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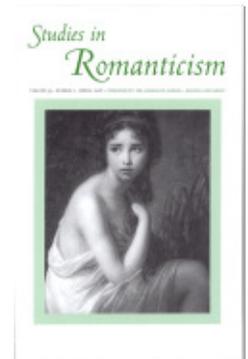
*An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the
British Imagination, 1750–1850* by Siobhan Carroll (review)

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an alternative to the prison system, in which the “soft influences” of nature could produce a version of restorative justice (22). Questions about what might get left out of the picture, of course, are probably an inevitable response to an argument that is so highly focused, so moments like this one didn’t significantly alter my appreciation for the work. I have a feeling that this fascinating and revealing book will be discussed by scholars in Romantic studies for years to come: I know it will certainly show its mark on my own work as I continue to digest its conclusions.

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Siobhan Carroll. *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 290. \$59.95.

Siobhan Carroll’s *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* complicates Edward Said’s apposition of imperialism with habitation and his statement that “uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist” (13). In the service of this endeavor, the book draws on canonical, lesser-known, and archival sources to construct intricate conceptual histories of four interrelated “atopias,” “cultural constructs” (7) defined as “‘real’ natural regions falling within the theoretical 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). These four sites of inquiry—the poles, the sea, the atmosphere, and the subterranean—symbolize both the limits and the ambitions of empire. In so doing, they highlight the vulnerabilities of the colonial project as well as the cultural work that can only be accomplished by literature’s placeless travel. How writers understand, take up, and/or reject literature’s potential ability to expand the empire via imagination forms the core of Carroll’s contribution to the field of Romanticism and to literary studies broadly conceived. Additionally, by charting a capacious map of references to and treatments of these atopias, Carroll has created a resource for scholars from any discipline interested in the cultural histories of uninhabited space. For example, Carroll’s finely wrought discursive histories of the poles and of the atmosphere will be invaluable to scholars interested in historicizing current debates about the environment both within and outside the academy.

Carroll’s first chapter focuses on the poles as objects of British “speculation,” a “slippery term” that, Carroll argues, “usefully captures the vexed

intersection of economic interests, scientific aspirations, and literary conjecture in a geo-imaginary region where the line between fact and fiction often appeared hopelessly blurred" (22). Carroll notes the similarities between the connotations and denotations of "to speculate" and "to imagine," citing as a key distinction the sense that "[i]n general, acts of speculation differ from acts of imagination in that the object of their contemplation—a soul, a star, a market—are presumed to exist externally to the mind that contemplates them[.]" a distinction that, in the period, "was not vigorously preserved" (210n12). Carroll's use of "speculation" in the chapter leads to a fascinating history of the poles, both as limits that resisted integration into empire, and as a sort of pure, romanticized version of unowned space capable of disguising the sins of imperial desire. Carroll's understanding of the term as "capturing the intersection" of various fields also reveals something about her methodology. Like the concepts—for, as she recognizes, they are concepts as much as "real" places—that Carroll works to historicize, her theoretical terms, "imagination" in particular, wind their way through more recent discourse, entextualizing disparate theoretical commitments and critical concerns. Take, for example, a revealing moment from the book's conclusion, in which Carroll explains, "I have analyzed the ways in which authors used atopic backdrops to assert the continued survival and *independence of the imagination* by setting limits on the ambitions of the state, exposing the weaknesses of empire, and inviting the formation of different communities than those *imagined by the nation*" (187, my emphasis). There are two different modes of imagination at play here, the independent imagination asserted by authors and the collective imagination of the nation. This sentence ties up a braid that Carroll weaves throughout the monograph from at least two definitional strands, that of the "literary imagination" (5) and that of "British imaginings of the globe" and of the nation's role on that globe (13). While the latter definition develops a term of art from postcolonial theory (Carroll cites Said, Anderson, and Linda Colley, and explains that her project "attempts to add a new spatial axis to theories of British identity formation, calling attention to the ways in which Britain was imagined . . . in relation to supposedly empty spaces" [11]), the former is a bit more mysterious, and pertains to one of the book's guiding concerns, namely, the augmentation of nationalist and postcolonial imagination to incorporate and clash with the types of imagining that literature alone might do, or might have been understood to do in the "Romantic century."

Explaining her use of the literary within a vast network of texts, Carroll writes:

While in this book I draw on texts ranging from voyage narratives to board games, my argument emphasizes the cultural work performed

by overtly fictive forms of text—the spatial representations of poems, plays, and novels—and on the ways that such imaginings inspired authors to reflect on the community-shaping influence of print culture in general and literature in particular. . . . Fictive forms, in other words, could make peculiarly visible the gap between the empirical experience of location and the mental exercises that invest sites with meaning, a phenomenon that, as we shall see, often inspired a certain degree of self-reflection on the part of their creators. (12)

An Empire of Air and Water thus illuminates the particular power of fictive forms to refract the complex and contradictory processes whereby both places and non-places come to be invested with meaning. The question remains how one might situate this potentially neo-Romantic investment alongside, within, or perhaps in contrast to the types of imagining postcolonial theory investigates. To understand literary imagining as inherently less problematic than nationalist imagining would be to oversimplify. Indeed, describing the ways in which “[c]oncerns over the future directions of empire appear to underpin *Frankenstein’s* concerns over the intersection of the domestic imagination with foreign spaces and its insistence on the bankruptcy of the eighteenth century’s speculative visions of colonial acquisition” (52), Carroll thinks through Victor and Elizabeth’s contrasting imaginative modes, and complicates Elizabeth’s seemingly harmless imaginative faculty by pointing out that “Shelley’s use of the phrase ‘sought to people,’ with its connotations of biological reproduction and colonial expansion . . . reveals the potential for seemingly harmless acts of imagination to be usurped and translated into brutal imperial nightmares” (52–53).

While the book’s theoretical commitments are at times difficult to parse, its deeply historicist methodology is uncompromisingly responsible, resulting in complex discursive histories that eschew oversimplification and avoid ideological retroprojection. For example, Carroll contextualizes *The Last Man* within discussions of the hot air balloon ranging from satirical cartoons and letters in periodicals, to Horace Walpole’s private correspondence, to *The Young Lady’s Introduction [sic] to Natural History*, to minor novels, and within political debates about the effects of slavery in the colonies on Britain’s figurative atmosphere. In so doing, Carroll offers a prismatic reading of *The Last Man’s* hot air balloons “lying broken before the foul atmosphere that is consuming the world” as an emblem of a future in which “none of humankind’s arts are at last adequate to overpower the poisonous atmosphere generated by humankind’s sins” (139). Here as elsewhere, the relevance for the environmental humanities is astounding.

A concluding chapter reorients the project inward to consider how ideas of atopia were brought to bear on the sublime metropolis of nineteenth-century London. For example, arguing that, in De Quincey’s *Confessions*,

“we see not only the image of the atopia invoked in an attempt to exert mental control over urban space, but also the fear that unproblematically celebrating the spatial transformations wrought by Britain’s global engagements represents a wrong turn—an improper way of engaging with the internationalized economic flows incarnated in the modern city” (200–201), Carroll casts the author’s memories as a site of inherently global engagement. By bringing the atopia home, the book challenges the supposition that objects of the imagination cannot be “presumed to exist externally to the mind that contemplates them” by inscribing uninhabitable atopias on those “real” lives that literature invites us to inhabit.

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Jeffrey N. Cox. *Romanticism in the Shadow of War: Literary Culture in the Napoleonic War Years*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. 276. \$95.

With the imagined expedition that introduces this richly contextualized new volume, Jeffrey N. Cox spins the globe and then boldly puts his finger on it. Dreaming of a world-spanning Grand Tour that Lord Byron never took, Cox’s introduction rockets past a dizzying array of early nineteenth century regimes, including those in Egypt, Thailand, and Persia, in a fantasy trajectory powered by the unstoppable *Bildung* of the privileged poet, that “consummate border-crosser and cultural pirate” (7). That Byron would have traveled further if only he’d had the chance suggests the motivational underpinnings of a work like this one, which reveals a Romantic global imagination shaped but not limited by war. Romanticism is a literature of border crossings, informed by the wartime raids, sallies and skirmishes of the Napoleonic era but also galvanized by détente and the cultural transmission allowed by peacetime travel. Together, escalation and de-escalation resulted in new, and newly transgressive, dramatic genres and literary hybrids. In good company with recent studies by Evan Gottlieb, Susan Manning, and Siobhan Carroll, Cox’s *Romanticism in the Shadow of War* reconsiders second-generation Romantic literary innovations as not merely reactions against first generation poetry, but as part of a complexly situated historical emergence. Limits, it turns out, whether of technology, inhabitability, or international cooperation, compel their own trespass: they demarcate that which we are challenged to think beyond.

With this deft spin, Cox shifts our focus from the “major,” first generation events of the French Revolution to the later clashes, counter-clashes,