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Sites of Emergency, States of Exception

- Valerio Massimo De Angelis and Giorgio Mariani**, Introduction 5
- Stefano Luconi**, “The Least Worst Place”:
Guantánamo in the US “War on Terror” 9
- Alessandra Calanchi**, Out of Exception, Into Emergency:
Fast-forward to Earth Zero 29
- Salvatore Proietti**, The Provisional Utopia and the State of Exception:
On *Ceremony* and *The Stand* 47
- Ali Dehdarirad**, “The Other Side of the Ditch”: (De)Constructing
Environmental Crisis in William Vollmann’s *Imperial*
and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* 63
- Cinzia Schiavini**, Constructing and Contesting the State(s)
of Exception: Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*
and the American Transnational Novel 81
- Angelo Arminio**, An Alternate History of the Warring States:
Global War in a State of Exception and Democratic
Short-circuit in Matt Gallagher’s *Empire City* 105

<i>Un Forum a puntate</i>	
<i>Frontiera/Frontiere: Conversazioni su confini e migrazioni tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico</i>	125
Introduzione: Valerio Massimo De Angelis	127
Seconda puntata:	
Paola Zaccaria e Lorena Carbonara,	
La svolta TransMediterrAtlantica del pensiero critico dei confini del progetto <i>S/murare il Mediterraneo</i>	129
<i>Articles</i>	
Stefano Franceschini, A “Maze of Stone-shadowed Twilight”: The Disorienting Nightmarescape of H. P. Lovecraft’s <i>At the Mountains of Madness</i>	147
Livia Bellardini, Assessing a Poetics of the Lyric with Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler	167
<i>L'inedito</i>	
Introduction: Carla Francellini	189
Maria Mazziotti Gillan, “What Is This Absence in the Heart?”	199
<i>Abstracts</i>	203
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	209

Sites of Emergency, States of Exception



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Introduction

In the wake of a COVID-19 pandemic that has elicited various and unprecedented forms of response by national and supranational governments, societies and cultures, and more generally humankind itself, the issue of how to address critical situations that create sites of emergency and call for extraordinary measures has become absolutely central in public debate. The pandemic is an example of the sudden and unexpected (or, better, expected but more or less consciously set aside by decision-makers all over the world) disruption of the structure of individual and collective life at a global level, but is only the symptom of a wider and more general situation that has been rapidly evolving in the last decades, since the so-called “Great Acceleration” of the Anthropocene, usually considered as dating from the end of World War II and the beginning of the Atomic Age, with the explosion of the first atomic bomb in New Mexico in July 1945.

The globalization of a world by now totally “colonized” by the human species up to the point of having changed its geological status had as its primary engine the United States of America, so that until the beginning of the twenty-first century globalization and Americanization were almost synonyms. The interconnectedness of all the elements of the global network has multiplied the occasions of local crises turning into world phenomena, and the various sites of emergency that have been springing everywhere have often had among its main causes the US political, economic, cultural and military strategies, but on the other hand the United States too has become extremely susceptible to events and processes originating elsewhere, in a short-circuit that was made dramatically visible on September 11, 2001, with the final outcome of a series of causes and effects which eventually became causes of other effects across continents. So decades of “emergencies” directly or indirectly created in the Middle

East by US politics collapsed in the backlash of Ground Zero, and this end result triggered another series of consequences by inaugurating a season of “states of exception,” at home and abroad, that severely questioned the very foundations of American democracy.

Since its introduction in Western political thought by Carl Schmitt, in the 1920s, the notion of “state of exception” has usually had the meaning of a critical condition that justifies the direct action of the sovereign, beyond the limits of the rule of law, in the name of the public good. Recent theorizations by Giorgio Agamben, Elaine Scarry and Achille Mbembe have pointed out that states of exception have never been “real” *exceptions* to law, but have instead always been predicted *by* law, as an instrument of augmentation of the sovereign’s power – that is, of the ultimate source of law, except in modern democracies. The United States is the first country to have been founded *ex novo* according to democratic principles, when the British colonies in North America became a site of emergency from the point of view of the colonists themselves, who believed their *de facto* independence from the mother country threatened by the resurgence of imperial power, and then declared the necessity to create an *exception*, dictated by the “necessity which constrain[ed] them to alter their former Systems of Government,” as stated in the Declaration of Independence. In other words, the United States was born as a *State of Exception* in itself, due to the fact that it excluded the sovereign as a legitimate source of power and substituted him with “the People” on the basis of the emergency created by the sovereign exceeding his *potestas* and claiming an *auctoritas* which was not recognized by the colonial subjects – the “exception” of the head of State going beyond the limits set to his power over the colonies finally resulting in the colonies creating a new, different “exception,” which obeyed to new and different rules.

It is an ironic contradiction that the first “exceptional” State – born on the assumption that no state of exception could warrant the excessive power of the sovereign – has become an imperial power systematically exceeding the rules of law by imposing on various (national and international) sites of emergency its own rules of exception (and also rejecting instances of superior legality such as international courts). And it is even more ironic that in the current situation, where the site of emergency is the whole world, the United States has first, under the Trump administration, even

refused to recognize that an emergency existed, and then has come to request, under the Biden administration, the suspension of patents to allow the poorer countries access to the vaccines, in the name of a global state of exception determined by the pandemic emergency.

The couplet “emergency/exception” can therefore involve many more meanings than could be expected, and with many different ideological features. This special issue intends precisely to explore how sites of emergency and states of exception have shaped contemporary American history and how they have been represented, analyzed, interpreted and also criticized and deconstructed by American literature.

The first article, by Stefano Luconi, briefly describes the ever-growing recourse to states of exception after the Civil War, and then addresses the ambiguities and contradictions of one emblematic “site of exception” justified by a “state of emergency” such as the War on Terror declared by George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks – namely, the institutionalization of the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba (GITMO) as the main detention facility for American prisoners, where every right of defense has been totally abolished in the name of the defense of rights. In the following contribution Alessandra Calanchi brings us back to the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century to investigate how a number of almost forgotten science-fiction novels project onto the Red Planet and its colonization anxieties about possible catastrophic emergencies that could lead to the extinction of the human species. Seventy years later other anxieties about the dangers of indiscriminated scientific and technological “progress,” and about the disruption of the community it could entail, are the focus of two novels as different as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Stephen King’s *The Stand*, in Salvatore Proietti’s essay, which argues that they both reject Schmitt’s and Agamben’s state of exception as a way to cope with the difficulties of rebuilding a sense of community after radical crises. Environmental cataclysms and the states of emergency they create are also examined, from an ecocritical approach, in Ali Dehdarirad’s article about William Vollmann’s *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, which shows how the two novels use migration as both a thematic center and a metaphor for states of uncertainty and instability that are the inevitable outcome of states of emergency. In her essay Cinzia Schiavini moves the center of attention to the aftermath of the single recent historical event

(9/11) that justified the most thorough suspension of civil rights in the USA, as represented in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*: the novel identifies the state of emergency/exception not as a temporary response to contingent crises but as a constant identitarian mode in American culture that 9/11 only made come to the fore. The last contribution to this special section of the journal, Angelo Arminio's article on Matt Gallagher's *Empire City*, emphasizes how this uchronian/dystopian novel stages the prospect of the authoritarian degeneration of American society not as the result of some external threat that justifies extreme measures, but as the final outcome of dynamics which have always been inherent to the US brand of democratic state and its imperialist ideology.