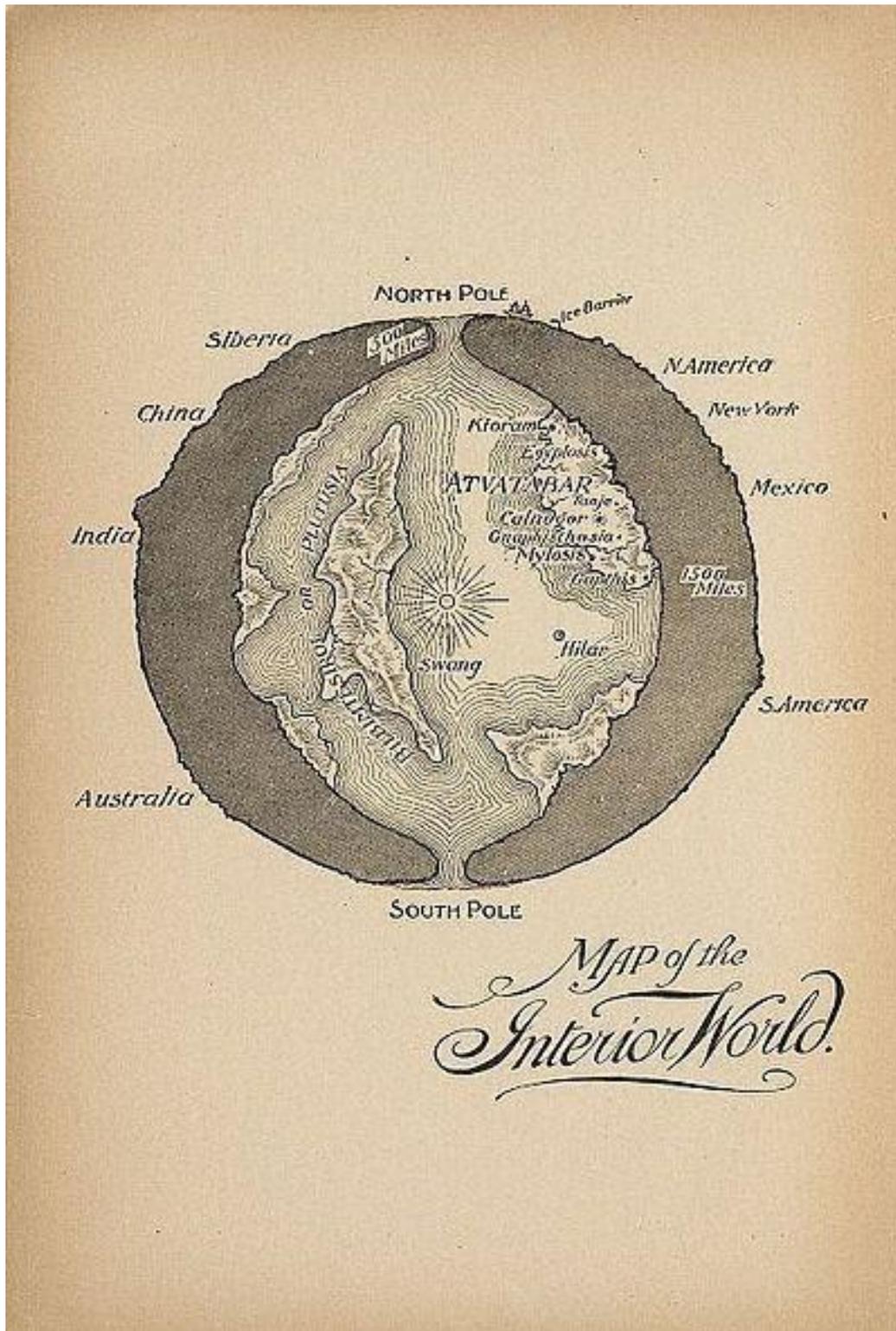


Image 1. *The Goddess of Atvatabar*, frontispiece.
Source: SF-251, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Accompanied by parts of his all-male crew, Lexington White not only discovers Atvatabar but in time becomes its ruler, marrying the Goddess Lyone and instituting new rules and laws in the

subterranean world. This conquest replaces (perhaps surpasses) the initial aim to claim the Pole, and he sets out for further adventures, exploring parts of the underworld unknown to the Atvatabarese. The solitary female traveler in *Mizora*, by contrast, never has her eyes set on conquest, but ends up in the Arctic by chance, noting that “[h]ad I started out with a resolve to discover the North Pole, I should never have succeeded” (LANE, 1889: 8). It is not only Vera Zarovitch’s individual traits that prohibit such a resolve but the gendered structures in the novel’s rendition of the actual world, later shown in relief against the all-female society of Mizora. Neither does Vera affect the encountered civilization, rather she functions as a reminder of the past that this society has strived to suppress.

The approximation of the actual world in which the narrative starts aligns, Jean Saberhagen maintains, with a “[p]ublic interest in Russia and Eastern Europe” and with ideas of resistance against “Russian political oppression” (SABERHAGEN, 1999: vii). Different forms of oppression are later highlighted in the juxtaposition between the surface world and Mizora, but aristocrat Vera is already at the outset suspected of harboring radical views and is under suspicion by her government. A briefly narrated series of events leads her to take part in a ceremony in Poland, commemorating the Battle of Grochow in 1831, which saw a Polish uprising against the invading Russian army. In the novel, the attendees are dispersed, Vera’s friend is killed, and our protagonist’s subsequent outrage sees her exiled “to the mines of Siberia for life” (LANE, 1889: 9). Escaping, by way of influential connections and bribery, the idea is for Vera to travel to France to there be joined by her husband and son, but her only option is “a whaling vessel bound for the Northern Seas” which unfortunately does not encounter a southbound ship (LANE, 1889: 20). What then ensues is under-dramatized to say the least. “It is not necessary to the interest of this narrative to enter into the details of shipwreck and disaster, which befel [sic] us in the Northern Seas,” we read (LANE, 1889: 10). The ship is crushed by ice, the captain perishes, and the rest of the crew abandon Vera in the Inuit (Esquimaux in the novel) settlement to which they have taken refuge.

The fact that these momentous occurrences are of little interest to describe in detail is significant, however, and contributes to establishing the Arctic as an atopic space: it is not to be inhabited for long even in text. Only two pages are devoted to Vera’s year-long stay with the Inuit, and although her hosts are not necessarily inhospitable, references are made to restrictions caused by the cold, wind and ice which make “existence a living death” (LANE, 1889: 12). She survives by ingesting “raw flesh and fat” and is plagued by the “never varied” landscape (LANE, 1889: 11). The Arctic thus emerges as the antithesis of life, un-nurturing, monochrome and static. Vera transfers her experiences also to the Inuit, described as “poor children of the North [whose] life is a continual struggle with cold and starvation” (LANE, 1889: 11). The traditionally colonialist characterization of

the indigenous inhabitants as children carries a particular significance when Vera's journey north is considered as a movement "backwards along a natural-historical timeline of human evolution through less developed forms of society" (CARVER, 2017: 177). The High Arctic and its inhabitants represent the bottom rung of the evolutionary ladder, a position in which Vera pronounces that she decidedly does not belong, an atopia she temporarily visits but needs to traverse and exit.

But finding passage south, where resides "everything that was dear or congenial" remains impossible (LANE, 1889: 11). When the whaling season begins at the end of the summer, Vera instead accompanies her Inuit hosts even further north, to the shores of open water where she suddenly feels more at home. There are birds, game and fish to eat, vegetation replaces the monochrome ice, and Vera feels "the kindly greeting of a mild breeze" coming from the nurturing "bosom of the water" (LANE, 1889: 12). Rather than signaling an opportunity to press on to claim the North Pole, the open polar sea here signals the beginning of a reversal of travelling backwards through evolution, raising in Vera the hope that she "might meet in that milder climate some of [her] own race" (LANE, 1889: 12). As her guides refuse to accompany her, she sets out alone in a canoe, a trip that will take her via a whirlpool to Mizora and the highly developed and superior civilization below ground.

Fifteen years later, Vera returns to the surface world, accompanied by the Mizoran Wauna. The journey across the Arctic is this time narrated in a few sentences only; although it presents no significant "distress," it is "monotonous," and it is not until they approach "civilized shores" that the beauty of the world makes an impression on Wauna (LANE, 1889: 143). The purpose of the return is to enlighten the world of the Mizoran way of life, but the two women are not able to effect change. The world remains ruled by "[i]gnorance, poverty and disease" and, unable to again find the Open Polar Sea and return home, Wauna dies in the Arctic. The last sentence of Lane's novel follows logically from these events, as well as from the loss of Vera's husband and child, but is still an unusual end to a novel of (accidental) discovery and adventure: "Life is a tragedy even under the most favorable conditions" (LANE, 1889: 147).

Compare, then, to the triumphal ending of *The Goddess of Atvatar*. Word of the expedition's success has reached the surface world via a small group of crewmembers that departs the expedition shortly before it reaches the subterranean civilization. Late in the novel, one survivor, Boatswain Dunbar, returns in the company of two large ships from Britain and the US, bringing news not only of his own rescue from the "scene of terror" that the Arctic constitutes, but of Lexington's reputation (BRADSHAW, 1892: 239). "There is no man more famous today than Lexington White," proclaims the commander of the British ship, and a newspaper account pronounces that "[t]he renown of Columbus and Magellan is overshadowed by [his] glory" (BRADSHAW, 1892: 236, 237).

Lexington has found something of far higher importance than the abstract notion of the North Pole and the men's journey to reach it, across the inhospitable, threatening Arctic, remains a footnote to the story: it is significant that Dunbar "seem[s] to forget largely the journey outward in the *Polar King*" (BRADSHAW, 1892: 238). The Arctic remains an atopia, to the side of habitable places, whereas Atvatabar is turned into "affective habitation" (CARROLL, 2015: 6).

In the indispensable *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, Francis Spufford charts the imaginative history of polar exploration and notes that theories of habitable places fill the important function of enabling "there to be *something* at the poles [...] rather than an expanse of ice significant only by geographical convention" (SPUFFORD, 1996: 76). For writers in the genre at focus here, this something turns out to be materially or ideologically rich societies, or lost civilizations that with the aid of the visitor can be ushered into modernity. The journey which either initiates or bookends the experience it is seldom addressed, with critics (like the fictional travelers) instead drawn to examine in detail the structures and ideals of the lost worlds. However, the stages of the journey are significant when examining the transition from realism to speculation, and increased attention to the atopic Arctic ensures that it will not figuratively remain little more than "an expanse of ice."

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