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Australia's Antarctic Turf

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Feature

It is January 1930 and the restless Southern Ocean is heaving itself up against the frozen coast of Eastern Antarctica. For hundreds of kilometres, this coastline consists entirely of ice: although Antarctica is a continent, only 2% of its surface consists of exposed rock; the rest is buried under a vast frozen mantle. But there is rock in this coastal scene: silhouetted against the glaring white of the glacial shelf, a barren island humps up out of the water. Slowly and cautiously, the Discovery approaches the island through uncharted waters; the crew's eyes strain in the frigid air as they scour the ocean's surface for ship-puncturing bergs. The approach to the island is difficult, but Captain Davis maintains the Discovery on its course as the wind howls in the rigging. Finally, the ship can go no further; the men lower a boat into the tossing sea. They pull hard at the oars until the boat is abreast of the island, and then they ram the bow against its icy littoral. Now one of the key moments of this exploratory expedition—officially titled the British, Australian, and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE)—is about to occur: the expedition is about to succeed in its primary spatial mission. Douglas Mawson, the Australian leader of the expedition, puts his feet onto the island and ascends to its bleak summit. There, he and his crew assemble a mound of loose stones and insert into it the flagpole they've carried with them across the ocean. Mawson reads an official proclamation of territorial annexation (see Bush 118-19), the photographer Frank Hurley shoots the moment on film, and one of the men hauls the Union Jack up the pole.

Until the Australian Flags Act of 1953, the Union Jack retained seniority over the Australian flag. BANZARE took place before the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which gave full political and foreign policy independence to Commonwealth countries, thus Mawson claimed Antarctic space on behalf of Britain. He did so with the understanding that Britain would subsequently grant Australia title to its own Antarctic space. Britain did so in 1933.

In the freezing wind, the men take off their hats, give three cheers for the King, and sing "God Save the King." They deposit a copy of the proclamation into a metal canister and affix this to the flagpole; for a moment they admire the view. But there is little time to savour the moment, or the feeling of solid ground under their cold feet: the ship is waiting and the wind is growing in force. The men row back to the Discovery; Mawson returns to his cabin and writes up the event. A crucial moment in Antarctica's spatial history has occurred: on what Mawson has aptly named Proclamation Island, Antarctica has been produced as Australian space. But how, exactly, does this production of Antarctica as a spatial possession work? How does this moment initiate the transformation of six million square kilometres of Antarctica—42% of the continent—into Australian space? The answer to this question lies in three separate, but articulated cultural technologies: representation, the body of the explorer, and international territorial law.

When it comes to thinking about 'turf', Antarctica may at first seem an odd subject of analysis. Physically, Antarctica is a turfless space, an entire continent devoid of grass, plants, land-based animals, or trees. Geopolitically, Antarctica remains the only continent on which no turf wars have been fought: British and Argentinian soldiers clashed over the occupation of a Peninsular base in the Hope Bay incident of 1952 (Dodds 56), but beyond this somewhat bathetic skirmish, Antarctic space has never been the object of physical conflict. Further, as Antarctica has no indigenous human population, its space remains free of the colonial turfs of dispossession, invasion, and loss. The Antarctic Treaty of 1961 formalised Antarctica's geopolitically turfless status, stipulating that the continent was to be used for peaceful purposes only, and stating that Antarctica was an internationally shared space of harmony and scientific goodwill. So why address Antarctic spatiality here? Two motivations underpin this article's anatomising of Australia's Antarctic space. First, too often Antarctica is imagined as an entirely homogeneous space: a vast white plain dotted here and there along its shifting coast by identical scientific research stations inhabited by identical bearded men. Similarly, the complexities of Antarctica's geopolitical and legal spaces are often overlooked in favour of a vision of the continent as a site of harmonious uniformity. While it is true that the bulk of Antarctic space is ice, the assumption that its cultural spatialities are identical is far from the case: this article is part of a larger endeavour to provide a 'thick' description of Antarctic spatialities, one which points to the heterogeneity of cultural geographies of the polar south. The Australian polar spatiality installed by Mawson differs radically from that of, for example, Chile; in a continent governed by international consensus, it is crucial that the specific cultural geographies and spatial histories of Treaty participants be clearly understood. Second, attending to complexities of Antarctic spatiality points up the intersecting cultural technologies involved in spatial production, cultural technologies so powerful that, in the case of Antarctica, they transformed nearly half of a distant continent into Australian sovereign space. This article focuses its critical attention on three core spatialising technologies, a trinary that echoes Henri Lefebvre's influential tripartite model of spatiality: this article attends to Australian Antarctic representation, practise, and the law.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Scott, Shackleton, and Amundsen trooped over the polar plateau, and Antarctic space became a setting for symbolic Edwardian performances of heroic imperial masculinity and 'frontier' hardiness. At the same time, a second, less symbolic, type of

Antarctican spatiality began to evolve: for the first time, Antarctica became a potential territorial possession; it became the object of expansionist geopolitics. Based in part on Scott's expeditions, Britain declared sovereignty over an undefined area of the continent in 1908, and France declared Antarctic space its own in 1924; by the late 1920s, what John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge refer to as the nation-state ontology—that is, the belief that land should and must be divided into state-owned units—had arrived in Antarctica. What the Adelaide Advertiser's 8 April 1929 headline referred to as "A Scramble for Antarctica" had begun. The British Imperial Conference of 1926 concluded that the entire continent should become a possession of Britain and its dominions, New Zealand and Australia (Imperial). Thus, in 1929, BANZARE set sail into the brutal Southern Ocean. Although the expedition included various scientists, its primary mission was not to observe Antarctic space, but to take possession of it: as the expedition's instructions from Australian Prime Minister Bruce stated, BANZARE's mission was to produce Antarctica as Empire's—and by extension, Australia's—sovereign space (Jacka and Jacka 251). With the moment described in the first paragraph of this article, along with four other such moments, BANZARE succeeded; just how it did so is the focus of this work.

It is by now axiomatic in spatial studies that the job of imperial explorers is not to locate landforms, but to produce a discursive space. "The early travellers," as Paul Carter notes of Australian explorers, "invented places rather than found them" (51). Numerous analytical investigations attend to the discursive power of exploration: in Australia, Carter's *Road to Botany Bay*, Simon Ryan's *Cartographic Eye*, Ross Gibson's *Diminishing Paradise*, and Brigid Hains's *The Ice and the Inland*, to name a few, lay bare the textual strategies through which the imperial annexation of "new" spaces was legitimated and enabled. Discursive territoriality was certainly a core product of BANZARE: as this article's opening paragraph demonstrates, one of the key missions of BANZARE was not simply to perform rituals of spatial possession, but to textualise them for popular and governmental consumption. Within ten months of the expedition's return, Hurley's film *Southward Ho! With Mawson* was touring Australia.

BANZARE consisted of two separate trips to Antarctica; *Southward Ho!* documents the first of these, while *Siege of the South* documents the both the first and the second, 1930-1, mission.

While there is not space here to provide a detailed textual analysis of the entire film, a focus on the "Proclamation Island moment" usefully points up some of the film's central spatialising work. Hurley situated the Proclamation Island scene at the heart of the film; the scene was so important that Hurley wished he had been able to shoot two hours of footage of Mawson's island performance (Ayres 194). This scene in the film opens with a long shot of the land and sea around the island; a soundtrack of howling wind not only documents the brutal conditions in which the expedition worked, but also emphasises the emptiness of Antarctic space prior to its "discovery" by Mawson: in this shot, the film visually confirms Antarctica's status as an available *terra nullius* awaiting cooption into Australian understanding, and into Australian national space. The film then cuts to a close-up of Mawson raising the flag; the sound of the wind disappears as Mawson begins to read the proclamation of possession. It is as if Mawson's proclamation of possession stills the protean chaos of unclaimed Antarctic space by inviting it into the spatial order of national territory: at this moment, Antarctica's agency is symbolically subsumed by Mawson's acquisitive words. As the scene ends, the camera once again pans over the surrounding sea and ice scape, visually confirming the impact of Mawson's—and the film's—performance: all this, the shot implies, is now made meaningful; all this is now understood, recorded, and, most importantly, all this is now ours.

A textual analysis of this filmic moment might identify numerous other spatialising strategies at work: its conflation of Mawson's and the viewer's proprietary gazes (Ryan), its invocation of the sublime, or its legitimising conflation of the 'purity' of the whiteness of the landscape with the whiteness of its claimants (Dyer 21). However, the spatial productivity of this moment far exceeds the discursive. What is at times frustrating about discourse analyses of spatiality is that they too often fail to articulate representation to other, equally potent, cultural technologies of spatial production. John Wylie notes that "on the whole, accounts of early twentieth-century Antarctic exploration exhibit a particular tendency to position and interpret exploratory experience in terms of self-contained discursive ensembles" (170). Despite the undisputed power of textuality, discourse alone does not, and cannot, produce a spatial possession. "Discursive and representational practices," as Jane Jacobs observes, "are in a mutually constitutive relationship with political and economic forces" (9); spatiality, in other words, is not simply a matter of texts. In order to understand fully the process of Antarctic spatial acquisition, it is necessary to depart from tales of exploration and ships and flags, and to focus on the less visceral spatiality of international territorial law. Or, more accurately, it is necessary to address the mutual imbrication of these two articulated spatialising "domains of practice" (Dixon).

The emerging field of critical legal geography is founded on the premise that legal analyses of territoriality neglect the spatial dimension of their investigations; rather than seeing the law as a means of spatial production, they position space as a neutral, universally-legible entity which is neatly governed by the "external variable" of territorial law (Blomley 28). "In the hegemonic conception of the law," Wesley Pue argues, "the entire world is transmuted into one vast isotropic surface" (568) upon which law acts. Nicholas Blomley asserts, however, that law is not a neutral organiser of space, but rather a cultural technology of spatial production. Territorial laws, in other words, make spaces, and don't simply govern them. When Mawson planted the flag and read the proclamation, he was producing Antarctica as a legal space as well as a discursive one.

Today's international territorial laws derive directly from European imperialism: as European empires expanded, they required a spatial system that would protect their newly-annexed lands, and thus they developed a set of laws of territorial acquisition and possession. Undergirding these laws is the ontological premise that space is divisible into state-owned sovereign units. At international law, space can be acquired by its imperial claimants in one of three main ways: through conquest, cession (treaty), or through "the discovery of terra nullius" (see Triggs 2). Antarctica and Australia remain the globe's only significant spaces to be transformed into possessions through the last of these methods. In the spatiality of the international law of discovery, explorers are not just government employees or symbolic representatives, but vessels of enormous legal force. According to international territorial law, sovereign title to "new" territory—land defined (by Europeans) as terra nullius, or land belonging to no one—can be established through the eyes, feet, codified ritual performances, and documents of explorers. That is, once an authorised explorer—Mawson carried documents from both the Australian Prime Minister and the British King that invested his body and his texts with the power to transform land into a possession—saw land, put his foot on it, planted a flag, read a proclamation, then documented these acts in words and maps, that land became a possession. These performative rituals and their documentation activate the legal spatiality of territorial acquisition; law here is revealed as a "bundle of practices" that produce space as a possession (Ford 202). What we witness when we attend to Mawson's island performance, then, is not merely a discursive performance, but also the transformation of Antarctica into a legal space of possession.

Similarly, the films and documents generated by the expedition are more than just a "sign system of human ambition" (Tang 190), they are evidence, valid at law, of territorial possession. They are key components of Australia's legal currency of Antarctic spatial purchase.

What is of central importance here is that Mawson's BANZARE performance on Proclamation Island is a moment in which the dryly legal, the bluntly physical, and the densely textual clearly intersect in the creation of space as a possession. Australia did not take possession of forty-two percent of Antarctica after BANZARE by law, by exploration, or by representation alone. The Australian government built its Antarctic space with letters patent and legal documents. BANZARE produced Australia's Antarctic possession through the physical and legal rituals of flag-planting, proclamation-reading, and exploration. BANZARE further contributed to Australia's polar empire with maps, journals, photos and films, and cadastral lists of the region's animals, minerals, magnetic fields, and winds. The law of "discovery of terra nullius" coalesced these spaces into a territory officially designated as Australian. It is crucial to recognise that the production of nearly half of Antarctica as Australian space was, and is not a matter of discourse, of physical performance, or of law alone. Rather, these three cultural technologies of spatial production are mutually imbricated; none can function without the others, nor is one reducible to an epiphenomenon of another. To focus on the discursive products of BANZARE without attending to the expedition's legal work not only downplays the significance of Mawson's spatialising achievement, but also blinds us to the role that law plays in the production of space. Attending to Mawson's Proclamation Island moment points to the unique nature of Australia's Antarctic spatiality: unlike the US, which constructs Antarctic spatiality as entirely non-sovereign; and unlike Chile, which bases its Antarctic sovereignty claim on Papal Bulls and acts of domestic colonisation, Australian Antarctic space is a spatiality of possession, founded on a bedrock of imperial exploration, representation, and law. Seventy-four years ago, the camera whirred as a man stuck a flagpole into the bleak summit rocks of a small Antarctic island: six million square kilometres of Antarctica became, and remain, Australian space.

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None

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