TRAVEL WRITING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
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TRAVEL WRITING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Filling the Blank Spaces

Edited by
Tim Youngs
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1. INTRODUCTION: FILLING THE BLANK SPACES

Tim Youngs

Blank spaces

In his narrative of Central African exploration, Through the Dark Continent (1878), Henry Morton Stanley tells his companion Frank Pocock, who was soon to drown on their adventure:

‘Now look at this, the latest chart which Europeans have drawn of this region. It is a blank, perfectly white. …

I assure you, Frank, this enormous void is about to be filled up. Blank as it is, it has a singular fascination for me. Never has white paper possessed such a charm for me as this has, and I have already mentally peopled it, filled it with most wonderful pictures of towns, villages, rivers, countries and tribes — all in the imagination — and I am burning to see whether I am correct or not.’ (Stanley 1890, p. 449)

A couple of decades later, Marlow, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad’s tale, Heart of Darkness, set mainly in the unnamed but identifiable Congo, would declare: