The Coldest War: Imagining Geopolitics from the Bottom of the Earth

Elizabeth Leane

Puns are difficult to avoid when the polar regions and the Cold War are brought together. Metaphors of icy exchanges and thawing relations spring easily to mind, pointing up the potential for symbolic uses of the Earth’s icescapes in literary texts of the period. Of course, the Arctic and Antarctic are not only symbols but also material places with their own specific histories and geopolitics. However, while the strategic importance to the Cold War of the Arctic, positioned between the US and the USSR and occupied by early missile warning systems, is readily acknowledged, the relevance of the remote Antarctic is less immediately clear.

With the 1959 Antarctic Treaty ‘freezing’ territorial claims, banning nuclear explosions and waste disposal, prohibiting military activities and enshrining the free exchange of scientific information, the continent for ‘peace and science’ has been popularly treated as a utopian example of international cooperation in a period otherwise characterised by tension and distrust.1 Physically isolated

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1 The phrase ‘peace and science’ comes from the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (or the ‘Madrid Protocol’), which designates the Antarctic as a ‘natural reserve’ devoted to these ideas, although both are also key to the original 1959 Treaty itself (see ‘Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty’, Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty, www.ats.aq/e/ep.htm (accessed 12 January 2019)).

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from the rest of the world by the Southern Ocean and lacking permanent inhabitants, the ice continent is regularly figured as a place happily removed from history, politics, culture and conflict. After visiting several times in the late 1980s and early 1990s, American writer Barry Lopez observed that in Antarctica there is ‘no war, no famine, no inflation, no polluting industry, no dictator, no bunkerched ghetto’. The continent, in this view, stands outside and apart from the rest of the global system, an ‘out-of-time, […] remote, autistic fastness’. One could be forgiven for considering Antarctica the only place on Earth not embroiled in the Cold War.

This popular image of Antarctica as an apolitical utopian space of international peace is, however, itself a product of the Cold War, a framing established and promulgated by political actors for specific national purposes. Literary texts from the period both reinforce this image and, at times, contest it. Geographically, the authors of these texts span the globe: examples below include writers from five continents, and there are also inevitably relevant texts—such as Argentinian writer Héctor Germán Oesterheld’s short novel Peligro en la Antártida (Danger in Antarctica, 1956)—that cannot be discussed here or are unknown to me due to my language limitations. The remote and isolated continent provided creative writers from a wide range of nations with a powerful site from which to explore global issues, particularly notions of infection (ideological and literal), isolation and secrecy. Beginning with an overview of the historical entanglement of the Antarctic region with Cold War tensions, this chapter examines a selection of texts written in or translated into English that exemplify this imaginative engagement.

**The Cold War Construction of a Continent for Peace and Science**

The key event in Antarctic history of the Cold War era is the 1959 signing of the Antarctic Treaty by twelve nations: the two ‘superpowers’ (the US and USSR), the seven ‘claimants’ (Argentina, Australia, Britain, Chile, France, New Zealand and Norway) and three non-claimant states (Belgium, Japan and South Africa). The Treaty grew directly out of the coordinated scientific effort known as the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957–58, the same undertaking that saw the launch of the Sputnik satellite. Frequently portrayed as a case of idealistic science emerging victorious over political squabbling, the development of the Antarctic Treaty is better understood as an expedient solution to an international standoff that produced benefits for both scientific and political actors.

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2 Lopez, ‘The Gift of Good Land’, *Antarctic Journal of the United States*, 27: 2 (1992), p. 1.
3 Ibid., p. 1.
4 I’m grateful to Pablo Wainschenker for pointing me to this text.
5 See, for example, Roger D. Launius, ‘Establishing Open Rights in the Antarctic and Outer Space: Cold War Rivalies and Geopolitics in the 1950s and 1960s’, in Klaus Dodds, Alan
The geopolitical situation regarding Antarctica at the end of World War Two was complex. Both superpowers had historically been active in Antarctic exploration at various times (although not in the ‘Heroic Era’ of the early twentieth century) and neither wanted to cede the large parts of the continent already claimed by other states. The claimants, for their part, had rejected an idea put forward in the late 1940s for governing the region together with the US as a condominium, because this would have meant relinquishing their claims; the USSR also objected to the arrangement, from which it was excluded. The international scientific cooperative effort of the IGY pointed to a route out of this impasse by providing a model for international governance. The Antarctic Treaty suited the claimant nations, whose sovereignty claims would be set to one side but not relinquished, and suited particularly those states such as Australia that feared Soviet militarisation in the far south; it also allowed the US and USSR, like other states, to access all parts of the region. Both officially reserved the right to make a future claim to any section of the continent (and are sometimes termed ‘semi-claimants’).

With the Treaty in place, international clout in Antarctica depended on a state’s ability to maintain a scientific presence there. Larger states such as the US and USSR could thus dominate by displaying their technological might. During the IGY, both had built stations on key symbolic sites: the US on the Geographic South Pole (the emblematic ‘heart’ of the continent where the territorial claims meet) and the USSR on the Geomagnetic South Pole and the challenging Pole of Inaccessibility (the furthest point on average from the coast). The US built public support for the initiative by framing its Antarctic activity, like its space exploration, in terms of a familiar ‘frontier’ mythology, portraying it as an ideal space for revitalised masculinity; by outspending other nations in its activities on the ice, the US could also showcase its economic and technological capabilities. The latter included a nuclear power station which began operating in 1962 at McMurdo Station on Ross Island and which (despite evident inefficiencies in its maintenance) was the poster child for US technological prowess on the continent until it was decommissioned ten years later. For the Soviets, who had a factory whaling flotilla operating in Antarctic waters but no strong historical arguments for a claim, the Treaty was a welcome development, forestalling attempts by the West to monopolise the continent’s governance. By the late 1960s, the USSR had five permanent stations on the continent, three of them in the large sector claimed by Australia.

D. Hemmings and Peder Roberts, eds, Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017), p. 218.

For a detailed analysis of this process, see James Spiller, Frontiers for the American Century: Outer Space, Antarctica, and Cold War Nationalism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1–19, 65–112.

See ibid., pp. 93–4.

Their main connection in terms of early exploration was the Bellinghausen expedition of 1819–20, which circumnavigated the continent and had some claim to a first sighting of it. Arguments for this first sighting, largely ignored in Russia for over a century, ramped up consider-
While tensions between the two superpowers were an obvious element of the political machinations that led to the Antarctic Treaty, one of the advantages of considering Cold War geopolitics (and literature) ‘from below’ is that it brings into the foreground states that are normally treated as more minor players in the era. States in the ‘Southern Ocean Rim’ proximate to Antarctica, remote from the traditional Cold War centres, were potentially vulnerable to militarisation of the far south but also well positioned to contribute to or facilitate activity there. Four of these states—Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Argentina—were (and are) also claimants.

Concerns around Antarctica in the early stages of the Cold War manifested in different ways for each of the Southern Oceanic Rim states. For Australia, security was an important concern in the period leading to the IGY, particularly as the first Soviet base in Antarctica, Mirny, was established in 1956 in Australia’s claimed territory south of the Indian Ocean. Only a few months later a newspaper report ‘speculated that the base was being used as a cover for missile launchers targeting Australia’. The Antarctic Treaty, with its demilitarisation clause, assuaged this concern. Similar security worries were felt by South Africa, one of the three nations with no claims or reservations to sign the Treaty (Japan and Belgium made up the remainder). New Zealand, positioned directly north of Ross Island, where the US had established its largest base (McMurdo), became a launching point for US activity and thus aligned itself with the US position. India, newly independent from Britain, took a very different view, arguing that the claims represented an ongoing imperialism and proposing in 1956 that the UN General Assembly discuss the ‘Question of Antarctica’, a move that was defeated by the claimants and their allies. The ‘Southern Cone’ nations of Argentina and Chile, with claims that overlapped with each other’s and with Great Britain’s, were in a complex position. The site of these claims—the Antarctic Peninsula—became (and remains) the most politically contested part of the South Polar region. One of the few ‘hot’ conflicts in the latter part of the Cold War, the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War, was triggered by the arrival of Argentinian marines at South Georgia, a subantarctic
island claimed by both Britain and Argentina and the site of a British scientific station.

By this time, international Antarctic politics were centring on the issue of potential mineral resources. The original Antarctic Treaty is silent about the possibility of mining. In the wake of the 1970s oil crisis, and alongside the burgeoning environmentalist movement, Antarctica again became the subject of intense political dispute. Malaysia, a non-claimant state that had not signed the Treaty at this point, protested the monopoly of wealthy nations on the continent; environmental NGOs called for a ‘World Park’; and Treaty nations began to recognise the need for a legal instrument regulating future mineral exploitation. A minerals convention was drawn up but eventually abandoned after Australia and France refused to sign, and was replaced in 1991 by an environmental protocol (often referred to as the ‘Madrid Protocol’) prohibiting mining indefinitely, in addition to many other protections. The popular framing of Antarctica shifted from a technological frontier to a ‘last wilderness’ stewarded by the Treaty nations.14

**Writing Antarctica: Constraints and Opportunities**

With Antarctica understood and governed as a ‘continent for science’ during much of the Cold War period, literary engagement tended to be, as it had been in earlier periods, necessarily distanced. Before the advent of large-scale tourism in the early 1990s, opportunities for professional writers to visit Antarctica were scarce. Peopled almost entirely by scientists, administrators and support personnel, the continent offered relatively few plotlines for realist narratives, especially when the writer was unfamiliar with both the physical environment and the social milieu. Novelists thus tended to favour either historical or speculative modes in which the continent’s geography was often more relevant than its geopolitics.

There were, of course, exceptions. Journalists travelled to the continent at times, particularly during the IGY, with some of them authoring novels as a by-product. Philip Benjamin, who covered the IGY for the *New York Times*, wrote a comic account of masculine toughening in *Quick, Before It Melts* (1964), which was quickly translated to screen as a mild screwball sex comedy. Narrated by a journalist who, like the author, is placed on assignment in the far south, the novel satirises stereotypical Cold War suspicions: ‘FILE SOONEST WHAT RUSSIANS DOING THERE AND HOW THEY PLAN TAKE-OVER ANTARCTICA’, the narrator’s managing editor cables: ‘HOW MUCH OIL ETGOLD DISCOVERED IN UNDOUBTED SECRET OPERATIONS’.15 A subplot of both novel and film involves the defection—for romantic rather than political reasons—of a Soviet scientist on exchange at

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14 On the US part in this process, see Spiller, *Frontiers*, p. 15.
15 Benjamin, *Quick, Before It Melts* (New York: Avon, 1964), p. 64.
a US station. Australian journalist David Burke, who in a 1956 newspaper article entitled ‘Red Flag near the South Pole’ had pointed to an emerging Soviet presence to his nation’s south, also visited US bases during the IGY. His detailed knowledge of the geopolitics of the era and understanding of the superpowers’ ability to dominate through displays of technological capability is evident in the thriller he wrote several years later, *Monday at McMurdo* (1967): “[Australia] writes her name against the biggest share of all”, reflects one character, “and yet the Russians have been squatting in it since the IGY without any by-your-leave and won’t ever pull out. What can Australia do about it?—Hell, she doesn’t even own an icebreaker!” The plot, however, hinges not on Soviet aspirations but on internal US politics and greed over mineral resources.

Occasionally, literary writers also visited the region on nationally sponsored residencies that were initially ad hoc but from the early 1980s gradually developed into systematised programmes. However, writers working in literary registers tended to respond more strongly to the continent’s exploration history than to its political present. Despite his direct experience of contemporary Antarctica via a US-sponsored visit in the 1960s, Australian novelist Thomas Keneally wrote two novels set in the ‘Heroic Era’ of the early twentieth century, drawing on expeditions led by Robert F. Scott and Douglas Mawson. Irish poet Derek Mahon’s villanelle ‘Antarctica’ (1985) takes its inspiration from Laurence Oates’s famous walk out of the tent to his death during Scott’s expedition. A focus on the ‘Heroic Era’ characterises even work by strongly leftist writers: British playwright Howard Brenton’s *Scott of the Antarctic* (1972) pokes fun at the imperialist, patriarchal and class-bound expedition of his title, while East German playwright Manfred Karge’s *Die Eroberung des Südpols* (The Conquest of the South Pole, 1986) has a group of unemployed men in an industrial town come to terms with their own predicament by reenacting Roald Amundsen’s expedition narrative in an attic room. While these texts could certainly be read in terms of Cold War politics, their specific interest in Antarctica relates primarily to the attitudes and ideologies that dominated its pre-war history.

More obviously relevant are texts falling within the genres that formed such an integral part of Cold War literature in general: thrillers, dystopias, science fiction novels and post-apocalyptic narratives. All of the texts discussed below could be classified within one or more of these genres. While these genres

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16 Historically, such exchanges happened from the time of the IGY. For an account of a US scientist’s stay with Soviet Antarctic researchers in 1960, see Gilbert Dewart’s *Antarctic Comrades: An American with the Russians in Antarctica* (1989).

17 Quoted in Irina Gan, “‘Will the Russians Abandon Mirny to the Penguins after 1959 ... or Will They Stay?’”, *Polar Record*, 45 (2009), p. 174.

18 Burke, *Monday at McMurdo* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1967), p. 136.

19 See Keneally’s *The Survivor* (1969) and *Victim of the Aurora* (1977).

20 See Andrew Hammond, “‘The Twilight of Utopia’': British Dystopian Fiction and the Cold War’, *The Modern Language Review*, 106: 3 (2011), p. 681.
found particular traction in a Cold War climate, they extended tropes and narrative arcs already operating within Antarctic fiction. A line can be traced, for example, from late nineteenth-century polar adventure stories for boys to the Cold War adult Antarctic thriller. In turn, dystopias and science fiction horror narratives draw on the Gothic tradition established by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Edgar Allan Poe, where the bottom of the world lures travellers into a confrontation with their worst fears. Post-apocalyptic fiction, in which the destruction of the present world often clears the way for the vision of a new one, draws on a utopian tradition in which Antarctica functions as a blank, ‘upside-down’ space where an improved society can be located. The analysis offered below, then, includes several texts published in the earlier twentieth century that establish tropes relevant to the Cold War period.

It is no coincidence that the genres that dominate Antarctic fiction of the Cold War and earlier periods are those strongly associated with male writers and readerships. The continent itself was effectively off-limits to women until the later twentieth century, with national programmes beginning to allow female expeditioners to stay at continental scientific bases only from the late 1960s. One of the features of English-language Antarctic fiction published during the 1960s is an anxiety about the potential feminisation of what had been previously conceived primarily as an uncomplicated space for male adventure and a testing ground for manly qualities. The Admiral in *Quick, Before It Melts* who goes purple in the face at the very idea of women in Antarctica is only a slight exaggeration of actual attitudes evident in the US naval establishment and elsewhere at the time. During much of the Cold War period, then, women were deliberately excluded from the continent and few possibilities to include female characters existed (at least in realist fiction). Unsurprisingly, most of the texts discussed below are authored by men and focus primarily on male protagonists.

The remaining sections of this chapter trace a set of thematic concerns, metaphors and narrative arcs that characterise Cold War fiction set in Antarctica, reflecting the continent’s symbolic power as much as the realities of its developing inhabitation and governance. For writers, the ice continent at the bottom of the world was a place from which to explore some of the governing ideas of later twentieth-century geopolitics: contagion and containment; global climate control and transformation; and concealment and revelation.

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21 Benjamin, *Quick, Before It Melts*, p. 30. For a description of women’s presence in Antarctica, and attitudes towards it, in the 1950s and 1960s, see Elizabeth Chipman, *Women on the Ice: A History of Women in the Far South* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1986), pp. 81–95.

22 There are, of course, exceptions to women’s absence as contributors to and characters in the Antarctic imagination at this time. For more detail, see Elizabeth Leane, ‘Fictionalizing Antarctica’, in Dodds, Hemmings and Roberts, eds, *Handbook*, pp. 23–4.
CONTAGION AND CONTAINMENT

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Antarctica remained remarkably unknown. Although sealers had decimated the marine mammal populations of its islands, and explorers had circumnavigated it, sighted it, stood on it and even spent a winter on its coast, the interior of the continent was still unexplored. While the first half of the century saw some forays onto its ice plateau, the continent remained remote and largely impregnable, making it an ideal place to set narratives dealing with a potentially global infection that must be kept contained.

Two very different short stories published prior to the Cold War—Russian poet Valery Bryusov’s ‘Respublika yuzhnavo kresta’ (The Republic of the Southern Cross, 1905) and US pulp science fiction writer John W. Campbell’s ‘Who Goes There?’ (1938)—illustrate the disparate ways in which this thematic could function.23 Set several centuries in the future, Bryusov’s story takes place in a new Antarctic state, established to take advantage of the continent’s substantial metal reserves. Its major city is Zvezdny (‘Star City’), situated at the Pole, covered by a huge opaque dome and home to around 2.5 million people, mainly retired metal-workers. Outwardly the epitome of democracy, the city is actually under the ‘autocratic tyranny’ of the shareholders and directors of the Republic’s factories.24 The city suffers a terrible epidemic—the disease of ‘contradiction’ in which victims act in direct opposition to their will—and before long is in a state of chaos and degeneracy, sealed off from its surrounds. Read in anticipation of the Cold War, the story is significant for its use of contagion as a political metaphor, with the ‘disease’ satirising the contradictions of Bryusov’s own society in the wake of the 1905 revolution.25 While the symbolist qualities of “The Republic of the Southern Cross” invite an allegorical reading, Campbell grounds ‘Who Goes There?’ in realistic detail, drawing elements from Richard Byrd’s narrative Discovery: The Story of the Second Byrd Expedition (1935). Set in the present, the story deals with the discovery by a group of isolated US scientists of an alien body buried deep in the ice. Scientific curiosity trumps caution and the horrific-looking corpse is allowed to defrost. Reviving after millions of years of cryonic slumber, the alien attacks the men and impersonates them so closely that it is impossible to tell genuine human from alien impostor. In the claustrophobia of the underground base, paranoia and
mistrust rapidly rise, until the hero devises a blood-test to determine which of the expeditioners is still human. The role of science as both the hubristic cause and the victorious solution to the crisis, and even more the sense of constant suspicion and secrecy, pre-empt Cold War science fiction narratives.

While in ‘The Republic of the Southern Cross’ and ‘Who Goes There?’ a spreading danger that arises in Antarctica is contained there due to the continent’s remoteness and harsh climate, the converse scenario, in which the Antarctic is the only uninfected region on Earth, became more common in the Cold War period, with the growing threat of a large-scale nuclear attack and ensuing fallout. In these cases, rather than fighting to prevent a contagion escaping the Antarctic and spreading throughout the globe, characters must put their hopes in the impregnability of the continent in an otherwise unliveable world. In post-apocalyptic novels, then, Antarctica often acts as a last possible refuge, a place that remains uncorrupted by humanity’s suicidal actions longer than any other, even providing a symbolically ‘clean’ site from which to start again in narratives where survival is possible. British-Australian writer Nevil Shute’s bestseller On the Beach (1957) sees people in a near-future Melbourne awaiting the inevitable arrival of a radioactive cloud after a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere. As humanity is extinguished slowly, according to latitude, one character speculates that “if there’s anybody in Antarctica […] they might go on for quite a while”. The South Pole becomes in narratives of this kind not only a geographical endpoint but also a temporal one, or what Dennis Cosgrove terms an ‘eschatological [end] of the earth’.28

In action-based narratives, this assumption can translate into a physical quest to reach safety in the far south. Down to a Sunless Sea (1979), by former British fighter pilot David Graham, is a good example. World War Three breaks out while the narrator is piloting a commercial flight from New York to London. Recalling Shute’s novel, he determines to take his passengers “as far South as possible [and] all the way to the South Pole, if necessary”, although his options are limited by the fact that, in the oil-starved future world of the narrative, the US has pulled out of all bases except McMurdo.29 En route, his plane joins with a Russian jet whose captain agrees to take on some of his passengers, in the hope that both aircraft then have the range and lift to avoid radioactive clouds and reach McMurdo. Once arrived, the nationals must put aside their differences to begin the regeneration of humanity in “the first land where all people

26 Not all Cold War narratives in which Antarctica becomes a place of refuge involve nuclear apocalypse, however. In John Calvin Batchelor’s The Birth of the People’s Republic of Antarctica (1983), the South Shetland Islands become vast and terrible refugee camps for those escaping or exiled from a world riven by disease, conflict, madness, racism and religious fanaticism.
27 Shute, On the Beach (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 130.
28 Cosgrove, Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination, new edn (2001; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 220. See also Elizabeth DeLoughrey, ‘Satellite Planetarity and the Ends of the Earth’, Public Culture, 26: 2 (2014), pp. 257–80.
29 Graham, Down to a Sunless Sea, new edn (1979; London: Heywood Books, 1989), p. 190.
are the same”’.\textsuperscript{30} Both Antarctica’s physical isolation and its international and unowned status are significant to plotlines of this kind in which near-total annihilation makes way for tentative regeneration.\textsuperscript{31}

More interested in the possible causes and consequences of a near-total human annihilation, and less in the heroics of individual characters, is Sakyô Komatsu’s post-apocalyptic novel \textit{Fukkatsu no bi} (The Day of Resurrection, 1964). The novel was adapted for film in 1980 with an international cast, incorporating scenes in both Japanese and English and marketed to English-speaking audiences as \textit{Virus}, also the name given to the English translation of the novel published in 2012. A young teenager when the US atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Komatsu grew up with a sense that the world might imminently end. Despite being a scholar of high (Italian) literature, he chose speculative fiction by ‘necessity’ as the genre through which he could best grapple with this condition, eventually becoming one of Japan’s most acclaimed and successful science fiction novelists.\textsuperscript{32}

Komatsu’s novel begins in a near-future world (1973) in which almost all humans and animals have been wiped out by a manufactured virus, leaving only the 10,000 people wintering in Antarctica during the months in which the epidemic took its toll, their isolation, along with the virus’s impotency at very cold temperatures, having protected them.\textsuperscript{33} Along with the inhabitants of two nuclear submarines (one US, one Soviet), this multinational collective begins regrouping to ensure continued life in Antarctica (a scenario that puts considerable pressure on the sixteen women among their number, who are all immediately recast as future mothers).\textsuperscript{34} Just when life seems to be regaining a foothold in Antarctica, an earthquake threatens to trigger a full-scale nuclear war in the north, with an automated US weapons system, activated by the earthquake, sending missiles towards the USSR that initiate an automated Soviet equivalent. Despite its isolation, Antarctica is not immune from the impending conflagration: a former right-wing US administration, it is eventually revealed, had “walked all over the Antarctic Treaty” in its plans to establish a secret missile base there to “take care of the commies in Africa and South

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 304.

\textsuperscript{31} In my (UK) edition of Graham’s novel, this regeneration is short-lived, as an axis shift moves Antarctica north and radioactivity rises to fatal levels, with the final lines offering only a sense of a new beginning in another dimension. The US edition, which I have not seen, apparently has the survivors living on.

\textsuperscript{32} Christopher Bolton, Komatsu Sakyô, Susan Napier, Tatsumi Takayuki, Kotani Mari and Otobe Junko, ‘An Interview with Komatsu Sakyô’, \textit{Science Fiction Studies}, 19: 3 (2002), pp. 238–9.

\textsuperscript{33}Ten thousand presumes a significant increase in the population of Antarctic stations in the few years between the novel’s publication and its temporal setting. Even today, the wintering population in Antarctica is only around 1000.

\textsuperscript{34}See Komatsu, \textit{Virus}, trans. by Daniel Huddleston (1964; San Francisco: Haikasoru, 2012), p. 247. Sixteen women presumes a more progressive future than was actually the case. While the novel’s women come from American, British, Norwegian and Soviet stations, in the historical 1973 none of these nations had had a woman overwinter in Antarctica.
America”. The Soviets are thus likely to have trained some of their own missiles on the continent. Cold War aggression lives on even in the absence of the humans who produced it. A Japanese seismologist volunteers to make a suicidal journey via submarine to the White House to deactivate the system. Although the mission is a failure, he survives the ensuing explosions, as does Antarctica, which was evidently not a Soviet target after all. The novel ends with the survivors’ tentative efforts to recolonise the tip of South America.

While *Virus* is a direct response to Cold War brinkmanship—it opens with a Russian submarine officer snubbing his American captain by replying in his native tongue—the catastrophe that Komatsu describes in considerable detail results not from deliberate action but rather from an accident that the conditions of paranoid militarism make near-inevitable. The virus in question is a biological weapon stolen from a facility in the south of England by a group of mercenaries and released when their plane crashes in the Italian Alps. The teasing response of the mercenaries when asked whom they represent gives a sense of the futility of trying to parcel out blame: “Who are we really working for? Some Nazi holdout in South America? A neo-fascist in West Germany or Italy? The Soviet Union? The Chinese? Perhaps it’s France, possessed by visions of glory. […] OAS? The Mafia? Perhaps the CIA”. Significantly, given Japan’s post-war alliance with America, the US is more culpable in the disaster than any other nation. It eventually becomes clear that the middlemen are indeed working for US agents, from whom the British stole the virus in the first place. Similarly, the nuclear strike is laid at the feet of the extreme right-wing US president who established the automated weapons system, along with the war-crazed US general who activates it in his dying moments. Nonetheless, the situation is so volatile and chaotic that culpability seems somewhat redundant: an “accidental war” is an inevitability when both superpowers, along with their allies, have reached such a high pitch of suspicion and hostility. Blame exists on both sides and, in an inversion of the theory of deterrence via Mutually Assured Destruction, symmetry is what produces the disaster: as a former member of the US Defense Department observes, “[f]ear is always like two mirrors placed opposite one another”.

Antarctica functions in the novel as a utopian antidote to the dystopia that has prevailed across the rest of the planet. Although it serves the familiar function of a physical refuge, “sealed in by ice [and] quarantined from the rest of the world”, the continent is also associated with an idealism inseparable from its (perceived) uselessness. As Komatsu would have been aware, Japan was active in the IGY and established Showa Base in Australia’s claimed territory, an architecturally updated version of which features in the novel. Explicitly

35 Ibid., pp. 271, 272.
36 Ibid., p. 35.
37 Ibid., p. 267.
38 Ibid., p. 270.
39 Ibid., p. 198.
prevented from making a territorial claim by the terms of its post-war Peace Treaty, Japan was one of the twelve states to sign the original Antarctic Treaty, the only non-Western nation, apart from the USSR, to do so. While Komatsu’s narrative represents scientists themselves as politically savvy actors who exaggerate Antarctica’s military and resource potential for their own purposes, their values influence the post-apocalyptic society in positive ways. The military survivors lose their notions of heroic glory and duty and the continent becomes a ‘scientists’ republic’. The humans who inhabit the continent (along with the submarine crews) immediately cohere under a wise elected US leader who in turn takes advice from the oldest survivor, a Soviet professor. Their incipient society faces threats from the outside—the ongoing presence of the virus, the nuclear war—but, despite some initial despair, never suffers from internal conflicts: ‘Now that they had lost their homelands, they were no longer the people of this or that country. All of them were Antarcitans, the earth’s only human society’. The narrative seems to accept on its own terms the image of Antarctica’s internationalist, scientific society as a corrective to escalating national conflicts.

Unlike many of the novels discussed in this chapter, Virus is global not only in its vision of the future but also in its formal structure. Action is set in diverse locations and described from a range of viewpoints. In one chapter the narrator asks readers to abandon their ‘anthropocentric point of view’ and imagine the progress of the virus from a cosmic perspective. Considered in the context of the long history of the ‘small sphere floating unsupported in the darkness of space’, the near-destruction of humanity becomes an ‘utterly routine occurrence’. This temporally and spatially distanced vision of Earth, anticipating famous images taken from space such as the ‘Blue Marble’ (1972), both estranges readers from their usual human-scale thinking and taps into a new planetary imagination that evolved during the Cold War.

**CONTROL AND TRANSFORMATION**

The Cold War saw the development of planetary-scale strategies, vulnerabilities and imaginative visions produced by the threat of world-wide destruction, the growth of global surveillance technologies and the new perspectives produced by space travel. Within scientific and military circles, the potential of geoengineering, particularly cloud-seeding, began to be explored. With their large quantities of stored water and their influence on weather systems, the polar regions took on a new resonance in discourses of planetary control and global futures, especially in the realm of speculative fiction. Well-known science

40 See ibid., p. 242.
41 Ibid., p. 278.
42 Ibid., p. 247.
43 Ibid., p. 203.
44 Ibid., pp. 204, 211.
fiction texts of the period such as John Wyndham’s *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) and J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) imagine a future Earth inundated by ocean due to the melting of the polar caps. Antarctica, within this context, becomes both resource and threat: a continent that might, with sufficient manipulation, be transformed into usable land but might also turn into a weapon to be deployed on a planetary scale.

Probably the first imaginative visions of large-scale physical transformation of Antarctica appeared in the US pulp magazines of the 1930s, when the Byrd expeditions spurred a whole series of science fiction narratives set in the region. I.R. Nathanson’s ‘The Antarctic Transformation’ (1931), from *Amazing Stories*, epitomises the techno-optimistic geoengineering impulse. A brief editorial introduction to the story foresees opportunities in the far south for ‘enterprising engineers and mechanics of the present day, who may find vast natural resources which might with their aid […] assume great industrial proportions’.

The story duly relates the discovery of superheated waters beneath the continent’s interior, leading to a huge construction project and eventually a temperate paradise of cities, industries, highways and large accessible mineral deposits. The following year, *Wonder Stories* offered J.M. Walsh’s ‘When the Earth Tilted’ (1932), which imagines a planet radically altered after the close approach of a comet causes a change in the angle of its rotational axis to its orbital plane: with the icecaps melted and cities flooded, a ‘green and smiling’ Antarctica becomes the familiar refuge, ‘a land from which, perhaps, the salvation of the remnant of mankind might come’. The mad genius of Arthur J. Burks’s ‘The Fatal Quadrant’ (1938), published in *Astounding Stories*, harbours plans to harness the forces of the Antarctic environment to control the planet’s seasons.

Variations on these themes—Antarctica melted, either naturally or anthropogenically, devastating the world while itself transforming into habitable and potentially utopian space—occur in fiction throughout the Cold War period.

One example is the short story ‘The President of the United States, Detective’ (1947), by science writer, philosopher and pacifist H.F. (Gerald) Heard, which won first prize in a short story contest sponsored by *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. Set in a future world in which the USSR has enveloped and then been side-lined by China, the plot focuses on the US president’s deduction that this Chinese-led communist empire is melting Arctic ice, planning to devastate low-lying nations while inhabiting its own interior highlands. He makes an immediate unilateral decision to up the ante, dropping nuclear bombs on both Greenland and Antarctica, with the aim of drowning the communist empire (along with the rest of the world) and shifting “the democratic

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45 Nathanson, ‘The Antarctic Transformation’, *Amazing Stories*, 6: 8 (1931), p. 721.
46 Walsh, ‘When the Earth Tilted’, *Wonder Stories*, 3: 12 (1932), pp. 1343–4.
47 See Burks, ‘The Fatal Quadrant’, *Astounding Stories*, 2: 6 (1938), pp. 43–4.
peoples of the Earth” to the lands freed up by the ice. The narrative is somewhat ambiguous about whether the democratic population will inhabit Greenland, Antarctica or both. However, Heard later developed the story into a longer version, ‘The Thaw Plan’ (1948), in which the West settles Antarctica and the USSR/East settles the far north, with impenetrable jungle in between. Eventually, the two groups evolve into different species. Confused Martian astronomers observing the Earth from afar conclude that the changes to the planet must be natural, as no intelligent life would so alter its global environment. The story is significant here for its literalisation of Cold War polarities, as well as for its anticipation of a series of later disaster novels and thrillers in which Antarctica’s ice—and the tsunamis, massive icebergs and sea-level rise it can produce—becomes a weapon to be deployed.

One of the few Soviet-authored Antarctic-based novels available in English begins with what looks like a climate control plot. Vsadniki niotkuda (Horsemen from Nowhere, 1967), by father-son science fiction writing team Aleksandr and Sergei Abramov, was first published in serial form in 1967 in Smena (Change), the magazine of the Youth Communist League, and translated into English in 1969. The narrative focuses on the members of a Soviet Antarctic expedition who discover that kilometre-long blocks of Antarctic ice are being removed by nebulous extra-terrestrial beings. Later, when the same thing occurs in other ice-covered regions, there is reason to suspect that the aliens are using the ice to geoengineer an Earth-like planet elsewhere. The ice removal is welcomed by humanity, warming the climate conveniently and making available extra land and resources. In the Antarctic, the extraterrestrial “guests” not only locate oil but also drill for it “and put up rigs of a very peculiar design”. An agreement is signed in Moscow by “interested companies” to form the “Society for the Joint Exploitation of Antarctic Petroleum”. While this summary suggests a standard techno-optimistic tale of resource exploitation in which terraforming is generously performed by aliens, Horsemen from Nowhere is far more complex. Although details of the Antarctic setting are drawn straightforwardly from reality—the team returns to the historical Soviet station of Mirny, for example—the specific geopolitics of the continent are marginal to the narrative, which makes no mention of territorial claims or the Treaty. Instead, the Antarctic icescape is the setting for an inexplicable alien experiment in which the men and their equipment are, for a brief period, exactly duplicated and forced to confront their own doubles. When the expedition members, and a US pilot who has joined them, return to base, suspicion grows around whether they themselves might not be alien copies. As the narrative continues, and the action shifts to the northern hemisphere, the

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48 Heard, ‘The President of the United States, Detective’, in Ellery Queen, ed., The Queen’s Awards—Second Series: The Winners of the Second Annual Detective Short-Story Contest Sponsored by Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine (London: Victor Gollancz, 1949), p. 36.
49 Abramov and Abramov, Horsemen from Nowhere, trans. by George Yankovsky (1967; Moscow: Mir, 1969), p. 231.
50 Ibid., pp. 231, 232.
doubling—which involves the subject being immersed in a spreading rose-coloured fog—expands to vehicles, towns and eventually large cities. As with Bryusov’s ‘The Republic of the Southern Cross’, the absurdity of the scenario invites a symbolic reading.

The plotline of *Horsemen from Nowhere* recalls a series of earlier texts: Campbell’s ‘Who Goes There?’, which hinges on similar questions of human and alien identity; Polish novelist Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* (1961), in which scientists investigating a planet-sized lifeform are confronted by its reproductions of people from their past; and the classic B-film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), a parable of communist (or perhaps McCarthyist) infiltration that similarly centres on aliens who perfectly impersonate humans. In *Horsemen from Nowhere*, a US Antarctic military commander, suspecting the duplicates of being “‘fifth column[ists]’”, advocates aggressive action; while he avoids ‘anticommunism’, the American press does not, reporting local views that the pink fog is the “‘work of the Reds’” who “‘not only colour politics, but even the air we breathe’”. Refusing any kind of knee-jerk reaction to either the Americans or the aliens, the Soviet team—by now working with the US commander in the Arctic—makes tentative contact with the extra-terrestrials. Thus the novel is a planetary narrative, but one in which terraforming the polar regions is merely a by-product of a much more important achievement. With its interest in ways to parse the difference between two seemingly identical, the suspicions that arise from such dualities and the restraint needed to bridge the distance between different modes of existence, *Horsemen from Nowhere* can be read as a metaphorical exploration of Cold War binaries. In this context, the Antarctic functions not simply at a narrative level as a remote site where aliens could convincingly be first encountered, but also thematically as a place of (apparent) neutrality in a politically divided world.

**Concealment and Revelation**

While speculative fiction set in Antarctica deals with Cold War anxieties through metaphor and extrapolation, the genre that captures its concerns most literally is the thriller. The Antarctic thriller has its early roots in imperial adventure stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and later developed in US pulp magazine fiction (‘The South Pole Terror’, by Lester Dent writing as Kenneth Robeson, appeared in the *Doc Savage Magazine* in 1936). But the genre was essentially launched by British novelist Hammond Innes’s *The White South* (1949). A massive bestseller set on a factory whaling ship and among the ice floes, Innes’s novel established the Antarctic as an ideal setting for an action-adventure thriller, in which the villain and hero could readily be isolated from external help in a highly hazardous environment. Every decade from this point saw more and more thrillers set in the far south, with several dozen titles

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51 Ibid., pp. 150, 92, 136, 136.
published in the second half of the twentieth century. Most Antarctic thrillers deal with covert operations, geopolitical intrigue and conflict over resources, often mineral deposits. Unsurprisingly, many are highly formulaic, most are written for US readerships and a number feature Russians among the villains, at least from the late 1970s. Nicholas Barker and Anthony Masters’s *Red Ice* (1986), for instance, revolves around Soviet uranium mining and Richard Moran’s disaster thriller *Cold Sea Rising* (1986) sees the USSR attempt to weaponise the Ross Ice Shelf, which has split off from the continent due to volcanic activity. *Operation: McMurdo Sound* (1982) and *White Death* (1985), titles in the ‘Killmaster’ series focusing on the Bond knockoff (and house pseudonym) Nick Carter, both involve Russian villains and lethal viruses manufactured in Antarctica. The multiple plot options of the children’s ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ novel *South Pole Sabotage* (1989), by Seddon Johnson, which include encounters with a missing UN satellite, a submarine, KGB and CIA spies and killer whales, are not a bad indication of the typical ingredients of the adult Antarctic thriller.

Not all Antarctic thrillers, however, are as interchangeable as this summary might suggest. Some, like *Monday at McMurdo*, draw on detailed knowledge of the continent and others use the far southern setting to bring to the fore regions, alliances and conflicts usually considered peripheral to Cold War intrigue. A number of Antarctic thrillers, including Barker and Masters’s *Red Ice* and Innes’s late novels *Isvik* (1991) and *Target Antarctica* (1993), engage with South American geopolitics. The action of Geoffrey Jenkins’s *A Grue of Ice* (1962) is set on and around the subantarctic Bouvetøya. During the Cold War, this uninhabited island—the most remote in the world—was claimed by Norway, contested by Britain and valued by Jenkins’s own nation of South Africa in meteorological terms, while also briefly becoming the subject of Soviet interest. The resource at the heart of the novel’s conspiracy is caesium, a rare mineral used in spacecraft. The hero, a scientist and ex-World War Two naval commander, must prevent a large deposit being revealed and exploited, as this could trigger “‘full-scale atomic war’”. The site of the deposit—an uncharted island near Bouvetøya—must remain secret if global stability is to be maintained.

Ironically, Antarctica’s seeming remoteness from Cold War geopolitics—not just physically but also politically, in its unique international governance system—is what makes it particularly suitable for covert operations in thriller narratives. *White for Danger* (1979), by Canadian-born New Zealand writer David Stevens, makes this explicit. The hero and narrator Logan Adams (who, as a

52 Exact numbers depend on how tightly the thriller and the Antarctic setting are defined. For a tentative list of titles (and more detailed discussion of the genre), see Elizabeth Leane, ‘Unstable Places and Generic Spaces: Thrillers Set in Antarctica’, in Lisa Fletcher, ed., *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reading Genre Settings* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 25–43.

53 See Roberts and van der Watt, ‘Environment Too Extreme?’, pp. 166–72.

54 Jenkins, *A Grue of Ice*, new edn (1962; New York and Bloomington: Authors Choice, 2009), p. 202.
Canadian-New Zealand adventure-thriller writer, seems something of an author surrogate) travels in an eight-strong multinational expedition to the region of Antarctica below Australia, searching for a mysterious city glimpsed on an earlier journey. Instead, they discover a secret Russian submarine base in caverns under the continent, powered by geothermal energy from volcanic fumaroles. This access to power might allow the Soviets, the expeditioners speculate, to “set up economic mining operations [...] build a small city and virtually claim an entire continent”. As the action unfolds, half of the team are revealed to be working covertly for either US or Soviet espionage agencies. The key villain, however, is not the sullen Russian navigator Captain Stanislaus Dyrsin, who has been posing as the American Stan Dawson, nor his thuggish and predatory sidekick Kokko, a Marxist Finn, but rather the seemingly affable New Zealand cinematographer and mountaineer, Cecil ‘Plum’ Pitt, a ‘sleeper’ whose sole motivation is money. “But you’re a New Zealander!” exclaims one character incredulously on learning his identity, as if his nationality automatically precludes any possible involvement in international intrigue. As Pitt explains, this assumption makes him an ideal spy: “because New Zealand is such a backwater in big-time politics [...] we get the open-arm welcome because we’re harmless”. This logic applies even more strongly to Antarctica, also a “back-of-beyond place” where death can easily be put down to natural forces. Even the CIA, although aware something might be afoot, is dismissive: “After all, who would think there would be anything important in the middle of Antarctica? [...] It’s not exactly a place where you can slip away for a secret meeting in a telephone booth”. While Antarctica thwarts the stereotypical tropes of the spy thriller, its very innocence signals its potential as a setting.

The Antarctic Cold War thriller inevitably merges into other genres: most frequently science fiction, horror and disaster, but also, in at least one instance, the utopia. D.C. Poyer’s White Continent (1980) is clearly marketed as a thriller, with its cover placing it ‘in the icy-hot tradition of [Alistair MacLean’s Arctic-set] Ice Station Zebra—a novel of relentless suspense on the final frontier’. The initial plot arc sees a diverse team of international experts, united by their hostility to the USSR, brought together by a group of mysterious backers to lead a secret operation to exploit coal and oil reserves in Antarctica. Their aim is presented as a noble one: to prevent a predicted Soviet monopoly on oil that would enable world dominance. Their mining operation will be covert only initially; the ultimate plan is to build a permanent settlement that, with other territorial claims thus far unrecognised, will establish sovereignty over the whole continent. This also requires hostile takeovers of existing national stations, which in the recession-ridden near-future world of the

55 Stevens, White for Danger, new edn (1979; Glasgow: Fontana-Collins, 1980), p. 166.
56 Ibid., p. 149.
57 Ibid., p. 149 (emphasis in original).
58 Ibid., p. 163.
59 Ibid., p. 157.
60 Poyer, White Continent (New York: Jove, 1980), front cover strapline.
narrative (the mid-1980s) comprise only two US and two Soviet bases. From the outset, however, the operation is undermined by an unidentified saboteur within its ranks.

Following this standard thriller set-up, however, the plot rapidly goes off track as the colonists become emotionally attached to their new homeland, learning the technologies necessary to function year-round in the extreme environment, establishing a flag, an anthem and an official proclamation of independence and, despite their capitalist and anti-Soviet motivations, developing a ‘true communist society’. The narrative transforms into a fully-fledged utopia based around a ‘very odd combination’ of communist and libertarian principles, a combination so idealistic that, one settler observes, it could only work amid the stark natural beauty and “cleanness” of Antarctica. The utopia eventually fails when the settlers are forced into a conflict with invading Chilean forces, who are keen to establish their own mining operation: the “dream” of an Antarctic homeland, reflects a former South African mercenary now willing to die for his new country, will become a “raw-material appendage of a rotten little South American dictatorship”. In Poyer’s narrative, exploitation of Antarctica’s resources is justified only if accompanied by home-making. *White Continent* is one of very few Antarctica utopias published in the Cold War period and is unusual in its embrace of the untransformed continent as a possible site of human settlement.

**Conclusion**

While both global and Antarctic geopolitics have shifted significantly since the end of the Cold War, a number of the texts discussed here have had surprisingly long afterlives. ‘Who Goes There?’ saw yet another adaptation in 2011; *Virus* was published in English in 2012, following Komatsu’s death (and took on new relevance when the COVID-19 pandemic affected all continents bar Antarctica); press reports appeared in 2015 of a possible adaptation of *Down to a Sunless Sea*; and Poyer’s *White Continent* was released the same year in a new, slimmer edition, now presented not as a thriller but as a novel of ‘war in

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61 Ibid., p. 227.
62 Ibid., pp. 227, 205.
63 Ibid., p. 292. This is something of an ironic statement given that Chile and Argentina are the two nations that have actually attempted to fashion a sense of domestic belonging to their claimed Antarctic territories, with families living at their bases on the Antarctic Peninsula. Although Poyer’s colonists, who begin their settlement in 1985, claim the first child born on the continent, historically both Argentina and Chile beat them to this.
64 An Antarctic utopian narrative published around the same time as Poyer’s is Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story ‘Sur’ (1982), a feminist alternative history in which a group of South American women are first to the South Pole. Their mode of inhabiting Antarctica, it hardly needs saying, contrasts significantly with that of Poyer’s settlers. Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Antarctica* (1997), although politically quite different from *White Continent*, shares some of its interest in home-making and judicious resource exploitation.
Antarctica’. This phrase, included in the new edition’s subtitle, relies for its shock value on a continuing sense of dissonance between the South Polar region and the prospect of armed conflict. The image of Antarctica established by the Cold War—a continent of ‘science and peace’, an exceptional place, a land innocent of conflict and national disputes—remains strong in the twenty-first century. With the 1991 ‘Madrid Protocol’ legally enshrining the region as specially protected, however, the Cold War mythology of the technological frontier has been overlaid and to some extent replaced by an environmentalist framing of the continent as the ‘last wilderness’. Climate change has given a new sense of urgency to Antarctica’s protection and to the work of its scientists. Although thrillers have continued to appear in their dozens, their conspiracies have altered: resource exploitation is still a common focus but is now understood in terms of the environmental damage it might do instead of, or as well as, its geopolitical significance.

Historically, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia’s ability to maintain its presence in Antarctica wavered. Its flagship station, Vostok, was forced to close for an extended period in 1994, with the New York Times declaring that ‘Russia no longer considers its Antarctic bases politically important’. The US, by contrast, began around the same time to plan for a new station at the South Pole, which housed expeditioners from 2003. However, the emergence of new ‘polar powers’, such as India and particularly China, has created a set of tensions that often look very similar to those of the 1950s. In Australia, for example, think tanks, government reports and academics have warned of increasing Chinese presence, and possible covert activities, to the nation’s south. Even as I wrote this chapter, an article appeared in the Mercury, the daily newspaper of my ‘Antarctic Gateway’ town of Hobart, reporting ‘widespread concern about the communist nation’s presence in the region’. In Antarctic fiction, too, Chinese villains have begun to replace Soviet ones: in Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens’s Icefire (1998), a Chinese ‘sleeper’ working as a fighter pilot for the US uses nuclear warheads to detach the Ross Ice Shelf, sending a massive tsunami towards California. In L.A. (Louisa) Larkin’s Thirst (2012), an Australian glaciologist must thwart a Chinese CEO’s plan to explode an ice-shelf to tow to a water-short China. The growing complexity of actors interested in Antarctica—including the Treaty signatories (which now number over...
fifty), tourist companies and NGOs—means that its governance system may be put under increasing pressure, and its fiction is likely to reflect this in new tropes, plotlines and character stereotypes.

The Antarctica of the present is undoubtedly a product of the Cold War. It has been shaped not only by the legal instruments that declare it an international continent of peace and science but also by the cultural texts that reinforce, exploit and sometimes challenge this framing. Conversely, imaginative responses to Antarctica in the twentieth century provide a unique perspective on the geopolitics of the Cold War. Its remote and isolated location enables anxieties around contagion, containment and concealment to be spatialised and explored. Viewing the world ‘from below’ brings to the fore places, actors and incidents normally considered marginal, defamiliarising typical understandings of the global conflict.