Faraway Close

by Elleke Boehmer

As one lockdown day has followed another, each one rather like the one that went before, time has developed a curious, flat quality. It passes but lacks texture. One week on, it is difficult to remember what we did last Monday or Tuesday.

It would be natural to assume that this homogeneity was inimical to creative work, that it militated against the sense of development and structure that helps to incubate new writing. I have found it oddly generative however, if for a very specific reason.

The two books I am currently working on (a novel about Antarctica and a history of southern exploration) both explore the condition of what it is to be together even when we're far apart, distant but proximate – conditions that have recently become part of everyone's experience. Up until March 2020, both book projects were proving incredibly difficult to get moving. For months, I worried that the main theme connecting both – distant closeness – would switch off most people, intriguing though it was to me.

Who would be interested in this idea of remote touching? I wondered to myself. How would my two main characters, separated by about ten thousand miles, be able to sustain a love affair? They get together in 2010. What media would they use to stay in touch? Would it be by email, by text or something more suggestive and imaginative; a kind of telepathy or magical thinking? And would readers feel drawn to such a relationship, passionate and loving, yet definitely not physical. How would I grab their interest?

In novels and films, we are used to encountering the drama of first touch, embrace, entwinement. Haptic senses are enticing. Against this, the idea of touching across distance sounds and feels cold and abstract.

Every time I told anyone about the novel – 'you see, there are these two characters and one is in the Antarctic and the other in Europe and they're in love' – they understandably looked at me with raised eyebrows and said something like, 'But how can you actually have a relationship when the two people involved are thousands of miles apart?'

As for the other project, the history of early navigation in the southern

hemisphere, here were individuals – ships' captains, ancient mariners, illustrators, whalers, scientists and helmsmen – who for months on end saw no one other than the crew they were sailing with. How was it for them to be so intimately connected yet distanced from everyone else?

These questions swirled through Christmas and into the New Year. And they affected the two projects at all levels. I was keen for the shape of the books – the novel as well as the history – to reflect these ideas of traversing distance, of staying connected though being miles apart. Would big white spaces between sections work, I asked myself, or was that too obvious? And what about writing in layers, to mimic my characters living in parallel?

And then the COVID-19 crisis broke. Lockdown descended and the shape of solutions began to glimmer. Suddenly I shared the question of how to stay connected while being apart with everyone else, not only here in Britain but everywhere around the world. Suddenly my interest turned into everyone's daily experience and living with distance became life-saving. I saw all around me, on social media, in the street while exercising, on television and Zoom, the inventive if also foot-slogging ways in which others were approaching the challenges that up to that point had seemingly been my characters' alone.

Now we needed a new vocabulary for talking about being remote together, an oxymoronic lexicon for feeling each other across distance, for thinking as one across the miles, faraway but close. I remember the lines that Paquita, the wife of Australian Antarctic explorer Douglas Mawson, wrote him in a letter – one which he would first read two years later in 1913 on his return home from not just one but two winters spent in an ice-bound hut on the edge of the snowy continent: 'O darling … if only nothing is happening to you but I think I should feel it.'

Lockdown has made the idea of distant proximity immediate and present in ways I could not have anticipated and perhaps would never have hoped for even if I had imagined them. Stories now jump out at me from the newspaper and social media that speak directly to my earlier perplexities – stories of people trying to fall in love or having a long distance affair; tales of individuals who break lockdown rules to meet and keep a new relationship alive; dating columns introducing singles to one another over separate takeaway meals.

I listen carefully as a friend tells me about how she met someone online

in March or April and how they have since tried to get to know one another face-to-face while still maintaining social distance. The levelling down of lockdown has allowed them to see each other in fields and go on walks, but at two metres. Gazing at each other, I imagine. Wondering how it will be finally to touch one another.

I think of young Black Lives Matter protesters across the past weeks meeting one another remotely while marching. That initial glance, perhaps, then falling in step together, and then after a while calling out mobile numbers across the space of empty street that separates them.

Now that stories like this have sprung to everyone's foreground, I find the two characters in my novel interacting and keeping in touch in ways that untill this year would hardly have seemed believable but now are convincing. In one example, they work out what the other might be doing on a normal day, and when – then try to think hard of them at precisely those times in the days that follow, a bit like Paquita and Douglas.

Meanwhile, in the southern history, the vast distances that intrepid individuals like Vasco Da Gama or James Cook travel, suddenly feel almost palpable. I see their tiny ships rounding wild Cape Horn and the stormy Cape of Good Hope, proceeding mostly by happenstance and instinct, and can almost feel the rushing of the great winds that have built up over vast uninterrupted distances of the Southern Ocean pressing into their faces. I sense their joy at meeting a passing ship that might be heading back to Lisbon or London, the ports that they departed from. I'm aware of the resistance, the push-back, of the great quantities of turbulent water that separate them from home. I imagine them approaching blue ice-barriers towering fifty metres above the sea that no other human has encountered before. I see them seeing their reflection in the icebergs.

A few years ago, I had a conversation with the writer Teju Cole that has several times come back to me during these past months. Over coffee at a festival we talked about our new work, and the challenge of finding a language for sensations that go beyond or blend together the well-described five senses. As we spoke it struck me that our awareness of distance might be one of these sensations – a sensation I sometimes call 'southing'. There is far more ocean in the southern hemisphere and far fewer people live there (only about 11% of the world's population), so the name figures.

For me, 'southing' calls up associations of thin blue air and charging

ocean currents. Of wind pressure and cold. As for its sound – 'southing' has the ringing, shirring sound of a high-frequency radio, out of tune.

But 'southing' also brings up a sense of proximity in spite of distance: the idea that for all of us on this planet, being distant involves connection of a kind. In April this year around 70% of the world's population was under lockdown – distanced yet experiencing together weather and light and night-time and four walls and the joys, even if circumscribed, of moving through space.

I remember when Michael Collins circled around the dark side of the moon on the Apollo 11 voyage and became, for that period, the remotest human being in the solar system, or anywhere. He described the experience as 'rounding the Horn'. The metaphor links two very different worlds – of our human planet and the cold moon – and yet feels right. It recalls the definitive and archetypal experience of any southern hemisphere traveller experiencing the higher southern latitudes while moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific – the standard route for any whaler or buccaneer in the age of sail. Travelling around wind-swept and stormy Cape Horn nearly always meant risking life and limb. It meant plumbing darkness and probing immensity, exactly as did Collins out on his own, circling the moon and at the same time remembering an intensely human history of navigating hazardous seas.

The high southern latitudes have traditionally induced in the voyager a sense of trespass as well as isolation. Nature here is always bigger, more forceful and more resistant to human design than anywhere else on the planet. And so, certainly for the first Polynesian and European explorers, it seemed to push back against their efforts to penetrate what Luis de Camões called its 'mysteries'. The Southern god, Adamastor, in Camões' great epic *The Lusiads* decries Vasco da Gama's 1497 entry into his waters off the Cape of Good Hope. He threatens that their 'audacious passage' will be met by 'harsh retribution': 'My cape will be implacably hostile/ With gales beyond any you have encountered'.

In the same 'storm-blasted' southern seas Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* famously meets with driving winds, threatening ice-fields, enclosing fog – and a bird that shows the crew fellowship. Every time I read the Rime, the Mariner's act of killing the albatross amidst the wastelands of life-denying ice appears all the more vicious and destructive.

As the Mariner learns from hard experience, in these forbidding latitudes, community is that much more important to express and to cherish. Weltering distance requires assertions of closeness no matter how absurd and pointless they may feel at the time. In researching the southern history, I am struck by how often passing ships on the 'everlasting terra incognita' of the Southern Ocean – in Herman Melville's phrase – take pains to draw close and cross wakes, to exchange letters and greetings.

In my novel, the two characters in love, yet 10,000 miles and a hemisphere apart and without reliable email, decide to look at the moon at the same time every night, as a way of keeping virtually in touch. Though they see different constellations they are at least joined celestially by longitude and the moon's orbit. So far, they are both committed to the arrangement, though one approaches it with greater confidence than the other. I am still wrestling with the fact that, according to my findings, the full moon does not appear above the horizon in the higher latitudes around the poles. I decide that, for now, the two may have to make do with incomplete but nonetheless visible gibbous moons.