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Who can Say What Lies Deep in the Mountains?: *La Gruta del Toscano*

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Abstract

In his 2006 novel *La Gruta del Toscano*, Mexican author Ignacio Padilla demonstrates the tendency among the Crack writers to “embrace and contest” their uneven access to world literature as writers from a peripheral culture. This under studied novel refuses to engage in privileging Latin American literature to establish truths about the non-West in Asia. The uneven power dynamic of East and West is embodied by Sherpa Pasang Nuru’s oral tales about lost Western explorers searching for the bottom of a cave they believe to be Dante’s Inferno. Nuru controls the narrative about the terrain and its literary connections. Padilla’s gesture of reaching out and appropriating source texts from the European literary canon and from Alpinist narrative embraces the power of their human drama, but also contests their Eurocentrism and imperialistic worldview. Rather than speaking for someone else in the Himalayan contact zone, Padilla’s inscrutable protagonist Nuru demonstrates sympathy for the situation of the local Sherpa population. As a “strategic Occidentalist,” to use the theory of Ignacio Sánchez Prado about the Crack authors, Padilla approaches Mexican narrative from a variety of foreign inspirations, and like in Borges’ view, his work demonstrates that there are no geographic limits to the scope of Latin American literary invention.

Keywords: Ignacio Padilla, *La Gruta del Toscano*, Crack authors, East / West, Coloniality, Alpinism.

People have always named the highest peaks and sometimes the deepest caves. In 1865 the tallest mountain in the world was given a new name for maps printed in London in honor of the retirement of chief surveyor Sir George Everest, a man who never actually saw the mountain. The Royal Geographic Society in London affirmed the name in his honor while also recognizing, as early as 1854, that local Nepali villages already called the mountain Devadhunga. Wade Davis notes that Sir George even complained that his name would be impossible to express in any of the local languages. Still, once the RGS had decided upon the name, it became one of the facts that children around the world would memorize as a fundamental truth. Decades went by, and European imperialistic projects oriented themselves toward the centers of continents and the extremes of the earth, like the highest point and the North and South Poles. Being the first to reach an extreme global point (from the European

point of view) became a fixation leading to the creation of heroic myths of geographic conquest. Many of the early attempts to climb Mt. Everest ended not only in failure but in legendary catastrophes, such as the famous and fatal summit attempt by George Mallory and Sandy Irvine in 1924. Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's globally reported ascent in 1953 changed their lives and made them the most famous individuals from their respective countries. Satisfying the now global desire to summit Everest has been a significant industry unto itself in Nepal since the 1990s. The Western desire to reach the highest point in the world has been fueled by heroic myths and nationalist competition that reduce the lived experiences of the non-Western people of the Himalayan mountains into folkloric supporting characters in travel narratives.

The discourse of colonialist exploration in the Himalayas is the theme of the novel *La Gruta del Toscano* (2006) by the Mexican writer Ignacio Padilla. There are two different kinds of contested spaces in the novel that are observed and interpreted by Western outsiders, whose truths are only known by non-Western locals. The first is that of the terrain itself, for in the mountains in Asia frustrated European expeditions flounder about naming its features in attempts to achieve world records, all the while abusing local sherpa climbing guides. The second space is that of Western literature, which in this case includes the Hispanic canon as a feature in the literary terrain upon which the novel is built. Both the physical and the literary terrain are contested by an enigmatic non-Western narrator who embraces and contests the right to define non-Western places as sites of meaning through literary interpretation of geography.

Both the adventure chronicle and the literary narratives about the Himalayas form stages that fit Mary Louise Pratt's concept of a "contact zone" in which a European imperial power re-writes the geography and history of a subjugated land with their own interests in mind. In this contested place, the reader's understanding of the physical and literary encounters in the novel are being undermined. The truth about the events portrayed comes to the reader through the stories told by the enigmatic local guide Pasang Nuru, a sherpa who lives near the entrance to the cave, as recorded in interviews with BBC journalists Milena Giddens and Seamus Linden about what he observed during his long life deep in the Himalayan mountains. Giddens and Linden are the Westerners attempting to document the truth for a film through the slippery oral stories told by a now elderly Nuru that contest Western adventure chronicles. He tells them a subversive reimagining of George Mallory's

failed attempt to climb Mount Everest, Sir Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay's successful climb, and parodies of a number of more contemporary European source adventure chronicles. The project of defining the physical terrain of these mountains and establishing their place names is an object of satire as Nuru is the surviving witness to the tragic re-writing of his homeland into a prized object of Western imperialist desire. As such, the novel satirizes and plays with the myths of European geographic imperialism in this contact zone by planting the national flags of a series of foolish European expeditions at the bottom of a deep cave.

In relation to the contested space of the Western literary tradition is the implied external observer or the reader: Padilla bases many of the characters of his explorers on a wide range of fictions, such as the 19th-century "Ruritania" novels of Anthony Hope, including *The Prisoner of Zenda*. The expeditions' reason for plumbing the depths of this cave in the Himalayas is that Nuru tells a group of Ruritanian explorers that the cave is the entrance to the Inferno from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The invention of Western meaning for a place that might not be more than a deep cave is shown through Padilla's narcissistic European explorers, who promote their own heroism in the same way that Don Quixote invents the Cave of Montesinos and then describes its marvels to Sancho Panza. Hope's invention of Ruritania parodied the pretensions of 19th-century continental Europe, so its inclusion in this novel extends the parody to target European coloniality in the conquest of the Himalayas. The counterpoint to the portentous colonial European epistemology regarding the Himalayas is the inscrutable local sherpa, Pasang Nuru, who guides and mourns the explorers through their travails, observing that their doomed interpretations of Asian topography are determined by Western literature. Apart from information learned from shreds of published narratives and a mysterious old camera, he is the only surviving witness to provide testimony and establish truths. Nuru, like the cave itself, resists Western interpretation or understanding while, at the same time, he is always there at the entrance, like Virgil, ready to guide as new European expeditions arrive.

I will first contextualize the novel as it fits within Crack literature and analyze how it aligns with and surpasses established criticism about deterritorialized narratives. Then, I will explore the contested spaces of geography and literature to compare these with a selection of chronicles and fictional texts that may have inspired this novel, insisting that the key to its critical dynamic is centered on the manipulation of the non-Western character Pasang Nuru, who controls and undermines Western epistemology about the non-West.

Padilla's friend and collaborator Pedro Ángel Palou notes that the Crack evolved in 2016 when Padilla tragically died in a car accident. Reflecting on his work, Palou reminisced about how Padilla could “mostrar las manchas necesarias, sin las cuales no existe la realidad, en la apariencia prístina e inmaculada de las cosas” (32). Padilla was unable to be part of the release that same year of the “Crack Postmanifesto” or the designated session at the Modern Language Association celebrating twenty years of the Crack authors, which sought to put the group's writings into perspective. Many scholarly articles have been published on the literary tendencies and self-promotion of Crack authors. Researchers in critical volumes edited by Héctor Jaimes, Pablo Brescia, and Oswaldo Estrada, as well as monographs by Gustavo Guerrero and Ramón Alvarado Ruiz, have taken the pulse and put into perspective the Crack authors' literary output. To be sure, the writers of the Crack (Jorge Volpi, Eloy Urroz, Pedro Ángel Palou, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, and Ignacio Padilla) were friends, mostly based in Mexico City, and considered themselves to be prolific readers. Tomás Regalado López describes the group as a “Generational discourse understood as a strategy of distinction” and “positioning strategy within the literary field.” (30). Much like the attitude of the McOndo authors, the Crack Manifesto and their early novels, took on what Guerrero calls “la postura del joven escritor” (112) as a way to orient themselves against the backdrop of the publishing domination by major authors of the Post-Boom. According to their manifesto, a commonality between them is that their books are serious and complicated works that challenge the reader rather than offering easy answers or simplistic cultural metaphors. Their novels often dialogue with the great literary movements within Mexican, Latin American and the Western canon and represent an effort to separate themselves from the output of some of the leading writers of the Post-Boom, whom they criticized for exhausting the genre of Magical Realism. Ramón Alvarado Ruiz finds much of the Crack's writings to be transnational in the sense that they show:

continuous displacements of the characters, their confrontation of external contexts and the way they assume the world's history. There is a local representation, but there is a global one as well. Instead of having an opposition, we have a dialectic configuration of modern history. (50)

Padilla's most successful novel, *Amphytrion* (2000), won prestigious international awards, and, like Volpi's 1999 novel *En busca de Klingsor*, it was set in the context of Nazi Germany. In 2001 Padilla published a collection of short stories named *Las antípodas y el siglo* that shares an

obvious connection to the world-spanning thematics of *La Gruta del Toscano*. The obvious progenitor of Latin American appropriation of world stories is Jorge Luis Borges, though, unlike Borges, who saw his Argentine voice as an equal to any other, Volpi and Padilla make a point about critiquing the systemic imbalance of power between European, North American, and other non-dominant voices in World Literature. In the “Crack Postmanifiesto,” Padilla states, “we have maintained our right to set our stories on the world’s, or underworld’s stage, where we can best express these particular stories which yes, have always been at home in the nation we know as the Spanish language” (Jaimes, 200). Indeed, the underworld’s stage is exactly where the characters of *La Gruta del Toscano* perform their tragic roles. However, not all critics admire the Crack’s deterritorialized narratives.

In an interview with Javier Rodríguez Marcos, Argentine author Ricardo Piglia alluded that the Crack authors were going too far to be seen as cosmopolitan, and in a rush to cash in on the popularity of Western narratives about World War II: “Ahora se da el gesto deliberado de ser contemporáneo, pones un nazi en una novela y ya pareces cosmopolita” (1). While not mentioning the Crack authors by name, there is little doubt that he had the authors of *Amphytrion* and *En busca de Klingsor* in mind. On the other side of the debate, some critics have found the Crack authors to be overly interested in the trappings of intellectualism found in following the traditional Latin American writers of the past who reside figuratively in Ángel Rama’s concept of the “Lettered City.” Thus, Gustavo Guerrero states,

Pues si es cierto que son capaces de plantearse una estrategia paranacional novedosa con la que toman distancia ante su propio campo y tratan de cambiar los signos de una literatura nivel global, no es menos cierto que simultáneamente, y en un sentido opuesto, acaban desempolvando la muceta del letrado e intentando redorar el aura que la acompaña. (165)

In his view, Guerrero sees the Crack as being aligned with following in the footsteps of the Boom and hewing to traditionalism in the canon of Latin American literature. According to Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Padilla is a “strategic Occidentalist,” meaning that he writes from a semi-peripheral position in the Mexican literary tradition about cosmopolitan interests; he appropriates from the Western canon with specific goals in mind (18). On the creation of the Crack group and on their access to publishing, Sánchez Prado notes:

The Crack group ... sought the right to participate in world literature without the imperatives that world literature in its different varieties (including

postcolonialism and, paradoxically, transnational corporate publishers) imposes on them as default responsibilities of a Mexican artist. (18)

Perhaps because of this, Crack fiction has not been seen as representative of Mexican identity even though each of these authors has written significant novels set in Mexico. Sánchez Prado defines “strategic Occidentalism” as a position that enables one to “embrace and contest” the uneven access that peripheral cultures have to the Eurocentric conception of world literature (19). This is certainly part of the project in *La Gruta del Toscano*, but in this essay, I seek to demonstrate that the novel also goes one step beyond an exercise in jockeying Hispanic literature into position alongside the traditional Western powers within World Literature. I argue that it also foregrounds a non-Western and non-Hispanic narrative viewpoint to have ownership of narrating the events related to the novel and, indeed, to choose not to reveal to the Spanish language readership to what truly happens in the novel. Moreover, I seek to show here how Padilla’s novel not only “embraces and contests” the Western literary canon of alpinist writing to have ownership of relaying meaning about the Himalayas but also resists the ability of any literature, including Hispanic Literature, to do the same through the foregrounding of an enigmatic, unreliable Sherpa narrator with sole access to the truth.

Through his appropriations of alpinist chronicles and fictions, his narrative portrays the Westerners as fantastic and foolhardy, while depicting the Sherpa people as inscrutable and beyond the empirical understanding of the West. In this novel, the beliefs of the Europeans about the non-West are broken into uncertainties at the “dislocations” between where Western mountaineering narrative and Western literature attempt to write over the physical Himalayas and the people who reside there.

Even as they clearly desired to be seen as important voices in Latin American literature, Sánchez Prado notes that Crack authors did not receive much distribution abroad, observing that Padilla, like many contemporary Mexican authors, has not had any significant success in English translation or in foreign literary circles. Only Volpi saw significant sales of his translated works. Because of the lack of traction outside of the Mexican market, Sánchez Prado sees that the Crack group’s narratives have received very little scholarly attention outside of Mexico. The only two critics to have discussed *La Gruta del Toscano* are Sánchez Prado, with a brief mention by Rosario Hubert in their broader analysis of cosmopolitan Latin American fiction. Indeed, across the two aforementioned edited volumes and monographs concerned with Crack writing practices, none of them mention *La Gruta del Toscano* more than in passing.

This article seeks to fill in the lacuna of analysis on this innovative novel by focusing on the play of appropriation and parody among Padilla's literary source texts.

Padilla's books often speak less about the world than they speak about other books. In the section of the "Manifiesto del Crack" written by Padilla, he coins the phrase "cronotopocero" to describe the sandbox-like creative space of the novel. According to Padilla, the places created in the inaugural novels of the Crack group are both everywhere and nowhere; in "dislocations" rather than preconceived and fixed narrative worlds.

La dislocación en estas novelas del Crack no será a fin de cuentas sino remedio de una realidad alocada y dislocada, producto de un mundo cuya massmediatización lo lleva a un fin de siglo trunco en tiempos y lugares, roto por exceso de ligamentos. (*Lateral*, 4)

La Gruta del Toscano is an example of this kind of early 2000s Mexican fiction that takes place in fictional liminality between the 19th-century European fictions, colonialist travel chronicles, and contemporary alpinist media production that it both appropriates and parodies.

The places, characters, and adventures in this novel draw inspiration from a wide variety of source texts, both real expeditions and fictional ones. Both types take place in the "contact zone" of the Himalayas. Pratt defines a "contact zone" as being "the space of colonial encounters ... usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Together, the two types of sources form a truly unique pastiche of "dislocaciones" where the novel's plot takes place. The alpinist disaster story of the early twentieth century, the steampunk science-fiction adventure set in the 19th century, and the epic poem of the 14th century are all dislocated layers of place forming a pastiche in the novel. Many of these source texts are famous adventure tales from European and North American explorers, novelists, and non-fiction writers. Padilla gives a description of *La Gruta del Toscano*'s source texts:

Se trata desde luego de un homenaje a la literatura que determinó mi vocación, alguna tan mala como Julio Verne y Salgari, y otra definitivamente apreciable como es la literatura pelágica de Conrad y Melville. Desde luego, toda la obra gira en torno a mi obsesión por el infierno y la literatura de Dante, así como al trabajo de Paul Bowles. Es, creo yo, o pretende ser una novela de aventuras, pero sobre todo es una paráfrasis de las crónicas de alpinismo sobre las que me volqué sobre todo después de que conocí la noticia del hallazgo del cadáver

de George Mallory en el cuarto escalón del Everest. De cronistas como Baldwin y especialmente Krakauer, aunque también de los relatos de las conquistas y desastres de los ochomiles, sé que obtuve la mayor influencia. Eso, y sin duda, de manera muy explícita *El prisionero de Zenda*, de Anthony Hope, con sus guiños a Kipling (*The Man Who Would Be King*), a Beckett (*Esperando a Godot* y *Fin de partida*, que son también modelos para *Si volviesen sus majestades*), mucho *Beau Geste*, de Wren, y *Las minas del rey Salomón*, de Haggard. (ctd. in Sánchez Prado 156)

La Gruta del Toscano's varied intertextuality with these works is astounding and leads to a complicated narrative geography. When Padilla mentions “crónicas de alpinismo,” he demonstrates the difficulty of even speaking about mountain climbing without employing Eurocentric concepts, which is significant given that Alpinism—denoting the climbing of the Alps—is as a Eurocentric descriptor for mountain exploration in general. Important scenes from the novel take place in the fictional city of Streslau and the bottom of Cocytus, the deepest ring of Hell, but they also occur in London and Darjeeling. Hubert points out that many of the descriptions of the places in the novel range from the incredibly specific to the intentionally vague and that many of the route points around the cave are made up, like the pass of Ibn Magaar (55). She observes, “Padilla doubles Borges’ bet for the universal geography available to the peripheral writer, for he transcends the global scope of the world as his patrimony and takes on literary settings” (50). Hubert points out that this novel reaffirms Borges’s belief that for Argentine, and in extension Latin American, writers “debemos pensar que nuestro patrimonio es el universo; ensayar todos los temas” (5). Padilla’s composite world drawn from obscure and well-known sources is an innovation born from Borges’s beliefs and demonstrates the potential of writing from “cronotopo zero.” The layering of invented spaces from the novel plays upon the tensions of the known physical world.

Padilla focused his doctoral studies on the Quixote at the University of Salamanca, and although it is omitted from his quoted list of inspirations, the event when the wandering knight descends into the cave of Montesinos in the second volume of *Don Quixote* is a rich source for the novel. This reference to Cervantes’s seminal tale is crucial to understanding the novel because it demonstrates the same process by which *Don Quixote's* imagination transforms an unremarkable hole in the ground into a place of legendary and literary importance.¹ *Don Quixote's* invents appropriate novels, history, and myths in order to decorate the simple cave

with world importance. The links between *La Gruta del Toscano* and this Quixotesque adventure are evident in reference to Don Quixote's guide to the underworld—for Dante, the guide is Virgil, for Don Quixote, it is Montesinos, and for the Ruritanian explorers, it is Pasang Nuru. Nuru's identification of the cave as the entrance to the underworld to European explorers, sparks the action of the novel. However, where Virgil and Montesinos lend themselves to the project of exploration and discovery, Pasang Nuru remains detached. Clearly, then, *La Gruta del Toscano* plays upon and participates in the literary appropriation occurring within the Quixote. The uncertainty and fabrications of Don Quixote regarding the contents of his cave are reflected in the same problematic interpretations of the contents of the cave by the characters in Padilla's narrative. There is no real history to the cave—all that can be said about it are inventions drawn from myths and legends. The cave of Montesinos is one of the dislocations found in *La Gruta del Toscano*, and rather than be an empirically explorable location with unique characteristics, both caves are blank canvases for invention, whose attributes and qualities are more determined by the goals and dreams of the characters than by their geology. In both texts, the caves are “cronotopo zero,” and the reader observes the process by which the caves are ascribed meaning by the characters.

Details that would nail down Nuru's character are left out of the narrative. He is shrouded in mystery as he serves as a knowing but inscrutable Himalayan version of Virgil's character from Dante's *Inferno*. The novel begins with expressions of doubt by the BBC journalists as to the possibility of capturing any of his histories accurately, “La historia guarda dos versiones de la muerte de Pasang Nuru” (1). While the European characters' deaths are definitive objective facts, Nuru exists in a haze of uncertainty, as if the narrative voice is incapable of fixing his details into Western epistemology. In Pratt's analysis of “contact zones,” she mentions the need to “foreground the interactive, improvisational, diffusionist dimensions of colonial encounters” (7). Nuru is certainly an example of a non-Western individual interacting with and improvising for the European explorers. Like many an entrepreneurial guide in a contact zone, he can speak a variety of European languages, “hablaba francés con acento gascón y un inglés como aprendido en un liceo isabelino” (15) and Captain Reissen-Mileto “no sabe si halagarlo o recelar de él como si aquél fuese un arte del demonio” (15). The narrative does not try to rationalize the sherpa, “el sherpa nunca pudo explicarse. Su don de lenguas era para él algo tan natural como la respiración, una facultad inescrutable” (17). This uncertainty about how to interpret Nuru's character shows how he

escapes the attempts of the Western explorers to explain the non-West. As a mountain guide, he inspires the imaginations of his contracted explorers by showing them the entrance to the underworld and even points out a possible inscription above the cave as evidence. Though his purpose may be as a subversion of Virgil, he is far from ominous; consistently, he is the most sympathetic character in the plot. The reader is introduced to him via confounding taped interviews with Giddens, and as the only surviving witness to many of the attempts to explore the cave, there is no other version of events other than his. Hubert posits that Nuru's opacity puts into question the very concept of exoticism to be found in the Orientalism of typical European alpinist texts. It parodies and subverts the genre of European travel writing that exoticizes the Orient even as it supposedly gives a Western scientific and subjective account. This resonates with Araceli Tinajero's concept of Latin American narratives that speak from the position of Western literature but excuse themselves from the possibility of concretely determining the specific facts of the Asian object of its gaze. Tinajero's object of study are works that express a general solidarity with marginalized and colonized people in Asia, and this general sentiment of sympathy pervades *La Gruta del Toscano* as well.

This critique of Eurocentric epistemology refuses to nail down the sherpa guide with any concrete facts. Mountaineering narratives often employ sherpas similarly to those of Western climbers—as part of the climbers' necessary equipment. The word Sherpa indicates the community of Tibetans who identify by it, but for the explorers the term “sherpa” has come to mean “porter.” Many of the first chronicles of climbing Himalayan peaks describe how many sherpas were lost during the journey: George Mallory “lost” seven sherpas in his expedition of 1922 and two more in 1923 (Davis). The verb “lost” euphemizes a gruesome death by falling or hypothermia, which these men suffered. Mallory and his companion, Andrew “Sandy” Irvine, were “lost” themselves in the unsuccessful Everest expedition of 1924. But while Mallory and Irvine were lost into legend, the lost sherpas were replaced like oxygen tanks. The hubris of Western climbers perishing in the Himalayas instantly suggests Padilla's reference to Jon Krakauer's best-seller *Into Thin Air*, which sets the stage for disaster on Everest by depicting the tragic competition between mountain guide Rob Hall's and Scott Fischer's climbing groups that ended in multiple deaths in 1997. Padilla also mentioned to Sánchez Prado the hugely publicized discovery of George Mallory's body below the summit of Mt. Everest in 1999 by Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition leader Eric Simonsen and legendary climber Conrad Anker in his list of inspirations. The media speculation fueling the

expedition to find those two lost European climbers centered on whether the pair made it to the summit before they died (no European newspapers questioned whether “lost” sherpas from any expedition had reached the summit before they disappeared). One of the remaining questions is whether Mallory’s camera can be found, as it is conceivable that a photograph could be developed to reveal if they had made it to the top. Finding a missing camera that could contain the evidence to prove European achievement is also the final quest of explorers in *La Gruta del Toscano*. Surprisingly, Nuru produces for the journalists one very old camera. These missions amounted to more than just gentlemen’s sport. According to Wade Davis, part of the logic of the Himalayan expedition is to inscribe the formerly free region into the knowledge of the British colonial enterprise,

If maps were the metaphor by which the Raj came into being, knowledge provided a foundation upon which the entire imperial adventure rested. The botanical explorer and archeologist, along with the trader, surveyor, and missionary were the forward scouts of empire. (46)

They also reinforce a category of inferiority in their work, the condition of coloniality upon local populations. Nevertheless, Western climbing chronicles only sometimes follow this rule. The first words of New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary’s chronicle of his ascent of Everest are, quoting Tenzing Norgay: “Tenzing called it the roar of a thousand tigers. Hour after hour, it came whining and screeching in an unrelenting stream from the west with such ferocity it set the canvas of our small Pyramid tent cracking like a rifle range” (1). By dint of his partnership and shared experience with Tenzing (who had been part of several previous British and Swiss expeditions), Hillary claimed legitimacy for being the first pair to climb Mt. Everest. Tenzing had been so invaluable to this and previous expeditions that he was made a full member of the party, a rank not afforded any other herpa or local guides. Hillary applauded Tenzing’s insistence that a Sherpa ought to be in the first group of humans to reach the summit and never revealed which of them set foot at the top first.

In *La Gruta del Toscano*, Pasang Nuru is an opaque and powerful agent that defies the objectification and anonymity of Mallory’s lost sherpas and Hillary and Tenzing’s comradeship. Who “loses” who is part of the epistemological power dynamic that forms when the survivors of expeditions put their experiences into words both in the narrative and in the books by European expedition members. The Sherpas of the valley and the monks at nearby Rongbuk Monastery held incredible importance for Mallory’s party until the moment the

survivors sat down to write their memoirs; at that point, they became a number of porters.² One of the explorers in the novel, Werner Ehingen, writes a chronicle named “las Entrañas del mundo,” which is a parodied version of Shackleton’s *Heart of the Antarctic*: it is a similar inversion of top-to-bottom as Everest is to the Inferno. In his story, he says that he “loses” four porters. The narrative voice describes this passage of Ehingen’s chronicle:

Los sherpas muertos apenas merecían de Ehingen un sentido epitafio donde halagaba la fortaleza de esos hombrecillos por los que no oculta cierta condescendencia, el dolor superficial de quien ha perdido una mascota con la que no ha tenido tiempo de encariñarse. (207)

The climbers do not understand, nor seek to understand Nuru, much the same as Mallory’s expedition showed an incredible lack of interest in the men who were their lifeline on the mountain. Younghusband once said that Sherpas could have summited Mt Everest but chose not to because “They have not the Spirit” (21). Belief in that intangible difference is what authorized the colonizers to behave as if their co-climbers were less than human, and Padilla excoriates them for this outlook in the novel. In a role reversal, every climbing season, it is Nuru who “loses” a number of European adventurers. While each year European expeditions arrive and are either lost or turned back, he is to be found again and again at his lodge like Virgil’s shade haunting the entrance to the Inferno.

The figure of the explorer in the novel varies from the avaricious and egotistical to the sympathetic but foolish. Still, they all go to the cave as part of a nationalist project to achieve a domination of the world, whether of people and/or of places, in the name of their homeland. Like in alpinist history, each expedition is known by its nationality and the year of its attempt. The conquest of natural exploration became wildly popular in the Western imagination with the books and speaking tours of explorers for the Royal Geographical Society, such as Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton. It is telling that one of *La Gruta del Toscano*’s epigraphs is from Gaston Rébuffat, a French climber who climbed Annapurna in the 1950s and seemingly survived World War II by climbing high above its reach in the Alps. Rébuffat’s 1955 climbing film *Étoiles et Tempêtes* forms one of the important early texts of European alpinism. He dedicated his life to being a mountain guide and spreading a love of wild places and his inclusion in the epigraph supports part of the “embrace” of the Occident that Sánchez Prado notes of the Crack authors. While the novel contains a tremendous critique of Western imperialism in the non-West, some inclusions, like that of Rébuffat, point to an embrace of

some sympathetic Western figures, revealing that not all of the explorers are arrogant colonizers.

Hubert says that for the European explorers, “entering a cave in the remotest peak of the Himalayas believed to be Hell itself would finally prove ... Europe’s unquestionable supremacy on the globe” (57). The idea of sports competition as an agent of imperialism and nationalism is crucial to the depiction of the Europeans, but there are some individuals on quixotic quests. The Italian expedition of 1937 is depicted in the most negative of lights, defined by the fascist beliefs of the Mussolini era. But other climbers, like a Portuguese priest and an Englishman from the Pacific Island of New Ireland, disappear simply because of their foolish passion for exploring the unexplored. Nuru mourns these two, and their passing is more tragedy than justice. The explorers are unable to see the cave as a cave, or as a place that is meaningful to the autochthonous Himalayans. Rather, they accept it as the Inferno because they read other texts celebrating it as a site of incredible meaning. The single adventurers contrast with the organized nationalist expeditions to the cave that represent the imperialist project mentioned by Hubert. The first group to reach the bottom will lay claim to the “universal victory” of having defeated the other European teams. The idea of a competition to arrive first in Hell, as a way to measure national worth, machismo, or the veracity of Catholic religious dogma, is the ridiculous inversion of the Occidental quest for Everest that Padilla uses to contest his Eurocentric source texts.

Each group of explorers read the *Divine Comedy* as a route-map for the Himalayan cave, and so they expect to find what was depicted by Dante. Hence, they operate with an understanding that applies the Western imagination of Hell to the physical features of Asia. Their inability to view the cave without transposing their own previously constructed map leads to their deaths. The first important nationalist group of explorers comes from fictional Ruritania. Padilla mentioned that one of the appropriations in *La Gruta del Toscano* are settings from the Ruritania novels of Alexander Hope. The sense of a fanciful European identity in the novel is based upon the literary inventions of Hope that began in his adventure novel of 1894, *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Ruritania is a made-up (though far from implausible) land sandwiched between Germany, Hungary, and Austria. Its people speak German, are primarily Catholic, and seem to be slightly retrograde in comparison with the rest of Europe, particularly behind England in terms of modernity.³ In *La Gruta del Toscano*, Captain Jan Reissen-Mileto is the leader of the Ruritanian expedition, the Fifth Company of Fusiliers, and Padilla writes that

he lives in a mansion in Zenda. While marching his men through the Himalayan mountains, the captain goes on a reconnaissance mission with his local guide, Pasang Nuru. Together they encounter the cave. The captain returns to his camp to find his men vanished. Upon his return to Bombay, he is court-marshalled and condemned for losing “la más brava compañía del Principado de Ruritania” (21). For this to be so, then, Ruritania also has an imperialist military project in Asia. Hope’s *Prisoner of Zenda* refrains from painting Ruritania beyond its borders, but here in Padilla’s novel, the small principality acts as another colonizing European state. The form and fate of the Fifth Company of Fusiliers resembles the exotic and hubris-laden stories of the French Foreign Legion, such as *Beau Geste* by PC Wren. Captain Riessen-Mileto is an avid reader of the writings of actual explorer Sir Francis Younghusband, who was the British commissioner in Tibet but whose fame came from his 1904 chronicles of Himalayan exploration with the Royal Geographic Society. Younghusband’s attitude of Eurocentric superiority pervades how the European expeditions treat locals. The main result of appropriating Ruritania with the doomed colonizer Captain Reissen-Mileto is that it satirizes the European colonial project while also luxuriating in the excesses of the genre of its appropriated source text. It embraces and contests the narratives that made isolated Deva-Dhungda into the sought-after prize of Mt. Everest. The novel also emphasizes that Ruritanian identity is made up of literary tropes and stereotypes, while the non-Europeans seem to escape the narrative voice’s ability to define them fluidly. The initial 1924 band of Captain Reissen-Mileto’s Ruritanian explorers from the “Real Sociedad Geográfica de Ruritania” do not know that the cave has any special meaning until Pasang Nuru points out to them that there are barely legible words written in Sanskrit over the cave’s mouth. The episode provides no further clarity about the written stone letters, it is simply Nuru’s word that they are there. In Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, the narrator is drawn to this cave by the shade of the Roman poet Virgil, who is to guide him away from certain death in a forest above ground, through the underworld until, at its very bottom, he will be drawn by his sublime and chaste love Beatriz and emerge into Paradise. Virgil reads aloud the inscription:

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.

I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL PAIN.

I AM THE WAY TO GO AMONG THE LOST [...]

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE (Canto III 1-9)

Dante's narrator describes this scene as he and Virgil enter the cave "I saw these words of dark and harsh intent / engraved upon the archway of a gate" (Canto III 11-12). Virgil then leads Dante through the entrance into a whirlwind of lost souls who helped only themselves in life and will never enter heaven nor descend to hell on their way farther down to the bottom. In the novel, Nuru discovers the opening to the cave and deciphers the writing above the entry that no one else can see:

El capitán no comprendió enseguida lo que le señalaba el Sherpa. Miró la cueva, parpadeó, siguió con impaciencia el índice de su joven guía. Finalmente descubrió los signos y escuchó con un escalofrío la voz del Sherpa traduciendo al alemán, sin rima ni cadencia, los versos que Dante Alighieri afirma haber leído en la misma puerta del infierno. (16)

In this passage, the captain believes Nuru's authority about the inscription because he can see the potential of himself being the "discoverer" of the mythic dimension of the cave to the public back home. Nuru gives the captain the place name for the cave out of his own interests. Pratt's term "autoethnography" is useful here: she describes it as "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (7). It could be inferred that Nuru uses the colonizer's literary, cultural reference to the *Inferno* to represent a cave in his own valley to boost his importance as a guide with the colonizers. He certainly demonstrates "partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror" (7), and he is the obvious beneficiary of inspiring so much fascination. Shortly after this episode, he opens a mountain inn and offers his services as a guide for years to come. To use Pratt's words, he is "interactive" and "improvisational" with the Europeans with the intention of profiting from their resources. Even so, it is hard to identify economic benefit as Nuru's motivation. His mysteriousness seems more than just the character's inability to understand him—the narrative itself is incapable of doing so, and to echo Tinajero's point, this may be on purpose. Once Captain Reissen-Mileto recognizes the implications of the inscription, he begins the process by which the Himalayan cave is given importance in Europe and is read in a literary rather than physical way. Instead of causing him to abandon hope, Dante's inscription on the rock raises his spirits to hyperbolic levels.

After having heard of the discovery, explorers around the world begin planning their conquest of this natural wonder according to Dante's description of the *Inferno* in the *Divine Comedy*. Back in drawing rooms in London, Rome, New York, and Streslau, they break the

cave into circles and chart its depths by their preconceived notions, drawn from Dante, of what the Inferno should look like. But the cave itself has its own structure, and misreading its topography brings about their own failure. For example, the night before beginning exploration, the group of Italian fascists imagines entering the various circles of hell described by Dante in honor of Italian nationalism and its supreme leader Mussolini:

Entre mapas y compases, los oficiales italianos franquearon mentalmente el Aqueronte, surcaron el Limbo, descendieron uno a uno de los círculos infernales, traspusieron la Ciudad de Dite, trazaron puentes sobre los Malebolge y se abismaron por último en la Fosa de los Gigantes hasta clavar la bandera italiana en la superficie helada del Cocito. (77-78)

The Italian fascists fail to reach the bottom despite their military organization and zeal. The group's German scientific attaché Lothar Seignerus discovers that their leader General Sansoni plans to abandon the bioluminescent animals called zarigüeyas that they were counting on to light their way. When Seignerus euthanizes the creatures, Sansoni shoots him. Another explorer, the Portuguese Jesuit priest Mario Gudino, seeks evidence of lost souls and demons to prove Catholic theology. Gudino dies from chemical burns suffered in his attempt at crossing a sulfurous lake inside the cave. It is only through Nuru's account of what Gudino told him on his deathbed that the reader is shown what Gudino found inside the cave. Whether or not Nuru is telling the truth is left for the reader to speculate. If Nuru is telling the truth, then the priest's final words were apostasy, "No me interesa el perdón de un dios capaz de inventar un lugar así" (41). Lucas Gleeson is an overweight solitary explorer from the island of New Ireland who seeks out Nuru's assistance for his expedition. In a moment of Steampunk imagery crossed with Jules Verne, Gleeson descends into the mouth of the cave in an Aerostat airship designed to float over the rivers of fire he expects to find, never to return.

Gleeson claimed to Nuru to have been a member of the 5th Company of Fusiliers, and that the men mysteriously changed into wolves in a scene that evoked the fate of Odysseus's crew on Circe's enchanted island in the *Odyssey*. The claim that army troupe had been turned into beasts and tore each other to shreds resonates with the legends around Roopkund Lake, also known as Skeleton Lake in the Garhwal Himalayan region, where hundreds of skeletons were found that are believed to have been victims of sudden hailstorms. Until recently, the bones were a mystery and were the inspiration for many supernatural conjectures. Each group of explorers described by Nuru evokes different dislocations of

source narratives. The worst groups of European explorers are parodies drawn to contest their source texts, while the more tragic or Quixotic figures, such as Captain Reissen-Mileto and Lucas Gleeson, show an embrace of their original narratives. The competition between European nationalist expeditions is both a source of comedy and tragedy in the novel. The explorers demonstrate to Nuru their national identities in hyperbolic excess. Nuru comes to the conclusion regarding Gleeson's Englishness,

al tal Gleeson nadie le habría creído si abjurase de su ser inglés. El más cándido de los inquisidores se habría rehusado a aceptar sin más que aquel gordo desorbitado no era inglés. Un inglés como un templo, un espía inglés, el último de los dodós ingleses, un explorador inglés, un hijo de puta inglés que rebosaba inglesidad por los cuatro costados. (107)

This profane hyperbole about English identity shows how the intensity of nationalist sentiment amongst the European explorers is derided.

The Ruritarians return in 1949: this time an aged Captain Reissen-Mileto assembles a group of Ruritanian explorers to attempt a descent to the bottom of the cave. The explorers are chosen for qualities of nationalist zeal and intensity of feeling rather than technical mountaineering skills. He chooses Werner Ehingen, the son of his late comrade Ehingen de Granz, to be the group leader because “llevaba en la sangre algo que ninguno de los otros llevaba. Algo que en opinión del capitán era imprescindible para llegar al fondo del infierno y vivir para contarlo: el rencor” (144). In their estimation, there is an almost supernatural quality to the Western explorer, and the spirit they desire in their comrades is like the spirit Youngusband found lacking in the sherpas. Nevertheless, the novel reveals the motivations and characteristics of the explorers from Nuru's point of view. He describes their motives as “un decálogo de razones de apariencia trascendentes, tales como el honor nacional, la divinidad, la conquista de últimas fronteras, la inmortalidad y el dominio de fuerzas naturales” (161). By adding in the “de apariencia,” the text's meaning changes from honoring the greatness of the explorers to contesting the value of the entire project. Nuru continues:

La humanidad no parecía mejor ni más santa porque un puñado de hombres ateridos hubiese puesto el pie en tal o cual círculo del infierno. Ni siquiera podía decirse que alguien se hubiese hecho más rico a consecuencia de esas expediciones. El riesgo, en suma, parecía haber sido el único motor de aquellos

hombres, lo cual ... no hablaba muy bien de la templanza de los occidentales, menos aún de su estatura moral. (161)

The expedition of 1949 fails, and two of the members die in the cave, yet “A pesar del fracaso, la muerte de ambos exploradores hizo que sus compañeros de cordada fuesen recibidos como héroes” (167). Indeed, the greatest inspiration for European nationalist climbing expeditions after World War II was the fact that Mallory and Irvine had failed to return in 1924. The narrative further ridicules alpinist celebrity, “De la noche a la mañana, la catástrofe ruritana en la Gruta del Toscano comenzó a ser apreciada como una cátedra de humanidad, tesón, y resistencia de los hombres contra los poderes inicuos de la naturaleza” (169). As mentioned before, much like Ernest Shackleton, Ehingen becomes a celebrity for his incredible survival rather than for his disastrous failure. The intangible quality of Spirit (the factor that Younghusband found lacking in the Sherpa community) is credited with his survival. Nothing shows the top-to-bottom logic of the parody of the novel better than by having Ehingen pen a best-selling book about their escape from the cave called “Las entrañas del mundo.” It is a play on words such as Alonso Quijano taking the name “Don Quixote” as an homage to a piece of armor that covers an area of the body below the waist. Similarly, Ehingen’s book suggests a parody of Shackleton’s *Heart of the Antarctic* by lowering the place in the metaphoric earth’s body from the heart to the bowels.

The Chinese expedition of 1965 attempts to defeat the Europeans at their own game, even as the novel points out the futility of the competition. The Chinese group joins in the European mania for the cave without believing in any of the supernatural or literary trappings that motivated Father Gudino or Lucas Gleeson, but they too arrive unprepared for its physical challenges and succumb to its perils.⁴ While they are not as hubris laden as the Europeans, the Chinese exploration is not sympathetically depicted in Nuru’s fragmented and unreliable descriptions. In the 70s, Nuru works for human traffickers smuggling refugees out of communist China into India and, while doing so, encounters Ang Xian, a member of the 1965 Chinese expedition who must now flee the Cultural Revolution. Xian told him that while they were descending into the cave, they discovered the corpse of a Ruritania from the 1949 expedition that could only have arrived at his point on the north face after having descended to the bottom on the south side. This debate about whether or not the lost Ruritania ever arrived at the bottom mimics the debate in Western climbing discourse about whether or not Mallory and Irvine died before or after summiting Everest. Indeed, a Chinese climber in 1975

identified a mummified cadaver below the yellow band on Everest as being English. In 1999, the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition, featuring celebrity climber Conrad Anker, identified the cadaver as belonging to Mallory. Conjecture regarding the finding of Irvine's ice axe and the location of Mallory's body fueled speculation that Mallory and Irvine did arrive at the top. Of course, there remains the missing camera that could provide material evidence of English triumph. Padilla's novel also taps into this history of speculating about the missing proof that could reveal a British nationalist triumph. The intrigue surrounding the possibility of finding a similar, Ruritanian camera fuels the final third of the novel.

Ang Xian tells Nuru about a room of the Mountain Museum in Beijing that is dedicated to the 1965 Chinese expedition to the cave. The Chinese explorers are under no illusion that they are entering a European hell. They laugh at the credulity of the Italians who believed they were seeing the bones of enormous beasts like Cerberus when they shine their flashlights on calcine rock formations: "días después seguían burlándose de la ceguera de los occidentales, tan duros de cabeza que no pudieron distinguir entre una simple formación calcárea y el espinazo de una bestia fabulosa" (312). Their purpose is not to prove Dante right, it is to prove him wrong. At home, their mission is considered to be "la celebración de un nuevo triunfo de la República Popular China sobre los demonios capitalistas" (316). Therein lies the criticism of the Chinese expedition—they are just as nationalistic in their pursuit of the world's extremes as the Europeans. But while the Europeans like Werner Ehingen attempted to turn the shame of their failures into a celebration of their survival spirit, the Chinese expedition falsified the results. Ang Xian reveals to Pasang Nuru that the Chinese expedition never made it to the bottom, that several were shot for disobeying orders, and in order to appease the party leaders, they mocked up fraudulent photographs to prove their triumph. At the end of the novel, the Giddins and Linden develop the film from the old camera that Nuru said that Xian had pried from the hands of a corpse deep in the cave

se levanta un animal que debió ser inmenso, un titán con alas de murciélago ahora devoradas por millares de animales blanquísimos, una auténtica legión de zarigüeyas que alumbran con sus colmillos y sus pieles fluorescentes el fondo del abismo, el cadáver gigantesco que las ha alimentado durante décadas y la pequeñez de los hombres que dieron sus vidas para fotografiar su banquete. (363)

It is the missing camera, and its film truly does contain the sought-after evidence of nationalist and European triumph. Nevertheless, the giant corpse reveals that the cave is also subject to the laws of nature. It had died and the invasive species of zarigüeyas had devoured it. Hell had frozen over, then the ice melted, and hell was inundated. After discovering water at the bottom instead of ice, the narrator says, “Si aquel era el infierno en la tierra, entonces debía por fuerza sujetarse a las leyes de la Tierra. Solo así podríamos comprender su existencia, sus mudanzas, y su desgarradora grandeza” (330). Even what humans view as hell is under constant processes of evolution and change, the Earth evolves, nothing is immutable. In fact, the only certainty is that “en la cordillera solo sobrevivirían aquellos para los que una montaña hubiera sido siempre y llanamente una montaña” (31).

La Gruta del Toscano draws from such a variety of source texts and parodies, so many of them that its moments of solemnity can come as a surprise. Yet the mountains are a place of fascination, and the explorers, from Captain Reissen Mileto to Lucas Gleeson, are not fools for being drawn there. To return to Pratt’s theory, the foolishness of it all comes from creating a literary map for the physical place of a “contact zone” and bringing conditions of “radical inequality and intractable conflict” (6). They want to make history by being the first Western imperialistic explorers to the bottom of the cave and thus gain supremacy for their nation, but supremacy for Europe means subjecting their non-Western hosts to the unequal condition of coloniality. The novel’s European characters are either hyperbolized versions of famous explorers such as George Mallory and Ernest Shackleton, or they are fictions based on famous literary characters like Don Quixote and Virgil. Yet it is the inscrutable and powerful character of Nuru that binds the dislocations together with the “autoethnography” of naming the Himalayan cave “La Gruta del Toscano.” Nuru is the connecting thread between these “dislocations” of the sources: the proud European alpinist chronicles of triumph and disaster, European fiction of the 19th century, Cervantes’s cave of Montesinos, and Dante’s *Inferno*. He is the sympathetic teller of tales and the guide to the mountains, but Nuru also resists providing verifiable truths. In the end, the novel does not allow Europe or even the Latin American novel to impose definitions upon the mountains of Asia. The imperialist climbers’ willingness to embrace his application of literary meaning from a 13th-century Italian poem to a deep Himalayan cave is their hubris. Like Don Quixote in the cave of Montesinos, they want this cave to be inhabited by legends and myths. In the end, the cave is elusive and impossible to be explored or explained. The Chinese expedition seeks to supplant Europe as colonizing

conquerors despite having no literary lineage to connect with, but they, too, fail. The profits they seek back home for beating the Europeans at the conquest of being the first to reach the bottom are tenuous. Rather than climbing to the world's peak to stake a national flag or reach the Inferno's heart, imperialism descends to the earth's bowels, never to return.

In *La Gruta del Toscano*, Padilla demonstrates the tendency among the Crack writers to “embrace and contest” their uneven access to world literature as writers from a peripheral culture. This novel also refuses to engage in privileging Latin American literature to establish truths about the non-West in Asia. Nuru's oral tales are the only entrance for the reader to the cave, he controls the narrative about the terrain and its literary connections entirely, and it never appears that his project is establishing verifiable truths for the BBC journalists. Padilla's gesture of reaching out and appropriating source texts from the European literary canon and from Alpinist narrative embraces the power of their human drama, but also contests their Eurocentrism and imperialistic worldview. Rather than speaking for someone else in the Himalayan contact zone, Padilla's inscrutable protagonist Nuru sympathizes with the situation of the local Sherpa population and resists the colonial and imperial gaze. As a “strategic Occidentalist,” Padilla approaches Mexican narrative from a variety of foreign inspirations, and like in Borges's view, his work demonstrates that there are no geographic limits to the scope of Latin American literary invention, eschewing the definition of the non-Western world in the Himalayas.

Notes

¹ At the cave, don Quixote impresses upon Sancho Panza and another companion his reason for exploring the cave by dedicating his adventure to Dulcinea and announcing to her and the world “Yo voy a despeñarme, a empozarme y a hundirme en el abismo que aquí se representa, sólo porque conozca el mundo que si tú me favoreces, no habrá imposible a quien yo no acometa y acabe” (594). He has his eyes set on being a part of world history. Sancho and their other companion lower don Quixote with ropes into the cave and then wait. Don Quijote falls asleep in the cave and when he is hauled back up by his anxious squire after an hour, then he calls for lunch. Sancho asks him what he saw in that inferno and he replies, “¿Infierno lo llamáis?... Pues no lo llaméis así porque no lo merece” (595). Having rested and eaten, he tells his companions that he had spent three days in a crystal castle enchanted by Merlin with the ancient Montesinos himself, the wounded knight Durandarte, and his love Belerma. Even Dulcinea del Toboso with her handmaidens makes an appearance and borrows four golden reales promising to return them later. Sancho accuses his master of being deranged but their companion thanks don Quixote for mentioning that water flowed through the cave which he believes to be the source of the seven lakes of the Ruidera in La Mancha.

² Mallory’s expedition sought guidance and supplies at the monastery founded in 1919 by Ngawang Tenzin Norbu at the foot of the Rongbuk glacier in the valley before Mt. Everest.

³ The novel’s protagonist Rudolph Ryssendal is a descendent of a Ruritanian prince, and while traveling to the capital city of Streslau he is mistaken for crown prince Rudolph Elphberg the Fifth. The people of Streslau, the capital city, are themselves an amalgam of continental European characterizations. Hope’s narrator says of them, “Ruritania is not England . . . Duels were frequent among all the upper classes, and private quarrels between great men kept the old habit spreading to their friends and dependents” (Chapter 15 lines 1-4).

⁴ The narrator recalls that in 1965 “Lloré con amargura el día en que una expedición china conquistó el fondo de la Gruta del Toscano” (171). Nuru recalls seeing the photograph of the Chinese expedition leader taking the People’s Republic’s flag in the cave “le ofendió sobremanera el aire festivo con que los chinos sonreían para la cámara, como si haber llegado al corazón del infierno fuese en efecto una proeza deportiva” (247).

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