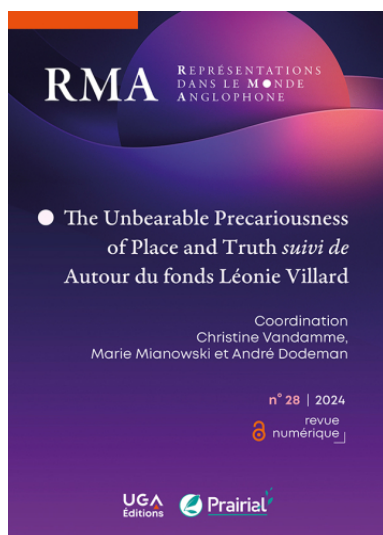




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The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth suivi de Autour du fonds Léonie Villard

The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth followed by Autour du fonds Léonie Villard

Directeur de publication Christine Vandamme, Marie Mianowski et André Dodeman

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INTRODUCTION

Le premier volet de ce volume, qui inclut 6 chapitres, résulte d'une journée d'études qui s'est tenue à l'Université Grenoble Alpes en 2021. Elle était consacrée à « Place and Post-Truth », ce dernier terme étant né après le Brexit et la première élection de Trump comme président des États-Unis. L'importance de la « post-vérité » et de la perte de foi dans les formes traditionnelles de vérité sont des caractéristiques propres aux XX^e et XXI^e siècles. Les chapitres de ce volet témoignent du besoin de faire la paix avec la vérité en révélant les mensonges du passé et l'impact de la propagande et la nécessité de se reconnecter à la vérité qu'impliquent l'ancrage et l'affiliation à une terre, un lieu, un positionnement social et politique.

Quant au second volet, il comprend cinq chapitres qui traitent de l'œuvre de Léonie Villard dans le cadre de la valorisation du fonds Léonie Villard conservé à l'Université Grenoble Alpes, à la bibliothèque SoCLE, correspondant à l'UFR du même nom et regroupant des enseignant·e·s et des chercheur·e·s autour des études aréales, portant sur les sociétés, cultures et langues étrangères. Cet ensemble d'articles permet de découvrir un portrait de Léonie Villard, brillante chercheuse et auteure, et de l'héritage qu'elle a légué.

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Introduction

The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth

L'insoutenable précarité de la place, du territoire et de la vérité

Christine Vandamme

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Acknowledgements

We owe thanks to the colleagues from Aix-Marseille Université (LERMA) and Montpellier 3 (EMMA), Matthew Graves, Gilles Teulié and Claire Omhovère for initiating the itinerant seminar “Geographies of displacement” in 2015, which later became the “Critical Geographies” seminar. It gave us the opportunity to welcome one of those seminars at Grenoble Alpes University in November 2021, the proceedings of which are collected in this volume as well as new additions by colleagues expert in the field who kindly accepted to be part of this beautiful volume. The original idea and project for the conference was launched by Marie Mianowski who then accepted for us to take on the publishing process and we warmly thank her for this. We are also very grateful to our generous and dedicated peer reviewers without whom such volumes could not achieve such high standards of quality.

We also owe abundant thanks to LISCA and ILCEA4 for supporting the project as well as the Représentations dans le monde anglophone editorial team, especially Estelle Rivier and Claire Maniez for their warm support of the volume project despite a very tight schedule in the end.

- 1 This volume was first conceived after the very stimulating debates and exchanges offered by the one-day conference on Place and Post-Truth that took place at Grenoble Alpes University in 2021. The

topicality of post-truth and the loss of faith in traditional forms of truth is a widely recognised characteristic of our early 21st century. Not surprisingly, “post-truth” was designated as international word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, both Brexit year and the year Trump was elected as president of the United States. And the definition given by the dictionary was as follows: “an adjective relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Flood). Such an appeal to emotions rather than reflection has led to a form of widespread relativism and a lack of critical analysis of facts, as well as a deeply ingrained mistrust of the very idea of a universal objective truth, whether scientific or otherwise. In his book *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, published in 2017, Matthew D’Ancona identifies three main reasons for the ever increasing development and influence of post-truth. First there is an undeniable decline of trust in our institutions since the financial crisis in 2008 in particular. Secondly the digital revolution has brought in its wake the proliferation of fake news and lies on social media as their algorithms will provide us with the type of information we are likely to approve and look for. Lastly and less obviously Matthew D’Ancona sees in the development of post-truth an indirect and fully unpredictable result of 1970s post-modern theories defended by scholars like Lyotard or Derrida—which strongly undermined what they considered as hegemonic metanarratives presenting one form of “truth” as universal and fixed in time. Such widespread scepticism as to the validity of normative truth(s) and narratives had both a positive outcome in giving extra momentum to various liberation movements such as the civil rights movement in America (D’Ancona) and a more problematic one, as it also reinforced a form of universal relativism that can be very harmful in suggesting any truth or pseudo-truth is as valid as any other. Post-truth thus sheds light on the apparent precariousness of truth when it is disconnected from objective empirical facts that can be cross-checked. If, on the contrary, any form of “truth” is systematically considered as just one narrative among others, one interpretation among others, this eventually undermines the foundations of any “truth” and the idea that some facts simply resist all forms of manipulation or distortion.

- 2 This is not to say that there is only one valid form of truthful account or interpretation of said facts but rather that a form of negotiation, compromise and consensus can be found even on contentious subjects related to place, history, national imagined communities but also the very possibility of human agency on a global stage. One of the main dangers identified by sociologists and neuroscientists alike about social media is their harmful impact on our brains, notably in creating echo chambers that “enhance the effect of confirmation bias, seeking and interpreting information that confirms [our] preconceived notions”¹ (Shei 27). Social media have been conceived to feed us with easy, accessible and oversimplified news items and ideas that will confine us in such alienating echo chambers disconnecting us more and more from reality and any objective or rational way of assessing the validity of our judgements. This is all the more disquieting as we are now facing many difficult and contentious questions: the legacies of decolonization and the ensuing memory and culture wars but also one of the most acute and complex challenges ever faced by humankind, namely climate change. Such entangled issues and realities require a cool head, an ability to approach difficult questions from as rational and disinterested an angle as possible and it also requires endorsing both the idea of scientific truth and objective observations on the one hand and also the notion of a necessary form of cooperation and trust—which post-truth precisely undermines. And this is one of the principal areas where post-truth intersects with place—or more precisely where post-truth endangers place.
- 3 As a result, most of the papers presented at the conference emphasised the need to make peace with truth in fighting against post-truth but also recognising lies, mendacity and propaganda are not new phenomena. If anything, post-truth in the English-speaking world has brought to its most climactic stage the epistemological crisis that has been developing since the second half of the 19th century and such groundbreaking works as Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1857) or Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), which both challenged and reviewed what had been considered scientific truth and dominant moral and religious dogma for centuries.
- 4 All these factors point in the same direction: the urgent need to rethink the bond linking humans together, humans to place and to

the truth of their situatedness within an environment they are in perpetual interaction with. Place is precisely and by definition about making connections. As Agnew points out in his “Space and Place” article, place is usually given two main meanings, first a “geometric conception of place as a mere part of space” and secondly “a phenomenological understanding of a place as a distinctive coming together in space” (Agnew and Livingstone 317). This is the second meaning of the term that the volume intends to scrutinize, “places as milieux that exercise a mediating role on physical, social and economic processes” (ibid.), a specific place being “constituted by the impact that being somewhere has on the constitution of the processes in question” (ibid.). In other words, a place as a “mi-lieu” (“middle place”² in French) suggests a necessary interaction between all its constitutive elements. According to Tom Cresswell, Place thus becomes “an event [...] marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence” (Cresswell 71).

- 5 To that extent Place is a powerful antidote to post-truth and two main dangers in our contemporary post-colonial and globalized world—exclusionary definitions of the nation-state, and climate change denial. There is a need to redefine the nation and the nation-state as inherently linked to place but also to the ever-changing make-up of the people living within its national borders. If place is a milieu that defines itself from the interaction of all elements *coming together* and interacting within a specific bounded space, it is also fundamentally “relational” according to Tim Cresswell who considers, together with Doreen Massey, that “places are constructed by objects and processes from outside” (Cresswell 71). Cresswell insists on the two essential notions of openness and change characterizing place: “Place [...] is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence. This significantly alters the value put on place as it is constructed from the outside rather than from the inside.” (71)
- 6 In former settler colonies the truth of place and its indigenous inhabitants has to come to light more vigorously for the nation to heal its wounds and move forward (cf. truth and reconciliation commissions or their equivalent in South Africa, Canada and Australia). A similar acknowledgment of reality and the truth and scientific validity of our current climate crisis has to continue

fighting post-truth statements about its inexistence. As Agnew points out,

if place in the former sense is definable entirely in relation to a singular spatial metric (latitude and longitude, elevation, etc.) or other spatial grid defined by putatively non-spatial processes (core-periphery, city-hinterland, administrative regions, etc.), place in the second sense is constituted by the impact that being somewhere has on the constitution of the processes in question. (Agnew and Livingstone 317)

In other words all six articles in this volume will try and assess what “impact” being somewhere can have on our way of coping with current issues such as climate change, obtaining more social justice and political recognition for indigenous people, migrant people, and their descendants.

- 7 And this is where place can work as an antidote to post-truth, when Place is really being experienced through connection and not instrumentalised in any form of lie or mendacity, whether colonial or otherwise. The aim of the volume is thus to think about places and the ways in which a socially acceptable way of representing a truth or multiple truths might be devised, to which any citizen whatever their genre, social class or personality might give credit, away from any form of propaganda or deliberate disinformation and manipulation.
- 8 So whether we are speaking about memory sites that are still invisible to the general public such as sites of massacres in Australia or memory sites that seem to blindly perpetuate an outdated ideology inherited from the British empire in the case of statues of eminent colonial figures in South Africa, the central question is that of replacing fabricated truths and colonial and neocolonial metanarratives of progress with the truth of what actually happened to all members of the national community and not simply to the victors. How can memory and the digging up of effaced histories and injustices on the one hand or the suppression of figures of colonial oppression from national memory sites on the other—or, at the very least, their recontextualization—enable the nation and its new memory sites to be seen as moving forward, healing past wounds and projecting the national community onto the future? How can the

reappropriation of place and memory sites more particularly contribute to the re-establishment of Truth in all its complexity? In this first part of the volume the historiographical and memorial stakes involved in the study of place in relation to truth will be detailed and examined thoroughly. How can a new approach to memory sites redefine their function, and their necessary evolution or transformation?

Place, Truth and Memory sites

- 9 Matthew Graves thus shows us why there is such an obsessive attention paid to memory sites in Australia and more recently to places where massacres were committed with all the well-known difficulties such an endeavour is deemed to encounter: the tension between truth and invention or fantasy, reality and possible manipulation of truth, the lack of easily identifiable and tangible proof and data. The irony being that all these difficulties are often induced by issues having to do with dis-placement, dis-location and the disconnection both spatial and cultural of many Aboriginal communities as a result of assimilation policies. Matthew Graves explains how one critic in particular, Mark McKenna, investigated the related questions of truth-telling, lost histories and the confiscation and/or obliteration of Aboriginal voices and “truths”. The Australian historian thus claimed in a poignant article entitled “The moment of Truth”, that Australians were now at a “crossroads”, having now to choose between “an honest reckoning with the past” or the continued “clinging to triumphant narratives” which, like post-truth narratives, tend to divide the nation and further entrench and trivialise the “violence inherent in the nation’s foundation” (McKenna 15).
- 10 Gilles Teulié, on the other hand, reflects on the dismantling of existing memory sites which are now being challenged and questioned for their assumed manipulation of truth and perpetuation of a colonial ideology. The issue of the *statue wars* in Africa in general and South Africa more particularly is an essential one. Erecting a statue in memory of famous historical figures who are considered worthy enough to represent the nation or the history of its people is a strong political and symbolic gesture. But when the figure is

synonymous with colonial oppression in a postcolonial nation that used to be a settler colony, it is only to be wondered at why their statue was not dismantled from public places much earlier on or at least more fully recontextualised in being placed in a museum for example or completed by a plaque at its foot explaining the impact such a figure had in the past and giving a nuanced assessment of their legacy for the present and the future. Gilles Teulié's article tackles such a highly controversial issue in the very recent heated debates and acts of vandalism on various statues of former South African diamond magnate Cecil Rhodes, both in South Africa and Britain. The comparative approach and the wide array of historical and theoretical references on memory wars in South African history both contribute to make the article not only very stimulating and thought-provoking but also highly informative and enlightening to any expert in the field. Gilles Teulié thus deliberately decided to contrast what happened to Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town and the one at Oriel college in Britain. The fact that Rhodes' bequest is now also helping African students to get more opportunities to study abroad thanks to a system of generous scholarships is one of the many interesting entangled issues where place, truth and historical heritage are displayed as not necessarily set in stone but possibly a source of reflexion and the perfect opportunity for more enlightened decisions in the future.

- 11 If place and truth are to be examined from a historical and memorial perspective, such a process can also be achieved through fiction and not only through the investigations into factual tangible evidence, be it massacre sites or statues. Indeed, as indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright once said, "writing fiction was a good way of telling the truth" (Wright 2018). This issue is particularly problematic when in former settler colonies the only truth(s) available have been written by non-indigenous writers whose relation to the place was warped from the start by appropriation. In the second part of this issue, the novel as a specific genre will thus be assessed as possibly providing the ultimate sanctuary or archive to preserve a partly dying indigenous memory as well as offering a *milieu* where new, alternative social and political forms of cooperation and co-construction of a common future can be imagined and offered to the readers. Can artistic creations, and novels more particularly,

provide a place where truth, or, should we say, multiple truths, can coexist and be reappropriated or invented anew?

Place, Truth and the Novel

- 12 Alexis Wright's choice to turn to fiction after a long career as a land activist in Australia is a case in point. She is an outstanding Indigenous Australian writer who believes fiction and the novel are means to achieve the reconciliation of the nation in having certain indigenous truths and perspectives known and acknowledged by non-indigenous and uprooted indigenous readers alike. She feels that the deep knowledge of place is a form of truth—or accumulation of truths—that has been preserved for the past for 60 000 years by countless indigenous Australian communities in their respective ancestral stories passed down from generation to generation. Wright actually feels that such “narratives of great and old wisdom are the true constitution for this country, and urgently need to be upfront in the national narrative in understanding how to care for it” (Wright 2019).
- 13 Opting for new forms of narration and new narratives on the part of indigenous writers worldwide is a strategy which can be less successful in other instances and notably when non-indigenous writers tackle similar issues. This is one of the main paradoxes studied by Anne Le Guellec in her article about *The Inland Sea* written by non-indigenous Australian writer Madeleine Watts. Whereas Alexis Wright manages to enlarge our epistemological horizons and power-knowledge in having us immerse ourselves in the deep knowledge of Country/Place, it seems Madeleine Watts's own narrative choices in her novel *The Inland Sea* leave the readers with a sense of failure and incompleteness, pointing to the need to urgently reconnect with place.
- 14 The foundational metanarrative of the “inland sea” shaped the horizon of expectations of the first non-indigenous explorers in Australia and it is exposed for what it is—an illusion, a mirage, the result of eager national mythmaking. Such an erroneous belief was a form of untruth that has a lot of characteristics in common with post-truth. Anne Le Guellec very cogently demonstrates this point when she sums them up as follows: the undermining of any truth-

claim, the loss of faith in a possible correspondence between language and reality and finally the rejection of any regime based on the authority of Truth. Not only does the novel contest any claim to absolute truth but it also foregrounds a strong sense of the acute precariousness of place. It is no coincidence if the plot has the reader visualise vast expanses of the Australian bush as they are burning. The plot is set in 2013 when, both in the novel and in real life, Australia was facing a dramatic heatwave. The main heroine is also concomitantly undergoing an existential crisis and is contrastively reminded of passages from her explorer ancestor's journals where John Oxley spells out his geographical project: mapping uncharted areas of central Australia and finding the "inland sea" or river system supposed to be lying at its core. The novel was published in 2020, another period of intense heat in the wake of massive bushfires that had just struck the nation. To that extent Watt's debut novel relates the precariousness of place and the various regimes of truth adopted from the early time of exploration to contemporary post-truth. And the terrible conclusion of it all is the ultimate inability to connect with any kind of place—or truth for that matter—as what Anne Le Guellec calls "emplaced meaningfulness" is made out of reach.

- 15 Indeed, in the novel and the British explorer's journal, the close observation of the land only brings about disillusion and disappointment but no other truth than that of relative failure. Similarly, the government's inability to fully acknowledge the seriousness of climate change and its cataclysmic consequences prior and successive to the 2013 bushfires in the novel's plot but also in 2019 is illustrated in a grotesque manner in the main protagonist's own disconnection from place and final decision in the last two paragraphs of the novel to have a swim in an "obscenely blue and lovely" water (Watts 251), oblivious to the dead bodies of so many birds wrecked on the rocks nearby. One of the reasons Madeleine Watts actually claims to have written the novel in the first place was to try and invent a new novelistic form to write climate fiction in answer to Indian thinker and writer Amitav Ghosh's *Great Derangement* critical volume dealing with how best to write about ecological crisis (Joyner). The fact that the main heroine should only be temporarily passing in Australia and intent on going to Los Angeles instead may also be one of the reasons why her

placelessness and her sense of unbelonging should be concomitant with her inability to come to terms with any form of “emplaced meaningfulness”. And this brings up the essential question of the place any of us actually speaks from and to what extent such a place will impact the type of truth or untruth or even post-truth we might come across, support and share.

The place we speak from and the truth we speak

- 16 The last three articles of the volume are particularly illuminating and exemplary in dealing with three distinctive perspectives inextricably linked with specific places of observation, understanding and expression: the pre-colonial, the multicultural and the migrant’s standpoint. In all three articles the writers reflect on the following issues: Who speaks and what legitimacy does one have to do so? From what place do we speak? To what extent does such a place colour or even warp the truth anyone might try and convey and also strongly determine the criteria deemed valid to establish it fully?

Precolonial truths or untruths

- 17 In the first article by Saugata Bhaduri, the place of origin of the observer and writer is all the more crucial as it precedes the regime of truth as defined by colonial propaganda and ideology. Saugata Bhaduri deliberately decides not to study post-truth as such but another form of truth or untruth that he designates as “pre-truth”. He focuses on the first European explorers’ accounts of their travels to Bengal from the late 13th to the early 19th century, thus showing that such pre-colonial players offered their own visions of Bengal, various perspectives that were much more plural and culturally and religiously harmonious than modern accounts of Bengal might suggest. Bhaduri thus offers a synthesis of his main theses spelled out in his groundbreaking volume on polycolonial influences in Bengal, *Polycoloniality: European Transactions with Bengal from the 13th to the 19th Century* (2020), while relating it in a thought-provoking manner to the questions of truth and untruth as related to place and culture. In an unexpected twist he thus demonstrates that the great

variety of tone and detail given by each traveller provides a general overview of Bengal that is paradoxically much closer to the true nature of Bengal than what is suggested by the current proliferation of post-truth and omnipresent sectarian discourses on both sides of the border dividing India's Bengal from Bangladesh's Bengal.

- 18 Salhia Ben Messahel's article offers another reflexion on the paradoxical place of truth being just as much on the side of the outsider's perspective as on that of the insider if we consider the issue of multiculturalism in Australia and its limitations. By "outsiders" Salhia Ben Messahel means Australians who are considered as not fully belonging to the national community in mainstream cultural representations because of their double allegiance to their country of origin or that of their parents or ancestry and their adoptive country, Australia and focuses more particularly on the Asian-Australian community.

Multicultural alternative truths

- 19 While Saugata Bhaduri addressed the question of the precariousness of truth and place from a pre-colonial point of view, Salhia Ben Messahel adopts a post-colonial and almost "post-multicultural" perspective. She ponders, together with Australian writer Alice Pung of Chinese descent, whether Benedict Anderson's concept of an *imagined community* in Australia is operational concerning the community of Asian descent and whether it is able to accommodate all its citizens in the egalitarian tradition it sees itself emanating from. In her article on Australia's "politics of inclusion in Alice Pung's writing", she addresses the entangled conceptions and realities of Home, feeling in place or out of place, for migrants or their descendants, and how truthful the very idea and political practice of so-called multiculturalism feels to them. Salhia Ben Messahel convincingly demonstrates that the objective of inclusiveness lying at the core of multicultural policies is not without its limitations. More often than not, instead of going further than assimilation or integration, multicultural representations tend to invisibilise the Asian-Australian community and relegate them to a space of their own, clearly distinct from the rest of the nation. It is as if their place was precisely to remain within a strictly defined perimeter. And such

a narrow definition of their place, whether social, cultural or political, tends to downplay the true nature of the Foucauldian alter spaces they actually live in, spaces of active interaction between different places. Salhia Ben Messahel also examines a form of ontology Lebanese-Australian anthropologist and scholar Ghassan Hage designates as “lenticular”, a process involving “multi-situatedness” and “multiple realities” as related to both the place of origin and the place of destination in the case of diasporic communities (Hage 99).

- 20 The last article to tackle the related notions of place and truth deals with refugee literature insofar as the truth or validity of refugee narratives is systematically questioned and suspected of fraud or dishonesty.

The conundrum of truth and precarious place in refugee literature

- 21 In her article “Truth, Lies and Credibility in Selected Works of Refugee Literature” Jessica Small addresses a specific meaning of place in its abstract dimension referring to the “place” we speak from. She makes a clear distinction between asylum seekers’ interviews where the refugee’s narrative is the object of a systemic “culture of disbelief” because of the place they speak from and on the other hand refugee literature where real truth can express itself fully and freely as there are no preestablished and arbitrary criteria defining what truth should sound and read like. In the second instance the complexity and plurality of truth/s and place/s can deploy itself without risking falling into any form of precariousness. Jessica Small focuses more particularly on Dina Nayeri’s *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019) and *Who Gets Believed* (2023), as well as Melatu Uche Okorie’s short story “Under The Awning” (2018), all of which have a strong autobiographical dimension and testimonial value. And we could conclude with Salman Rushdie, that it is precisely from such voices coming from the ground up that the readers’ “faith in the truth” can be rekindled. Rushdie thus warns it is our duty and mission as scholars, humanists, and intellectuals to keep our “faith in the truth” intact and do this “from the ground up”, in other words from the precarious place of the subaltern just as much, if not more, as from any other place: “We stand [...] in the midst of

the rubble of the truth. And it is for us—writers, thinkers, journalists, philosophers—to undertake the task of rebuilding our readers’ belief in reality, their faith in the truth. And to do it with new language, from the ground up.” (Rushdie)

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NOTES

- 1 This phenomenon and the risk of manipulation it leads to ultimately has been cogently analysed by Chris Shei and James Schnell in their 2024 *Handbook of Language and Mind Engineering*.
- 2 Milieu (n.): “surroundings, medium, environment”, 1854, from French milieu, “middle, medium, mean”, literally “middle place” (12 c.), from mi “middle” (from Latin medius, from PIE root *medhyo- “middle”) + lieu “place” (see lieu). Online Etymology Dictionary, <www.etymonline.com/word/milieu>.

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Mots-clés

espace, territoire, milieu, place, vérité, post-vérité, représentations nationales, mémoire

Keywords

space, place, truth, post-truth, national representations, memory

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Australia's "Moment of Truth" and the Burden of Historical Proof

Le « moment de vérité » de l'Australie et le fardeau de la preuve historique

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TEXTE

- 1 The terms “post-truth” and “post-fact” “exploded on the social media scene” after 2015 when “post-truth” became the Oxford Dictionaries’ 2016 word of the year, although it had been “simmering for the past decade” (Lewandowsky 354), at least since the publication of the eponymous essay by Ralph Keyes (2004).¹ Oxford University Press retraces its origin to the early 1990s and an article in *The Nation* by playwright Steve Tesich about how truth in American public life fell a casualty of the Iran-Contra scandal and the First Gulf War (Kreitner 2016).² Australian politics has proven to be no exception to this transnational trend. Public debate became increasingly couched in post-truth political discourse in the ensuing years, notably when Prime minister Scott Morrison was accused of lying by president Emmanuel Macron over the AUKUS submarine deal (ABC News, 31 Oct. 2021), a view seconded by Morrison’s predecessor Malcolm Turnbull (ABC Radio, 2 Nov. 2021),³ or when Shadow Housing and Homelessness Minister Jason Clare accused Morrison of making misleading statements about climate change at Cop-26: “This bloke doesn’t just lie, he lies about lying” (Sky News, 15 Nov. 2021).
- 2 An adjective defined by Oxford Languages as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”, the emergence of post-truth discourse is attributed by Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook to “societal mega-trends such as a decline in social capital, growing economic inequality, increased polarization, declining trust in science, and an increasingly fractionated media

landscape” (353). While it was said to mark the “current moment” in the United States (Kreitner 2016), in Australia it coincided with the revival of the older compound noun “truth-telling” in the debate about Indigenous rights and Australian colonial and post-colonial history. “Truth-telling” features in the 2015 edition of the Oxford Concise Medical Dictionary where it is defined as an ethical duty amongst clinicians to speak truthfully to their patients and tell them “the facts openly, honestly, and unambiguously” (Martin 776), yet in the nationwide consultations of Indigenous communities leading to publication of the Final Report of the Referendum Council on 30 June 2017, the term had long been a key notion. In the text of that report the lexical field of “truth”, including “truth-telling” and “true history”, occurs no less than sixty-three times.

- 3 This intense focus on truth-telling is what Mark McKenna has called “Australia’s moment of truth” (2018, 8). For Henry Reynolds, it is the result of “a remarkable growth of historical awareness” (2017, 11) leading to the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017); the culmination of two decades of work in Indigenous communities and civil society to reveal forgotten histories and remake the national narrative by coming to terms with Australia’s violent past and its deep history, thereby moving beyond the faltering reconciliation process towards constitutional recognition and lasting political change. The 2021 *State of Reconciliation in Australia Report* “places truth-telling at the centre of how we move forward” (Mundine 3).
- 4 Yet, establishing the truth of events which are hard to document because of limited sources, and because they are shrouded in centuries of forgetting and denial, continues to prove challenging and controversial. This article asks whether history can be trusted to show the way to the truth, “when the truth may only be ashes and dust” in the words of the 2016 Nobel Laureate in Literature (Dylan 1985), or whether shifting standards and burdens of historical proof could be said to be gradually reframing the national story in post-colonial Australia.
- 5 In the wake of the “History Wars”, the borders between truth-telling and story-telling, science and literature, have worn thin as authors turn to fictional reconstitution and literary memoir to probe the dark recesses of sites of memory, and historians to archeology and the

earth sciences to supplement and test limited sources (Griffiths 179, Roberts et al. 194). Faced with the challenge of writing up her research into the massacre of Indigenous people perpetrated in 1844 by cattle station hands at Bluff Rock, a granite outcrop at Tenterfield in northern New South Wales, “the truth of [which] remains clouded by many conflicting versions” (“Bluff Rock”), Katrina Schlunke turned to personal testimony to supplement scarce sources in her hybrid history-cum-memoir *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre* (2005), a choice which was critically received by the reviewer in *Aboriginal History* who objected that “this concern with her own feelings tends to undermine the integrity of the rest of the work [...] Schlunke’s method seems to involve a kind of tyranny over the past” (Atkinson 232).

- 6 Kate Grenvilles investigation of a massacre of Aboriginal people on the Hawkesbury River circa 1814 in the prize-winning historical fiction *The Secret River* (2005) (later made into a mini-series for television), and its non-fiction sequel *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) exploring her settler ancestor’s role in it, sparked a heated public history debate. The author’s assertion (reformulated in a subsequent interview) that “historical novels give people who will never read history a chance to think about some of the issues that history raises” (Grenville 2009), was objected to by Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen who underlined the anachronism the novelist had committed by transposing details of the massacre from a separate killing at Waterloo Creek two decades later (Stewart). In a *Quarterly Essay* article “The History Question: Who Owns the Past?” Clendinnen rejects the novelist’s “claim to ‘know’ with equal certainty both what is intimated within the records and what is beyond it”, one which exposes “a gulf” between “doing history” and “doing fiction” (20). What distinguishes the former from the latter is the critical role of historians who she urges to engage with the politics of the past as its “custodians and interpreters” (15), if they are to resist its appropriation by novelists and memorialists:

Given the power of stories, historians must be on constant alert regarding their uses, because, like their cousins the archeologists, their obligation is to preserve the past in its least corrupted form. Citizens will go on exploiting the past for all manner of private and public enterprises, reputable and disreputable; historians will go on

resisting opportunistic appropriations. That critical role will engage them in “politics” broadly understood. (Clendinnen 65)

- 7 Implicit in curating the past “in its least corrupted form” is the issue of the relativity of historical truth, the question of questions at the heart of evidentiary standards in historical research, “how do we know when we know?” (Kaestle 362). Here, Clendinnen’s position converges with that of the historiographer John Tosh whose view is “that the methods of academic history hold out the promise not of ‘truth’ in the absolute sense, but of incremental growth in our knowledge of the past” (xii). Formal proof may be beyond the range of historians, the “facts” of history are those inferences drawn from the available sources that are validated by the cumulative weight of expert opinion (Tosh 158). Tosh points to the challenge posed to standards of proof in academic history by the postmodern turn in scholarship on the one hand, and the development of the growing memory culture in society at large on the other. The task facing historians is how to play their legitimate part in memory studies without neglecting their regard for evidential proof (Tosh 279) or, we might add, while leaving no stone in the field of “forgotten histories” unturned. In answering his own rhetorical question about standards of evidence, Carl F. Kaestle reaches for another metaphor for the early stages of historical research which he compares to “a lot of horses pawing at the ground and not going anywhere yet” before tentative hypotheses can progress towards viable generalizations, subject to the internal standards of historical dialogue: the “consonance of micro- and macro-levels of analysis, synthesis of contradictory claims, and reinforcement across regions or nations” (Kaestle 366). Kaestle concedes, like Tosh, that answers will still be “impermanent” and incomplete, but they will “give us a little better light for looking into the abyss” (ibid.).
- 8 This is where the notion of the burden of proof enters the historian’s reckoning by analogy with Law: the onus on a party to a case to produce sufficient evidence to establish the truth of the facts. It is legal terminology Stuart Macintyre reaches for in *The History Wars* when assessing the validity of Keith Windschuttle’s critique, in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, of the research undertaken by

Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan, and their peers, into the massacres of the frontier wars:

He [Windschuttle] imposes stringent standards of evidence—from reputable eyewitnesses and perfectly corroborated—to rule out higher numbers [of victims].
He applies these forensic techniques to prosecute the historians, but he also acts as counsel for the defence for the colonial authorities. (164–165)

Windschuttle's minute examination of the evidence is most damaging, Macintyre concedes, where it exposes discrepancies between the sources and historians' accounts, but in the final analysis he finds the defence counsel culpable of engaging in an exercise of "counter-history" (166), less intent on contributing to the establishment of the truth than to reducing the body count (167). With reference to the intense scrutiny to which Lyndall Ryan's *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* was subjected, Macintyre surmises "some might conclude that there is no alternative to the campaign of denial but to compile as full an inventory as possible of the frontier wars", adding presciently: "It would be a lengthy, grisly and always imprecise business as the records are neither comprehensive nor unambiguous" (Macintyre 170). Presciently, because this is precisely the arduous course that historians of the frontier wars would take.

- 9 In the decade that followed, research to further substantiate the pioneering work of Reynolds et al. would proceed apace. Although it is not within the remit of this article to provide a panoramic account of that "intellectual and cultural movement that in a little over a generation has transformed the nation's understanding of both traditional Aboriginal society and the relations between Indigenous and settler Australians" (Reynolds 2013, 5), it should begin with the third edition of Reynolds's own seminal study *The Other Side of the Frontier* (2006), reissued to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first, including a new introduction in which the author sustains his estimate of 20,000 Aboriginal dead in answer to Windschuttle's charge that his figures were deliberately inflated (11). A few years later, in *Forgotten War*, Reynolds would revise that estimate "steeply upwards to 30,000 and beyond, perhaps well beyond" (2013, 70) based on a synthesis of historical research into conflict on the frontiers of

settlement accumulated since 1981,⁴ while at the same time pressing home the case for the board of the Australian War Memorial to formally acknowledge the frontier wars, a call which flows from the critique of the Anzac tradition formulated with Marilyn Lake, Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi in terms of truth-telling in *What's Wrong with Anzac* (2010): “History runs counter to myth-making. We write to encourage a more critical and truthful public debate about the uses of the Anzac myth” (VIII). In taking this stand, Reynolds, Lake and their peers took up the challenge issued by Inga Clendinnen to critically engage in the politics of the past at the nexus of history and collective memory.

- 10 Starting from the premise that “during the first half of the 20th century the Aborigines were written out of Australian history” (Reynolds 2013, 11), this group of historians has sought to write them back in by embedding “the national story in the histories of our own soil”, as Mark McKenna puts it in *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories* (xv), the second in a geohistorical series beginning with *Looking for Blackfella's Point: An Australian History of Place* (2002). Where the first book in McKenna's trilogy plumbs the absence of collective remembrance at an Aboriginal meeting place on the south coast of New South Wales, the second investigates half-forgotten encounters between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians located at the four corners of the island-continent and on the edge of national consciousness. The third volume, *Return to Uluru* (2021), revisits a specific site of memory, but this time an iconic monolith at the centre of the continent,⁵ and a hidden history: the unlawful killing in 1934 of an Anangu Pitjantjatjara man, Yokununna, at Uluru/Ayer's Rock by a mounted constable of the Northern Territory police, William McKinnon. What distinguishes McKenna's most recent book from its prequels is less a methodological change in approach—he takes a characteristically deep dive into the available records, both written and oral—as a shift in historiographical focus, to a case study that questions the fine line between legal and historical standards of evidence and burdens of proof. *Return to Uluru* reopens a cold case: the 1935 Commonwealth Board of Enquiry into McKinnon's alleged ill-treatment of Aboriginal prisoners and fatal shooting of Yokununna. In its final report, the Board failed to press charges, finding that the ill-treatment was meted out on the instructions of “the responsible

mission official”, and that the shooting, though unwarranted, was “legally justifiable” (to prevent escape) (McKenna 2021, 124). Apart from a single dissenting opinion, the Board found that “from a legal point of view, no charge could be maintained in a court of law against McKinnon” (McKenna 2021, 123). William McKinnon returned to his policing duties and lived out the rest of his days untroubled by the criminal justice system. Had there been a miscarriage of justice?

- 11 McKenna reassesses the evidence presented to the Board with the forensic attention to detail invoked by Stuart Macintyre as the benchmark, post-History Wars, for historians intent on substantiating frontier violence. Unlike an official Commonwealth enquiry, the historian does not have to meet the legal burden of proof or standards of evidentiary truth to satisfy a court of law, only to demonstrate that its findings were unsound because it contradicted its own reasoning in arguing, at once, that McKinnon’s actions were legally justified, and that he should have ignored his orders and allowed Yokununna to escape (McKenna 2021, 123). McKenna underlines the “laboured equivocation” (123) of the Board and lets the dissenting opinion speak for itself: the “contradictory nature” of the evidence made it “well-nigh impossible to ascertain the real truth”, and “the natives were too afraid to give true evidence on any matters affecting the police” (125). The report had been fudged, truth was not served, justice was not delivered.
- 12 There the historian might have rested his case, were it not for a belated plot twist worthy of a novel. McKinnon’s daughter opens her father’s papers to McKenna, who steps out of “the protective cocoon of the archive” (McKenna 2021, 197) and into the communicative remembering of family history. The discovery of McKinnon’s original logbook for the year 1934 produces a eureka moment: the policeman’s account that he had fired on the fugitive with intent to harm, to all intents and purposes a handwritten confession that he had lied to the Board of Enquiry. It is at this point that the story separates into two intertwining strands which speak to the complex heritage of frontier violence and the affective charge it continues to carry: McKenna resolves to break “the uncomfortable truth” to the McKinnon’s family (McKenna 2021, 242), and to bring closure to Yokununna’s descendants by making arrangements for the repatriation of his remains from the South Australian Museum (244). By this point, the

historian has stepped out not just from behind the archive, but from his conventional academic role, to become an actor in the politics of memory and reconciliation:

Only after I'd returned home from Uluru in 2020, did I fully appreciate how McKinnon was part of two histories that were hidden, and inseparably entwined, in the landscape of central Australia [...]; he was a key figure in the violent history we'd erased from national memory and, at the same time, a contributor to the powerful myths of the centre we've invented since. He was none of us and all of us. (253)⁶

- 13 McKenna would be present at the repatriation of Yokununna's remains and reburial by his descendants at Uluru in October 2022, itself a significant outcome of the truth-telling process documented by the land council anthropologist Claire Brereton and two of his senior family members. Brereton observes of their collaboration that:

[...] family were very interested in learning all that was possible [about Yukun's exhumation] from the written records. In this way, we see the intermingling of oral histories with written histories by Aboriginal people to arrive at the "truth" [...] Primacy is given to oral records; but where they are lacking, oral records are supplemented by written colonial records. (5–6)

- 14 *Return to Uluru* was heralded by Megan Davis, the chair of the First Nations Constitutional Convention in 2017, as a companion piece to the Uluru Statement of the Heart: "The Uluru Statement seeks to enshrine, as this book does, the ancient politics of this land within the framework of Australian democracy. *Return to Uluru* will form an important part of Australia's truth-telling canon" (2). It wasn't the only new history to unfold in the lee of the monolith and the convention that gathered there. In *Truth Telling: History, Sovereignty and the Uluru Statement* (2021), Henry Reynolds surveys the growth in historical awareness of the past twenty years on the road to Uluru in five stages, from the History Wars and the reconciliation process, through the "writing back" of Aboriginal Australia into its war history (albeit in the restrictive and Anzac-conformist narrative of the "Black Diggers"), and the recognition of the frontier wars of conquest and appropriation, to the "Unfinished business" of reconciliation and

constitutional recognition (Reynolds 2021, 11). On the key issue of sovereignty, Reynolds makes the case that the sovereignty of the First Nations peoples survived the invasion and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown. He concedes, nevertheless, that the lasting impact of appeals of the Convention for a First Nations voice in the constitution and a Makarrata Commission⁷ for agreement-making and truth-telling, is uncertain and that reconciliation will remain symbolic and ineffectual without further “truth work”.

- 15 Mark McKenna lauded the engagement of *Truth-telling* as “a political call to arms” (Reynolds 2021, 3), but where does the unfinished business of politics leave the historian? In her review of Reynolds’s book Sarah Maddison expresses scepticism at the capacity of truth-telling to transform Indigenous-settler relations in the absence of structural change, because it means different things to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. For the latter, it is an end in itself, the recognition of a past which Australians can put behind them. For the former, it is the prelude to the acknowledgment of sovereignty and a pathway to self-determination. This was before the unequivocal rejection by Australians of the first pillar of the Uluru Statement in the Voice to Parliament referendum of October 2023. The subsequent shelving of the Labor government’s plans for a republic referendum 2.0 makes a new constitutional settlement in-the-round a distant prospect at best. The promise of a Makarrata commission on the model of the South African TRC appears to be no longer on the table, at least in the life of the current parliament. The political impact of Uluru remains uncertain. What remains is the validation of Indigenous oral history, the nexus with storytelling (with its attendant ambiguities), and the subtle shift in the burden of proof in public history since the History Wars, mirrored by a jurisprudence which acknowledges “the unnecessarily complex and high benchmark for proving native title” (Strelein 6). It is no longer possible to roll back the growing body of interdisciplinary research dedicated to uncovering Australia’s buried frontier histories, or the technological innovations (magnetic gradiometry and ground-penetrating radar) and methodological refinements borne of the collaboration between historians, archeologists, social scientists and geophysicists (Roberts et al.). The ARC-funded Colonial Frontier Massacre Map Project, led at Newcastle University Australia by the late Lyndall Ryan in

partnership with *The Guardian Australia* and launched contemporaneously with the First Nations Convention at Uluru, is perhaps the most high-profile accomplishment. By the time it concluded in 2022 it had documented no less than 438 frontier massacre sites in the period 1780–1930 costing at least 10,657 lives using a methodology adapted, in the absence of a definition in international law, from Jacques Semelin’s pioneering scholarship on massacre and the genocidal process, as well as Barbara A. Mann’s notion of fractal massacres.⁸ The “massacre map” had Ryan’s peers reaching for superlatives in their posthumous tributes:⁹ it survived her as “a cartographic memorial, a shimmering testimonial to a moral truth which is at once overwhelming and undeniable” (McKenna in Haskins). Forty years after the critical reception of Ryan’s PhD thesis, it could be claimed on her behalf that the ambition (advocated by Macintyre) “to compile as full an inventory as possible of the frontier wars”, combining new research in massacre studies and digital technology, has produced “sufficient evidence”¹⁰ (Allen 198) to provide the most comprehensive picture to date of systemic violence on Australia’s colonial frontier.

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NOTES

- 1 Ralph Keyes: "In the post-truth era, borders blur between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction." (38)
- 2 Steve Tesich: "In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world."
- 3 Emmanuel Macron: "I don't think [he lied], I know." Malcolm Turnbull: "[...] he did very elaborately and duplicitously deceive France."
- 4 Reynolds acknowledges the contribution of Australian military historians such as John Connor in bringing to light the major conflicts fought on the frontier in the first half century of settlement.

- 5 “In less than fifty years, the rock had gone from a lonely monolith that barely registered in the national imagination to the most recognisable symbol of Australia next to the Sydney Opera House and the kangaroo. What had long been the Anangu’s ‘holy place’ and ‘most sacred spot’ had gradually become the entire nation’s centre, at once geographical and spiritual.” (McKenna 2021, 174)
- 6 A phrase which echoes prime minister Paul Keating’s “Unknown Soldier speech” of 11 November 1993, “He is all of them. And he is one of us”, in counterpoint to the Anzac tradition.
- 7 A Yolngu term meaning “the coming together after a struggle”.
- 8 The killing of 30% of a hunter/forager group, or 6 in 20 people.
- 9 Vale Emerita Professor Lyndall Ryan (14 April 1943–30 April 2024).
- 10 The Colonial Frontiers Massacres project team applied the legal notion of “sufficiency of evidence” to record only those massacres that could be substantiated from convergent sources.

RÉSUMÉS

English

The intensification of efforts since the turn of the millenium to uncover and map sites where massacres of indigenous Australians are said to have taken place during the frontier wars participate in what Mark McKenna calls “Australia’s moment of truth”—the culmination of the work of diverse agencies to recover “forgotten” histories and remake Australia’s national narrative by coming to terms with its violent colonial past. Yet, substantiating violence and dispossession that is shrouded in centuries of forgetting and denial continues to prove problematical and controversial in the wake of the History Wars. Faced with the challenges of gathering irrefutable evidence, authors have turned to historical fiction or literary memoir to probe frontier massacres, and historians to archeology and the earth sciences to supplement and proof-test scarce sources. Can forensic science and GIS be trusted to provide corroboration “when the truth may only be ashes and dust”, or are shifting burdens and standards of historical proof gradually reframing the national story?

Français

L’intensification des efforts déployés depuis le tournant du millénaire visant à découvrir et cartographier les sites où des massacres d’Australiens indigènes auraient eu lieu pendant les guerres frontalières participe à ce que Mark McKenna appelle « l’heure de vérité de l’Australie » consacrant le

travail de divers acteurs civiques pour désenterrer des histoires « oubliées » et réécrire le récit national australien en faisant la lumière sur son passé violent. Pourtant, révéler la violence et la dépossession enveloppées dans des siècles d'oubli et de déni continue à poser des problèmes et à susciter la controverse dans le sillage des guerres de la mémoire. Face à la difficulté d'établir les faits, des auteurs se sont tournés vers la fiction historique ou les mémoires littéraires pour sonder les sombres recoins des lieux de massacres, et des historiens vers l'archéologie et les sciences de la terre pour compléter et tester des sources limitées. Peut-on faire confiance à la science médico-légale ou au SIG pour trouver des éléments de preuve « lorsque la vérité n'est que cendres et poussière », ou bien s'agit-il de recadrer progressivement l'histoire nationale grâce à une réévaluation des modes de preuve ?

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Mots-clés

Australie postcoloniale, histoire autochtone, post-vérité, expression de la vérité, récits nationaux, historiographie, charge de la preuve, critères d'authenticité de la preuve

Keywords

post-colonial Australia, indigenous history, post-truth, truth-telling, national narratives, historiography, burden of proof, standards of evidence

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“When Cecil Rhodes’ Colossal Statue Has a Foot in Cape Town and the Other in Oxford”: Post-Truth Political Reactions to Contested British Imperial Monuments

« Lorsque le colosse de Cecil Rhodes a un pied au Cap et l'autre à Oxford » : la post-vérité dans les réactions politiques à la contestation des monuments impériaux britanniques

Gilles Teulié

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PLAN

Memory wars from South Africa
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TEXTE

- 1 When Percy Fitzgerald wrote about statues in an art journal in 1914, he emphasised that a people’s memory is “embalmed” in statues (Fitzgerald 338), pointing out that the memory of a person is forever captured by monuments dedicated to that person. Referring to the 19th-century statues on the banks of the Thames, he also suggested that there were statues depicting people who were unknown to the public and who thus became “bronze enigmas”, that aroused no interest, kindled no emotion and “might as well be away”. But on the other hand, Nelsons, Wellingtons, Pitts, Foxes, Queens, Kings, and the like, “all spoke in a language of their own to the crowd” (Fitzgerald 338), highlighting a sort of social dialogue between the audience and the monuments, even though there may be different interpretations of such dialogue (Marschall 2010, 296). For Fitzgerald, important and famous figures were interestingly associated with British expansionism: “All this holds more particularly in a great

capital like London, in which no obscure or mediocre men should have place, and only those who have done vast service to the empire” (Fitzgerald 338). The erection of monuments, especially statues, serves to honour people who have rendered outstanding services to a community. No wonder Cecil Rhodes had so many statues and memorials (plaques) erected to commemorate him. Alluding to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Rhodes Colossus, a huge statue of the god Helios that stood at the entrance to the port of Rhodes on the island of the same name, Edward L. Sambourne played with the diamond magnate’s name in a political cartoon published in *Punch* magazine on 10 December 1892 (p. 266) under the title “The Rhodes Colossus: Striding from Cape Town to Cairo”. Cecil Rhodes is depicted as a giant in colonial dress, with a pith helmet in one hand, standing on Africa, one foot on Cairo, the other on Cape Town, and stretching a telegraph wire from one city to another. He is so tall that his head is floating in the clouds. The cartoon was published after Rhodes had mentioned that he wanted to lay the telegraph wire from northern to southern Africa, crossing only British territory, and therefore this cartoon carries an ironic undertone.

- 2 The unveiling of monuments is a way of shaping a cityscape, but also of making an occupied territory visible, a way of saying: “This is our land”. Space and place are therefore what statues are about, as Tim Cresswell says: “place is central to forms of struggle and resistance too” (Cresswell 3). As symbols, statues are thus targets for resistance or opposition movements that expressed their anger through destruction. The toppling of statues is therefore not new, as we know that the Roman Senate officially instituted *damnatio memoriae* to attempt to “erase” someone from history, as with the toppling of the statues of Poppaea and Nero. Since ancient times, many monuments have been desecrated, temporarily but more often permanently (King George III in New York in 1776). Therefore, it is not surprising that the statue of slaveholder Edward Colston in Bristol had been targeted through petitions or vandalised since at least the 1990s before it was thrown into the river Avon in 2020 (Rengel 66), while in New Zealand some have noted that changing values have led to statue wars, which could be read as part of a “long-standing New Zealand tradition” of attacking statues of royalty, colonial rulers and military leaders amounting to 23 % of statues having been vandalised in one form or

another since the 1930s (Ballantyne 2). In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement following the tragic death of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, which triggered a wave of demonstrations, riots and the desecration of monuments in many places in the USA, attacks on monuments multiplied. Many monuments that could be associated with racism were attacked and desecrated in one way or another. Other victims of racism echoed the reactions of Black people, such as the Native Americans who on 12 October 2020 had an obelisk in the plaza of Santa Fe, New Mexico, torn down because they found it offensive as it paid homage to “the heroes who have fallen in the various battles with savage resilient Indians in the territory of New Mexico” (the original word “savage” had been deleted a few years before the monument was toppled and the word “resilient” was added instead). Indigenous Canadians and sympathisers joined the process by removing about fifteen statues between September 2020 and April 2022, including statues of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1 July 2021) and of many prominent white Canadians such as the “founder” of Canada, six-time Prime Minister John A. Macdonald. Indigenous Australians also took up the fight with slogans such as “White Australia has a Black History”, “Change the date. No pride in genocide” or “Aboriginal Lives Matter”, Maoris performed a haka at BLM protests in New Zealand, while statues of Sir George Grey, Zealandia, James Cook and Colonel Marmaduke Nixon were defaced. David Olusoga, a historian at the University of Manchester, pointed out that the era of engaging with a one-sided Western history was coming to an end: “These are the history wars we are having... Statues have become lightning rods for a struggle we are going to have about our history” (Olusoga n.p.). Historiography is also about the people who witnessed the events and talk about their involvement (Price, Chikane, Habib). Yet, one important element to consider in this fight over commemoration is the “post-truth context” in which these fights take place. Myriam Revault d’Allonnes reminds us that post-truth politics are not to be opposed to “democratic politics devoted to the respect of truth”, but rather to a form of “indifference to truth”, a “divide now considered inessential between true and false” and an ultimate confusion between truth and opinion (Revault d’Allonnes 34–35, my translation). The post-truth era thus offers an opportunity for many to challenge official (and historical) narratives with a distortion of

truth as was the case with the Brexit campaign or Trump's speeches prior to the 2016 presidential elections. But it can also alert citizens to the possibility of critically assessing official and institutionalised history by providing another (post-colonial) perspective as "the visibility of a monument is in fact entirely contingent upon the debate concerning the reinterpretation of history at moments of social and political transitions" (Coombes 12).

- 3 This article aims to come back on the episodes of the removal of the statues of Cecil Rhodes by anti-racist and anti-colonial activists and the political reactions they provoked. By comparing two statues of Cecil Rhodes, one in Cape Town and the other in Oxford, the difference between the monuments remaining in the former colonies (South Africa) and those erected in the metropolis (England) will also be analysed to determine how important the local context is and whether the imperial legacy is perceived differently.

Memory wars from South Africa

- 4 A decade before the "Rhodes Must Fall" tsunami, Paul Mayham wondered in the preface to his book on Cecil Rhodes why this "arch-imperialist sustained so much attention in the century after his death", noting that because of his aggressive imperialism, there was little coverage of the centenary of his birth in 2002, Rhodes scholarship in 2003, and Rhodes University in 2004 (Mayham). Perhaps one of the explanations for the afterlife of the image of Cecil Rhodes is that he is often referred to as the archetype of the Victorian imperialist, whose pillars were capitalism and expansionism:

For a brief, brilliant moment the activists of #RMF found a language and a form of protest that was able to haul this legacy into focus. In doing so, I believe that they were aided by the form of the Rhodes statue itself, which so powerfully summarized this deeply inscribed coloniality, as well as by the sheer intensity of the surrounding symbolic and memorial landscape. (Shepherd 79)

- 5 In 2015, South Africa is a post-apartheid country struggling with the legacy of officially introduced racial segregation. Since the African National Congress Party's victory in South Africa's first multicultural

elections in 1994, frustrations and tensions had grown with the government, whose task of providing a better life for 55 million people (blacks and whites alike), far more than the pro-apartheid National Party (which was only concerned with the welfare of 5 million whites) was daunting. Dealing with the legacy of apartheid was on the government's agenda, which also meant dealing with the symbols of segregation, such as the statues and busts of white leaders like Paul Kruger, J. B. M. Hertzog, D. F. Malan, J. G. Strydom or Hendrik Verwoerd, which were removed from public places. Other apartheid symbols had become a point of contention—the springbok on the national rugby team's jersey versus the protea, the new symbol of South African sport, or the changing of names: Street names (Voortrekker Street became Steve Biko Street in Pretoria), airports (Ian Smuts International Airport in Johannesburg became Oliver R. Tambo International Airport) or cities (Pietersburg became Polokwane, Port Elizabeth became Gqeberha, while Pretoria became Tshwane, probably the most controversial change)... When it was accepted that “white” memorials should not be destroyed (The Afrikaner Voortrekker memorial in Pretoria or the English Anglo-Zulu War memorials in Isandlwana), “black” memorials were erected alongside them to achieve a more balanced representation of the South African commemorative space (Teulié). These are the more visible aspects of the legacy of apartheid and colonial rule, along with all the statues erected to the heroes of the anti-apartheid movement, including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Vusumzi Saul Mkhize or Steve Biko but also victims of the apartheid police, such as the Gugulethu Seven, the Craddock Four, etc. But what sparked the memory wars on a larger scale were the slow, less visible advances in the social agenda. One of these was access to education and the curriculum, which was seen as too European and not African enough. In 2015, most academics in South Africa were still white. The priority given to education by Nelson Mandela was slow to bear mature fruit, as a whole generation of young freedom fighters had given up school to fight against apartheid. The gap between the generations has therefore not yet been bridged.

- 6 The #Rhodes SoWhite movement (later #Rhodesmustfall) began on 9 March 2015, when Chumani Maxwele, a UCT student with a placard on his chest “Exhibit White @ arrogance UCT” threw human

excrement at the statue, stating that he wanted to bridge the gap between black and white students at UCT and move the university away from its Eurocentricity (Pitso and others). The movement gathered momentum from then on, a large rally took place on 12 March to debate the issue among students, then a march was held. The pressure increased when on 20 March students stormed the UCT administration building and occupied it for several days. On 8 April, a UCT board meeting was disrupted by students allegedly chanting “One Settler, One Bullet”, giving the movement a pan-Africanist undertone. On 27 March 2015, the UCT board voted to remove the statue, which was done on 9 April with a huge media coverage.

- 7 On Monday, 31 October 2016, the permanent removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue was approved by the University of Cape Town Board of Governors. Four proposals were made to host the statue, one in the USA and three in South Africa (in 2021, the statue was still in the care of UCT). During the demonstrations, many slogans were displayed, such as: “Make Rhodes History”, “All Rhodes lead to colonisation of the mind” and the sign at the base of the statue pedestal read “F. Your dream of empire”. The “dream” of Cecil Rhodes was obviously featured in the famous *Punch* cartoon “Rhodes Colossus” of 1892 mentioned earlier. If we imagine that the UCT Statue symbolically represents one foot of the “Rhodes Colossus” in South Africa, while the other foot is embodied by the Oriel Statue of Cecil Rhodes erected in Oxford, we can conclude in both cases that the “colossal” statues of Cecil Rhodes (by the standards of media coverage) are only standing on feet of clay. The movement was then exported to Britain.
- 8 The Oxford Movement followed on from the UCT Movement and continued the social media firestorm that had popularised Cecil Rhodes for many people around the world (Calderisi 14). In June 2015, a black South African student from KwaZulu-Natal, Ntokozo Qwabe, who had received a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University in 2013, became the co-founder of the movement at Oxford (#RhodesMustFallOxford) with the slogan stated on their Facebook page: “an organisation determined to decolonise space, curriculum and institutional memory and fight intersectional oppression” (RhodesMustFallOxford). Ntokozo Qwabe, a law student at Keble University, justified the modernity of the movement by emphasising

that the legacy of imperialism was still present: “When people talk about colonialism, they often think of a past event that happened. They don’t think of it as something that manifests itself in the daily life of institutions like Oxford” (qtd in Rhoden-Paul). The student movement demanded the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the facade of Oriel College in Oxford, along with a decolonised curriculum and the banning of racist attitudes from the institution. Debates were fierce and pressure groups organised to support or attack the movement. Oriel College had long debates about the issue, while the student movement never stopped through demonstrations, boycotts, art exhibitions (dance), social media and maintaining links with the original movement in South Africa, such as marching in Oxford in 2021 to commemorate the 1976 Soweto Uprising (RhodesMustFallOxford). One of the main arguments of opponents against the removal of the statue was that the Rhodes Scholarships, which enable 100 non-English students to study at Oriel each year and which were funded by Cecil Rhodes, himself a former student at Oriel, should be returned by those who criticised the diamond magnate. This was the case of Joshua Nott, a white South African, son of a wealthy lawyer, who actively campaigned for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town and then applied for and received a Rhodes Scholarship to continue his studies at Oxford in 2017 (BBC reporter). This was also the case of Ntokozo Quwabe, who was criticised by the British press and on social media for accepting his Rhodes scholarship. Both Nott and Quwabe were called hypocrites. Both responded that free speech cannot be silenced by money and that one can criticise the institution from within.

- 9 The movement continued with less press coverage but flared up again in June 2020 following the death of George Floyd and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which quickly spread around the world. The debates were also revitalised in academic circles by the support of the movement by some Oxford University professors. The Vice-Chancellor Louise Richardson was criticised for not complying with the demand. Student pressure mounted and on 17 June 2020, Oriel College accepted the idea of removing the statue, but had to have the public’s wish confirmed by setting up an independent commission of enquiry. Anyone could write to the commission and

make their views known. The 144-page report was finally published in April 2021, without deciding for or against the statue, but with an assessment of the situation quoting students and relying on the survey of secondary school students to shed light on the state of reactions to the statue. The recommendations on the monument state that whatever decision should be made, it should be placed in context (Oriel College, *Report of a Commission of Inquiry*, 10–13).

- 10 The Oriel College board eventually decided not to take down the statue for cost reasons and wanted to focus on the commission's recommendations. Perhaps pressure came from the city council, which had a say in the matter as the building is a Grade II listed building. Oriel College cites compliance with government guidelines, stating on its website that in a letter to the DCMS (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) Arms Length Bodies in September 2020, the Culture Secretary expressed the government's expectations in relation to controversial heritage assets: no action must be taken that is "motivated by activism or politics", otherwise there was a threat that funding would be withdrawn: "It is imperative that you continue to act impartially, in line with your publicly funded status and not in a way that calls it into question" (Oriol contextualisation). The threat that the funders would pull out if this happened must also have played a part in the decision. The protesters were dismayed: "No matter how Oriel College tries to justify its decision, leaving the statue standing is an act of institutional racism" (Race). The British government responded to the various movements and adopted a policy to preserve the monuments, known as the "retain and explain" policy, leaving controversial historical statues in place with added context, such as the monuments to William Beckford and John Cass, politicians associated with the transatlantic slave trade (Gershon).
- 11 In October 2021, Oriel college installed a modern explanatory plaque on the heritage of Rhodes at the foot of the façade where the statue is located (Oriol contextualisation). It became highly controversial because Rhodes was labelled a "committed British colonialist" and opponents felt the text did not address his legacy. Social media became a battleground, with both opponents as exemplified by Nigel Gardiner who wrote on 10 October 2021: "As an @OriolOxford alumnus, I am dismayed by the snivelling cowardice shown in the face of the left-wing mob. Like many other Oriel graduates I am grateful

for the education I received at Oxford in large part due to the generosity of Rhode's bequest" (qtd in Gershon). On the other hand, Dan Hicks noted on 11 October 2021 that "the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign did not, from memory, call for the erection of a third college memorial to Cecil Rhodes. The small metal sign is an embarrassment and reveals the incoherence and futility of the ideology of 'explain and retain'" (qtd in Gershon). Oriel College added a URL on the Rhodes plaque that provides access to the college official website to further contextualise the statue without downplaying Rhodes violent legacy (Beinart).

- 12 The ideology behind the statues in the settler colonies may be different from that which was erected in the metropolises. The struggle for spatial memory is more topical when the right to land is contested, as in South Africa, where land restitution is still an issue in the South African elections in May 2024, 30 years after the first multicultural elections. Sabine Marschall (2017, 671) reminds us that the erection of public monuments concludes the struggle for land. She recalls the first such monument, Vasco de Gama's 1497 Portuguese stone cross in Mossel Bay (a replica of which was sunk in the Indian Ocean before it was recovered). Similarly, Annette Hamilton argues that settler colonies are littered with monuments that are particularly important "since the significations and authorising narratives of the pre-colonial period are incomprehensible or contradict the historical meanings new settlers need to impose" (Hamilton 104). This balance of power between settlers and colonised populations could explain why the UCT Rhodes statue could not remain, as the former colonised population now holds power, whereas this is not the case with the Oriel Rhodes statue. For the defeated (indigenous) populations radical iconoclasm and the abolition of culture means the restoration of the myth of origin, to "restore the prime African land, erase all traces of domination foisted on them by force" (Marschall 2017, 674). This is the root of the war memories, because if the descendants of the settlers can return home (i.e. to the metropolises), as the French did from Algeria in 1962, there is a way out. But if Afrikaners (as a minority in their country) or white Australians and New Zealanders (as a majority) consider the land their ancestors migrated to (and conquered) as their home, there seems to be no solution other than

trying to find a balance between the multicultural groups living on the same soil: “Empire-building and colonialism produce stark inequalities and deeply-felt pain. Those are the central facts of New Zealand history and they are profoundly troubling. Removing statues to agents of empire will signal an important shift in our values.” Ballantyne adds: “But we must recognise that we cannot undo the past, nor can it be wished away. There is no easy way of settling our history or coming to terms with it” (6-7). Yet dealing with a violent legacy can be therapeutic, as the example of an interactive course engaging South African students with the pros and cons about the fate of statues shows that it enabled the realisation that the damage and destruction of statues can both highlight an unresolved psychological trauma of South Africa’s past and be cathartic (Masters 175). Mandela explained that with the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the time had come to heal the wounds. Coming to terms with colonialism and apartheid meant bridging the gap between generations, defining today’s values by understanding the context of that time, because today’s truth may not have been the truth in the past or in the future (D’Ancona 2017a, 19), so should we judge former communities by modern standards? This is what historians call “presentism”, when people from the past are judged for living in history in their own time and criticised for not living in our time (Haperin). Examining the erection of a statue can also shed new light on the monuments that we assume were unanimously accepted when they entered the public sphere, therefore it is important to recognise the mixture of resistance and support what surrounded their erection, rather than simply accepting their seemingly hegemonic and uncontested physical reality (Watts 24).

- 13 Bitter comments were made when the British government intervened in the debate with its policy of “retain and explain”. Kim Wagner, professor of imperial history at Queen Mary University of London, said: “Cecil Rhodes has become a rallying point for imperiophiliacs, and the slogan to ‘retain and explain’ is just part of the ongoing effort to whitewash his legacy and that of the empire more generally. Luckily, most of us don’t get our history from statues or plaques” (qtd in Hall Rachel). Historian Hannah Woods said Rhodes was a controversial figure in his day and puts things into perspective when

she adds: “It is deeply depressing that amid our current culture wars we seem even less capable of critique than Britain’s 19th-century imperialists themselves”, adding that it is ironic that Rhodes enjoys more favourable coverage in parts of the British media today than he did in his lifetime (qtd in Hall Rachel). But alongside the historical debate, there are also the political reactions to the movement, which like all debates about society and historical legacy elicit different responses.

The South African and British political agenda

14 Statues are pretexts for the expression of political and/or ideological ideas: “[...] Confederate statues offer pre-existing iconography for racists. The people who descended on Charlottesville last weekend were there to make a naked show of force for white supremacy. The Robert E. Lee statue is a clear symbol of their hateful ideology” (Christian 47–48). But if the monument is a symbol, it goes hand in hand with a discourse that serves an ideology. The discourse may or may not be based on facts, and this is why the wars of remembrance clash between those who believe that the truth is established once and for all and cannot be changed, and those who see factual truth as something to be brushed aside when it goes against their interests (Brahms 3). The same is true for the supporters of these political and ideological groups who may or may not accept the lies as in a sense, the lies of politicians should be the least of people’s concerns; in the post-truth era, it is people’s participation and degree of complicity in those lies that is at stake (D’Ancona 2017a, 18). As some have pointed out, social media has favoured the recent explosion of the post-truth era (Revault d’Allonnes 32). It is what D’Ancona calls “the digital bazaar” (D’Ancona 2017b, 46). Lies have always been part of human rhetorical tools, what makes post-truth new today is technology (Brahms 3). Nevertheless, social media can be seen as positive in this context, as it allows people to access the debates and thus enrich history (Rengel 68).

15 Since the Rhodes Must Fall movement began in South Africa, Julius Malema, an ANC dissident, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters, a left-wing South African political party, has repeatedly stated that he

was in favour of the removal of the statue and also supports a movement against white supremacy. On 22 March 2015, he called for the removal of all apartheid and colonial symbols. In the following weeks, many “white” monuments were attacked (both British and Afrikaner). The ANC government was opposed to the #RhodesMustFall movement, as expressed by the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, who denounced a political bias in the movement, that he said was manipulated by the EFF and aimed at the ANC government to try and achieve through violence what it could not achieve through elections. Monuments were protected, such as a human chain surrounding the statue of Paul Kruger in Krugersdorp, which was painted red in April 2015 or taken away to avoid being destroyed, while RMF supporters advocated for further destruction. Monuments to Cecil Rhodes became important targets that were regularly defaced. The RMF movement was thus a tool used by the EFF for publicity.

- 16 Julius Malema gave a speech at the EFF Student Summit at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (29 March 2015). He stated that the movement was no small thing, but “an onslaught against white supremacy” (qtd in Nkosi), because in his opinion the statues have the negative effect of reinforcing white people’s sense of superiority. He added that if the symbol was destroyed, people would start talking to each other as equals and whites would understand that they are not superior to other people. Equality (at least as partners) is the watchword: “We ought to teach them that they are not superior, neither are they inferior. We’re equal partners. We seek a better world that is characterised by friendship and peace. But there will never be friendship and peace if the other think he is superior to the other one” (qtd in Nkosi). Therefore, like Mandela before being jailed, he emphasised that white supremacy should not be replaced by black supremacy and that they were there to liberate black people so that they could have access to the rights and freedom enjoyed by all. But even if this was not the martial language Malema is used to, he took a swipe at the ANC government with the movement: “The ANC wants to perpetuate illiteracy because it benefits from it. If people are illiterate, the ANC benefits from it” (quoted in Nkosi). His lieutenants were more aggressive, such as the MP for the Nelson Mandela Bay area Bo Madwara, who threatened to throw the Port

Elizabeth (Anglo-Boer War) Horse Memorial into the sea if it was re-erected after it had been taken away for protection. EFF spokesperson Mbuyeseni Ndlozi stated on 9 April 2015 that the party was in favour of removing the statues, not destroying them. Nevertheless, on Tuesday, 21 April 2015, he, Julius Malema and the deputy chairperson of the EFF in Tshwane Moafrika Mabongwana were prohibited by a court order from calling for the destruction of monuments.

- 17 The deputy chairperson of the Afrikaner Solidarity Movement advocacy group, Johan Kruger, filed an application in the North Gauteng High Court (Pretoria) against the EFF for inciting the removal and vandalism of statues. He stated that the EFF's reckless incitement was always followed by the defacement and vandalism of statues. Each time, the EFF took responsibility, knowing full well that it was a crime. This incitement by the EFF had to be stopped (qtd in Matlala). EFF leader Julius Malema, while denying any responsibility of his party, responded: "There is no court that can stop the will of the people. It is not us who are tearing down the statues. It is the people. We are not going to waste our time opposing this" (Matlala n.p.). Pretoria High Court judge Eben Jordaan was receptive to the Solidarity Movement Trust's argument that the EFF's incitement to vandalism was dividing South Africa into pro and con and was therefore detrimental to national cohesion (George Herald). The EFF admitted to being responsible for the attacks on some statues such as those of Louis Botha, Paul Kruger, Queen Victoria (by 24-year-old white EFF activist Paul "WeZiswe" Walsh) and the Anglo-Boer War memorial in Uitenhage (George Herald). The EFF had to issue a statement if its supporters were not responsible. But it continued to capitalise on black anger at these statues.
- 18 In May 2018, EFF leaders changed their target to the statue of Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal from 1883 to 1900, and threatened to destroy it themselves if the DA (Democratic Alliance)-led Tshwane (Pretoria) Municipality did not do so itself (Andersen). Since then, the EFF has been listing the removal of the offending statues as part of its agenda, as can be seen in the party's election manifesto (accessed online on 19 May 2024). In the "Cultural Heritage" section, point 49 reads: "The EFF Government will remove apartheid statues and take them to a dedicated apartheid museum under the theme:

NEVER AGAIN”. Interestingly, it only talks about “apartheid statues” and not “colonial” statues, even though we can assume that this is the same thing in the EFF’s rhetoric. Point 51, however, is about changing names that “have a direct or indirect reference to the colonial or apartheid era by the end of 2029” (EFF). Interestingly, this perspective is quite different from that of concerned British people, as it is their heritage which is at stake.

- 19 With migration at the heart of Brexit, it is understandable that the question of Britain’s imperial past is of great interest to people in the UK. A poll conducted by YouGov on 17 and 18 January 2016 concluded that Rhodes should not fall, as shown by the responses to the question: “Do you think the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University should be taken down?” 11% answered that it should, 59% that it should not and 29% did not know. Furthermore, when asked “Was the British Empire a good thing or a bad thing?”, the answers were 43% Good, 19% Bad, 25% Neither; and to the question: “Is Britain’s history of colonialism something to be proud of or something to regret?”, 44% should be proud, 21% should regret it, 23% neither (Dahlgreen). However, despite this conservative attitude, it seems that the landslide victory of Black Lives Matter gave new impetus to anti-racist movements and revealed to people who were less aware of racist attitudes that post-imperial racism still runs rampant throughout the Western world. Statues were once again the visible symbols of this sense of racial superiority, according to some. Once again, there was an important link between the RMF movement in South Africa and the movement in Oxford, expressed by the former (and last) white president of South Africa, Frederik W. de Klerk. In a letter to the director of *The Times*, published on 26 December 2015, he commented on the fate of the Cecil Rhodes statue at Oriel:

It is regrettable that the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ folly has spread from South Africa to Oriel College. My people—the Afrikaners—have greater reason to dislike Rhodes than anyone else. He was the architect of the Anglo-Boer War, that had a disastrous impact on our people. Yet the National Party government never thought of removing his name from our history. (De Klerk)

- 20 He then broadened the perspective by questioning the act of toppling statues and wondered what would result if the political correctness

of today were consistently applied, very few of Oxford's great figures would stand up to scrutiny. George Washington—another Oriel graduate—certainly would not. How many statues would there even be left in Britain? and then added: “We do not commemorate historic figures for their ability to measure up to current conceptions of political correctness—but because of their actual impact on history” (De Klerk). Interestingly, an Afrikaner was defending Rhodes, which might be surprising if one did not know that in South Africa, the UCT statue of Cecil Rhodes has been contested, as have many Boer and Afrikaner monuments that characterise the South African memorial space. Defending the British imperialists thus also meant protecting the visibility of Afrikaners in history as Rhodes had influenced history for better or worse, so had Boer leaders and heroes. It is striking that De Klerk rails against students, by which he probably means not only Oxford students, but also South African students who have put South Africa in a difficult position with their demonstrations, riots and destruction of historical artefacts. These students probably reminded him of the heyday of South African resistance to apartheid, such as during the Soweto Uprising in 1976. But he was also eager to fight the British in the form of a symbolic ‘the Empire strikes back’ (perhaps with the Second Anglo-Boer War in mind): “Students have always been full of sound and fury, signifying very little. However, one would have expected an institution as venerable as Oriel to be a little more gracious in its treatment of its most generous benefactor.” And further adding: “If Oriel now finds Rhodes so reprehensible, would the honourable solution not be to return his bequest, plus interest, to the victims of British imperialism in southern Africa?” (De Klerk).

- 21 The defence of British memorials is also the position of the Conservative British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who expressed his opinion about the Oriel statue bluntly in 2020: “I’m pro-heritage. I’m pro-history, and I’m in favour of people understanding our past with all its imperfections...” Using humour he stated: “I want to build people up, not tear people down. If we go around trying to bowdlerise or edit our history in this way, it’s like some politician sneakily trying to change his Wikipedia entry” (qtd in Howe). The PM also stated, “We cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend to have a different history (qtd in Walker / Howe). He added

that the preservation of the monuments is also a tribute to past generations who should not be forgotten and that they had different perspectives, different understandings of right and wrong. But these statues teach people something about the past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history and impoverish the education of future generations (qtd in Walker / Howe). In this sense, he agrees with a young Zulu, Awelani Mdawu, who argues in favour of keeping the Paul Kruger statue in Pretoria, as it is a tradition for young Zulus to walk with their elders who point to something to explain to the young what they should learn. If the statue is taken away, the grandparents have no way of explaining colonialism and apartheid. In Zulu it says: “Indlela I buzwa kwa Ba Phambili” (“You ask for the way of those who have gone before you”) (Quartz).

- 22 An interesting question is, who decides who is good or bad? It is a slippery slope, said Tory MP Ben Bradley (Brown and Camber), while on the other side Sadiq Khan, the Labour Mayor of London, declared: “The statue of slave trader Robert Milligan has now been removed from West India Quay. It’s a sad truth that much of our prosperity comes from the slave trade—but this does not have to be celebrated in our public spaces” (qtd in Brown and Camber). Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party from 2015 to 2020, stated that Cecil Rhodes was “racist” and “subjugated and killed large numbers of people in what became Rhodesia and eventually Zimbabwe and Zambia, and made a great deal of money out of diamond mining and others in South Africa” (Mills), adding that he sees no need to honour his life. He mentioned Cecil Rhodes to illustrate the need to contextualise history and historical figures more thoroughly: “I think [statues] are important as symbols. But what’s more important is the teaching of history, and how we have an understanding of colonialism” (Mills). On the other side of the spectrum, more conservative people abhor chaos and destruction with the old dichotomy that the ‘civilised’ builds while the ‘savage’ or ‘barbarian’ destroys. Vandalism is therefore disliked by many who do not like revolutionary radicalism: for those mainly on the political right and in the pro-Colston camp, the empty plinth as it stands today in Bristol city centre represents loss, criminal damage and the scars of violence (Rengel 68). Another example can be found the day after the

movement against the Rhodes statue in Oxford began, when two journalists wrote in the *Daily Mail*, a right-wing British tabloid: “So what next? Ban all books mentioning Rhodes? Burn them?” (Brown and Camber).

- 23 They added that the denial of history does not help the cause of the minorities these protesters claim to represent. Rather, it hinders the efforts of those working within the system to bridge educational and income gaps (Brown and Camber). Similarly, in 2016 in South Africa, 75 ‘imperial’ artworks were removed by UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price, from UCT offices and halls, after 23 were vandalised by students. There was an outcry as he was accused of pandering to a minority group. When Vice-Chancellor Price’s book about his experiences during the Rhodes Must Fall movement at UCT, *Statues and Storms*, was published, there was commentary on the movement, such as from a social media user named Gavin Williams, who wrote on 3 October 2023 that there were precedents in Germany for the burning of books and the destruction of “decadent art”. British historian and specialist of Southern Africa, Donal Lowry, emphasised that it was striking “how far this worldwide iconoclasm has diverged from a long-standing, if somewhat whiggish tradition, of reconciling and incorporating opposing, even bloody, elements of history in a seemingly organic continuity” (Lowry). He also argued that Britain was pursuing a policy of “symbolic synthesis” in relation to commemorations, seeing public spaces as inclusive rather than exclusive: “A short distance away, in the centre of London, we have statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Field Marshal Jan Smuts, who fought against the British Empire before becoming a champion of the Commonwealth that succeeded it.” He added that there are also “statues of deposed King James II and American revolutionary George Washington nearby. Surely there is no other former imperial capital that combines such contradictions” (Lowry). He also linked South Africa with the example of what he calls the oxymoronic association of the “Mandela-Rhodes Foundation”, which was supported by Mandela who wanted to bridge the gap between blacks and whites.
- 24 The Conservatives’ stance on the memory wars was questioned in an unflustered manner. Sathnam Sanghera, author of the bestselling book *Empireland*, tweeted, “Why govern when you can

just play in the culture wars?” (qtd in Hall). Indeed, reference is made here to a memorial plaque to Cecil Rhodes, unveiled in King Edward Street in 1906 on the front of the house where Rhodes lived in 1881. The plaque was protected by the government by being granted Grade II listed status by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, on 21 July 2022. This sparked another wave of protests against the protection of imperialist memory, such as that of Professor Kim Wagner, who said of the UK Culture Secretary: “This is simply what one would expect from Nadine Dorries and a discredited government, which has nothing left but the pursuit of its inept culture-war project” (qtd Hall). The point being made here is that the Conservative government is pursuing a policy of “divide and rule” around the “memory wars”. Cultural manipulation has become the bugbear of this policy, which is based on the simple proposition that history cannot be erased or rewritten. To which historians like Charlotte Lydia Riley responded: “Historians are not too concerned about the threat of ‘rewriting history’ because rewriting history is the historian’s profession, their professional endeavour. They are constantly engaged in reassessing the past and reinterpreting the stories they thought they knew” (Riley). She adds that history is not just about how things happened, but also about what relationship we have to that past and how we want to represent it. Talking about the past sheds light on the present: “The past may be dead, but history is alive, and it is constructed in the present” (Riley), which is echoed by Rahul Rao when he emphasises that statues have more to do with the present than the past (Rao).

Conclusion

- 25 Referring to the 2020 Covid Pandemic Myriam Revault d’Allonnes underlined that what upheld the French government’s policy was the trust in scientific analysis of the situation but added that contesting scientific evidence started to spread in social media. One of her conclusions is that to discredit science is to destroy the common basis that allows humans to debate (Revault d’Allonnes 138). With this in mind we may understand that human sciences such as History can be all the more contested as “historical truth”, if such a thing exists (not factual accuracy), is the result of a precarious balance between the historian’s place in society and their point of view on the one

hand and the historical material they will have to interpret and partly shape themselves, as shown by the popular sentence “history is written by the winner” or alternatively “What can historians do, when newspapers and politicians tell people we cannot be trusted with history?” (Woods 118).

- 26 On a broader perspective the future is at stake as “This is not a battle between liberals and conservatives. It is a battle between two ways of perceiving the world, two fundamentally different approaches to reality: and as between the two, you do have to choose” (D’Ancona 2017b, 4). On 15 March 2024, the M Shed Museum in Bristol included the toppled statue of Edward Colston in its permanent collection “Colston, What Next?” in the “Bristol People Gallery” along with exhibits of the poster used by the protesters who threw the statue into the river Avon. The statue lies (Colston is no longer standing) and still bears the different coloured graffiti that was written on it before it was sunk (McConnelle-Simpson). The option of dismantling (not destroying) the statue and displaying it in a museum with explanations to help people reflect on the story was adopted here. UCT’s Cecil Rhodes statue was also dismantled but kept out of reach of the public. Another option is to place a plaque on the statue, leaving it where it is (Oriel College’s Rhodes statue). But if the colonial transgressions of Cecil Rhodes are now widely recognised, his legacy could be transformed into something more positively philanthropic. In 2003, the Rhodes Trust celebrated its centenary and established the Mandela Rhodes Foundation to provide scholarships to African students pursuing postgraduate studies at South African universities. In Mandela’s own words, this is a way of bridging the gap between whites and blacks, which he continued to emphasise until his death: “We see the Mandela Rhodes Foundation as an important initiative within the efforts of South Africans to take responsibility for the transformation of their society, so grievously skewed by a history of colonialism and apartheid.” He then added: “We shall once more take hands across historical divides that others may deem unbridgeable” (About us). People did not react to the Rhodes-Mandela connection at the time because, as the foundation’s website says, it was a way “to return some of Cecil John Rhodes’s wealth to its origins in Africa” (About us). Dealing with the legacy of colonialism and apartheid was thus postponed in order to support the process of “healing the

wounds” propagated by Mandela, until Rhodes Must Fall addressed it two decades later, which led Rahul Rao to state: “I mention this not as an alibi for our inaction, but to recognise that South Africa has been the epicentre of this movement. Everything else is a reverberation.” The hashtag “Something or Someone Must Fall” does indeed originate from South Africa (Rhodes MF, Fees MF, Zuma MF) and has led to references being made to it when other “falls” are desired, such as in “Oxpol”, the Oxford University politics blog, where Richard Elliott wrote on 8 July 2016, “Brexiters Must fall: why liberals and the Left must combine forces to Confront the Cecil Rhodes of the twenty-first century.” Cecil Rhodes continues to be what he was, at least in the last years of his life: the archetype of the imperialist who today metonymically embodies all Western countries with an imperial and colonial legacy. Referring to Eastern European countries grappling with the monuments of their Soviet past, Charles Merewether explained that we live in what might be called an age of commemoration. On the one hand, new monuments are being erected to remember and scrutinise the violent events of the past; on the other, monuments are being destroyed to symbolise the end of an era. Their destruction symbolises the desire to leave the past behind. But he wonders whether this is possible (Merewether 183). But what has changed? According to Sabine Marschall, very little: “After rushed debate, the Rhodes statue was indeed removed on 9 April 2015, but the predicted ‘statue revolution’ hardly took place” (Marschall 2017, 671). She then added that the other attacks on statues in South Africa were without consequence as the monuments were cleaned up and repaired and very few were removed. The example of the Cecil Rhodes statues, whether an exception or something that can become a pattern, shows that in a former settler colony, the imperial statue could not stand for long, while in a metropolis like England the Oriel statue remained. Is there a pattern here? Did the British authorities protect their monuments well enough or was it only the threat of Oriel College’s wealthy donors to withdraw their financial support that saved the Oriel statue? Is it a broader problem linked to the presence of minorities in Britain which originate from the former Empire? It should be noted, however, that South Africa is now governed by the descendants of the formerly colonised populations, while Britain is governed by those who promoted the British imperial project. The project of decolonizing the mind, the

museum or the curriculum which accompanied the toppling of statues is still active even though some words have too strong a connotation and maybe should be changed as they are used as fear-mongers, often understood as erasing the colonial past and heritage and turn some people against post-colonialism. For this reason, Sathnam Sanghera argues for a “widening of the curriculums” rather than their decolonisation (220). In that perspective, one but can only agree with Sabine Marschall when she states that “The dramatic expression of discontent with the continued presence of these symbolic reminders of the past suggests that the reconciliatory strategies and negotiated solutions of the immediate transition period may need to be revisited” (Marschall 2022, 28).

- 27 A cartoon entitled “Cancel Culture” by Gary McCoy summarises the difficulty of finding common ground for commemoration, because one man’s hero is another man’s villain. A group of three hooded and masked individuals are about to topple a massive rectangular marble stone while a sculptor is in the process of carving it. The sculptor says: “Can’t you at least wait and see who it will be first?” One of the three activists replies: “No! We’re already sure it’s going to offend us!” (McCoy).

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RÉSUMÉS

English

If many monuments inspired by Greco-Roman statuary have been destroyed in the history of humanity, it is because their aesthetics, their closeness to reality and above all their symbolism have made them, and still make them, prime targets for conveying political messages, without the need for direct attacks on human beings. This radical iconoclasm was magnified in South Africa in 2015 by the debate at the University of Cape Town (UCT) when some students demanded that the statue of the tycoon Cecil Rhodes be taken down because, they said, it was a daily offence when they walked past it, reminding them of the days of colonisation and apartheid. As the movement gathered momentum, the debate shifted to another statue of Rhodes, this one in Oxford. The aim of this article is to try to understand the phenomena at play in this period from 2015 to 2024 by comparing the treatment of two statues of the same figure but located in different memorial spaces, namely a former settlement colony and what used to be its metropolis, in an attempt to understand the imperial legacy.

Français

Si de nombreux monuments, inspirés par la statuaire gréco-romaine, ont été détruits dans l'histoire de l'humanité, c'est que leur esthétique, leur rapport avec la réalité et surtout leur symbolique en ont fait, et en font encore, des cibles privilégiées pour véhiculer des messages politiques, sans que pour cela, on ait besoin de s'en prendre directement à des êtres humains. Cet iconoclasme radical a été amplifié en Afrique du Sud en 2015 par le débat qui a agité l'Université du Cap (UCT) lorsque certains étudiants ont demandé que la statue du magnat Cecil Rhodes soit déboulonnée, car, disaient-ils, elle était une offense quotidienne lorsqu'ils passaient devant elle, leur rappelant les jours de la colonisation et de l'apartheid. Le mouvement ayant pris de l'ampleur, le débat s'est déplacé vers une autre statue de Rhodes, érigée à Oxford celle-là. Cet article vise à essayer de comprendre les phénomènes en jeu dans cette période de 2015 à 2024 en comparant le traitement des deux statues d'un même personnage mais situées dans des espaces mémoriels différents, à savoir une ancienne colonie de peuplement et ce qui fut sa métropole afin d'essayer d'appréhender l'héritage impérial.

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Mots-clés

statues, guerres mémorielles, Rhodes (Cecil), Rhodes must fall, Afrique du Sud, Oriel College, UCT, Université d'Oxford, post-vérité

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An Exploration of the Limits of Analogical Thinking in a Post-Truth Climate: *The Inland Sea* by Madeleine Watts

Explorer les limites de la pensée analogique dans un climat de post-vérité dans le roman The Inland Sea de Madeleine Watts

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TEXTE

- 1 The apocalyptic overtones of the international coverage of the 1919–2020 bushfires in Australia seemed to signal that something so momentous was taking place that it would finally jolt Australian decision-makers out of decades of climate change denialism and environmental inaction. Popular outrage at Scott Morrison, the then Liberal-National Party Prime Minister, for his stupendously casual attitude to climate science warnings contributed to his being voted out of office in 2022. Two months after the leader of the opposition Peter Dutton announced, in June 2024, that he would go to the next election promising to build seven nuclear power plants, Anthony Albanese's Labour government approved the construction of "the largest solar precinct in the world".¹ Despite these recent policy developments the nationalist narrative of environmental particularism and settler resilience, upheld by powerful media outlets and fossil fuel lobby groups, still holds great power to persuade in 21st century Australia. The difficulty for dissenting voices to make themselves heard in Western democracies in the current cultural climate, which has seen a marked erosion of the authority of traditional guarantors of knowledge and contributed to the rise of populism, is the tenor of *The Inland Sea* (2020), a debut novel by Australian writer Madeleine Watts. The main protagonist, an Australian literature graduate student based in Sydney, finds herself struggling to make sense of her professional goals and love life in an increasingly chaotic social and environmental climate. Mainly set

during the 2013 New South Wales bushfires, the novel weaves together several narratives. The fictional account of the protagonist's final, anxiety-ridden year in Sydney before she decides to go abroad alternates with references to early 19th century English explorations of, and theories about the Australian outback, as well as heterodiegetic addresses to the reader narrating the effects of global warming that archaeology and climate science predict for the future. This volume's invitation to analyse how the notions of place and post-truth intersect implies that the historical epistemic break represented by the advent of a "post-truth era" has also had an impact on place, defined as a lived-experience environment with which humans establish meaningful relations at an individual or collective level. Whether post-truth, in line with the post-modern substitution of situated knowledge for universalist knowledge, is defined as the relativisation of all truth-claims, or is thought of more radically as the refutation of the belief in a correspondence between language and the world, or as the denial of the very idea of truth as an absolute, a primitive axiom upon which an epistemic enterprise can be safely built up, in any case the foundationalist concept of emplaced meaningfulness cannot but be also put into serious doubt. However, since in Australia it was *terra nullius*, that so-called "beautiful fiction of law" (Dolin), that long served as basis for settlers' land claims, any belief in emplaced meaningfulness has owed more to adherence to settler colonial ideology than to "the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence" (Relph 43). As Victorian archives show, even as settlement was expanding, *terra nullius* was controversial not only in Britain but also in Australia (Dolin). This complicates attempts to present Madeleine Watts's twenty-first century critique of the settler-colonial sense of entitlement to place as reflecting the "paradigm shift" commonly associated with the advent of the "post-truth era". Yet some reviewers (Dobbs, Lucas, Mac Veagh) have compared *The Inland Sea* to Jenny Offill's 2020 novel *Weather*, written after Donald Trump's 2016 election, as it also juxtaposes personal, domestic anxieties with larger political anxieties, and the even larger anxieties about climate change. This article will therefore look into how the Australian setting of post-truth, in the cli-fi novel *The Inland Sea*, affects its writing, narrative arc and moral conclusion. The first part of the article will briefly outline some of the linguistic,

philosophical and socio-political tensions that are encapsulated in the broad notion of post-truth, in order to see what echoes of these tensions are revealed in the cultural environment of Watt's novel. The second part explores how the disconnection of government and media from the Australian public's lived experience of global warming impacts the concept of place as "home" and the possibility of developing a grounded narrative in the novel. In the third part, the question raised by Amitav Ghosh about the suitability of the novel genre to talk about climate change will be used as a starting point to discuss the moral, political, as well as aesthetic responsibilities involved in writing Australian fiction in a post-truth era.

- 2 "Sometimes the only way to maintain a forest is by starting a controlled forest fire." This is the metaphor that Habsgood-Coote uses, in his pragmatist approach to language, to justify why he believes the catch-all phrase "post-truth" should be banned from use. Rather than the "ordinary language" philosophy approach—which is comparable, he says, to that of a gardener who respects the complexity and organic unity of natural language, and sees ordinary language as "embod[ying] the wisdom of collective experience"—Habsgood-Coote prioritises "the utility of language as a tool for co-ordination and talking about the world", and favours the "forest manager" approach in order to maintain a "traversable linguistic landscape" (1). "Post-truth", according to Habsgood-Coote is confusing, as its usage is trend-related and does not refer to a specific, well-identified object; secondly, it is redundant as other words already exist to refer to the hardly novel occurrence of "blatant falsehoods expressed in the public sphere" (8); and thirdly, in the hands of government authorities and the establishment it can be an ideological weapon to discuss the "epistemic health of democracy", particularly when used enclosed in "scare quotes" (3). Although Habsgood-Coote makes an early disclaimer, stating that he has no authority to legislate linguistic usage (2-3), the advice he gives is based on a firm trust in the possibility of scientific objectivity in social sciences, a belief in a correct management of knowledge at the service of the common good, and faith in the axiom that language gives reliable access to the reality of the world and ought to guarantee social cohesion. He denounces the "bad ideology" associated with the use of the phrase "post-truth" because he

believes it mainly aims to delegitimise views not supported by the experts in power (Estlund's "epistocracy" 2008), yet his fundamental epistemic confidence is at odds with the post-modern approach of someone like Michel Foucault who clearly identified truth with power:

Truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power [...] Each society has its regime of truth [...]: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (113–114)

- 3 Truth, according to Foucault, is always situated (in a specific time and politically specific place) and defined by specific conditions of truth (basic concepts and experimental practices) under a specific *regime* of truth. The post-modern distrust in the metaphysical philosophies of history derived from the Heideggerian relocating of meaning and truth within language itself need not however lead to an epistemological capitulation. In *The Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo critiques the effects of what he terms the "guilty conscience" of the liberal intelligentsia. The current widespread lack of confidence in Western scientific-technological culture, because of its links to the capitalist system of exploitation that destroys man's authentic relationship with nature, have left intellectuals feeling that they were (or could be perceived as being) complicit in the promotion of this culture, hence their retreat from the public arena (47–48). Chaos and confusion have ensued, as the information wars waged unchecked by the media leading to the proliferation of conflicting alternative truths. Rather than rueing the relativisation of the absolute, however, "weak thought" proponent Vattimo embraces the idea that language can at best convey an interpretation of reality, and works towards a "weak" rather than "strong" ontology. For him, postmodern anti-foundationalism should not be seen pessimistically as a state of dead-end crisis but rather as a challenge to develop a more rigorously historicized process of interpretation, and as a unique opportunity for the democratisation of public life: "Living in

this multiple world means experiencing freedom as a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation” (20).

- 4 Feminist theory thinker Shelley Budgeon agrees that “post-truth” describes a “decisive cultural shift in the socio-political landscape” insisting however that in this landscape, “established norms used to establish knowledge claims are being *selectively* reconstructed” (253 emphasis mine). A shift is not a revolution, and Budgeon is not sanguine about the real opportunities for democratic debate the partial changes of the post-truth era have brought about:

That which may be understood as factual evidence is, thereby, put into dispute by introducing a very different standard for measuring the truth of claims. The result is a levelling of the positions from which “truth” emanates—a “democratisation” of epistemology that at heart is driven by a suspicion of “elites”, establishment authorities and minority groups who are seen to have been granted a privileged position that is unjustified. Post-truth rhetoric calls for authoritative status to be handed back to “normal” individuals who are incited to speak the truth of their own individual experience through the lens of “common sense”. (253–254)

- 5 Budgeon speaks of a “levelling” of truth-assigning positions enabling the denial of the truth-claims not only of the establishment, but also of minority groups who had been granted a voice by the post-modern cultural relativism ethos. She concedes, moreover, that the foundationalist feminist approach that constructed feminine physical and emotional experience as essentially different from, as well as superior to so-called “universal” rationality has proved a double-edged tool. In the post-truth era, it could be appropriate to define “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionary), and used by “normal individuals” as a tool of self-empowerment through the societal (re)marginalisation of other groups.
- 6 Albeit for opposed reasons, Habgood-Coote and Budgeon are both suspicious of the moral and political ends the term “post-truth” can be made to serve: elitist ends when used to discredit the protest of sections of the population against the failure of liberal democracies to engage realistically with economic and social evolutions; populist

ends when claiming to champion the views of the kind of conservative “silent majority” President Nixon used as leverage against anti-colonial activists during the Vietnam War for example. Post-truth is thus described by Habsgood-Coote and Budgeon as mere power-consolidating rhetoric, suggesting that no real paradigm shift has in fact occurred.

- 7 Set in 21st century Australia, *The Inland Sea* seems to confirm this view, while pointing to unignorable external factors such as rising heat and uncontrollable fires to bring into stark relief the aberrant workings of a society disastrously clinging to a settler nation’s regime of truth, epitomized by the stubbornly optimistic Australian idiom: “She’ll be right.” The novel reflects the tensions and contradictions encapsulated in the catch-all notion of “post-truth” summarily set out above: the immediate threats associated with global warming should undermine, and yet appear to bolster traditional nationalist narratives of colonial control and resilience. The main protagonist and narrator is a literature graduate student at the university in Sydney who is told by her thesis supervisor that “more women with good minds” like her are needed “to stop the discipline turning stale” (18). This view suggests that the judicious questioning of established knowledge, far from being destabilising, is conducive to its continued epistemic relevance. But after the narrator has struggled for a year to write a doctoral proposal, both supervisor and aspiring academic have to acknowledge that the latter has become so “neurotically inarticulate” that she must put off, and most likely abandon her hopes of ever entering “the sandstone sanctum of academia” she had formerly pictured as a “kind of utopia where men and women spent days on end walking the flagstones and making sense of all that was senseless” (18).
- 8 Thus cast adrift from the career on which she had been set, and having come to distrust “all the patterns of reason that [she] had believed [she] could rely on” (19), the unnamed narrator sees “the open wilderness of adulthood stretched ahead like so much wasteland” (9). What could simply read like a form of teenage angst is associated, however, with solastalgia, the word Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined to refer to the homesickness people experience when mourning a home environment that is (being) irretrievably lost. The novel is set during a

particularly acute climatic crisis, in the austral summer of 2013 when historic bushfires swept across the state of New South Wales, destroying hundreds of houses and buildings, as well as thousands of acres of agricultural and national park land. In a city full of smoke and the sound of sirens, the narrator is in such a constant state of stress that general annihilation is almost tempting:

[G]reat clouds of flame burned along the horizon in the west. We could all see it was out of control. Nobody needed the Rural Fire Service to confirm it. There was a horrible brittleness to the leaf litter, and crickets, and the sirens. I looked directly at the paperbark tree across the street [...]. It would take so little to catch light. For all of it to go up in flames. And would that be so very bad? (228)

The narrator's existential distress is heightened by the fact that her social interactions reveal that she seems the only one experiencing any concern. As one of her friends tells her, only talking about "normal weather" is socially acceptable (42). Yet the novel itself is structured in four sections entitled "Heat", "Flood", "Tremor" and "Wildfire" in reference to the real natural disasters that incredibly all occurred in 2013, dramatically signalling the end of climatic normality:

The heat was relentless. We were told that the intense weather signalled the end of "stationarity". The thousand-year storms no longer happened every thousand years. They seemed to occur yearly now, maybe more, along with the heat, the fire and the floods. (19)

Such a sequence of events convinces the narrator that "the improbable [is] probable" (219), and makes her increasingly impatient with the media reporting rising temperatures as they would sporting feats: "In the end, they would say that this January was the hottest month on record, in the hottest year on record, although they've said that about every year since." (9)

- 9 The narrator is particularly riled by the "show" of jokey indifference to the environmental implications of the increasing heat that the media encourage among their audience:

On the seven o'clock news there was always someone making a show of frying an egg on the asphalt of an outer-suburbs driveway. Watch this! they would shout to the camera. Yolks slipped out onto the bitumen and sat trembling there beneath the burning Australian sun. The people on the news were always grinning, nearly naked but for a singlet or a pair of shorts, sweating into their sunglasses. (9)

At the dispatch emergency call centre where the heroine has found a job after losing her student allowance, a silent television broadcasts such inane infotainment to help the workers insulate themselves from the callers' personal tragedies: "As [the man] whimpered, I'm fucking dying, I was looking up at the television where a smiling man was frying another egg on yet another stretch of suburban bitumen". (43)

- 10 Yet even in the city, people are not immune to the changes in the weather as reported acts of social violence reveal:

The convulsion of the storm struck in a way that seemed only natural, following as it did the tense weeks that seemed to justify the punch to the back of the head, the child left locked in the back seat of the car, the missing girl. (10)

Here the reasoning that tentatively links natural and social violence ("only natural", "justify") confusingly associates meteorological logic with *aberrant* human violence, seeming to reflect the narrator's and her fellow Australians' slipping grip on reality.

- 11 Government narratives about what is happening evidence the same disconnectedness as the news bulletin. Dramatic bushfires having broken out across the state, a never-ending stream of desperate calls for help make the heroine's shifts at the emergency call centre particularly harrowing. Yet the Prime Minister thinks it appropriate to insist that "these fires are certainly not a function of climate change, they are a function of life in Australia" (228). Prime Minister Tony Abbott actually spoke these words during the 2013 bushfires, even accusing United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change executive secretary Christiana Figueres of "talking through her hat" when she linked bushfires with human-caused emissions of greenhouse gases.² To a certain extent, climate change denialism in

Australia makes political sense, considering that the nation's economy still relies heavily on fossil fuel extraction. Nevertheless, resorting to nationalistic chauvinism to excuse governmental inaction is a symptom of how Australian post-truth populism opposes "the fundamental principles of democratic communication, namely the need for fact-based, reasoned debate, tolerance and solidarity—essential principles for viable public life in today's globalised and multicultural societies" (Waisbord 18).

- 12 Unlike her co-workers who insulate themselves from the most stressful aspects of their job by refusing to talk or think about it during and after their shifts, choosing instead to believe in hair-raising online stories about self-cannibalism in far-away places like London (135), or to get excited about conspiracy scares, the narrator finds that "the emergencies of those on the phones were leaking through the borders of [her] own personal emergencies" (89).
- 13 The main protagonist's mental and physical boundaries become increasingly porous as the narrative progresses, so that to try to resist losing herself entirely, and because she seems unable to accept the absence of any 'true' external reality or definitive meaning, she starts collecting facts, quotations, snippets of conversation that seem "pertinent to [her] own general condition" (42):

The notebook became a place for certain types of information, unattributed fragments I wrote in from other texts, interspersed with my own thoughts and diary entries, as though by leaning into the fragmentation of my own workday experience I might somehow conquer the sense of disarray and poor attention I felt daily on the phones. (42)

These fragments of information are linked to the protagonist's story only metonymically, through spatial juxtaposition on the page. In one such sequence, an entry such as the unexplained plague affecting starfish of the Western Pacific Coast is followed by a snippet of Roman mythological lore which interpreted volcanic eruptions as a sign of "Vulcan's anger each time he learnt that Venus, his wife, had been found fucking someone else" (41–42), and a passage from *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* by American artist and prominent AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz. It falls to the reader to

attempt to reconstruct the discursive logic linking these disparate bits and pieces: in a world where science is as yet unable to understand the full complexity of interactions within biotopes and therefore the real extent of the impact of global warming, the only alternatives to try to make sense of the “slow apocalypse” of the age (Watts *Irish Times*) are typically misogynistic myth, and testimonies of other people’s existential crises.

- 14 As could be expected, this form of fragmentary, apparently haphazard accumulation of facts does not provide the narrator with a stable ground on which to rebuild her confidence in truthful representations of the world, nor with a sense of existential purpose. Instead, her distrust in authoritative representations and her increasing feeling of alienation from her homeland is compounded by her reading of the exploration journal written by her ancestor, and proudly given to her by her own father, the early 19th century New South Wales General surveyor John Oxley.
- 15 Reading this journal reveals to the narrator that rather than resulting from a change of paradigm that the post-truth era is supposed to have introduced, her 21st century contemporaries’ neurotic determination to ignore their impending doom is a continuation of the behaviour of 19th century explorers who, against all evidence, were intent on finding the mythical inland sea that would help making an alien land their “Home”:

[I]f you didn’t believe in an inland sea and all that ripe promise of the landscape, you might then have to face what you’d done—set up home on this drought-ridden ancientness that you’d stolen and didn’t understand. [Oxley] that feckless imperialist trudging through the landscape for all those weeks in 1817, [was slowly] overwhelmed by a sense of alarm that there was simply fuck-all Out There. No Providence, no Eden, no neat or rational conclusion to the narrative. Except that wasn’t what he reported when he got back to the coast. (51–52)

As the narrator becomes aware, reflecting on the lie her ancestor manufactured to cover up his lost gamble on the landscape, Australia’s settler culture has no authentically grounded tradition of place to fall back on.

- 16 In the Heideggerian conception of place as a meaningful “home” grounded in everyday experience, place and truth are merged in the core values of stability, security, permanence. Noting how “[p]lace attachment processes normally reflect the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional embeddedness individuals experience in their sociophysical environments”, Perkins and Brown have studied the effects of disruptions in place attachments caused by voluntary relocations, but also burglaries and disasters. Their study confirms how “fundamental” place attachments are to the “experience and meaning of everyday life” (279). But in Sydney, the narrator’s place attachments seem to be in a constant state of disruption, and not only because of extreme weather events: “Bougainvillea choked the windows, tree roots unsettled the pavement, and the streets in the last light of evening looked like the return of the bush was being kept only barely in reserve” (31). Throughout the novel, the urban structures supposed to keep the natural environment at bay prove illusory. In the crumbling section of Redfern where the narrator lives, rain, insects, leaves keep flying in through the window or down the flimsily boarded-up chimney; the smoke and light from the bushfires pervade the city; even the picturesque growths of palms and bougainvillea on the waterfront are described as great swarms erupting from “some madman’s garden of Babylon” (10).
- 17 Watts has been taken to task for not “reckoning with her [narrator’s] depoliticised existence in a gentrifying enclave of Redfern” (Dobbs). But it seems that in a world where the city’s historic landmarks—Redfern being an inner city suburb of Sydney historically associated with industrial and racial struggles—are threatened either by the bush, or by the new elites’ social ambitions, no “human-scale” equivalent of “stationarity”, no emplaced, “self-contained narrative” (123), religious, political or otherwise seems possible:

As the flood swept south across the state line and into New South Wales all the records were broken. A thousand-year flood, again, when there had been a thousand-year flood only three years earlier. [...]

Some hideous auspice, this, or proof of God’s displeasure, or else just simply bad luck. The Prime Minister conceded that it was indeed “a tough period”.

And so the waters crept. The ocean bled into the land. Salt

water seeped into the crops. Rivers not rivers. Homes not homes. (77–78)

The narrator's feelings of epistemic, cultural and emotional homelessness and her political disengagement lead her to dismissively portray her native city as "a small and insignificant place on a stretch of shore in the far-right corner of the map, a city nobody remembered, or cared to pay attention to" (249). Her decision to leave it behind can therefore be understood as an expression of existential despair about, or disgust with, her homeland. But the novel does not suggest that she is expecting to find a meaningful life elsewhere, for she is attracted to "the kind of place with no particular purpose" (71), and picks Los Angeles as a place to move to only because it has "nothing to do with [her], where there would be no history or memory tethering [her] to the land" (56). Nor does the narrator claim the moral high ground for her state of dissociation.

- 18 In fact, in the last two paragraphs of the book, the narrator swims out into the middle of a bay and unexpectedly enjoys what could be described as an oceanic feeling of unbounded completeness. This final moment of release from anxiety, bodily limitations and sentimental ties could be seen as a possibility of resolution or sublimation for the main protagonist, and therefore also as a partly positive end point for the narrative arc. However, it seems more relevant to interpret it as a psychically regressive moment for the narrator, according to Freud's analysis of the oceanic sensation (Freud, Kristeva), and as deceptive resolution for the novel as a whole. Indeed, to reach this place of bliss and harmony the narrator first has to "pick [her way]" through the scum of urban waste clogging the beach and the water's edge, as well as through the "massacre" of disorientated and weakened migratory birds who died in a recent storm (250–251). She is not entirely oblivious to how morally shocking her private moment of holistic wellbeing is. In fact, she perceives that by contrast with the foully poignant periphery of the bay, the water in the middle is "preternaturally clear [...] *obscenely* blue and lovely" (251 my emphasis). Far from providing any definitive answer to the heroine's quest, her private/cosmic experience of psychic and physical wholeness at the end of the novel—similar to the one

19th century colonial explorers aspired to in their search for the fabled inland sea—pointedly withholds any reassuring closure.

- 19 Acknowledging in an interview that Amitav Ghosh's book *The Great Derangement* had proved a formative read for her, Madeleine Watts bluntly recused the "traditional bourgeois" realist novel's foregrounding of "probability" and its attempt to "rationaliz[e] the novelistic universe by turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all" (Ghosh 15 quoted in Watts "There's something thrilling"). "I think Australia has always had 'surreal' or non-real weather", Watts told the interviewer, shifting from Ghosh's anti-bourgeois angle of attack to an anti-colonial environmentalist one: "It doesn't fit the realist novel—and climate change just makes everything exaggerated. And that's realism's problem."

- 20 She also seems to agree with Ghosh that the realist novel's focus on an individual character's moral and epistemic trajectory through life, an approach that is epitomised by the *Bildungsroman* genre, cannot adequately represent the vastness and complexity of ongoing anthropocenic crises:

I was interested in engaging with the coming-of-age novel, but the arc of a bildungsroman generally has the character coming to a kind of resolution at the end, a place at which becoming ends and adulthood begins. It became fairly obvious to me in the writing process that the character in my novel was never going to learn anything and that I didn't want her to. [...] I hated the false imposition of logic on to a world when my world—the political and ecological and economic world I lived in—felt like one of complete chaos. (Watts "Vulnerability")

- 21 Watts describes her own book as an "anti-coming-of-age novel", a conscious rejection of "any kind of redemption narrative" that is best suited to represent "the experience of [her] generation":

It's a very unreflective book. You are so close to the narrator and what's happening—the backstory is violence, natural disaster, frightened animals. So it all comes across in the register of panic. And when you can't reflect—because all you have is a fight-or-flight response—it can become very difficult to escape from anything.

That's why I wanted the structure of the book: it gets more and more and then just ends, without much resolution. (Watts "Vulnerability")

- 22 The current rise in mental health problems among younger generations in Western democracies, partly as a result of the pandemic, economic uncertainty and climatic insecurity, lends weight to Watts' desire to produce a narrative that really "grapple[s] with the idea that there's no fix to this" (Watts "Vulnerability"). To do this, it is necessary to deconstruct the presumption of the bildungsroman that the journey will eventually lead the main protagonist to a place of enlightened stability and control. Yet even if *The Inland Sea* offers up no resolution at the end, and even if fragmentation and narrative collage are substituted for discursive linearity, these do produce a discourse that uses analogical thinking to prove a point.
- 23 Reviewer Katie Dobbs sums it up as follows: "The search for the inland sea [...] inspires a chain of metaphors that draw a tenuous line between colonial forefathers, violent fathers, and shithead lovers." This is achieved thanks to heterodiegetic, expository passages that are distributed throughout the novel. Most of them revolve around 19th century explorations of the continent but they also deal with a variety of topics, ranging from biological accounts of the impact of stress on mental and bodily functions, climate modelling projections of how rising sea levels will impact coastal cities like Sydney and the interior (197–198), or information about the disastrous ecological consequences of 19th and 20th century irrigation projects (195). As mentioned earlier, Surveyor general John Oxley, in particular, is a recurring figure. He is ambivalently presented as a national hero, a presumptuous fool and liar, but also as one of the narrator's ancestors, and someone she identifies with, in her quest for reassurance via the lover she renames Lachlan, after the "ghost river" her ancestor followed into the interior (147). Oxley also serves to model the predatory men she encounters in her daily life.
- 24 One chapter is devoted to a discussion of conflicting 19th century geological theories, English "uniformitarianism" (a theory according to which all points of the Earth had changed at the same rate and in the same way through time) versus French "catastrophism" which hypothesised an evolution made up of sudden, episodic cataclysms.

This short chapter connects English geologist Lyell—who rejected catastrophism as “pre-rationalist, and essentially un-English, [r]evolutionary hogwash”, thus “waging an ideological war in the form of rocks” (145)—with Lyell’s “protégé” Charles Darwin, famous Australian explorer Charles Sturt and earlier explorer John Oxley in the same belief that the earth was “Orderly and Consistent and could be mastered by Men [and space] was made for conquering”: “They all believed. Believed in the warm, wet centre opening its legs out there in the heart of the dead, dry country. [...] The desert had to be other than empty. The river must flow backward for a reason” (146–147). In accordance with the concept of gendered settler colonialism the heterodiegetic narrator draws a parallel between these Victorian men’s desire to conquer the land and their masculine desire to possess the female body, denouncing the dangers of analogical thinking which allowed belief and reasoning, scientific theory and ideology to overlap. The chapter thus begins with the narrator first denouncing the fallacy of an analogy early 19th century theologian, geologist and palaeontologist William Buckland made between coal formations in England and Australia, and then analogically portraying the settlers’ exploitative impulses as sexual ones:

Buckland, in his paper, described “A strong analogy between the coal formation of the Hunter’s River and River Hawkesbury in New South Wales and that of England, which well deserves to be accurately investigated”. This would prove a confusing analogy. New South Wales is not England, and Hunter coal is not English coal, but it would not stop anyone from reaching a hand into the navel of the earth and squeezing at any promising flesh they could find. (145)

- 25 Analogical reasoning is presented as fallible by the narrator, yet is constantly used to expose the unconscious motivations behind colonising greed. Linking European regimes of truth, represented as combining a belief in the universality of experimental findings and a trust in deductive rationality—both portrayed as “arrogant”—with masculinist exploitative attitudes to the land, the novel turns the inland sea of the title into a metaphor signifying for these men the promise of sexual, scientific, ideological, as well as professional and commercial fulfilment and security.

- 26 The inland sea that the title of the novel alludes to is the fiction early 19th century explorers created when they observed New South Wales rivers flowing westwards, away from the coast, leading them to believe that there must be an inland sea into which these rivers flowed. In an interview Watts explains that “this utter belief, based on a kind of ‘rational thinking’ that isn’t rational, which perpetuates the inland sea as a kind of logical conclusion” was what had interested her:

Part of what the book says about the inland sea—why it works as an image—is that it’s been proven to be false but then still you have people like Charles Sturt going out in the desert saying, *Right, this has to be here*. It was an attitude to land that erased Indigenous knowledge; it wasn’t interested in paying attention to what was there or talking to the people who own the land. (Watts “Vulnerability”)

- 27 Post-modern critiques of imperialistic “grand narratives” have efficiently discredited colonial truth-claims based on Euro-centric ideas of superiority, and in this context, the fact there was no inland sea to be found makes the obstinacy of 19th century explorers seem ridiculous. Yet, as the narrator concedes later, rising sea-levels will bring back into existence the Early Cretaceous Eromanga Sea in the low-lying plains of the Australian interior: “Oxley wasn’t wrong, exactly. He was just 110 million years too late, and a few hundred years too soon” (198).
- 28 This remark, even if put to the reader with a heavy dose of irony, acknowledges that from a geological perspective, the hypothesis of the existence of an inland sea made sense, and that its absence was a mystery that could not fail to intrigue explorers like Charles Sturt. Logically, this fact should radically undermine the novel’s analogical structure: if explorers like Oxley and Sturt were not just arrogant imperialists, driven by a desire to prove their own white, masculine superiority, if their science at least was sound, then they *were* acquiring valid geological knowledge about place. From a scientific perspective, the line Watts attributes to Charles Sturt—“Right, [the inland sea] has to be here”—is therefore more similar to Galileo’s apocryphal “And yet it moves” than to William Mulholland’s line “there it is, take it” (216). In the 1910s, civil engineer Mulholland campaigned for and led the construction of the controversial

Los Angeles Aqueduct, which, by 1913, diverted the Owens River to irrigate the San Fernando Valley where the syndicate of wealthy investors he was part of had bought up land. The construction of the aqueduct ruined the Owens Valley farmers and ranchers, and dried up Lake Owens, leading in the 1920s to legal and political conflicts that became known as the “California Water Wars”. By aligning Sturt’s determination to find an inland sea with Mulholland’s diversion of a well-known river for direct personal profit, Watts presents the explorer’s efforts as a pure expression of arrogance and greed. Yet, as suggested above, Stuart’s apparently counter-factual assertion could also stem from trust in the experimental knowledge and a correct observation of the land. The narrator’s feminist critique of 19th and 20th century faith in scientific reasoning, equating it with imperialist machismo, is therefore an oversimplification. Moreover, as an axiomatic starting point for the production of other analogical links between the first explorers’ sense of epistemic and patriarchal superiority and the narrator’s male contemporaries’ misogynist sense of gendered entitlement, it tends to obscure key, place-specific issues. Firstly, the reader may be led to believe that Australia’s disregard for Indigenous people’s land and water rights is a thing of the colonial past—not because the novel suggests these rights are now acknowledged, but because Indigenous Australians and their ongoing struggle for sovereignty are completely absent from the diegetic present. Furthermore, by linking the exploitative ethos of settler colonialism to Australia’s misogynistic culture, the analogy ultimately makes the story all about the narrator and her struggle to come to terms with constant instances of casual male aggression.

29 Her on-again, off-again boyfriend having entirely failed to support her after having pushed her into having an abortion, the narrator is lost for words when he seems to focus only on his own sense of hurt at her temporary physical unavailability: “He implied that my absence in his bed had wounded him. And this had both touched and angered me, so that I didn’t know which emotion was the correct one to express, and so said nothing” (104–105). This confirms Budgeon’s point about the “post-truth” re-appropriation of the supposedly feminine language of emotions to maintain masculine dominance.

30 Similarly, when the narrator hears two men worrying about the impact the sexual allegations against three Sydney football players

would have on the “general morale of the team”, and dismissing the woman’s allegations off-hand, just because of the way she looked, the fact that all she can do is write down the clinching argument “She’s asking for it” (112–113) is indicative of her disempowerment as a woman. Listening to a murder report, she learns that the assailant was ashamed for having cried all through his police interrogation like a “big sissy man”, but felt legitimate in killing his victim because she had pushed him away when he was “actually trying to do a nice thing” by picking her up (100–101). This leaves the narrator struggling to understand “the kind of man who hunts a girl, throws her down, weeps, leaves her body and walks away, returning to the world as ordinary a man as he had always been” (102).

- 31 In these incidents, and in the media coverage that some receive, what the narrative convincingly points out is that the claim to feelings of pain is put by the individual or group inflicting the violence rather than by the victim. This reversal reflects the way post-truth dynamics coalesce with anti-feminist rhetoric: in the post-truth “reformulation of gender hierarchy, masculinity is reconstituted as a site of injury, complicating the effort to establish the validity of claims made by women about their experiences” (Budgeon 254–255). Since feminist theory traditionally grants personal experience the seal of authenticity when making knowledge claims, the particular importance afforded to emotions and the personal narrative in the post-truth era actually weakens the feminist position:

Within the post-truth “feeling culture”, this expression of pain takes on the status of truth and therefore men’s rights groups regularly deploy emotion as the basis for making anti-feminist claims and defending misogynist views. Although expressive reaction in post-truth culture is accepted as an alternative to rational argument [...] women’s distinctive access to emotional knowing does not afford them epistemic legitimacy. (Budgeon 256)

The fact that the narrator is confused and often rendered speechless by remarks which construct masculinity as a site of injury rather than aggression therefore convincingly illustrates the effects of post-truth recuperation of the rhetorical tools feminists honed in an unequal power struggle.

- 32 However, because of the novel's overriding focus on the narrator's physical and psychological distress, it can be argued that the analogy between the violence she experiences in her own body and colonial depredations ultimately serves to deflect difficult questions about contemporary Australia's enduring problematic relations to place. The moment the narrator almost gets raped by the "man from the desert" she met in a night-club illustrates the obfuscating power of analogy: "The soil [was] so polluted and wet and soft that when he pushed me down and my hand reached out to catch my fall I felt as though I were penetrating the flesh of the earth" (240). In a sense, to use the terminology introduced by I. A. Richards, the narrator's increasingly battered, bruised, bleeding body ends up being the main "tenor" of the analogy, colonial exploitation and environmental degradation being reduced to the status of a mere "vehicle".
- 33 The implications of such figurative connections in the novel is variously appreciated by Watts's reviewers. Overall Katie Dobbs is critical of the "uneasy correlation between invasion, environmental cataclysm and the narrator's personal upheavals (from sexual harassment to botched IUD implantations) that errs into melancholic solipsism". Her conclusion is ambivalent, though, as she seems to be congratulating Watts on abstaining from trying to provide solutions, while also condemning what she sees as the novel's purely aesthetic approach to our anxious times:

With no pretensions to lighting the way out of our current mess, Watts guides us into the thicket, leaves us in an anxious twilight between the material and the figurative. Where, we might imagine, our aspiring-writer narrator is sitting down to pen her *Künstlerroman*—while outside her window, in her fabled California, yet another band of devastating fires, driven by record-breaking drought and heat, burn.

- 34 Another reviewer is similarly perplexed by the conflation of the historical feminisation of *terra incognita* ("a symbolic equation so well established that the feminist critique of the trope has become its own scholarly cliché") with personal, ecological and climatic disaster:

Has this novel taken the woman-as-nature and recast it into something new? Or does it get stuck rehashing notions of gendered

wilderness? What are the affective politics of presenting an individual woman's pain alongside and as figure for crises of global proportions? (MacVeagh)

Arguing in defence of the novel that it “resists unitary readings”, however, MacVeagh, with a nod to Ghosh's reference to “unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space”, gives it the benefit of the doubt:

It plays with the idea that understanding ecological and personal catastrophes through each other is something cringey and then challenges that cringe's gendered stakes. [...] In carefully lining up climatological events and the banalities of breakups, *The Inland Sea* suggests that climate crisis may very well be representable within the generic containment of everyday life.

- 35 MacVeagh's argument does not, however, specify how the word “understanding” should be understood. By using the same word to refer to the heroine's heartbreak and to ecological disaster, she asserts the existence of similarities, that, it is implied, would allow the reader to relate emotionally to both. But is metaphorical or analogical understanding helpful in this case? In a sense, the narrator's early disclaimer on the opening page of the novel is as illuminating as it is ambiguous:

In the end, they would say that this January was the hottest month on record, in the hottest year on record, although they've said that about every year since. But this was the last January I sweltered through before I left the city entirely. *I don't know anything* about those other summers. (9 my emphasis)

- 36 What could be a preliminary admission of epistemic incompetence is also a way for the narrator to warn us from the outset that she has lost patience with the incapacity of climate science to make an impact on state policies, with the Australian media, and with Australia as a place she could call home. The art of fiction is not about delivering a “message”, and formlessness (which Watts claims for her narrator) and inconclusiveness can be useful figurative devices to portray a young woman's psychological distress and cultural meltdown in the post-truth era—but they can also be aesthetic

failings and represent an abdication of intellectual responsibility. As Jeff Malpas puts it when debating the dangers of post-modern scepticism, “retrieving truth” is vitally important as:

[...] fragmentation of discourse and an abandonment of truth [...] is a denial of the problem posed by modernity and not a resolution. In failing to deal with that problem, the spectre of modernity, the identification of the true with the technological, will always be among us. (303)

- 37 The post-modern “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv) that served the colonial expansion of European empires, and the post-colonial denunciation of the enduring legacy of imperialist truth-claims in power relations in settler cultures have certainly complicated the speaking position of non-Indigenous writers in Australia today. While it was still possible for high modernist writers like Patrick White (*The Tree of Man*, *Voss*) and David Malouf (*Remembering Babylon*) to poetically portray settler indigenisation as a way out from the classically exploitative colonial relationship to the land, this solution was largely foreclosed to later generations of writers like Andrew McGahan (*White Earth*) or Kate Grenville (*The Secret River*). For the earlier generation of writers, indigenisation meant either that their characters came to a better understanding of, and a reverence for, place through ordeal and humbling experience, or through assimilation into Aboriginal culture like Gemmy who is adopted into an Indigenous community. McGahan or Grenville, on the other hand, had to find ways of portraying their non-Indigenous characters’ fundamental disconnection from place as a way to show that their claims to a deep knowledge of the land were illusory, while making their experiences emblematic of an enlightened Australian identity. The post-truth era having cast further suspicion on established modes of learning and communicating information, the privileged speaking position of young, university-educated, published non-Indigenous writers makes what they can credibly say about Australia today particularly elusive. Perhaps this is why, rather than attempting to broach politically-sensitive issues, *The Inland Sea* opts for a virtuoso rendering of feelings of individual pain, disorientation and insecurity, and trusting the reader to accept their analogical extension to a lament on

colonisation and the destruction of the natural world. However, Watts's rather complacent disavowal of any form of truth outside the all-encompassing suffering psyche arguably prevents the novel from convincingly engaging with such issues.

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NOTES

1 See Minister for the Environment and Water Tanya Plibersek's 21 August 2024 media release : <<https://minister.dcceew.gov.au/plibersek/media-releases/albanese-government-gives-environment-approvals-australias-biggest-renewable-energy-project-ever>>.

- 2 Graham Readfearn, “Australian Prime Minister Denies 25 Years of Research Linking Climate Change to Bushfires”, *The Guardian*, 23 Oct 2013.

RÉSUMÉS

English

Despite recent decarbonisation policy decisions in Australia the nationalist narrative of environmental particularism and settler resilience still encourages exploitative attitudes to place. The difficulty for dissenting voices to make themselves heard in Western democracies in the current cultural climate, which has seen a marked erosion of the authority of traditional guarantors of knowledge and contributed to the rise of populism, is the tenor of Australian writer Madeleine Watts’s debut novel *The Inland Sea* (2020). After outlining some of the linguistic, philosophical and socio-political tensions that are encapsulated in the broad notion of post-truth, the article explores how the disconnection of government and media from the Australian public’s lived experience of global warming affects the concept of place as “home” and the possibility of developing a grounded narrative. Finally, the question raised by Amitav Ghosh about the suitability of the novel genre to talk about climate change is used as a starting point to discuss the moral, political and aesthetic responsibilities involved in writing Australian fiction in a post-truth era.

Français

Malgré les décisions politiques en matière de décarbonisation prises récemment en Australie, le récit nationaliste du particularisme environnemental et de la résilience des colons encourage toujours un rapport au lieu fondé sur la surexploitation. La difficulté pour les voix dissidentes de se faire entendre dans les démocraties occidentales dans le climat culturel actuel, qui a vu une érosion marquée de l’autorité des garants traditionnels du savoir et une montée du populisme, est le thème du premier roman de l’écrivaine australienne Madeleine Watts, *The Inland Sea* (2020). Après avoir souligné certaines des tensions linguistiques, philosophiques et sociopolitiques résumées dans la notion générale de post-vérité, l’article explore la manière dont la déconnexion du discours dominant par rapport à l’expérience vécue des effets du réchauffement climatique impacte la façon dont l’espace national est représenté dans le roman. Enfin, la question soulevée par Amitav Ghosh quant à la pertinence du genre romanesque pour parler du changement climatique est utilisée comme point de départ pour évoquer les responsabilités morales, politiques et esthétiques qu’implique l’écriture de fiction en Australie à l’ère de la post-vérité.

INDEX

Mots-clés

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Keywords

national mythologies, climate change fiction, analogy, feminist fiction

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The Pre-Truth of the Place (Rather than “The Lie of the Land”): Representations of Bengal in the Writings of Early European Travellers

La pré-vérité du lieu (entre topographie et mensonge) : les représentations du Bengale dans les textes des premiers explorateurs européens

Saugata Bhaduri

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TEXTE

- 1 In this volume, aimed to analyze the relationship between ‘Place and Post-Truth’, I thought that, to emphasize further on the connections between veracity and temporality, I would rather take a step or two back, to what I could refer to as ‘pre-truth of the place’ (in this particular case that of Bengal generated through the European imaginary before colonization of the former by the latter could begin in earnest). However, there is one more reason too for me to turn to ‘pre-truth’ here. ‘Truth’ has always been manipulated by the powers that are, and exposing the constructed nature of such ‘Truth’ has always been a resistive strategy, but what is new about the era of ‘post-truth’ is that, with the classic model of ideologization having given way to cynicism—where not ‘false consciousness’ and ‘interpellation’ of innocent masses, but knowing participation by them in the generation and circulation of untruth rules the roost—even the semblance of a mask of ‘Truth’ is not required anymore by the powers to be. Therefore, the invocation of ‘Truth vs Untruth’ may not work effectively to unmask or resist regimes of post-truth, as it would simply take us from one normativized regime of ‘truth’ to another (say, from the neo-fascist to the neo-liberal or vice-versa). My submission is that the concept of ‘pre-truth’ may be more helpful in doing the same: pre-truth being what lay before any of the regimes of ‘Truth’ (or ‘Lies’) set in; what did not necessarily claim to be factual,

but whose subsequent moulding into 'Truth' lays bare the dynamics of the manipulation that Truth or Post-Truth subsequently undertake. This becomes all the more relevant as I am writing about Bengal at the exact time (August 2024) when Bangladesh, one of the two major constituents of the geo-cultural territory called 'Bengal', is passing through a transitory period where a students' revolution has driven the elected government out of the country, leading to a period of both hope and apprehension, fuelled all the more by all sorts of discourses circulating in the electronic media, the 'truth' of which is often difficult to determine.

- 2 In traditional postcolonial theory, the cultural mapping of a colonized territory by the colonizer is often thought of in terms of the phrase 'The Lie of the Land' (see, for example, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's 1992 book by the same name), with there being a pun on the word 'lie', to convey the dual sense of the mapping being aimed to survey how the land *lies*, as also to suggest that the discourses about the land that emerge from such an exercise are often but *lies*. However, the colonial cultural mapping of the 'land', and the resultant 'lie' that emerges out of it in both its senses, is usually preceded by many pre-colonial (often enticing bits of the not-so-true) narrativizations of the 'place' which is yet to be colonized, producing thus a pre-colonial body of 'pre-truth of the place', as it were, before either the 'truth' or the 'lie' of the actual land gets rendered unto a real colonial cultural imaginary. To examine this, I will look at writings of 'early modern' European travellers who came to Bengal and wrote about it, somewhat prior to, but in preparation of, Europe's 'polycolonial' contact with Bengal, that is prior to the setting up of multiple European colonies in Bengal by the Portuguese (1514), the Dutch (1623), the English (1650), and the French (1673). [Some other European nations set up colonies in Bengal too, like the Danish (1698) and the Germans (1723), but I leave them out of discussion here, because they were somewhat late in establishing their contact with Bengal.] Further, prior to all this, there was also a steady flow of European (primarily Italian) travellers to, and travel accounts about, Bengal from the late 13th to the 16th centuries, whose writings I also look at, in building up a case for the pre-truth of Bengal from a polycolonial standpoint. I have already discussed the writers that I take up here (and much more) in far greater detail in my book

Polycoloniality (see Bhaduri), but here I build up an altogether new case for the ‘pre-truth’ that emerges in their writings about Bengal.

- 3 I classify these early modern European travellers who came to Bengal and wrote about it into two groups—the ‘Extra-Colonials’ and the ‘Pre-Colonials’, with the former standing for travellers from European countries which did not ever have colonies in Bengal, and the latter for travellers who visited Bengal prior to their respective countries ending up having colonies there. The first extra-colonial early modern European traveller to come to Bengal and write about it is the Italian explorer Marco Polo (1254–1324), who mentions Bengal in Chapter XLII of Book II of his *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (1298–1299). He writes an entire chapter on it, Chapter XLV, “Of the Province of Bangala”, having visited Bengal before 1290—in the 1270s–80s perhaps—the period to which Book II conforms. The second is another Italian explorer and merchant, Nicolo Conti (1395–1469), who travelled through Bengal in the 1430s, and narrated it in his travelogue, *The Travels of Nicolo Conti, in the East* (1444). The third is the Italian traveller and adventurer Ludovico di Varthema (1470–1517), who came to Bengal in 1505, and wrote about it in two chapters—“Chapter concerning the City of Banghella” and “Chapter concerning some Christian Merchants in Banghella”—in “The Third Book Concerning India”, in his elaborate travelogue *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema* (1510). I call these early European traveller-writers to Bengal ‘extra-colonials’ because they are all Italians, and Italy never came to have any colonial presence in Bengal, or anywhere in India. [The closest the Italians came to having a colony in India was when, between 1864 and 1868, Italy made unsuccessful attempts to buy the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal from the Danish, who had the archipelago, named by them as Frederikssøerne (Frederick’s Islands), as their colony from 1756, but the islands were finally successfully sold to the English on 16 October 1868.] The writings of these three extra-colonial European travellers to Bengal would have really created an impact on the production of pre-truth in the European imagination of the place of Bengal.
- 4 I deliberately omit here two early extra-colonial ‘western’ travellers who came to Bengal in 1292 and 1345, respectively, and wrote about it. The first amongst these is the Italian, John of Montecorvino (1247–

1328), who visited the east coast of India at least till Mylapore (in today's Chennai) and probably up to Bengal, and wrote a letter about the same on 22 December 1292, which is certainly the earliest 'written' account on India by a 'modern' European (since Marco Polo's period of visit may have preceded Montecorvino's but his written account saw the light of day only in 1298–1299), but I leave him out from this discussion because it is not certain (in fact, it is quite unlikely) that he actually came to Bengal. I also leave out Ibn Battuta (1304–c. 1368), who visited Chattogram (Chittagong) and Sylhet in eastern Bengal in 1345, and wrote about the same in fair detail in his travelogue, *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling* (1355), because though the first early modern 'westerner' (Ibn Battuta was from Tangiers in Morocco, just off the coast of southern Spain) to certainly visit Bengal and write about it, he was technically not 'European', to whom alone I restrict this account.

- 5 Moving on to the 'Pre-Colonials', I take up for discussion here the earliest representatives of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, and the French, who visited Bengal and wrote about it, before their respective countries should set up colonies there. I discuss, therefore, one after the other the accounts of: the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa (c. 1480–1521), who visited Bengal in the 1510s, and described this in § 102 "The Kingdom of Bengala" in Vol. 2 of his *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (1518); the Dutch Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563–1611), who visited Bengal in the 1580s, and wrote about it in Chapter 16 "Of the Kingdom of Bengalen, and the river Ganges" of Vol. 1 of his *Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies* (1596); the English Ralph Fitch (1550–1611), who visited Bengal in 1586 and in 1588–1589, and we have his travelogue "The Voyage of M. Ralph Fitch Marchant of London" (1591), originally published in Vol. 2 of Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations* (1599); the French Vincent Le Blanc (1554–c. 1640), who visited Bengal in 1575, and wrote about it in Chapter 22 "Of the kingdom of Bengala, and Ternassery" of the First Part of his *The World Surveyed* (1648); and the second French visitor to Bengal, François Pyrard de Laval (1578–1623), who passed through Chittagong in 1607, and documented it in *The Voyage of François Pyrard de Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil* (1611). I call

these travellers ‘pre-colonials’ because they were from Portugal, the Netherlands, England, and France—the four major players in polycolonial Bengal—but they visited Bengal before their countries could set up colonies in Bengal in 1514, 1623, 1650, and 1673, respectively. Let me discuss these eight travellers one after the other, to see how they set up the pre-truth of Bengal.

- 6 The first ‘modern’ European to talk about Bengal was surely the Italian Marco Polo (1254–1324). But, while he, in Chapters XVII to XXXIII of Book III of his *Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (1298–1299), describes his journey, around 1292, in the Indian subcontinent—from Andaman and Nicobar Islands, to Sri Lanka, to the Coromandel coast, along the Malabar coast, and right up to today’s Gujarat and Sindh (Polo 347–388)—there is no mention of Bengal here. It is however in his Book II, which concerns his travels before leaving Kublai Khan’s court in 1290 (i.e. in the 1270s and 80s) that Marco Polo mentions Bengal (or Bangala) several times, beginning with Chapter XLII, in relation to Kublai Khan’s (referred to as the Grand Khan) battle in 1272 with the King of Mien (today’s Myanmar) and Bangala. This description has led to some doubt as to whether Marco Polo really knew Bengal, or based his account on what he heard about the place from other sources in the Khan’s court (thus in itself a ‘pre-truth’ of sorts). This is so because there is no historical evidence of Kublai Khan’s army ever having fought a battle with any king of Bengal, though it is possible that the Burmese king of Mien may have styled himself king of Bangala as well as of Mien, having conquered some eastern district belonging to Bengal, which is quite likely given the contiguity of Myanmar and parts of eastern Bengal. Bengal thus being invoked in this chapter only by extension, let me not go into details of the battle, and instead move on to Chapter XLV of Book II, “Of the Province of Bangala”, where Marco Polo indeed gives an account of proper Bengal.
- 7 In this chapter, Marco Polo has a brief comment to make about the language of Bengal—“It has its peculiar language” (260). He focuses also on the religious customs and the scholarly class of the region:

The people are worshippers of idols, and amongst them there are teachers, at the head of schools for instruction in the principles of their idolatrous religion and of necromancy, whose doctrine prevails

amongst all ranks, including the nobles and chiefs of the country. (260)

Polo mentions the food habits of the people of Bengal too: “The inhabitants live upon flesh, milk, and rice, of which they have abundance” (260). He insists also on the primacy of agriculture and trade in the region: “Much cotton is grown in the country, and trade flourishes. Spikenard, galangal, ginger, sugar, and many sorts of drugs are amongst the productions of the soil; to purchase which the merchants from various parts of India resort thither” (261). More strikingly still Marco Polo draws our attention to the slave trade in Bengal, particularly to the prisoners of war who are castrated and sold as prospective guards of princely harems in other kingdoms:

They likewise make purchases of eunuchs, of whom there are numbers in the country, as slaves; for all the prisoners taken in war are presently emasculated; and as every prince and person of rank is desirous of having them for the custody of their women, the merchants obtain a large profit by carrying them to other kingdoms, and there disposing of them. (261)

8 Thus, Marco Polo seems to have pointed out some of the peculiarities of the culture and customs of Bengal—including its linguistic, religious, and food habits—while also commenting on its flourishing economy, as also its darker side, in terms of its involvement in a very cruel form of slave trade.

9 The second extra-colonial visitor to Bengal, Nicolo Conti (1395–1469), travelled, among other places, up the river Ganges from its mouth in the Bay of Bengal to northern India and then via the mountains to the mouth of the Ganges again, and thus twice through Bengal, in the 1430s, and wrote his travelogue in Latin in 1444. While Marco Polo had discussed only the language, religion, food, and trade of Bengal, Conti begins by describing the two cities of Bengal that he passes through—Cernove and Buffetania (10)—leading to a lot of speculation in the readership to follow about what these towns would be. Cernove could probably be a corruption of Gaur-Nagar, or the ‘city of Gaur’, the old capital of Bengal, or Shehr-Nau, the ‘new city’ of Tanda, to which the capital of Bengal was later shifted from Gaur, and Buffetania could either be Patna or Bardhaman. The point, however,

is that Conti describes Bengal as having big cities. Conti also focuses on the river itself—the mighty deltaic Ganga of Bengal—which he seemed to have been awestruck by: “This river is so large that, being in the middle of it, you cannot see land on either side. [...] in some places it is fifteen miles in width” (10). He is also awestruck by the flora, particularly the mighty bamboo:

On the banks of this river there grow reeds extremely high, and of such surprising thickness that one man alone cannot encompass them with his arms: they make of these fishing boats, for which purpose one alone is sufficient, and of the wood or bark, which is more than a palm’s breadth in thickness, skiffs adapted to the navigation of the river. (10)

And he is also awestruck by the fauna, particularly the aquatic animals: “Crocodiles and various kinds of fishes unknown to us are found in the river” (10).

- 10 Conti is most appreciative of the people of Bengal or of eastern India. Dividing ‘India’ into three zones—from Persia to the Indus, from the Indus to the Ganges, and what lies east of the Ganges—Conti reserves his greatest civilisational approbation for the dwellers of the third part of India, i.e. Bengal and beyond, though the description, to make them appear like Europeans, seems a bit exaggerated:

All India is divided into three parts: one, extending from Persia to the Indus; the second, comprising the district from the Indus to the Ganges; and the third, all that is beyond. This third part excels the others in riches, politeness, and magnificence, and is equal to our own country in the style of life and in civilization. For the inhabitants have most sumptuous buildings, elegant habitations, and handsome furniture; they lead a more refined life, removed from all barbarity and coarseness. The men are extremely humane, and the merchants very rich, so much so that some will carry on their business in forty of their own ships, each of which is valued at fifty thousand gold pieces. These alone use tables at their meals, in the manner of Europeans, with silver vessels upon them; whilst the inhabitants of the rest of India eat upon carpets spread upon the ground. (21)

- 11 However, not restricting himself to only praising the people of Bengal, Conti also describes quite graphically the abominable act of

sati that he must have witnessed during his trip, thus also not avoiding to describe his brush with the darker side of Bengal, which also vividly influences the pre-truth imagining of Bengal in the European mind:

[...] the dead are burned, and the living wives, for the most part, are consumed in the same funeral pyre with their husband, one or more, according to the agreement at the time the marriage was contracted. [...] The deceased husband is laid on a couch, dressed in his best garments. A vast funeral pyre is erected over him in the form of a pyramid, constructed of odoriferous woods. The pile being ignited, the wife, habited in her richest garments, walks gaily around it, singing, accompanied by a great concourse of people, and amid the sounds of trumpets, flutes, and songs. [...] When she has walked round the fire several times, she stands near the elevation on which is the priest, and taking off her dress puts on a white linen garment, her body having first been washed according to custom. In obedience to the exhortation of the priest she then springs into the fire. If some show more timidity (for it frequently happens that they become stupefied by terror at the sight of the struggles of the others, or of their sufferings in the fire), they are thrown into the fire by the bystanders, whether consenting or not. (24)

Thus, Conti, like Marco Polo, brings to the fore both the rich and dark sides of Bengal, but he also adds more to Polo's account, by talking about the cities and the natural features of Bengal too.

- 12 Our third extra-colonial visitor, the Italian Ludovico di Varthema (1470–1517), came to Bengal in 1505, and wrote an elaborate travelogue about his visit: *The Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna from 1502 to 1508*. His travelogue appeared in Italian in 1510 and was translated into Latin in 1511, German in 1515, Spanish in 1520, French in 1556, Dutch in 1563, and English in 1577, thus opening up the pre-truth of Bengal for the first time in more than two centuries (after Marco Polo) to a broader European imagination. Varthema devotes two chapters—"Chapter concerning the City of Banghella" and "Chapter concerning some Christian Merchants in Banghella" (210–212, 212–214)—in "The Third Book Concerning India" in his *Travels* solely to his experiences in Bengal, which he calls "Banghella". He talks specifically about arriving at "the city of Banghella" (210), and since there is currently no city by that name in Bengal, there is some

debate as to which city is referred to by the name Banghella, adding to the pre-truth about the place. The editor of Varthema's travelogue, George Percy Badger, shows how different commentators identify Varthema's city of Banghella with Gaur, or Chittagong, or Satgaon, which all being the main cities of Bengal at that time, could have been referred to as 'the city of Bengal' (see Badger's comments in Varthema 210, LXXX–LXXXII, CXXI). Whatever the location of the city of Banghella may be, what really matters is that Varthema thought of it as a fabulous place: "This city was one of the best that I had hitherto seen, and has a very great realm" (211), and later "this city, which I believe is the best in the world" (214). Varthema also goes on to describe the Sultan who ruled over this city and who "maintain[ed] two hundred thousand men for battle on foot and on horse" (211). Adding further to his account of the richness of the place, Varthema goes on to describe the plentiful food production and the commercial pre-eminence of Bengal, and the richness of the merchants who stayed there: "This country abounds more in grain, flesh of every kind, in great quantity of sugar, also of ginger, and of great abundance of cotton, than any country in the world. And here there are the richest merchants I ever met with" (212). However, Varthema is surely hyperbolic and 'pre-truthy' when he claims the city of Bengal to be the best city in the world, with a massive army, with more food production than any country in the world, and with the richest merchants ever.

- 13 More interestingly, Varthema also encounters some Christian merchants in Bengal, and writes a whole chapter on them. He tells us, "We also found some Christian merchants here. They said that they were from a city called Sarnau," and "that in their country there were many lords also Christians, but they are subject to the great Khan [of] Cathai" (212). Varthema is particularly amazed at the fact that they are "white" and Christians: "These same men are as white as we are, and confess that they are Christians, and believe in the Trinity, and likewise in the Twelve Apostles, in the four Evangelists, and they also have baptism with water" (213). Varthema identifies them as possibly Armenian, based on their script: "But they write in the contrary way to us, that is, after the manner of Armenia" (213), though the editor of the volume, George Badger, convinces us in a footnote that this is a wrong identification as the Armenian script is also written from left

to right, and they must have been Nestorians writing in some Arabesque script. Varthema also observes these Christian merchants' food habits: "they eat at a table after our fashion, and they eat every kind of flesh" (214). Importantly, he is so enamoured by them, that he decides to leave with them on a ship for Pego (Pegu/Bago in Myanmar), leaving behind his "best city in the world", ending his Bengal journey thus: "We departed thence with the said Christians, and went towards a city which is called Pego, distant from Banghella about a thousand miles" (214). What is to be noted is that, apart from commenting on the cities and the general prosperity of Bengal, Varthema also brings to the fore the potential cosmopolitan nature of the place, with the presence of merchants from other parts of the world, practising other religions.

- 14 One can now move on towards pre-colonial pre-truth, i.e. accounts of early modern European travellers to Bengal and their accounts prior to their respective countries having colonies in Bengal. One can begin with Duarte Barbosa (c. 1480–1521), who was in the service of the Portuguese government in India between 1500 and 1516, and visited Bengal around 1510. It should be noted that the Portuguese had colonies in parts of India from 1498, but in Bengal only from 1514, after Barbosa had left. Based initially in Cochin (Kochi) and noted for his linguistic skills, Barbosa was posted in 1502 as a scrivener and an interpreter from Malayalam to Portuguese in a factory in Cannanore (Kannur). Travelling intermittently through southern and eastern India, and combining his experiences therein with those of his prior voyages from Portugal to India and the later ones in south-east Asia, Barbosa wrote *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (*Livro de Duarte Barbosa*) in around 1516. Chapter § 102, titled "The Kingdom of Bengala", in Vol. 2 of this book is where the account of his visit to Bengal in the 1510s is recorded. Like his extra-colonial predecessors, Barbosa also points out the presence of big urban setups in Bengal, particularly the "city of Bengala": "this sea is a Gulf which runneth in between two lands, and going well into it there is to the north a right great city of the Moors, which they call Bengala" (135), which is "a very excellent sea-haven" (136). Similarly, Barbosa also points out the trade-driven and prosperous cosmopolitan nature of the city's demographics: "The inhabitants thereof are white men" (137), and that "there dwell there as well strangers from many lands, such as Arabs,

Persians, Abexis and Indians” (138–139), with its residents being “great merchants and they possess great ships” (141–142) of both the Arabian and the Chinese sort, “which are of great size and carry great cargoes” (142) and trade all over the south and southeast Asian coastline.

- 15 Additionally, Barbosa also focuses on Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal and the differences and disparities between different castes. Barbosa shows how the towns of Bengal were populated primarily by Hindus, it being a place “wherein are many towns, as well inland as on the coast, the inhabitants whereof are Heathen” (135), while the flourishing coastal mercantile trade was primarily held by the Muslims: “The Moors dwell in the seaports where there is great traffic in goods of many kinds and sailing of ships both great and small to many countries” (135). Barbosa also talks in detail about the difference in dresses and jewellery worn, and the personal lifestyle of “the respectable Moors”, which seems quite extravagant, indulgent and bordering on the indolent: “They are luxurious, eat well and spend freely, and have many other extravagancies as well” (147), while the “lower castes” of the city of Bengala wear different and much less elaborate clothing, compared to the merchants: “The lower castes of this town wear short white shirts, which come half way down their thighs, and on their heads little twisted turbans of three or four folds” (148). Barbosa also comments on how conversion to Islam is rampant among the Hindus primarily to gain favours from their Muslim overlords: “The Heathen of these parts daily become Moors to gain the favour of their rulers” (148). Like Polo before him, Barbosa also mentions the evil practice of slave trade in Bengal, but he projects it further as a case of Muslim merchants of Bengal buying or kidnapping young Hindu boys, and castrating them and selling them:

The Moorish merchants of this city oftentimes travel up country to buy Heathen boys from their parents or from other persons who steal them and castrate them, so that they are left quite flat. Many die from this; those who live they train well and sell them. They value them much as guardians of their women and estates and for other low objects. (147)

- 16 Barbosa ends his account with the comment that what he has observed in the “city of Bengala” in terms of cohabitation and mutual

relations between Hindus and Muslims is generalisable to the whole of the kingdom of Bengal. Thus, Barbosa adds a further layer to the pre-truth of Bengal, that concerning the not-too-hospitable relationship between different communities and castes there.

- 17 Our second pre-colonial European traveller to Bengal, the first Dutchman to visit Bengal in the 1580s, much before the Netherlands had its first colony in Bengal in 1623, was the merchant and historian Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563–1611), Secretary to the Portuguese Viceroy in Goa from 1583 to 1588. During his tenure at Goa, Linschoten visited many parts of India including Bengal and wrote about it in his *Itinerario*, which was published from Amsterdam in Dutch in 1596. An English-translation of the *Itinerario* was published from London in 1598, and called *Iohn Huighen van Linschoten: His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte & West Indies*; a German translation was published the same year, followed by two Latin translations from Frankfurt and Amsterdam in 1599; and a French translation followed in 1610, suggesting the importance of this book for the emergent pre-truth of the polycolonial European imaginary. The 16th chapter of Volume 1 of this aforesaid book is devoted to Bengal, and he mentions “the towne of Chatigan, which is the chief towne of Bengala” (93–94), and also “Porto grande, and Porto Pequeno, that is the great haven and the little haven” (95), thus touching upon both Chittagong and Hooghly, the two major settlements of the Portuguese in Bengal at that point of time. Linschoten also marvels at the plentifulness of produces in Bengal and the cheapness of it: “The country is most plentiful of necessary victuails [...] and so good cheape that it were incredible to declare” (94), and particularly stresses on the different kinds of fabric produced in Bengal—cotton, linen (probably jute, as it seems from the description), and silk:

[M]uch Cotton linen is made there which is very fine, and much esteemed in India, and not only spread abroad and carried into India and al the East parts, but also into Portingal, and other places [...] They have likewise other linen excellently wrought of a hearbe, which they spinne like yearne [...] it is yealowish, and is called the hearbe of Bengalen [...] likewise they make whole pièces or webbes of this hearbe, sometimes mixed and woven with silke. [...] (95–96)

Thus, like his predecessors, Linschoten also ends up mentioning the big cities of Bengal and its prosperity and primacy in trade.

- 18 However, at a departure from his predecessors, Linschoten does not have a very high opinion of the inhabitants of Bengal, as he says, “they are a most subtile and wicked people, and are esteemed the worst slaves of all India, for that they are all thieves, and the women whores” (94), almost as a word of caution for any nation desirous of trading with or colonising Bengal. However, for Linschoten, this apparent lawlessness in Bengal also makes it very inviting for a potential Dutch trading expedition to Bengal, and what makes it even more exciting, from an administratively colonial point of view, is that the sole European colonisers of Bengal at that point of time, the Portuguese, were not much into administration, leaving the field open for future entrants like the Dutch. As Linschoten says,

The Portingalles deale and traffique thether [...] but there they have no Fortes, nor any government, nor policié as in India [they have], but live in a manner like wild men, and untamed horses, for that every man doth there what hee will, and every man is Lord [and maister], ney ther estéeme they any thing of justice, whether there be any or none, and in this manner doe certayne Portingalles dwell among them, some here, some there [scattered abroad]. (95)

This is not exactly true—the Portuguese did have formal settlements and governmental machinery in their Bengal colonies in the mid-1580s—but this write-up by Linschoten was meant as a pre-truth, an advertisement to his fellow countrymen, the Dutch, to come over to the prosperous, though a little wily, Bengal, and set up trade there, colonize it, and govern it properly. And, this is precisely what the Dutch do. In 1595, the first Dutch voyage to India happens, between 1598 and 1600, six companies are formed, and in 1602 the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or the United East India Company) is established, with their first formal colony in Bengal being established in 1623.

- 19 Our third pre-colonial travel writer is the Englishman, Ralph Fitch, who first visited Bengal in 1586, several years before England would have its first colony there in 1650. In 1578, Sir Edward Osborne and Richard Staper secured permission from the Ottoman Emperor,

Sultan Murad III, for trading in his empire, and in 1581, Queen Elizabeth I granted a 'private letters patent' to Osborne and Staper, permitting them to represent England in trade with territories belonging to the Ottoman Empire, leading to the foundation of the 'Turkey Company', better known as the 'Levant Company' (technically though this name was chartered only in 1592, after the merger of the 'Turkey Company' with the 'Venice Company'). Funded by the 'Levant Company', and with a letter from Queen Elizabeth I to the Mughal Emperor Akbar (Jalaluddin Akbar, 'Zelabdim Echebar' in the then English orthography), the merchants John Newberie and John Eldred, the relatively obscure Ralph Fitch, a jeweller William Leedes, and a painter James Story took the ship *Tyger* on 12 February 1583, on a mission to India, the first such official mission to India from England, more than 17 years before the founding of the East India Company. Evidently, Ralph Fitch (1550–1611) was not the leader or the most important person of the 1583 expedition, but he is the one who has gained greater attention than his superiors Newberie and Eldred, because of the breadth of his travels, and his influential writings about the same. The team reached Aleppo by sea, from where they moved on by land to Baghdad and Basra, which they reached in August 1583. At Basra, Eldred stayed back, while the others moved on to Hormuz. In Hormuz, all four were arrested by the Portuguese, suspected of being spies, and sent as prisoners, via Diu, Daman, and the Portuguese holdings in Bombay, to Goa in November 1583. Thanks to the intercession of a couple of Jesuits, including Thomas Stephens (the first modern Englishman, a Jesuit missionary, to come and settle in India, Goa to be precise, in 1579), they secured release, but the painter Story stayed back in Goa to join the Jesuit order. Fitch, Newberie and Leedes left Goa in April 1584 to travel by land through central India to the Mughal emperor Akbar's court in Fatehpur Sikri. There, they presented to the emperor the letter from Queen Elizabeth I, thus becoming the first direct 'ambassadors' of the British crown to the Mughal court. The jeweller Leedes stayed back in Fatehpur Sikri to work for Akbar with handsome remuneration, while Fitch and Newberie set off on a journey through India, but Newberie decided to return in September 1585, via Lahore and was not heard of again. In November 1585, Fitch started his solo travels from Agra, down the rivers Yamuna and Ganga, through Allahabad, Benares and Patna, to reach Tanda in Bengal in February 1586, and travelling

extensively through it. Fitch left for Southeast Asia by sea from Bengal on 28 November 1586, and on his way back, visited Bengal again from November 1588 to 3 February 1589, before setting off by sea to Sri Lanka to Cochin to Goa for his return journey exactly the way he had come, and returned to London on 29 April 1591. Detailed narrativization of these trips exists through letters by Eldred, Newberie, and Fitch, most of which were first published in Richard Hakluyt's *The Principall Navigations, Voiages, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589), and then in Chapter VI of Vol. X of Samuel Purchas's *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others* (1625), and thereafter in many compilations of Fitch's famed travelogue.

- 20 Like the travellers before him, Ralph Fitch also presents Bengal as quite prosperous, where “Many of the people are very rich” (119), and the region as rich in produces and in maritime trade: “Great store of Cotton cloth goeth from hence, and much Rice, wherewith they serue all India, Ceilon, Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra and many other places” (119–120). Fitch further shows how Bengal is at the crossroads not only of maritime trade, but also the land-routes of Central Asia, leading to the cosmopolitanism that earlier travellers had also pointed out: “and there are marchants which come out of China, & they say out of Muscouia or Tartarie. And they come to buy muske, cambals, agats, silke, pepper and saffron like the saffron of Persia” (116). Fitch also talks about the darker side and possible lawlessness in Bengal, when he says how the usual route from Cooch Behar to Hooghly was deemed unsafe: “We went through the wildernes, because the right way was full of thieues” (113), adding to it the lawlessness caused by the unstable political situation in interior Bengal. He mentions “Chondery”, the king of Sripur, and “Isacan” (Isha Khan), “The chiefe king of all these countries” (119), who were all rebels who would have declared their own sovereignty, rebelling against the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Fitch says, crediting the topography of south-central Bengal for the possibility of such rebelliousness, “They be all hereabouts rebels against their king Zelabdim Echebar: for here are so many riuers and llands, that they flee from one to another, whereby his horse-men cannot preuaile against them” (118–119).

- 21 Over and above these pre-truths already pointed out by his predecessors, what is spectacular about Ralph Fitch's addition to the discourse is that he travelled extensively through Bengal, not just to the usual big cities visited by Europeans (Gaur, Tanda, Satgaon, Hooghly, Chittagong, etc.) but also to far-flung areas of the hinterland of Bengal, and wrote about them. For instance, he proceeds "into the country of Couche, which lieth 25. dayes iourny Northwards from Tanda" (111), i.e. Cooch Behar in the foothills of North Bengal. He further talks of Bhutan (whether he visited it or not): "There is a country 4. daies iournie from Couche or Quickeu before mentioned, which is called Bottanter and the citie Bottia [...]. There are very high mountains in this countrey, & one of them so steep that when a man is 6. daies iourney off it, he may see it perfectly" (116). He also goes to Tripura: "From Satagam I trauelled by the countrey of the king Tippara or porto of Tippara" (115), to relatively smaller port towns like Angeli (Hijli) (114) and Bacola (Bakla / Barishal / Bakerganj) (118), and big towns of interior east Bengal—to "Serrepore which standeth vpon the riuer of Ganges" (118), and "Sinnergan [which] is a towne sixe leagues from Serrepore" (119), i.e. Sripur and Sonargaon, respectively. It is very significant that Fitch visits and writes about not just the usual big port cities (Satgaon, Hooghly, Chittagong, etc.) but also far-flung peripheral places, smaller port towns, and towns in the interior hinterland of Bengal. Fitch's construction of the pre-truth of Bengal is thus not just about its port town and places of obvious trade interests, but about the hinterland and far-flung margins of Bengal. This actually corresponds to the final outcome of the polycolonial game: that of the English controlling the whole of the Indian hinterland, with the other European powers having only small enclaves of colonies on the coast. A further addition by Fitch to the pre-existing pre-truth of Bengal is the beginnings of somewhat of an 'orientalization' of the natives there. For instance, curiously, Ralph Fitch shows some Bengalis (at least the Hindus of Cooch Behar) as great animal lovers: "Here they be all Gentiles, and they will kil nothing. They haue hospitals for sheepe, goates, dogs, cats, birds, & for all other liuing creatures. When they be old & lame, they keepe them vntil they die" (112), which must be a bit exaggerated, leading to further fantastic accounts by his pre-colonial successors.

- 22 One can move on to the last set of pre-colonial travel writers to Bengal, the two Frenchmen to have visited Bengal before the French had their colony there from 1673. The first Frenchman to have come to Bengal was the traveller Vincent Le Blanc (1554–c. 1640), who visited the elusive “Towne of Bengale”, Chittagong, and Satgaon around 1575, and gives his account of the same in Chapter 22, “Of the kingdom of Bengala, and Ternassery”, of the First Part of his *The World Surveyed: Or, The Famous Voyages & Travailes of Vincent Le Blanc, or White, of Marseilles* (1648). Like his predecessors, Le Blanc talks a bit about the geography of Bengal: “This Kingdom reaches 200. leagues upon the sea side, and contains the Kingdomes of Sirapu [Sripur], Chandecan, Bacal [Bakla], Aracan, or Mogor [the land of the Mogs, i.e. today’s Rakhine province of Myanmar], and others” (83). He also brings into focus a bit of the then political situation of Bengal, that it “remains stil subjected to the great Mogull, Prince of Tartary, and Supreme Lord of all Indostan: and yet there remaine some Lords in that Countrey, that are Soveraignes, and obey the Mogull in a Noble manner” (83). His attention is primarily drawn, however, to the religious plurality of the place: “The Inhabitants of Bengale are Idolaters, Mahometans, and some Christians, for there are Portugaueses, and Fathers of the Society” (83). Le Blanc notes this multi-ethnic cosmopolitan ethos of Bengal in its trade practices too, and observes that “the people are very civill, and given to trade. And all Nations have free traffick, as Persians, Greekes, Abyssins, Chineses, Guserates, Malabares, Turkes, Moores, Jewes, Russes, or Georgians, and many others” (84). Thus, like the travellers before him, Le Blanc also notes the religious tolerance and cosmopolitanism of Bengal, and he notes as well how “The King of Bengale is an Idolater, as generally all the Eastern are” (85), but how the King was welcoming of the Christian fathers: “This King hath entertained the Fathers of the society at Chandecan, his Royal Town” (87).
- 23 What Le Blanc adds to the pre-truth discourse of Bengal is its connection to antique history. He brings us face to face with the toponymic confusion that we have encountered earlier, by naming the chief town of Bengal as “Bengale” itself, but adds further to the conundrum by stating that the locals call this city “Batacouta”, and

that it could be the same city that was referred to in Antiquity as “Ganges” on the banks of the river by the same name:

Leaving the Coast of *Coromandell*, we came to the Kingdom of *Bengale*, the chiefe Town whereof beares the name, or at least so called by the *Portuguese*, and other Nations, & by the Natives *Batacouta*, one of the greatest antiquity in the *Indies*. Some would have it to be old *Ganges*, a Royall Town upon the River *Ganges*. (83)

The identification of this city of “Bengale” with a place called by the locals as “Batacouta” and the ancients as “Ganges” connects Bengal to the known history of European Antiquity, as the city of “Gange” referred to by classical greats like Plutarch and Ptolemy as the grand capital of the ancient and formidable kingdom of “Gangaridae” located in the deltaic region of the river Ganga, which is indeed today’s Bengal, is often identified with archaeological finds at Wari-Bateswar (the name does sound similar to Battacouta) in today’s Bangladesh or Chandraketugarh in today’s West Bengal. Neither of these two places would have been towns of any consequence in Le Blanc’s time, but this is definitely an attempt to connect the place with the pre-truth of antique history. Le Blanc, almost carrying forward what Fitch had begun regarding the pre-truth of Bengal, also takes off on some general Orientalist fantasies, like the Hindu king of the city of Bengal having a contingent of Amazonian female bodyguards and a seraglio of amorous and licentious women:

The King keepes a great Court, followed by a gallant Nobility, and his chiefeſt guard conſiſts of women, [...] they put more truſt in them then in men, they march very gravely, are very valiant, and expert horſeriders and vaulters, uſe the Cimiterie and buckler, and battle axes very dexterouſly: you muſt take a care to come neer them in their March, for they will abuſe you, [...] the King maintains a great many of them in his Pallace, and the handsommeſt are richly attired.

The Sun once ſet, ’tis forbidden to any man to come neere the quarter, the *Seraglio* is kept in, it lookes upon a faire garden, on the ſide of a pleaſant river, where the Ladies walke at night, and ’tis death for any man to be found there. [...] If the women are ſurprized in their amours, they run no danger, and men are very ſeldom exempt from puniſhments. (85)

- 24 Similarly, he talks of the languid climate of Bengal having contributed to some cases of freakishly long lifespans, including one person who was 330 years old:

The Climate is very temperate, and well air'd, that makes them live long, witnesse the Moor of *Bangale*, aged three hundred and thirty years, in 1537. The oldest of the Countrey never knew him but old, and of the same growth, and remembred *Cambaye* without a Mahometan, his hair chang'd colour four times, from black to white, and he lost his teeth as often, and still they came again, he had about 700. wives in his life time, he was an Idolater for a 100. years together, and was the rest of his time a Mahometan [...]. (86)

Or that, for their funeral rites, Bengalis apparently “maintain women to lament and weep over the dead, according to the ancient *Roman* fashion. These women are clothed in mantles of the *Spanish* fashion [...] One of these women makes a Panegyrick of the dead” (89), and such other descriptions. These, certainly untrue and fantastic, descriptions do throw some light on the early French imagining of Bengal in particular, and the Orient in general, in terms of their pre-truth of the place.

- 25 The second French visitor to Bengal, François Pyrard de Laval (1578–1623), passed through Chittagong in 1607, and documented it in *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil* (1611). Apart from talking about the usual pre-truth about Bengal set by his predecessors—its richness and trade prospects, the cosmopolitanism of the place, the inner conflicts between Muslim kings and Hindu chieftains, the slave trade, etc.—Pyrard de Laval also has cautionary negative assessments to make about both its female and male inhabitants: “the women are pretty, but more shameless than elsewhere in India. The men are much given to trafficking in merchandise, and not to war or arms,—a soft, courteous, clever people, but having the repute of great cheats, thieves, and liars” (290). Besides, like Le Blanc, Pyrard de Laval also engages in some interesting exoticization, particularly about the fauna of Bengal, when he mentions elephants and rhinoceroses, and also reports that there are “some say unicorns, too, which are said to be found in this land only. They say other animals will not drink at a well until a female unicorn has steeped her horn in the water, so they

all wait on the bank till she comes and does so" (289). I do not know what to make of the Orientalist exoticization of Bengal peculiar to the pre-colonial French travellers, that too fairly late in the day, when the East would not have been that mysterious to the European imaginary any more, but this additional layer of pre-truth mystique to the place may have some correlation to how the French were relatively cautious and late starters in their colonization of Bengal, compared to the Portuguese, the Dutch or the English.

26 As one can note from the above accounts, as the extra-colonial and pre-colonial European travel accounts of Bengal move down time, and closer to actual colonization by the respective nations of the travellers, there are certain shifts in the construction of the pre-truth about the place. One can note a gradual accretion of pre-truth: from an initial description of its language, religion, food, and trade (Polo); to a description of its geographical, geological, sociological features, and flora and fauna (Conti); to hyperbolic projections of grand cities of the place and focus on its cosmopolitanism (Varthema); to more administrative issues like Hindu-Muslim relations and caste relations (Barbosa); to cautionary notes about its people as also enticement for prospective colonization (Linschoten); to scouting and reporting the hinterland of Bengal beyond the major cities (Fitch); to connecting Bengal with antique history and orientalist mystique of mythology (Le Blanc, Pyrard de Laval). Whether these shifts can be causally connected to the periodic and successful propagation of colonialism by diverse European nations in Bengal can only be speculated upon, but one can definitely see this well-crafted construction of a sustained narrative of the pre-truth of the place of Bengal to have laid the grounds for its reception in the European polycolonial imaginary.

27 Ten prominent themes seem to stand out from this accumulated pre-truth about Bengal. There are indeed many positives:

1) the rich history and geography of Bengal (pointed out by Polo, then by Conti, and connected to European Antiquity by Le Blanc);

2) the rich language and customs of Bengal (pointed out primarily by Polo and Conti);

- 3) the prosperity of Bengal (pointed out by Polo, Varthema, Linschoten, and Fitch);
- 4) the grand cities of Bengal (described by Conti, Varthema, Barbosa, and Linschoten);
- 5) the diverse hinterland of interior Bengal (described primarily by Fitch);
- 6) the cosmopolitan nature of Bengal (indicated by Varthema, Barbosa, Fitch, and Le Blanc).

But, on the other side, there are also the negatives:

- 7) problematic communal and caste relations in Bengal (described primarily by Barbosa);
- 8) leading to its dark side where inhuman practices like slave trade and sati flourish, the people are dishonest, and there is general lawlessness (begun by Polo and Conti, and carried forward by Linschoten, Fitch, and Pyrard de Laval);
- 9) leading to fantastic and stereotypical Orientalizing imaginings of Bengal (beginning with Fitch, but primarily in Le Blanc and Pyrard de Laval);
- 10) culminating in an enticement for a potential colonization of Bengal (primarily in Linschoten).

- 28 Could it be that these ten themes, arising out of the pre-truth of Bengal, can form a template for Bengal and Bengalis today to negotiate the labyrinthine alleyways of untruth and post-truth, and even resist the same?
- 29 Bengalis are the third-largest ethnic group in the world after the Han Chinese and Arabs (Chakravarti), with Bengali being the sixth-most spoken native language in the world (Lane), and yet, Bengal is a divided nation. The repeated partition of the subcontinent, particularly of Bengal (1905, 1947, 1971), has ensured that there are

multiple geopolitical entities, which can be collectively called ‘Bengal’: Bangladesh (referred to at some point of time as East Bengal); the Indian state of West Bengal; other parts of India where Bengali is the official language—the state of Tripura, and the Barak Valley region of the state of Assam; and parts of India where Bengali is the most-spoken language without it being assigned the official language status—the Andaman Islands, and some areas of the states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkand, and Odisha, adjoining West Bengal—there thus being multiple Bengals. Around 58% of the 300 million Bengalis reside in Bangladesh, around 38% in India, and around 4% are in diaspora, with there being major divisions as well amongst Bengalis on grounds of religion (66% of Bengalis are Muslims, 33% Hindus, and 1% of other religions, primarily Buddhists and Christians), and caste (see Census, Bangladesh; Census, West Bengal). Of late, one can notice enhanced communal polarization on both sides of the border through competitive fundamentalisms and casteisms, triggered often by post-truth and fake news. How can a divided Bengal battle these divisive ‘post-truths’, and think through its differences, through its diversities, through its pluralities, rather than giving in to homogenizing majoritarianism of either the Muslim or Hindu sort on the two sides of the border? My submission is that it can possibly do so by inverting its self-same gaze and imagining oneself as a divided, but plural and inclusive, Bengali people, by invoking the imagination of Bengal by others—Bengal deriving its toolkit of re-imagining itself, contra sectarian post-truth, through literary ‘pre-truth’ about the place, e.g., as discussed in this article, through how the colonial ‘others’ had imagined Bengal before they had become colonizers. The derivation of this toolkit from the imagination of Bengal by Europeans, rather than from that by Bengalis themselves, is important not because the former is any truer (after all, it is ‘pre-truth’ and not ‘truth’), but because it is only from the other’s perspective that one can deflate one’s self-same identitarian post-truths.

- 30 But, what toolkit can we derive from this perusal of extra-colonial and pre-colonial pre-truth imaginings of Bengal? To follow up from the ten themes of pre-truth listed above, and to extrapolate therefrom:

- 1) We can surely take pride in the rich history and the awe-inspiring geography of Bengal;
- 2) We must cherish our unique and rich language and customs;
- 3) We ought to reminisce on the prosperity that Bengal once had (and may still have),
- 4) And celebrate its grand big cities and their flourishing trade;
- 5) But, we should also be accepting of the diversity that the interior regions of Bengal and its hinterland represent, and be responsive to the plurality that Bengal is all about.
- 6) This, particularly because Bengal has been shown to be a cradle of tolerance of diverse communities, and of cosmopolitanism;
- 7) Because otherwise, communal tension and caste problems are just lurking around the corner in Bengal, and can flare into sectarianism any time;
- 8) Thrusting us into the darker sides of Bengal, marked with fundamentalism, obscurantism, intolerance, hypocrisy, oppression of minorities, and violence;
- 9) Where blatant lies and fantastic imaginings and fake news may rule,
- 10) Inviting possible and renewed new-imperialist aggression and annexation.

31 Thus, these lessons learnt from the pre-truth of the place, as constructed by the 'other', can arm us against falling prey to the vagaries of post-truth, that seek to divide us and rule us evermore, and this could be all the more relevant for Bengal in our current times, with the current political turmoil in Bangladesh and growing sectarianism on both sides of the border that separates the two (or more) Bengals.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

This article argues that the concept of 'pre-truth'—or what lies before a regime of 'Truth' (or 'Lies') about a certain subject sets in—can help one take on the vagaries of 'post-truth' that later peril that subject. In the colonial context, for instance, one can see that the 'lie of the land' (in both senses of the word 'lie') that emerges out of colonial mapping, is often preceded by prior accounts of the yet to be colonized territory, producing a pre-colonial body of 'pre-truth of the place', whose subsequent appropriation lays bare the manipulation that Truth or Post-Truth regimes undertake. This article looks at writings of 'early modern' European travellers to Bengal, prior to Europe's 'polycolonial' contact with the area: both as 'extra-colonials' i.e. late 13th to early 16th century travellers from European countries (primarily Italy) which did not have colonies in Bengal—'pre-colonials'—i.e. the first Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French travellers from the early 16th to the mid-17th centuries, who visited Bengal prior to their respective countries having colonies there. The article, in studying the writings of eight such travellers, notes a gradual accretion of pre-truth about Bengal, and identifies ten themes that emerge from the same. It further argues that these ten themes can form the template for a toolkit with which Bengalis can resist the identitarian polarization and fundamentalisms triggered by post-truth and fake news on both sides of their borders today. This is all the more because this toolkit is derived from the pre-truth imagination of Bengal by Europeans, rather than Bengalis themselves, as it is only from the other's provisionally true (or pre-true) perspective that one can deflate one's self-same identitarian post-truths.

Français

Cet article soutient que le concept de « pré-vérité » — ou ce qui se situe avant qu'un régime de Vérité (ou de Mensonges) ne se mette en place à propos d'un certain sujet — peut permettre d'affronter les aléas de la post-vérité qui plus tard menacent un tel sujet. Dans un contexte colonial par exemple, on peut voir que la configuration du territoire qui émerge de la cartographie coloniale est souvent précédée de récits antérieurs à propos de cette région qui reste à coloniser, produisant ainsi un ensemble de textes précoloniaux définissant ce qu'on pourrait appeler une pré-vérité du lieu, dont l'appropriation à venir ne fera que mettre à nu une logique de manipulation que les régimes de la Vérité ou de la Post-vérité enclenchent alors. Cet article examine des récits de voyageurs européens au Bengale au début de l'époque moderne, avant le développement des contacts « polycoloniaux » de l'Europe avec toute la région : qu'il s'agisse d'européens extra-coloniaux, c'est-à-dire de voyageurs qui, de la fin du ^{xiii}^e siècle au début du ^{xvi}^e siècle (essentiellement des Italiens), ne venaient pas de pays qui auraient par la suite établi des colonies au Bengale, ou encore de précoloniaux, les premiers voyageurs portugais, hollandais, anglais et français qui du début ^{xvi}^e au milieu du ^{xvii}^e siècles ont visité le Bengale avant que leurs pays d'origine respectifs n'y établissent de colonies. L'analyse des écrits de huit de ces voyageurs permet ainsi de noter une accumulation progressive de pré-vérités sur le Bengale et identifie dix thèmes qui en émergent. L'argumentation se poursuit ensuite en suggérant l'idée que ces dix thèmes puissent fournir une sorte de boîte à outils conceptuels qui pourrait se révéler utile aux Bengalais afin de résister au mieux à la polarisation identitaire et au fondamentalisme que la post-vérité et la désinformation encouragent des deux côtés de leurs frontières. Ceci est d'autant plus valable qu'une telle boîte à outils dérive justement de la pré-vérité imaginaire que les Européens ont projetée sur le Bengale plutôt que des Bengalais eux-mêmes, comme si on ne pouvait paradoxalement combattre et vaincre ses propres post-vérités identitaires que depuis la perspective de l'Autre, proposant une éphémère et fragile « vérité » ou « pré-vérité ».

INDEX

Mots-clés

pré-vérité, Bengale, polycolonialité, pré-colonial, extra-colonial, écriture de voyage du début de l'époque moderne jusqu'au ^{xvii}^e siècle

Keywords

pre-truth, Bengal, polycoloniality, pre-colonial, extra-colonial, early modern, European travel writing

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Alice Pung's Asian-Australian Place and Truth

La vérité sur la composante asiatique de la culture australienne chez Alice Pung

Salhia Ben-Messahel

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PLAN

Reconfiguring belonging

Alternative views

Navigating between structures

TEXTE

- 1 The construction of an inclusive society has been central to Australian politics from the early days of the egalitarian society during the Federation movement of the late 19th century, and has also been significant in the emergence of the multicultural tenet that became central to Australia as a nation in the 1970s and more significantly in the late 1980s when Australia was celebrating its 200 years as an independent nation in the Asia-Pacific region. Multiculturalism as an ideal for an inclusive society nonetheless questions the meaning of the term “nation” and seems to sustain the nature of the country as a former settler-colony and a post-colonial place—a place that emerged from the conception of landscape as both a recipient of utopia and dystopia; a place alternately perceived as an inferno or empty space and as the Elysium and land of plenty. Thus, the myth of the destiny of the White man in the antipodes has been a recurrent issue in literary accounts dealing with the construction and evolution of the nation, along with the Indigenous presence and the tragic consequences of colonialism, and while the Asian presence appears in early representations of Australia, it has often been in negative terms, constricting Asian migrants to their

Otherness and them belonging to their country of birth or ancestry. In the early days of Federation, Asian migrants, contrary to the British and Irish convicts and settlers, were relegated to the fringes and common representations of them were stereotypical and racist, depicting them as cunning oriental subjects, proponents of communist discourse at a time when Anglo-Australians were becoming conscious about their isolation from Britain, which they thought heightened their vulnerability owing to their regional proximity to Asian countries. Such proximity and vulnerability still recur in political discourse. Even if Australian attempts to engage with Asia to construct an Asian future have occurred, especially from the late 1980s onward, the binary opposition “Western/Asian” seems to prevent Australia from being part of Asia. Moreover, while fiction and the arts often sought to bridge the gap between Anglo-Australians and Indigenous Australians they seem to have failed to incorporate the Asian heritage in the definition of “nation” and in the sense of belonging to place, and literary discourses may suggest that the binary “them/us” still overshadows the idea of an inclusive and multicultural society. In an essay published on the eve of the 2002 Commonwealth Games, novelist and critic Richard Flanagan insists on how his generation, like younger generations of Australians, do not relate to Britain as “back home” but rather as a distant foreign country. He refers to Australia as a “polyglot country”, as a “vast and troubled country” (Flanagan 2002). I wish to take on the word “troubled” to examine the many ways in which Australian literary discourse has attempted to redefine the understanding of “Otherness” as “Oneness” and how the “trouble” which Flanagan refers to may be a signifier indicating the shifting perspective and blurring effect that occurs when Australians attempt to define what “being Australian” means, what Australian culture is. I shall address such shifting perspectives through the issue of inclusion in Alice Pung’s three works: *Unpolished Gem* (2006), *Her Father’s Daughter* (2009), and *Laurinda* (2014). I shall also refer to *Growing Up Asian* (2008), a collection of stories by Asian-Australian artists and writers born in or outside of Australia and who belong to different generations.

- 2 Pung’s writing retraces family history and explores the ways in which integration and assimilation of cultural others took place in Australia.

Basing herself on her own experience as the child of Chinese migrants born in Cambodia, who fled the Khmer regime and as an Australian-born who had to find ways of fitting into the Anglo-Australian mainstream, Pung delivers stories that both inscribe in autobiographic and fictional writing. Focusing on the main characters in each publication, be it Alice Pung herself in *Unpolished Gem* or *Her Father's Daughter* or Lucy Lam, the main character in *Laurinda*, I shall explore the configurations of home, the many ways in which home is imagined to such an extent that it designs a space for affective geographies. I shall in fact argue that issues such as “Home” and “Being in place” are never stable since they are prone to the multiple angles through which one's gaze operates and since individuals are able to navigate between social and cultural structures, temporary spaces for being in place and out of place, in an alter moment and space that surfaces from “lenticular ontologies”, to borrow from Ghassan Hage's own words, from a space that allows individuals to inhabit realities that are continuously flickering and changing before their very eyes.

- 3 I will rely on Hage's ideas and his exploration of multiculturalism and migrancy vis à vis an Anglo-Australian mainstream especially in his critical book *The Diasporic Condition* (2021). Hage argues that those who have a social and affective connection to various geographic locations, immigrants for instance, are commonly depicted as individuals who not only have a problem with the “nation” but are also torn between various places. His anthropological and social approach deconstructs such discourse and suggests that individuals can dwell in various places at the same time so that place/home no longer signifies one space but many. Hage's perception of otherness and his critical approach operate in Pung's examination of migrancy and the place of Asia within the history of settler Australia. Since she started writing Pung has always sought to design an alternative space whereby the migrant other and their Australian-born descendants could be given a voice and thus subvert the political discourse on Asia as well as ensure a proper incorporation of migrants from Asia in the national narrative. In the introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (2008), an anthology gathering stories, essays, poetry, comic art and interviews by Asian-Australian artists, Pung refers to the distorted vision settler Australia may have about

Asian-Australians and expresses her wish for the anthology to contribute to discussions about identity, place and perspective (4). This anthology, like all the other works by Pung, seek to deconstruct prejudices about non-settler Australians and restore the truth about migrancy and the place of Asia within Australia.

Reconfiguring belonging

- 4 In her autobiographic account, *Unpolished Gem*, Alice Pung insists on the first line that “This story does not begin on a boat”, placing herself as the teller of a tale that does not inscribe in ethnic story-telling or migrant writing by shifting the angle from an outside position to a position from within, which subverts the Eurocentric perception of non-European migrants and their descendants.
- 5 In the introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (2008), an anthology that “reveals that there is more than one voice within any given culture” (2), Pung states that “Asian-Australians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders” (1) and explains that the stories by authors with an Asian heritage and from different generations “show us not only what it is like to grow in Australia, but also what it means to be Asian-Australian” (4).
- 6 Pung’s assessments reflect her own stance as a writer since her stories aim at examining the issue of ethnicity and migration from an inside perspective, from the family home in Australia, in order to interrogate the inclusion of Asian migration and culture within the history of the multicultural nation. In her books, Pung focuses on the family microcosm within the national macrocosm and in so doing restores the meaning of Asia to Australia, interrogates the consequences of migration, refugee discourse, diasporic conditions and the way in which ancestry, rather than colliding with the culture of the birth country, interacts with it and allows the subject to inhabit a space and at the same time claim another space (Hage 2021, 78).
- 7 Thus, by pluralizing her own conception of inhabitation, Pung delves into the cultural and contiguous spaces that occur between “those homes related to ancestry” and “home, the birth country”, depicting different members and generations of the same family, in the space of domesticity and the nation. Home naturally surfaces as a

transcultural space that metaphorizes the characters' own subjectivity and positioning within Australian society. "Homing" (Hage 2018, 3), the verbal form of home, may sum up Pung's writing technique as it refers to the process of aiming for or moving directly towards something. Such a process appears in her work whenever the main narrator, Pung herself in *Unpolished Gem* or *Her Father's Daughter* and the character of Lucy in *Laurinda*, is eager to explore and expose the many ways in which belonging may manifest itself at a social level and, by extension, at a political level through the issue of multiculturalism regularly. In *Unpolished Gem*, the positioning of Alice within her own family highlights her alterity both at home and outside of home and such alterity, which forms another space for discourse, is also signified through the other places that the rest of the family occupy at home. For instance, when Alice refers to her family tree, one is aware that it does encompass a binary between the Pungs on the father's side and the Chias on the mother's side. Pung's Chia grandparents are depicted as outsiders to the family: "Outside Grandfather", "Outside Grandmother", both at the beginning of the first chapter and throughout the whole narrative (56–57). Rather than being a mere microcosm, the family unit appears to be a *field* as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, that naturally entices the characters to explore other fields and construct their own subjectivity. In *Laurinda*, for instance, as Lucy is trying to put her baby brother (called the Lamb) on a carousel, she is confronted to racist comments by an "overweight mother" who claims, using a faulty grammar, "we was here first" (180). The woman's attitude, rather than negating Lucy's place in the mainstream, reinforces her own sense of belonging and place in Australia, especially as she realises how much she cares about her school and selective environment:

And it was then that I understood my attachment to Laurinda. I was wearing my uniform, and this woman—who lived on welfare and fast food—would never be part of that world. She thought that people like us were going to steal her kid's job in the future, just as she thought we were trying to steal a free ride now. (180)

- 8 Lucy's realization again brings to mind Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the field whereby the field (academic here but which can be political,

religious, medical and so on) is an autonomous space within a larger space (usually a social microcosm within the social macrocosm), which for Lucy encapsulates the pursuit of a specific goal, which is integration under the tenet “multiculturalism”. The school uniform is a signifier for Lucy’s position in society and the future. Laurinda thus seems to offer a space outside of home throughout which the character is able to gain agency, even though such agency may be in fact restricted by other fields embodied by the Cabinet, a sorority run by a group of Anglo-Australian and middle-class girls, as well as other fields like the social microcosm embodied by girls’ mothers, or the school administration. All these fields or places in which Lucy operates tend to enclose her rather than liberate her or provide her with a sense of belonging. School, just like home, tends to prevent Lucy from being entirely part of multicultural Australia and finding her place in the multicultural fabric of the nation. The nation, like home, are places that encapsulate both the realities of multiculturalism and the distorted visions one—settler Australians and Asian Australians—may have on otherness. Thus, the world of home is restricted to the family and the Asian migrant heritage, it is as problematic as school and highlights the difficulty for Lucy to find a place for being. Home is both the place of belonging and unbelonging, the place where truth and untruth about the multicultural nation unravel.

- 9 In his exploration of the concept of “Home”, Ghassan Hage argues that a “home” is not the same as a “house” and that the issue of “home” is political considering that one’s perception of home may vary according to a specific context. Hage insists on the idea that “occupying a space does not necessarily mean that you develop a homely attachment to it” (Hage 2018). Hage’s arguments are convincing and resonate with Alice Pung’s depictions of place and perceptions of home. Speaking at the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2017, in the “Second Generations Narrative session”, Pung said:

Until you move out of home, you don’t realise how anxious your home life is, [...] You don’t realise how unreasonable some of your parents’ anxieties are, or the way they deal with certain things, you don’t realise it’s probably not the healthiest way to [live] [...] they used to have—they still do have—these irrational reactions to

ordinary stresses of life, which kind of made me really stressed as well, living at home. (Pung 2017)

- 10 Pung's observations are relevant of the discovery she made as soon as she left the space of domesticity to integrate the mainstream for educational purposes. Her comments encapsulate the idea that by sustaining the culture of the country of origin, the family home surfaces as a space of enclosure for Alice, who can eventually reach out to her own subjectivity as an Australian when she moves out from such home to create her own home:

The four walls of her flat became her sanctuary, and the suburb of Parksville her private retreat. [...] It was then that she realised the relativity of tasks: that reading could mean as much as toiling, or that sitting in the sun looking at her hands would not result in a boot-stamp of guilt in her face. Perhaps she was freeing herself from the moiling mentality of her parents, free now to be a let-us-all-rejoice Australian. (*Her Father's Daughter*, 59)

In this passage, the lexical field is reminiscent of Alice's perception that she is making a world for herself—that she is in fact territorializing, “sanctuarizing”, her own self and cultural identity in a new place—and it also subtly underscores Alice's Australianness in that she experiences “basking in the sun” freely and enjoying the outside environment. Yet, while Alice inhabits a new space, she remembers the other (familial) space and establishes comparisons that in fact initiate a movement towards an alter space of being, a space that surpasses the binary “them/us” since it pluralizes the conception of inhabitation.

- 11 Pung's stories raise the anxiety and the trauma of being a refugee in multicultural Australia, of fitting-in. Such anxiety brings to mind Frantz Fanon's study of the relation between power and visibility, between invisibility and powerlessness, and the idea that “the relegation [of the colonized] to powerlessness is met with modes of resistance, including strategies where the colonized may access spaces of visibility and invisibility to avoid discipline and surveillance and to further their own goals or political agenda” (Villegas 2010, 147). Although migrants and refugees have not been colonized, unlike Indigenous Australians, similar processes of control extend to them

being non-English background individuals. In fact, they appear to be discarded from the Anglo-centric mainstream as well as the multicultural space. In *Laurinda*, Lucy's parents are positioned outside the multicultural space, her mother working from home, sewing clothes in the garage and putting both her and her young son's health at risk. When a nurse is dispatched to check on the home environment, her perception of Alice's mother encapsulates stereotypical images of the sweat-shop and Asian others (274-276). The nurse's taunting attitude, just like the attitude of Lucy's friends from school or that of a student's mother, all of them suggest that those seen as ethnic others are labelled under the category "Asian" regardless of the many specificities—cultural, regional and national—that such a qualifier actually encompasses. Some remarks are either racist or rely on an exotic approach, which is racialist:

"Well, would you look at those dexterous Asian fingers. So fast!"

"Yes, Asians do seem to have more nimble fingers", said Mrs Leslie. "When I was in Suzhou"—she pronounced it Shoo-zhoo, trying to make it more exotic, I suppose—"I visited a silk factory, and they were girls around Lucy's age, all with small and delicate hands, embroidering silks. The owner told me that it was a four-thousand-year-old tradition, that sort of handicraft."

"How delightful!" exclaimed Mrs White. "We've never been to China."

"You know which other people have nimble fingers?" asked Chelsea. "South Americans."

"Oh?" Mrs Leslie loved stories about different cultures.

"Yeah, when we went to Venezuela two years ago, they stole my camera! Remember that, Mum? Those filthy, monobrowed pickpockets..." (167)

- 12 In this passage, one senses the "ethnic caging" of those deemed non-white and the ideas raised by Ghassan Hage in *White Nation* considering that "the way the voice of the 'ethnic other' is made passive not only by those who want to eradicate it, but also by those

who are happy to welcome it under some conditions they feel entitled to set is one of the main features of these ritualistic ‘immigration debates’ that White Australians enjoy having so much” (Hage 1998, 17). The various experiences that Lucy has within her school environment and her encounters with White Australians show that the latter, racists or multiculturalists, do share the idea that they are masters of the national space and can thus decide who can fit in or not in that space. Invited to give a speech at the school graduation ceremony, Lucy refers to her personal history and exposes the hypocrisy of multiculturalism and egalitarianism in a humoristic manner: “We came to Australia on a boat from Vietnam when I was two. We are Teochew Chinese. I come from Stanley, one of the most disadvantaged suburbs in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics” (327–328). Lucy’s enrolment in Laurinda, one of the elite private catholic schools, owes to her gaining a scholarship but is performed under the guise of multiculturalism and egalitarianism, two of Australia’s most cherished tenets which she is often indirectly reminded about by teachers (222–223). Yet, it is precisely by integrating the so-called elite and their rules that Lucy is confronted with the hypocrisy of white Australia and the cultural manipulation she is subjected to (263). This is all the more dramatic since in an earlier passage, the reference to a real political event, Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech in the Australian Parliament, establishes a parallel between the racist comments against Asians and multiculturalism and Lucy’s own experience at school: “‘They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and don’t assimilate,’ she had declared, and I heard an echo of what was happening to me at Laurinda. I was regressing back to my ghetto of one and not assimilating” (253).

Alternative views

- 13 Issues of migration, Asianness and multiculturalism, in Pung’s whole work, draw on Homi Bhabha’s theorization of the “unhomely” understood not as a state of lacking home, or the opposite of having a home, but rather as the recognition that the frontier between the world and the home is breaking down. As Bhabha puts it, in “displacement the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of

each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 1994, 13). In *Unpolished Gem*, Alice is expressing her desire as a teenager to experience what others do: having a boyfriend, going to the movies with friends and “showing off” to her friends. She is very much aware of the complexity of navigating between two cultures and of her place in the mainstream:

Australian democracy seemed to be available to all by the mere shedding of your clothes. Perhaps clothes did not have to be discarded, because in broad daylight we would see the schoolgirls and boys in their school uniforms, full blazers and ties and kilts and long socks, lying atop each other in the park. There was no other place to go [...] Parents did not get it. Life was not to be spent at the mercy of sunken-faced migrants, bringing from the old country a million scruples that made no sense. Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free, not held tight in the clutches of the village gossip or the narrow-eyed matchmaker. (*Unpolished Gem*, 101)

- 14 One could argue here that the character’s perception of her own alterity and her idea of home and the family rely on Paul Gilroy’s idea of the “geometry of colonial power”, which is “notable for the stress it placed on recognition and interdependency and the way it pushed cultural questions to the fore: each racial and ethnic type turns out to have its own space where it is at home and can be itself” (Gilroy 2005, 51). Both Alice in *Her Father’s Daughter* and the character of Lucy in *Laurinda* seem to be caught in the geometry of colonial power, which still operates in postcolonial Australia and that tends to discard otherness under the guise of cultural diversity and the egalitarian society. The acceptance letter that Lucy receives from Laurinda is a fine example of the instrumentalization of otherness for academic but also social and political purposes:

Dear Lucy,
As we approach the new century, we must equip our students to become leaders in myriad far-reaching social, economic and cultural fields. Laurinda is proud to introduce and embrace experiences of diversity in our strong tradition.
It is with great pleasure that I write to inform you that you have been awarded the inaugural Laurinda Equal Access scholarship. (17)

The letter shows that the school's diversity is based on economic success and political purposes rather than on issues of social inclusion. Lucy's experience shows that she is thus caught in an intermediate space between school and home, and in a permanent state of comparative existence.

- 15 In Pung's writings, the main character, be it Alice or Lucy, "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" (Bhabha 1994, 13). This idea in fact surfaces during an interview when the novelist mentions the racist taunts she was subjected to and how, in fact, home and society are both located in "an unhallowed place":

But in this scatological suburb [Baybrook], I was indeed often bored shitless. Imagine this—you go outside and hoons in cobbled-together Holdens wind down their windows and tell you to Go Back Home, Chinks. So you walk home and inside, it's supposed to be like home. But it's not a home you know. (Pung 2020)

- 16 The use of home as a common signifier for either belonging, identity, inclusion or exclusion emerges through the issue of alterity so that postcolonial and multicultural Australia is being both subverted and reconfigured. Subversion often stems from the perception of the migrant characters and the representation they respectively wish to display to assert both a sense of un-belonging (maintaining the culture of the home-country) and belonging (adopting the culture of the host-country). Pung provides a fine example of this when interviewed by Nic Brasch and discussing her own parents' attitude vis à vis their relatives in their home-country and their own new life in Australia. The example she provides interestingly draws on the medium of photography and the visual message, and how they participate in the construction of another story, of an alter space of discourse, which in Nicolas Bourriaud's sense "designates a different relationship with time: no longer the aftermath of a historical moment, but the infinite extension of the kaleidoscopic play of temporal loops in the service of a history as a spiral which advances while turning back upon itself" (Bourriaud, 2009, 186):

Alice: 'We've made it. We're living this Australian dream'. And they'd send these photographs overseas to other relatives who'd survived,

and they'd say, 'Look. Look at us. We've made it'. And they were so proud of these second-hand clothes. But when they tell the story, if you sat them down, they'd say, 'We're so ashamed of our second-hand clothes. We're so poor'. And the photographs tell a different story.

Nic: Tell a very different story.

Alice: They tell the reality of the moment. And so that's why I didn't interview them, because it was a different truth.

Nic: Sure. Absolutely.

Alice: It was the truth of the moment. And my dad knew it wasn't a lie, because I had the photographic evidence of their ecstasy wearing these 1970s flared pants. [...] (Pung 2017b)

Alice Pung's idea that the photographs tell a different story, the reality of the moment and the truth of the moment, suggests that the photograph is a trope that directs one's gaze to a reality and can redirect it simultaneously to another reality, both narrative spaces playing against one another and creating a mnemohistory—a space where memory and history interact—aimed at restoring part of the refugee's truth. Thus, the photograph retraces both the Australian Dream and the social reality that Alice's parents were confronted to. It conveys a visual message about the incorporation of Asian migrants in Australia and displays different perspectives considering the angle one takes to look at it and interpret it—the photograph is a signifier of what Hage terms as “the lenticular condition” (Hage 2020). Hage's concept refers to the way in which individuals can perceive different things operating on the same surface depending on the angle they are looking at them.

- 17 In *Her Father's Daughter*, as soon as she has settled away from home and in her own space, the character of Alice is confronted to her own reality and Australian cultural identity by looking at the outside world. Alice refers to what she sees by insisting that they “were more interesting things to watch, like the way her own thoughts developed like Polaroids and the way some of the images would not show up as

anything but a grey blur, while others were so vivid that it hurt to look at them with the naked eye” (59). The photographic process acts as thought and memory, providing details with great accuracy; it encompasses Alice’s ability at seeing the present and confronting her new reality, an alter space where “No one was watching her and she was invisible” (59)—such invisibility is ironic considering that it expresses her being part of the national space rather than being the “invisible cultural other”. The perception that Alice has shows that integrating a different place from home allows her to become part of the mainstream and thus to subvert nationalistic discourses of the multicultural (and white) nation.

- 18 Ghassan Hage’s analysis of the nature of diasporic existence as taking a lenticular form is useful when reading Pung’s work since the concept of home and being in her stories operates through the lenticular, the image that appears differently depending on the angle from which one looks at it. Hage argues that “in contrast to the single image/reality captured in the common photograph the lenticular surface contains a multiplicity of images/realities that reveal themselves respectively and are continuously flickering and speaking to each other” (Hage, 2019). In *Laurinda*, Lucy is thus compelled to navigate between various spaces: home, the classroom, the Cabinet, School and the multicultural suburb where she lives. On realizing that “At this school, the worst thing was trying to rise above the limits set for you by the minds of others” (238), Lucy decides to break with the Cabinet (262), the group of Anglo-Australian girls for whom bullying those they think are socially or culturally inferior to them is normal practice. Such break, which implies staying home and calling sick, raises her awareness that in her attempt to mimic her schoolmates and subscribing to the discourse of the Cabinet, she has invariably donned the white mask of multicultural Australia; and cannot see beyond the white sorority—the centre—as well as the Anglo-Australian mainstream. Such realization, rather than ethnically caging Lucy will in fact make her see that in wishing to join the Cabinet and becoming “an upstanding Laurinda citizen” (23), she has lost sight of reality:

I did not go to school the next day.
I woke up and decided I didn’t even want to get out of bed. My peripheral vision had shrunk, like the picture on our old television.

When you switched off the black and white box, the image grew darker around the edges, and was then sucked into a little black hole at the centre. I spent some time examining my own hands and fingernails, intrigued that such things belonged to me. Pink and brown and many-pronged, they looked like creatures of the sea, like tentacles without a head or body attached. (262)

In this passage Lucy's perception of her body as being detached from her mind, of her hands and fingernails looking like "tentacles without a head or body attached", encompasses her alienation from her own self and makes her realize that she was caught into one form of reality, "whiteness", which was synonymous with enclosure. The desire to fit into Anglo-Australian culture is also raised in *Unpolished Gem*, especially when Alice is pondering on her relationship with her non-Asian boyfriend and asserts: "I realised that no matter how tired or how hot, I could never be so laid-back, even if no one else was around. Would I ever see the sky as completely and as clearly as he could? I was always on guard, always ready to leap to my feet and deny everything." (234)

- 19 The ability of seeing recurs and operates as the condition for being and being part of mainstream culture. Alice's perceptions are fraught with anxiety and stress to such an extent that they situate her in a "Western modernity" with "mono existence" (Hage 2019). In *Her Father's Daughter*, Alice refers to the disappearance of her peripheral vision as she is alone in China—"a foreign country" (37)—and does not relate to the place. Such disappearance expresses her own uncertainty about her own understanding of the family story, even more so as her first book is being released:

She had written about the self-centred myopia of being young, and the paranoias, real and imagined, of her outworking relatives. Months before the book's release, she feared the response of these people, who did not entirely understand the law of the country, who regarded most outsiders with suspicion, who would not get the humour. Yet her aunties and uncles, relatives and family friends, had come to her book launch to support her. (89)

- 20 Alice Pung's exposure of her Asian heritage and her family story subverts nationalistic responses to multiculturalism by highlighting

the monolithic perception of culture both from her family's perspective and from the perspective of Anglo-Australians. Issues of race and the incorporation of non-European descent migrants, more specifically from Asian countries, affect the multicultural mainstream and expose the flaws of multiculturalism. In *Her Father's Daughter*, when Alice is away from the family home and from Australia, retracing her father's story in Beijing, she realises that her perception is monolithic: "Being alone in a foreign country like this made her peripheral vision disappear. All thought and feeling was condensed to simple words" (37).

- 21 However, by delving into family history not only is Alice asserting her own subjectivity and agency—an alter space of enunciation—but she is also replacing the history of Asian migration at the very heart of Australian society. The characters of Alice and Lucy thus seem to navigate between social and cultural spaces by means of re-directing their gaze onto a lenticular surface that "contains a multiplicity of images/realities that reveal themselves perspectively and are continuously flickering and speaking to each other" (Hage 2019). "Perspectively" referring to the way that objects appear smaller when they are further away and to the fact that such a process makes parallel lines appear to meet each other at a point in the distance.

Navigating between structures

- 22 Pung's re-incorporation of the history of Asian migrancy to Australia designs an alter space, which extends beyond the ideal of "multiculturalism" and calls for a reconfiguration of the very definition of "Asian-Australian". Her writing and involvement resonate with other Australian voices calling for the incorporation of Asian migrant stories in the history of the federated nation. A writer, critic and former Australian cultural attaché in Beijing, Nicholas Jose made a strong and interesting statement about the place of Asia in the Australian space when he made a public statement in Chinatown, Sydney, in 2011:

The Chinese-Australian writer Sang Ye calls Chinatown 'a flowerpot simply placed here,' where no one puts down roots, because 'the soil in the flowerpot is segregated from the soil here' (*The Finish Line*,

1995). But that's only part of the story. That flowerpot has been in Australia as long as any European garden. (Jose 2011)

Jose's use of the botanical imagery of plants and roots metaphorically highlights the negation of the Asian presence in Australia as early as the British settlement of the country in the late 18th century and calls for a reconfiguration of national history. It resonates with Edouard Glissant's relational poetics whereby Chinese migration is part of the formation of the nation, the "flowerpot" being a receptacle and an actor in the process of the relation between China and Australia (Ben-Messahel 2017), "a sort of consciousness of consciousness", turning each individual "into a disconcerted actor in the poetics of relation" (Glissant 1997).

- 23 Nicholas Jose's perception not only raises the place of Asia in Australia and the issue of multiculturalism but also implies that within the space of the settler and multicultural nation, one can perceive the formation of alter spaces for discourse, spaces that speak to and subvert the main space known as "multicultural Australia". Jose clearly directs the eye of the public towards the signs and traces visible in the urban geography that deconstruct standard historical accounts of the nation. His observations refer to the journey-forms of generations of migrants from Asia, to the visible and invisible components of their experience. Pung's biographical and fictional stories also restore the journey-forms of migrants and their descendants to show "what it means to be Asian-Australian" (Pung 2008, 4). In the introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, a collection of stories by renowned Australian authors and artists with Asian background, Pung refers to the Asian migration to Australia and their marginal, if not minimal, place in the history of the settlement of Australia. In fact, the original introduction to the volume, which was released in a magazine a year after publication, refers to the arrival of the British First Fleet in 1788, to the drama of colonization for Indigenous Australians who had been decimated and "eclipsed by the shadow of the great ships" and to a history that "has not been too kind to [our] ethnic entrepreneurs and Polynesian coolies, who arrived in Australia less than a century after Cook" (Pung 2009). In this original introduction, Pung addresses the

importance laid on Australia's egalitarianism and the lack of incorporation of Asian settler history in schoolbooks:

So what was it like for a yellow or brown person growing up in a country where 'Advance Australia Fair' was taken literally to mean 'advance, pale-faced patriots,' while those of a different colour should be effaced? In secondary school, the only representations I saw of our early Asian settlers—people with faces like my relatives—were in illustrations as pigtailed caricatured demons or hanging dead from trees in the goldfields; even though the early pre-mining-boom Chinese were known to be carpenters, merchants and free-settler farmers. (Pung 2009)

- 24 Pung also shows how such stereotyped representations have prevailed in discourses of the nation and the egalitarian society since the beginning of the European settlement of Australia and the extent to which racial representations still permeated political discourse on citizenship in 2007:

The Australian government provides a simple explanation of this skewed representation for curious new arrivals and inquisitive schoolchildren: 'The colonists, like most people then, believed that there were differences between races, and that the Chinese were inferior, but they also did not want a society with deep divisions or where foreign outcasts worked for low wages and lowered the dignity of all labour.' This is the reassuring explanation provided in the 2007 guide to the Australian Citizenship Test for the racial violence that erupted during the riots in Lambing Flats and other areas in the late 1850s and the 1860s. (Pung 2009)

- 25 Such a watered-down view most certainly sustains the myth of the destiny of the white man in the Antipodes so prevalent since the beginning of colonization and erases the extreme violence imposed upon those deemed non-white. Besides, Pung's approach, which seeks to fill in the gaps within the history of the nation and to highlight the flaws of multiculturalism, has often been labelled under "migrant writing" or "second generation narratives". Such perception misplaces the narrative genre and invariably places the author in the "ethnic caging", on the margin of the space of Australian writing. Such ethnic labelling is even significant when Pung is compelled to

explain that *Unpolished Gem* is “a story about coming of age, a Bildungsroman; rather than a story about refugees in Australia” (D’Arcangelo 2014). *Unpolished Gem*, *Her Father’s Daughter* and *Laurinda* all focus on the discovery of the main character’s subjectivity as an Australian with Asian background and cannot be labelled “ethnic” and thus cannot undergo territorial assignment according to ancestry. In *Laurinda*, Lucy, just like her schoolmate Harshan born in Australia of Sri Lankan parents (63), is constantly defined through a locus of enunciation that negates her Australianness. Questions about where she comes from occur naturally:

“Guys, this is Lucy”, explained Chelsea. “She’s new at Laurinda.”

“Oh, really? Are you on exchange?” asked Raymond.

“No, I’m local.”

“What part of Asia are you from?” he asked, as if he had not heard me.

[...] I must have stayed silent for a moment too long, because Chelsea replied, “She’s Chinese.” Then she said to me, “You know, Aaron went on the China trip last year.”

I turned towards Aaron. “How was it?” I asked. “Were the people really friendly despite being so poor? And was the food really great?”

He didn’t detect my sarcasm. “Of yes. It’s a remarkable culture.”
What fifteen-year-old uses the word *remarkable*? (207)

- 26 Pung’s work responds to such ethnic labelling through the use of irony, displacing the distorted and monolithic cultural vision on non-white others and designing an altermodern space (Bourriaud 2009) that exceeds the multicultural and postcolonial discourses, provides a discursive space for the character’s critical response to Australia’s nationalistic approach. Such a discursive space operates through a “lenticular process involving oscillation

between a multiplicity of realities” (Hage 2019) and provides agency. In *Laurinda*, Lucy manages to negotiate such an oscillation, being able to find her own voice and sense of belonging when giving out her full name “My name is Lucy Linh Lam” (332) and thus realizing that she is “piecing together all the separate parts” (336) of herself and her life.

- 27 Pung’s writing aims at “making history by unmaking preceding realities and significations, constituting hundreds of points of emergence and creativity, unexpected conjunction or improbable continuums. It doubles history with a sense of continual evolution” (Deleuze 1988).
- 28 By showing that there is more than one voice within any given culture and exploring a mode of simultaneously inhabiting the multiple cultural realities that make Australia, Pung, whose story did not begin on a boat, manages to create an alter space that subverts the space of multiculturalism, the “reservoir for exotic differences” (Bourriaud 2009, 164), the simulacrum for postcolonial Australia. Through her writings, Pung shows that multiculturalism and the settler-nation are both political ideologies meant to erase the culture of the other. Her stories reverse the perspective by creating other spaces of discourse—places for being—that reflect the true nature of Australia.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

This paper interrogates the perception of otherness and the many ways in which various means of belonging and displacements occur in Alice Pung's writing: *Growing Up Asian* (2008), *Her Father's Daughter* (2011) and *Unpolished Gem* (2014).

Pung's autobiographical account and fictional stories show that the experience of migrancy occurs through the process of lenticular analytics described by Ghassan Hage in his critical book *Lenticular Ontologies* (2021).

Borrowing Hage's concept of the "lenticular condition", this paper will show that multiculturalism has failed to find an alternative to universalism considering that it *de facto* re-creates ethnic forms of enrooting, of territorializing ethnicity. Pung's stories thus explore issues of Otherness through a discourse that seeks to re-incorporate Asia within Australia so that the cultural Other is able to navigate various spaces not by simply breaking the boundaries between a "Them and Us" or a "Here and There" but rather by negotiating between such "Here and There" and thus reconfiguring issues of nation and place from another perspective.

Français

Les trois ouvrages de Alice Pung, *Growing Up Asian* (2008), *Her Father's Daughter* (2011) and *Unpolished Gem* (2014), interrogent la perception de l'altérité et les différentes formes d'appartenance au lieu et à la nation multiculturelle. Les récits, qu'ils soient autobiographiques ou fictifs, montrent que l'expérience de la migration et l'appropriation du lieu opèrent à travers un « effet lenticulaire » tel qu'identifié par Ghassan Hage dans son ouvrage critique *Lenticular Ontologies* (2021). L'effet lenticulaire qui transparait dans les trois récits implique que la perspective sur toute forme d'altérité varie en fonction des lieux et des expériences, que le multiculturalisme australien n'est pas espace unificateur mais le lieu du différent, qu'il reproduit des formes d'enracinement ethnique et territorialise, de fait, l'ethnicité. L'écriture de Pung génère une forme de discours et un espace qui permettent à tout individu, perçu comme étant « autre », de se déplacer à travers plusieurs espaces, à travers les interstices perceptibles dans l'espace « ici et là », du « nous et les autres ».

INDEX

Mots-clés

faire lieu, lieu, condition lenticulaire, radican, Australie, altermodernité

Keywords

homing, place, lenticular ontologies, radican aesthetics, Australia, altermodernity

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No Place for Truth? Credibility and Dis/belief in Asylum Storytelling

La vérité a-t-elle une place ? Crédibilité et culture du doute dans les récits des réfugiés

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Droits d'auteur

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PLAN

Credibility criteria

Linearity

Theme

Tone

Detail

Originality

Narrative capital

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Conclusion: a place for truth in fiction

TEXTE

- 1 Across the nation-states of the global north, asylum interviews constitute an essential and determining stage in the processing of an asylum claim (see Miller III). During these interviews, asylum seekers are required to recount the story of their escape from their country of origin to the representative(s) of the nation present. The nation-state will then either accept these stories, resulting in the granting of refugee status, or reject them, resulting in appeal or expulsion. Asylum interviews are therefore moments of coerced storytelling in which “refugees must narrate themselves into existence” (Wooley 18). By stereotyping asylum seekers within a “bogus asylum seeker” / “genuine refugee” binary (Kushner 257), contemporary media and political discourses often imply that truth within asylum storytelling is the determining factor in shaping the outcome of asylum interviews. Such an implication stands in stark opposition to the

findings of studies on the asylum adjudication processes in the US, UK, France and Ireland (Conlan et al., Anderson et al., Bögner et al., Reid, Shuman and Bohmer, Holland) which indicate that asylum seekers' stories are instead subject to a series of hostile and elusive credibility criteria within a systemic "culture of disbelief" (Anderson et al.).

- 2 This article examines how the complex relationship between credibility and truth in asylum adjudication contexts is represented and problematised within contemporary works of refugee literature. An altogether different form of asylum storytelling than that of asylum interviews, refugee literature has been defined as "a body of texts *by* and *about* refugees which represent migration as part of a shared world" (Stan 795, emphasis added), where the term "refugees" encompasses all those subject to forced displacement. In this sense, the term transcends the narrow confines of its internationally-recognised legal definition¹ and is instead in accordance with the framework of the emerging interdisciplinary field of Critical Refugee Studies (Critical Refugee Studies Collective, "Who we are"), within which:

Refugees are human beings forcibly displaced within or outside of their land of origin as a result of persecution, conflict, war, conquest, settler/colonialism, militarism, occupation, empire, and environmental and climate-related disasters, regardless of their legal status. Refugees can be self-identified and are often unrecognized within the limited definitions proffered by international and state laws, hence may be subsumed, in those instances, under other labels such as "undocumented". (Critical Refugee Studies Collective)

In contrast to the coercive context and the "limited definitions" within which the stories of asylum adjudication procedures are produced, works of refugee literature constitute creative expressions of refugee agency, and renew the epistemologies through which asylum is addressed.

- 3 In particular, I will seek to examine here what select works of refugee literature have to say about the *place* given to truth within asylum adjudication, where truth is understood as denoting the multifaceted complexity of lived experience. In this sense, truth cannot be

singular. To borrow Adrienne Rich's phrasing in a 1975 essay, "there is no 'the truth', 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity" (187). Indeed, forced displacement is often caused by intersecting geo-political factors that have erupted into chaotic violence. The latter is experienced traumatically on an individual level, so that such factors can be difficult to understand and articulate. Making sense of the truth involves an informed and attentive focus on its multitude of interconnected threads, as Rich observes: "the pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet" (187).

- 4 Meanwhile, by interrogating what place is *given* to truth in these contexts, I evoke implications of place as a "position in some scale, order or series"; place as a "standing", "merit" or "rank", encapsulated in the phrase "*to know one's place*" ("Place" 938–939). Exploring the kind of place afforded to truth entails examining the extent to which the complexity of truth is acknowledged as important and *prioritised* in representations of asylum adjudication. Indeed, the use of the word "place" is also intended to invite a conception of the asylum interview as a place, not tethered to any particular geopolitical boundary but nonetheless attached to a particular experience (of asylum storytelling) within a particular encounter (between nation-state representatives and asylum seeker). Is any truth to be found in the literary representations of such a place?
- 5 I apply these questions to a selection of texts by two refugee writers: Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019) and *Who Gets Believed?* (2023), hybrid works combining autobiography and creative non-fiction with fictional passages, and Melatu Uche Okorie's short story "Under The Awning" (2018). Nayeri's works offer narrative representations of asylum interviews and storytelling that draw from her lived experiences as well as her extensive research and volunteer work in the field of forced migration.² Okorie's story constitutes a forceful parallel to the asylum storytelling process. By means of an embedded narrative structure, "Under The Awning" recounts the experiences of a migrant woman in Ireland who attends a creative writing group and reads aloud her autobiographical story of racialised persecution, only to be met with disbelief and criticism

by the other participants. All three texts offer representations of refugee storytelling in which truth is sidelined or rejected due to oppressive preconceptions and prejudices, operating within the systemic “culture of disbelief” identified by Anderson et al.

Credibility criteria

- 6 Two implications lie behind the rhetorical question that constitutes the title of *Who Gets Believed?* The first is that truth is subordinate to *credibility*, one’s “capacity to be believed or believed in” (“Credibility”). The second, as demonstrated by the unusual passive structure, is that one’s credibility is reliant on external factors beyond one’s control. In her study on the reception of asylum stories in the context of US asylum adjudication procedures, Madeline Holland confirms the reality of these implications within asylum interviews. In particular, she demonstrates that there is a predetermined narrative criteria of credibility applied to asylum stories, that hinders the expression and recognition of truth: “Western literary standards shape our understanding of what a ‘true story’ should sound like; this conflation of literary story-telling and truthful story-telling in the context of asylum proceedings can result in the failure to recognise ‘true’ stories” (86). Holland’s study compellingly outlined three narrative criteria required of asylum application testimony: detail, plausibility and consistency. Studying the social-scientific literature on the asylum adjudication processes in the US, UK, France and Ireland in line with Holland’s approach reveals the importance of the following criteria in asylum narratives: linearity, the theme of persecution, an equilibrium of tone, a victimising form of characterisation, and an attention to detail and originality. These criteria are depicted and problematised in Nayeri and Okorie’s writings as leaving little place for truth to be expressed, let alone recognised.

Linearity

- 7 The aforementioned literature suggests that linearity is one of the most prominent requirements of asylum narratives, in contrast to the supposed discrepancies they might present. Holland quotes Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a reminder of the preference for cause-and-event structures in plots at the origin of Western thought: “of all

plots [...] the episodic are the worst [...] in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (87). In order to abide by this cultural preference, asylum stories should follow a logical, causal and chronological pattern. This pattern should be firmly situated within a Western temporal framework (Schuman and Bohmer 396). In her work calling for postcolonial analyses of the dominance of the Western linear temporal framework in the field of international relations, Katharina Hunfield denounces the way in which "the colonisation of time", which she defines as "a process within which the time of the European colonisers was institutionalised as the Greenwich Mean Time of normativity", created "a discourse of otherness through time that helped to construct the racial and cultural inferiority of non-Europeans as well as the marginalisation and suppression of non-European ways of narrating and relating to time" (101). Such discourse is apparent in the suspicion afforded to asylum seekers who are unable to narrate their stories according to the norms of Western temporality. Presenting the findings of their research on US asylum adjudication, Amy Schuman and Carol Bohmer discuss the difficulties faced by applicants "unfamiliar with the use of calendar dates", citing "one Afghan applicant [who] knew nothing about the Western calendar" and "Malay clients [who] had no concept of time in Western terms" (396). In the Irish context, a report from the Irish Refugee Council found that asylum decision makers are often tempted "to conclude that the account presented to them is simply not plausible according to their knowledge or understanding of events which occur in countries which have [...] very different cultures" (Conlan et al. 3).

- 8 In *Who Gets Believed?*, author Dina Nayeri draws from her lived experience to illustrate how "refugees draw suspicion by fumbling over dates" (119):

When my family landed in Dubai from Iran, the first leg of our asylum journey, we calculated my Western birthday. I was nine years old and my birthday was in *Ordibehesht*, the second month, which roughly equaled May, the fifth month. I scrutinized my mother's calendar and converted the date. But here was a confusion that frustrated us. In the Persian solar calendar, the leap day is added on March 20, just before the equinox. In the Gregorian calendar, it is added on February 29. So, the leap day adjustment happens twenty days later

in Iran than it does in the West. Every leap year, they have a different birthday in the Gregorian calendar. They must translate their birthday from a calendar year of *the year they were born*. If they check this year's calendar, they could be off by a day. (119)

There is a strong undercurrent of irony in Nayeri's description of a nine-year-old girl who is capable of comprehending concepts of cultural difference in a way that her surrounding environment is not. This is underlined by the didactic tone with which Nayeri exposes and explains the problem using simple, logical structures—"but", "In the Persian solar calendar", "In the Gregorian calendar", "So", italicising her key point for further clarity. Indeed, in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, she offers her readers a lesson in interculturality on the topic of Iranian storytelling:

Iranians have no problem with spoilers—the ending isn't the pleasure of a story for them. They don't start in the middle of the action (as Western writers are taught to do) or even at the beginning (where Western logic may take them), they start long before the beginning: 'Let me tell you about modern Iran', they say, because that is how they are trained to begin. And those are the savvy ones; the rest begin with the creation of the universe. But you start philosophising and you've lost your Western listener. (242–243)

In this passage Nayeri assumes the pedagogical role of cultural mediator, translating Iranian storytelling norms for her Western readership. Through the use of clauses inserted in brackets, she repeatedly situates Iranian norms in comparison to Western counterparts, creating a consistent, visual parallel between the two. In so doing, she uses her writing to demonstrate the cultural relativity, inherent to perceptions of truth, that is often overlooked in contexts of asylum adjudication.

- 9 Melatu Uche Okorie's story "Under The Awning" uses a different conceit through which to demonstrate the unjust dominance of Western notions of chronology when applied to asylum storytelling. The story that the protagonist presents to the writing group, narrated in the second person, focuses less on the speaker's flight from Nigeria than on the racially-motivated hostility she has experienced since her arrival in Ireland, although, as we see in the

group's reactions to her story, the same credibility criteria are rigidly applied. The woman's story could be described in Aristotelian terms as "episodic"; she eschews coherent chronology in favour of a series of emotive impressions and memories that conjure her isolation and loneliness in the face of racism. New occurrences in the narrative are presented abruptly, without any temporal indicators for context: "You stood under the awning outside the spar shop" (40); "You got on your bus" (41); "On television a man was talking". The other members of the group do not fail to criticise her lack of linearity, calling for the story to be "rewritten in chronological order" (55), to "observe chronology" (55). Echoing the rejection of asylum claims that do not conform to Western temporal frameworks, her story is not acceptable to them because it does not meet their expectations of narrative temporality, and this narrative gap prevents her from finding a place in the group.

Theme

- 10 Theme is also crucial to the acceptance of asylum stories. More precisely, asylum stories must have at their core the theme of persecution, since the Geneva Convention defines as refugees only those who justify "a well-founded fear of being persecuted" in their country of origin. "To meet the criteria for political asylum", as Schuman and Bohmer write, "applicants need to reframe what they often understand as a personal trauma into an act of political aggression; [...] rape victims, for example, see their rape as a personal attack rather than an example of gender violence" (396). In their experience, "many victims never reach the stage of being able to use a political narrative to describe their personal situation" (397).
- 11 This phenomenon is demonstrated in a passage from *The Ungrateful Refugee* in which Nayeri quotes the oral testimony of Parvis Noshirrani, an Iranian refugee and volunteer cultural mediator in the Netherlands who helps his compatriots in Amsterdam prepare their asylum stories. Noshirrani recounts the failure of a Kurdish refugee and rape victim to recount her rape as an act of persecution:

I once helped a badly raped Kurdish girl. Soldiers came through her village and raped her in the stable beside the horses. She kept weeping, "I wish I could find a pill to forget the past. I wish I didn't

remember.” She was losing her mind. They rejected her claim. Do you know why? They said “You are not an interesting person for the government. It was a random act and you were in the wrong place. You don’t have a credible fear that the soldiers will return for you.” (177)

- 12 Even though its storyteller belonged to an acknowledged persecuted group, the story was rejected because its main theme was that of personal trauma, as evidenced by the repetition of the first-person pronoun and the focus on her own interiority. Contrastingly, Suketu Mehta’s case study on asylum storytelling, published in *The New Yorker*, includes the example of a refugee from the Central African Republic who successively claimed asylum in the United States. Whilst the latter was also claiming asylum on the basis of rape, she was able to recount her story according to the theme of political persecution: “The President of my country was about to be overthrown. My father worked with the previous government. They arrested my father, and tortured everybody at home. [...] People are not allowed to express their opinion if they’re against power” (“The Asylum Seeker”). She then describes the rape in graphic detail, before concluding “[If I return] I might be killed on the road, because I am a member of the opposition.” Her story is clearly framed in political terms, beginning by establishing the context of political turmoil, clearly demonstrating the connection of the events in relation to this context, and concluding by articulating her fears in explicitly political terms. As Mehta muses: “The system demanded a certain kind of narrative if she was to be allowed to stay here, and she furnished it.”
- 13 In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Nayeri reflects upon the importance of selecting the appropriate theme for asylum stories through the plot trajectory of Kaweh, a Kurdish-Iranian asylum seeker in the UK. Nayeri’s imagined rendering of his ultimately successful asylum interview is narrated in explicitly political terms:

I was a member of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran for over three years. I was approached by the Iranian authorities to be a spy and I refused. They gave me money that I accepted and used for my personal needs. I never repaid them. They found me in Turkey. My life is in danger in Iran and also in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey. (208)

Like the young woman of Mehta's case study, Kaweh frames his story within the political context and its consequences, explicitly referencing the nature of his political affiliation and the fact that the state is the source of his persecution. It works, as Kaweh is granted asylum. Nayeri's inclusion of this story is demonstrative of the thematic imperative underlying successful asylum storytelling within asylum adjudication.

Tone

- 14 A further characteristic of storytelling that can prove problematic for asylum seekers is that of tone, and in particular emotivity. Research suggests that for an asylum story to be deemed credible, it must strike an extremely delicate balance in its expression of emotion. On the one hand, a certain amount of emotion is expected: Schumer and Bohman report that recounting the story "too calmly" can "negatively affect the claimant in the B.C.I.S interview", because "the interviewer is less likely to believe the account if it is not accompanied by suitable emotional expression, even though such emotionally flat presentation is characteristic of the posttraumatic disorder suffered by many applicants" (400). On the other hand, they warn of the dangers of telling a story with "too much emotion" (394). This, too, "will have a negative impact in that the interviewer may dismiss the claimant as simply hysterical [...] our legal system values rationality and objectivity in the narratives presented in court" (394). An advanced understanding of the legal and cultural context of the listener is thus essential to striking the elusive equilibrium in tone necessary for meeting this narrative criterion.
- 15 In *Who Gets Believed?*, Dina Nayeri compares the composed emotion expected by asylum adjudicators to the literary preferences of a Western readership:

Western readers are taught that it is always more dignified, deeper, to swallow your drama [...] drama is bad. Big emotions are lowbrow, and to understand events complexly, one must be emotionally unsure. Subtle pain is deeper pain; better to show a trembling hand, though even that is too much. (158)

- 16 In the same work, Nayeri draws from her own life story to illustrate this phenomenon. One of the book's central subplots recounts the story of her mentally ill brother-in-law Josh, whose threats of suicide are regarded with cynicism by narrator-Nayeri. Josh eventually takes his own life, leading the former to grapple with the preconceptions and prejudices that led to her misplaced disbelief. This process is didactic, intended to demonstrate how such biases impact credibility. Prior to Josh's funeral, narrator-Nayeri is "nervous" at witnessing his mother's grief:

How would his mother's agony manifest? I kept imagining myself in her shoes. I would be like my father's cousin in Iran, who, on the day of her husband's funeral, threw herself on the floor. She thrashed her bed, other mourners' chests. She screamed and rejected all sympathy. She wailed and ripped out her hair by fistfulls, demanding that God return him to her. (191)

When her mother-in-law instead demonstrates emotional composure, remaining "gracious and serene", even "consoling friends and neighbours", narrator-Nayeri is impressed: "I sensed a new kind of respect for her taking root"; "*Well done, Flo*" (191–192). There is an undertone of negativity in her description of the Iranian cousin's mourning, that she imagines as her own, through vivid evocations of physical violence—verbs such as "threw", "thrash", "ripped".

In contrast, the adjectives she uses to describe her mother-in-law are decidedly complimentary. Narrator-Nayeri has internalised Western distaste for the overtly emotional mourning practices of Iran, while writer-Nayeri exposes her own biases in the service of demonstrating and problematising culturally-based predispositions to her readers.

- 17 Melatu Uche Okorie's "*Under The Awning*" also demonstrates such biases, through the responses of the creative writing workshop participants to the narrator's account of her protagonist's sadness. The latter is engulfed by her emotion: "you cried for a long time on your bed [...] confused at how alone you felt" (50). Her emotional display fails to move the participants, who brand the scene as "melodramatic" (53), "bleak and negative" (51) and instruct the narrator to "work on the bleak picture" (55). Like the asylum seekers cited in Schumer and Bohnan's study, she has failed to regulate the tone of her writing and her story is criticised accordingly.

- 18 Perhaps the element of the narrator's story that most displeases the workshop participants, however, is her failure to write a character that appeals to their sense of how a victim *should* behave. This too is an important criterion in the evaluation of asylum storytelling: Emily Reid's research into asylum adjudication in France found that asylum seekers were required to "perform their victimhood" if their stories were to succeed. She cites the example of a woman referred to as "Bimpe":

As [Bimpe] was preparing her appeal testimony, she expressed hope in the fact that she was busy reconstructing her life, having found employment and a new community in Nice; however, the *de facto* obligation to embody an "ideal-type" victim meant she was counseled to focus upon the tragedy of her experiences, rather than her continuing strength in survival.

- 19 Schumer and Bohman come to the same conclusion, quoting the advice that US asylum attorney Lea Greenberg repeats to her clients to never talk about their lives in terms other than suffering, "never volunteer anything except maltreatment suffered by you and your family" (394). These findings echo what Vanessa Pupavac describes as "the prevailing cultural image of the refugee" as being "a feminised, traumatised victim" (1). The latter's study into common sympathetic representations of refugees before and after the Cold War charts a movement away from representations of refugees as courageous political dissidents towards figures who are "traumatised, scared and in shock" (1). To elicit sympathy, then, the narrative "I" of asylum stories must be characterised along these lines.
- 20 Okorie's narrator fails to conform to this archetypal characterisation. Her story gets off to the wrong start when the sensory trigger of rainfall prompts fond memories of life in Nigeria: "*you knew that back home, life would not stop over 'this small rain'*"; rather, street sellers would continue selling fragrant foods; there would be a joyous cacophony of "*singing in pidgin English, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba*"; "*there would be corn sellers lined up along your street selling your favourite fresh roast corn*" (40–41, italics in original). Nostalgia for home is incompatible with the figure of a long-suffering-victim that the narrator is required to embody.

- 21 The ending, too, is problematic: she concludes the story on a note of resilience, as the narrator “went [...] and bought a diary” (50), implying agency and self-expression in writing. Yet, one participant revealingly comments: “something [...] prevents me from caring about the character. I always know I’m reading a work of fiction” (51). By refusing to characterise her protagonist as a passive victim figure, Okorie’s narrator alienates her audience, whose stereotyped visions of refugees as helpless are such that demonstrations of agency are perceived as lacking in verisimilitude.

Detail

- 22 The challenge of verisimilitude is reflected in a further criterion that carries narrative weight in the context of asylum storytelling: that of detail. Holland cites Roland Barthes’ essay “The Reality Effect” in her discussion of the importance of this factor in lending credibility to asylum seeker testimony (88). Just as Barthes applauds the realism of Flaubert’s intricate depiction of “an old piano [that] supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons” in his depiction of a room in “A Simple Heart” (qtd in Barthes 141), so one immigration officer in the US explained his criteria for credibility: “[asylum seekers] have to give me detail. He could answer my questions. He could give me details [...] if you lived it you can give me the answers” (qtd in Holland 88). In her research in the French context, Reid found that lack of detail was the most frequently-cited reason given to accompany the 75% refusal rate in 2019, the year of her study, with rejection letters repeating the phrases “not detailed enough” or “vague”.
- 23 This criterion can be particularly difficult to fulfil when asylum seekers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are forced to recount traumatic events. Not only does trauma elude linear narratives, but recounting such experiences can harm the recuperation process and trigger post-traumatic instructions (Schock et al.). Nayeri uses narrative to demonstrate the hardship of being forced to recount—and in so doing, relive—deeply traumatic experiences. *Who Gets Believed?* opens with a graphic torture scene, in which a character known only as “K” or “KV” is brutally interrogated in a prison in his native Sri Lanka for being

falsely suspected of collusion with the Tamil Tiger insurgency. K's storyline is one of the central narrative threads of the book, and is based on the true story of a man who, having suffered brutal torture in Sri Lanka, was not only disbelieved by the British Home Office after claiming asylum in the UK but was accused of hiring another person to inflict grievous wounds on him in order to gain refugee status (United Kingdom Supreme Court). The description is harrowing in its detailing of K's suffering:

K was taken into the interrogation room with ten men who demanded to know where the Tamil Tigers hid their gold. As he knelt, panting, trying to convince them that he knew nothing, he felt a heat near their shoulder. He turned to see a soldier with a metal rod approaching. The end of the rod glowed red; even through a terrified grey haze, it was easy to make out the glow in the room. Before K could think, the rod sank right into his arm, an instant heat shot through his body, and he passed out to the sound of his own distant screams. He woke to more questions about the Tamil Tiger gold, and to the sensation of new wounds: now his back, too, was badly burned, though he didn't remember it happening.

Then the gaggle of men held him down and poured gasoline over his face, his back, covering his fresh wounds. They threatened to set him alight unless he revealed the location of the gold. "I swear I don't know", he said, for the hundredth time. "I'm not LTTE. I'm a jeweler's assistant." As K choked on gasoline, an itch crept up his back and arms and distracted him from the foul taste, the smell. Then the itch became searing, and the screams poured out of him again. He glanced at his arm—strange the details one remembers—and saw the dry skin of his long confinement now wet and slimy and peeling away (6).

- 24 The vivid mental images that Nayeri conjures for her readers such as the rod penetrating K's arm, the pouring of gasoline on his wounds, and the sight of his skin peeling away, are intensified by the ample sensory detail. All five senses are evoked through the "red" "glow", the "smell" of gasoline, the "sound" of screaming, the "itch" and "searing" sensation and "slimy" skin, "the foul taste." K's terror is represented in the lack of control he has over his screams, from which he appears to dissociate himself, so that they seem "distant", "pouring" out of him.

Structurally, the progression of pain from the initial “heat”, to “itch”, to “searing” agony, intensifies the reader’s sense of K’s torment.

- 25 The striking nature of this passage is such that the reader is reminded of it when, later on in the book and after the reader’s attention has been diverted elsewhere by the introduction of different plotlines, K is forced to recount his torture to UK asylum officers “during the interview with the Home Office” (23). K’s retelling echoes words and phrases from the original passage:

In that small office, he repeated the whole story: that in August 2009, his captors burned his *arm* with a hot soldering iron. That *he felt a heat* on his arm, turned and saw the *glowing rod*. That the *burning* intensified, he fell forward, and passed out. That his captors branded his back cleanly while he was unconscious and, when he woke, *poured gasoline* on his *wounds* to increase the pain.
(23, emphasis added)

The repetition of the distressing story is not necessary for the reader’s comprehension of the plot, for which the clause “he repeated the whole story” would have sufficed: its inclusion can thus be interpreted as a textual demonstration of the suffering that asylum seekers experience when obliged to recount traumatic experiences. By using the same words and images that she used in her initial passage, Nayeri makes her readers recall their reading of the latter; this is an illustration of the flashbacks that the asylum interview can trigger in PTSD sufferers and that can render the criterion of detail so difficult to fulfil.

Originality

- 26 The requirement for detail functions jointly with the requirement for originality. In her research, Emily Reid notes that asylum claims are likely to fail if the stories told are “‘too similar’ to other seekers’ experiences”; Shuman and Bohmer explain that “[Officials] think that similar stories are evidence of fraud” (396). Holland quotes one US asylum officer’s suspicion when confronted with stories that are “so boilerplate, there’s nothing anything unique about the claims, it makes you wonder” (88). Dina Nayeri expresses the entwined nature of these criteria when, in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, she remarks that

“the [asylum] story must be compelling, full of strange, but not too strange, details. It must not mimic other stories” (251).

- 27 Nayeri employs heavy irony to underline the combination of challenging narrative demands required of asylum stories:

To satisfy an asylum officer takes the same narrative sophistication it takes to please book critics. At once logical and judgmental of demeanour, both are on guard for manipulation and emotional trickery. Stick to the concrete, the five senses, they say. Sound natural, human, but also dazzle with your prose. Make me cry, but a whiff of sentimentality and you're done [...] Go ahead. Try it. It's not so hard, you penniless, traumatised fugitive from a ravaged village, just write a story worthy of *The New Yorker*.
(*The Ungrateful Refugee* 243)

- 28 The irony of the final sentence underlines the contrast between the requirements imposed on asylum narratives and the testimony that can be reasonably expected of trauma survivors, whilst the persistent use of the imperative mode reflects the coercion through which such stories are extracted. Meanwhile, the reference to the iconic American magazine functions as a reminder of the Western standards that are indiscriminately applied to asylum stories of all cultural origins in adjudication contexts of the Global North. In Nayeri's representations of asylum adjudication, as well as in Okorie's short story, truth is relegated behind a series of interconnected preconceptions and requirements.

Narrative capital

- 29 Of course, writing “a story worthy of *The New Yorker*” also requires a significant amount of “narrative capital”, to borrow the term coined by Ivor Goodson in his book *Developing Narrative Theory* (14). Goodson intended the term as a reference to Bourdieu's own triad of economic, social and cultural capital, to reflect how these intersecting forms of capital are involved in the construction of narrative. In Goodson's view, contemporary discourse of both the personal and political fields has taken a “narrative turn”: in this context, it is a matter of pressing importance that “stories and storylines need to be understood, not just as personal constructions

but as *expressions of particular historical and cultural opportunities*" (6, emphasis added). The "opportunities" that determine how a narrative is constructed can also determine the prejudice, or lack thereof, with which it is received. Dina Nayeri and Melatu Uche Okorie's literary representations demonstrate that perceptions of truth are associated with the storytellers' reserves of narrative capital, thus disclosing how intersecting forms of privilege are involved in the credibility granted to an individual's story.³

- 30 For instance, the following transcript of an exchange between two asylum officers in the US provides rare evidence of the profound impact that class and education level can have on the likelihood of an asylum claim to be accepted:

Asylum Officer 1: When I get somebody from China who I know is a PhD, I'm much more generous with them than I am with some guy who I may think is cooking in the back of some kitchen. And it's not because—it's not—that's not how I'm thinking either. But I'm thinking that oh, this person is very articulate. Their claim is very—
Asylum Officer 2: Well of course, it makes it easier to understand it.
(Qtd. in Holland 89)

- 31 Such disparities are further compounded by an unequal access to mediators such as lawyers. Understanding the intricacies of foreign legal systems without a lawyer requires a level of specialised knowledge available to very few. In *Who Gets Believed?*, Dina Nayeri underscores this point with a quote from US asylum attorney Ana Reyes, who claims that "the real issue [in asylum stories] isn't credibility versus non credibility. The real issue is whether you have an attorney. I'd say that the biggest predictor of whether you will get asylum is whether you have an attorney" (81). Nayeri adds that proving credibility in a court "isn't hard if you have a degree from Harvard Law, as Reyes does" (83), hinting at the further variation in degrees of narrative capital that exists amongst legal professionals themselves.
- 32 She also explores this issue through her depiction of Kaweh's experience of legal representation prior to his asylum interview, in *The Ungrateful Refugee*. Well-educated, informed, and confident in his knowledge and rights, Kaweh is able to turn down the "young

solicitor, a trainee in immigration law” whom he first consults, when the latter states “he would be removed to Turkey, since he first claimed asylum there” (209). His assertive response illustrates his conviction: “‘No,’ he said, ‘you have it wrong. I didn’t claim asylum in Turkey. I did it through UNHCR. That makes a material difference.’ When had he learned this? He hardly knew; one of the many long nights of reading and obsessing” (209–210). After a second solicitor makes “the same error”, Kaweh’s roommate’s brother arranges a meeting with a “London solicitor”, which he “borrow[s] money” to attend (210); the reference to the UK capital is intended to evoke metropolitan prestige. This solicitor proves superior to the previous two and Kaweh’s asylum claim is ultimately successful. Kaweh’s effective legal representation is thus the product of a combination of privilege and chance, dependent upon knowledge, training, self-confidence, social networks and the ability to procure funds, in addition to sheer serendipity of circumstance. By including this story, Nayeri invites her readers to ponder upon the fate of those asylum seekers who do not benefit from such advantages and therefore upon the injustice that operates when it comes to the legal mediation of asylum stories.

- 33 Nayeri’s fiction tends to focus on Persian characters and does not dwell on the disparity in experiences created as a result of racialisation; in Okorie’s story “Under The Awning”, however, this constitutes the central theme. Indeed, the short story can be read as an illustration of the way in which racial prejudice negatively impacts narrative capital. In the story that she shares with the group, Okorie’s protagonist-narrator outlines a series of racist microaggressions that she has suffered: from finding that fellow passengers avoid sitting next to her on the bus (41), to being subject to racial slurs (42, 50), derogatory stereotypes about “Africans” (46) and racial fetishisation (48). Her story is branded unrealistic: the group’s comments repeatedly criticise the protagonist’s “paranoia” (52) and accuse her of “completely misread[ing]” events. One particularly violent comment goes so far as to suggest that her perceptions of racism are the fabricated result of her own “self-loathing and self-hatred” (53). In so doing, the members of the group demonstrate their own failure to understand a key message of the story: the nature of racism is such that its targets are made to feel constantly aware of

their racialisation. It is precisely because of the narrator's race that her story is criticised by the group, since she is recounting experiences that they cannot relate to and subsequently deny.

- 34 In the end, the narrator internalises the participants' criticism and re-writes her story accordingly. The end of her re-drafted version sees her attempt to appease her audience by explicitly articulating the possibility that the microaggressions were not intended maliciously:

Your class-mates who asked their friends to mind their bags were not actually doing anything wrong; the bus driver who dropped you two stops away from your bus stop could have done so due to road works; the man in the supermarket who asked your mother for a BJ is just sick; and the children who called out "Blackie" at you whenever they saw you passing by could just be what they were, children. (54)

This rewrite is still insufficient to convince some of the participants. One comment asks her to "temper the racism", judging—ironically—that "there is so much bias, so much prejudice, that it almost swallows itself" (54). Okorie explained in a podcast that the story is intended to reflect the violence that accompanies discussions of racism, in which the dismissal of one's accounts of experiences of racism is a second "form of abuse"; to the point that "it's easier if a person with white skin talks about it" (Scholes). In "Under The Awning" she portrays a situation in which racialised people's stories are systematically disbelieved, no matter how much their author attempts to adapt them to please the demands of their (white) audience. When it comes to narrative capital, the short story suggests, the skill and training of the storyteller cannot counteract the limiting factor of racialisation. Both writers thus illustrate how injustice and prejudice can prevent truth from being heard in places of asylum storytelling.

Culture of disbelief

- 35 Finally, Dina Nayeri's representations of asylum interview procedures situate rejections of truth within what humanitarian workers and researchers working in the field of British asylum adjudication have termed "the culture of disbelief": an environment characterised by

“inconsistent decision-making, insensitivity and bias” that works against asylum seekers (Anderson et al.). In her ethnographic study of the day-to-day workings of Immigration Officers in the UK Home Office, Olga Jubany outlines the impact of this culture on the work of asylum officers as follows:

[Asylum officers’] roles are increasingly aimed at identifying threats and enforcing social control. Asylum seekers represent a menace to the state and society that officers must identify, be that a welfare cheat, asylum shopper, bogus refugee, criminal or terrorist. (5)

- 36 As part of her research, she was given the rare opportunity to attend the full six-week training program provided to those whose role it is to determine the validity of asylum claims made in the UK: she was struck by the way in which “officers are tacitly encouraged to reproduce a world that connects asylum and migration to threats and fears” (30). In other instances, the Home Office’s incentivisation of its workers to delegitimise asylum stories is rather less tacit: this is notably the case for their controversial policy of awarding gift vouchers to officers who achieve a 70% or above refusal rate in asylum appeals (Taylor and Mason). Structural disbelief “is not an individual or exceptional process”, Jubany insists, “but one that takes place within a socio-cultural, political and organisational context, in which a very specific subculture develops” (7).
- 37 Nayeri’s literary representations demonstrate how this subculture pervasively impedes the recognition of true experiences. The Home Office itself regularly appears as an anthropomorphised figure in her writing. A ministerial department with a diverse and complex management structure supported by twenty-nine agencies and public bodies (UK government), the Home Office is personified in Nayeri’s writing as a single, unified and villainous character. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the Home Office is afforded the capacity of speech when it ejects refugees for their humanitarianism: “people had been rejected for doing charity work out of boredom. ‘You worked’, the Home Office would say. ‘You broke the rules’” (214). In *Who Gets Believed?*, the “Home Office” is represented as being capable of vision, when the latter functions to facilitate the expulsion of refugees: “the Home Office zeroed in on the doctor’s clearly hyperbolic point about anaesthesia” (180, my emphasis). Nayeri

employs the third person to suggest that the Home Office is a homogenised actor. Commenting on the decision made to deny asylum to KV on the basis that his torture wounds could have been self-inflicted, Nayeri writes:

The cruelty and audacity of KV's rejection shook the humanitarian community. Activists and lawyers saw it as a chilling new low in disbelief culture, a warning that standards had shifted away from refuge toward barred gates. [...] The Home Office was now openly teaching its gatekeepers bad-faith techniques, incentivising and training them to trap survivors in surreal logic games. If they offered a place to anyone, it was because they had lost. (263–264)

Here, the “Home Office” is explicitly represented as the origin of “disbelief culture”: it is portrayed as a malevolent ruler, whose workers are pawns in the extension of its power, as demonstrated by the use of the possessive pronoun “its”. Asylum adjudication is viewed as a “game”, the rules of which the Home Office determines and the aim of which is to issue rejections; the odds are inevitably stacked in the game-creator’s favour. The Home Office thus functions as a metonym for the culture of disbelief at large, in all of its harmful cynicism. Nonetheless, there is a subtle shift from singular to plural pronouns at the end of the quotation, as “it” becomes “they”; despite the homogenising force of violence symbolised by the Home Office, Nayeri reminds us that it is built up of a multitude of individual actors who each have a part to play.

- 38 The metaphor of asylum officers as “gatekeepers” in the previous quotation is repeated throughout Nayeri’s work (e.g. *The Ungrateful Refugee* 66; *Who Gets Believed?* 124). At the end of *Who Gets Believed?* Nayeri confirms the intertextual association with Kafka’s *The Trial* that the image was intended to evoke.⁴ In particular, the term evokes a character in an embedded fable entitled “Before the Law” (Kafka 153–155), in which a man seeks entry to the law but is stopped by a gatekeeper: after spending his entire life waiting to be granted permission to enter, the man asks the gatekeeper before his death why it is that no one else has sought entry. The gatekeeper explains that the door was meant only for him and is now closing. Beyond its evident underlining of the destructive power of bureaucracy, the significance of the reference lies in

Nayeri's interpretation of the role of the gatekeepers in Kafka's parable: "Kafka seems to say that we have some power: to reject authority, to look away, to refuse to play a part or even to twist the knife" (260). Nayeri's vision of asylum officers as Kafkaesque gatekeepers, far from absolving them of responsibility, serves to highlight their role as active agents within the bureaucratic system.

- 39 Elsewhere in Nayeri's work, the term "asylum officer" is employed as a byword for cynicism. Writing from a refugee camp in Katsikas, Greece, Nayeri states in *The Ungrateful Refugee* that "it is widely understood here that, in becoming an asylum officer, you relinquish all imagination and wonder" (158). Becoming an asylum officer according to Nayeri means becoming a "cynical reader" (*The Ungrateful Refugee* 245) and a "dishonest listener", who "grabs the part [of a story] that helps their case, and ignores all else" (*Who Gets Believed?* 227). In so doing, she refuses to fall into the trap outlined by Olga Jubany, in which "most accounts [of the encounter between states and asylum seekers] underplay the roles played by those individuals and groups who embody state power, particularly at borders" (4) and instead emphasises the fact that "it is the immigration officers themselves who are the Charon of refuge, determining who passes to the next stage of the process and filtering out the majority" (Jubany 5).
- 40 Nonetheless, Nayeri does not do so without exploring the socio-cultural context in which such cynicism is engendered. If Olga Jubany laments "the paucity of research into immigration officers' worlds" (12), Nayeri's fictionalised account of an immigration officer's life and work in *Who Gets Believed?* contributes to rectifying this absence at least in the realm of the imaginary, and adds nuance to her own representations of the cynical gatekeepers to asylum. In the passage in question, Nayeri's narration invites us to imagine the asylum officer responsible for the handling of KV's asylum claim:

I imagine it like this:

Somewhere in London, a young woman graduates with a two-year degree. She casts about for jobs. It's rough out there, competing with university and masters graduates. She sees an ad for a Home Office caseworker. She can be part of something good. If she's precocious, she reads up on the Refugee Convention, studies the harrowing

photos of overpacked dinghies on a black Aegean night. Maybe she thinks, *I'll save some of these wretched people.* (174)

Nayeri's imagined caseworker must navigate a challenging economic environment in which she struggles with a relative amount of disadvantage. She nonetheless demonstrates altruistic intent in the face of the representations of refugees that inform her imaginings of what her work will entail. She experiences trepidation when, on the first day of the job, she is met by a superior—"a senior caseworker"—who greets her with an intimidating "Welcome to the toughest job of your life" and instructs her to be distrustful: "Get ready to be lied to. A lot" (74). She undergoes training in which she is ingrained with the message that "her job is to root out inconsistency" (74).

- 41 Over time, the Home Office environment begins to impact both her well-being and the generosity with which she listens to asylum testimony:

A ritual begins, a drumbeat of danger and despair that over weeks and months wears her down. The ritual changes her. How can so many people come out of the same country with the exact same injuries? How can so many people have crossed the same bridge, met the same smuggler, worn out their shoes on the same treacherous mountain? It seems impossible that she should meet twenty men a day, all dark, all with the same face, the same stature, branded with the same scar patterns, running from the same village. [...]

The young caseworker goes back to her office. She stares at the bottomless pile of nightmares on her desk. Later today, she will hear three new Sri Lankan cases, all identical to KV's—his captors back home have wounded so many brothers. None of this is special to this English woman; by now, the rituals have worn down her senses. The droning stories, one after the other. She is tired. A single rote response has crystallized. *What dramatics. Maybe he did it to himself.* (174–175)

Her newfound cynicism is represented as being intertwined with a mental fatigue that "changes her". The repetition of the verbal phrase "wears (her) down / worn down" rhythmically mirrors the exhausting cycle of routine she seems caught in. Besides, the alliteration of the

plosive “D” in the description of the “drumbeat of danger and despair” of her working life functions as an aural manifestation of such repeated hardship. She appears to be impacted by the trauma—or “bottomless pile of nightmares”—that she encounters daily, and as a result, “she is tired”, the short sentence further emphasising the limited capacities that result from exhaustion. The reminder of her “English” nationality underlines the cultural distance between her and the “Sri Lankan cases” she is working on, that involves grappling with subject matter outside the realm of her lived experience. In her tiredness, she accepts the simplest solution to the string of rhetorical questions that plague her, the one that has been engrained in her like a “rote response”; the stories that she is hearing are lies, “dramatics”. By the end of the passage, to KV’s detriment, the optimistic graduate has become a weary cynic:

Then KV enters her interview room carrying photos of his mutilated back that looks like every other mutilated back, and medical reports that read like all the others, from the same NGO doctors. The caseworker sighs: another Tamil Tiger, limping and scared. (175)

- 42 Nayeri’s imagined caseworker is not innocent of becoming a Kafkaesque gatekeeper. The latter’s dismissive sigh in the face of a suffering individual is a gesture of hostility that only she seems responsible for—nor is she inherently mistrustful of asylum seekers. Rather, Dina Nayeri depicts asylum officers as the result of their political and socio-cultural environment. They end up engaging in the “culture of disbelief”, in which hostile cynicism is bred, fostered and reproduced until it prevents recognition of truth.

Conclusion: a place for truth in fiction

- 43 Dina Nayeri’s multifaceted portrayal of an asylum caseworker is testament to the power of fiction to afford multiple perspectives; or, to once again borrow Adrienne Rich’s phrasing, to tease out “the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern” (187). As demonstrated by Dina Nayeri and Melatu Uche Okorie’s representations of the fraught experiences of asylum storytelling, fiction is a place in which

complex phenomena can be gently yet powerfully untangled, thus giving truth an important place. Their representations illustrate the hostility of asylum interviews, in which asylum seekers' stories are subject to harmful, preconceived criteria and culturally-ingrained disbelief. It is all the more significant that fiction is the discursive space used to denounce such hostility. If, as Coleridge famously described, fiction requires a "willing suspension of disbelief" from its audience (208), thus it might appear as an antidote to the "culture of disbelief" surrounding asylum interviews, a time and place where, in Nayeri's words: "there are no limits on the truth. There is no risk to believing" ("Throwback").

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NOTES

¹ This definition is enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention of the then newly-founded United Nations. It qualifies exclusively as a refugee: “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race,

religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR). Its scope is thus limited to those able to convincingly demonstrate targeted persecution in their country of origin, and does not include those who flee for other reasons such as, for example, poverty or environmental destruction. It also necessarily excludes asylum seekers.

2 For a broad introduction to Nayeri’s background and work, including the novels not studied in this paper, see the interview published in this journal in 2019 (Small).

3 Goodson’s term carries a second, therapeutic, meaning, pertaining to the capacity of an individual to imagine promising narrative trajectories within their own lives. For the purpose of these analyses, my use of the term here excludes this element.

4 *Who Gets Believed?* is indeed scattered with references to *The Trial*, such as the inclusion of the section title “The Rule of the World”—a reference to a quote from *The Trial*’s protagonist K—and indeed the repeated choice to refer to KV as “K”.

RÉSUMÉS

English

Across the global north, asylum interviews are incidents of coerced storytelling in which asylum seekers must narrate their flight from their country of origin to representatives of their host country, in the hope of being granted refugee status. Whilst media and political discourses often imply that truth within asylum storytelling is the determining factor in shaping the outcome of an asylum claim, socio-scientific research into asylum adjudication processes in the US, UK, France and Ireland reveal that asylum seekers’ stories are instead subject to a series of hostile and prejudiced credibility criteria within a systemic “culture of disbelief”. This article examines the place of truth in asylum storytelling in a comparative approach that draws socio-scientific research together with the literary portrayals of asylum interviews by authors Dina Nayeri and Melatu Uche Okorie. These works of refugee literature emerge as alternative forms of asylum storytelling that denounce the injustices of asylum adjudication all the while creating a place for truth within fiction.

Français

Dans l’ensemble des pays du Nord global, les récits sont au cœur des entretiens d’asile, pendant lesquels les demandeurs d’asile doivent raconter leur fuite de leur pays d’origine aux représentants de leur pays d’accueil,

dans l'espoir d'obtenir le statut de réfugié. Alors que les discours politiques et médiatiques laissent souvent entendre que la vérité au sein du récit raconté constitue le facteur déterminant de l'issue des demandes d'asile, les recherches socio-scientifiques sur les processus d'arbitrage des demandes d'asile aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Uni, en France et en Irlande révèlent que les récits des demandeurs d'asile sont au contraire soumis à une série de critères de crédibilité hostiles et biaisés dans le cadre d'une « culture de l'incrédulité » systémique. Cet article examine la place de la vérité dans les récits de demande d'asile, à travers une approche comparative qui met en relation les recherches socio-scientifiques et les représentations littéraires des entretiens d'asile par les auteures Dina Nayeri et Melatu Uche Okorie. Ces œuvres de littérature des réfugiés — « refugee literature » — émergent comme des formes alternatives des récits d'asile qui dénoncent les injustices systématiques tout en créant un lieu où la vérité peut trouver sa place, au sein même de la fiction.

INDEX

Mots-clés

demande d'asile, entretien d'asile, tribunaux d'asile, culture de l'incrédulité, littérature des réfugié·e·s, Nayeri (Dina), Okorie (Melatu Uche)

Keywords

asylum seeking, asylum adjudication, asylum interviews, culture of disbelief, Home Office, refugee literature, Nayeri (Dina), Okorie (Melatu Uche)

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Autour du fonds Léonie Villard

Introduction

Marie Mianowski

Droits d'auteur

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TEXTE

- 1 Ce recueil de cinq chapitres traite du fonds Léonie Villard conservé à l'Université Grenoble Alpes, à la bibliothèque SoCLE, correspondant à l'UFR du même nom qui regroupe des enseignant·e·s et des chercheur·euse·s autour des études aréales, portant sur les sociétés, cultures et langues étrangères. Le fonds Léonie Villard a occupé pendant des décennies, sans doute plus de cinquante ans, mais nul n'a pu jusqu'ici le confirmer avec précision, une salle du bâtiment Stendhal, à l'écart géographiquement de la bibliothèque de langues étrangères et plus encore de la bibliothèque universitaire droit-langues de l'Université Grenoble Alpes, si bien qu'avant ce travail de recherche sur le fonds, peu de personnes en connaissaient l'existence, hormis celles et ceux qui fréquentaient la salle C307 du bâtiment Stendhal pour y déjeuner ou y faire des photocopies. À l'heure où ces pages sont imprimées, en novembre 2024, le fonds a été déménagé depuis quatre mois à cause de travaux en cours à l'étage du bâtiment où il était installé. Les deux mille six cents ouvrages qui le constituent sont néanmoins toujours empruntables, mais ils sont désormais conservés dans un conteneur qui fait partie de la réserve de la bibliothèque. Aucune information ne permet à ce jour d'affirmer qu'il sera réinstallé dans des rayonnages à l'issue des travaux.
- 2 Ce sont pourtant ces rayonnages, d'imposantes vitrines alignées le long de trois murs de la salle C307, qui ont attiré mon attention à mon arrivée à l'Université Grenoble Alpes en 2017, alors que plus personne ne se souvenait ni de l'origine du fonds qu'ils abritaient, ni de leur propriétaire, Léonie Villard, dont un portrait imposant trônait pourtant dans ladite salle et dont des étiquettes « fonds Léonie Villard » apposées sur les vitrines rappelaient l'identité. La présente publication, ainsi que le *Journal de guerre*¹ de Léonie Villard paru en

français le 31 octobre 2024, ont pour vocation² de garantir que les ouvrages ayant appartenu à Léonie Villard, et toujours empruntables, continuent à être identifiables comme un ensemble constitué. En l'état actuel des choses, le déménagement du fonds dans un conteneur et la disparition des rayonnages qui l'accueillaient jusqu'à l'été 2024, parachèvent le processus d'invisibilisation de celle qui le constitua avec passion, entre la toute fin du ^{xix}^e siècle et 1969, l'année précédant sa mort.

- 3 Ce fonds privé, que Léonie Villard cède à la bibliothèque de l'université de Grenoble, très probablement dans les années 1960, par l'intermédiaire d'anciens étudiants³, est bien davantage qu'un ensemble d'ouvrages dont la plupart des titres, très classiques, figurent par ailleurs dans le catalogue de la bibliothèque universitaire. Ce fonds fait figure de collection, non seulement parce qu'il est un exemple de bibliothèque de professeur de lettres de la première moitié du ^{xx}^e siècle, spécialiste de littérature anglaise et américaine ; mais aussi parce que, fait plus rare à l'époque, ce professeur est une femme ; et enfin parce que nombre de ces titres sont des dons d'amis, de collègues, d'étudiant·e·s. Le fonds Léonie Villard est donc non seulement le reflet d'une époque de l'anglistique⁴, mais également une sorte de mémoire du réseau d'amitiés et d'affinités intellectuelles tissé par Léonie Villard avec des auteurs qu'elle a lus, étudiés et enseignés, ainsi qu'avec ses collègues, ancien·ne·s étudiant·e·s et ami·e·s, en France, en Angleterre et aux États-Unis, également auteur·e·s d'ouvrages.

- 4 Léonie, Jeanne, Antoinette Villard⁵ naît le 30 novembre 1878 à Lyon⁶. Ses parents, originaires du nord du département de l'Isère se sont mariés un an plus tôt, mais son père, veuf, a déjà quatre enfants⁷ dont trois vivants, de son premier mariage. On ne sait rien des toutes premières années de Léonie Villard hormis qu'elle naît et grandit au n° 1 de la rue de l'Hôtel de Ville (actuellement rue du Président-Édouard-Herriot) à Lyon, où son père, Léon Villard, décède quelques années plus tard alors qu'elle n'a que six ans. Elle vit ensuite avec sa mère, Jeanne Marie Chalamel, une demi-sœur et son demi-frère Léon⁸ de cinq ans son aîné, au 42 rue Duguesclin, avant d'emménager au tournant du siècle dans un appartement au deuxième étage avec balcon du 24 rue Tronchet où elle vit jusqu'à sa mort en mai 1970. Elle partage sa vie avec sa mère, qui y décède

en 1929, et son demi-frère Léon Villard fils, clerc de notaire, qui meurt en décembre 1942, considérablement affaibli par les conditions catastrophiques auxquelles l'Occupation allemande à Lyon les contraint. Comme lui, Léonie avait sans doute contracté la poliomyélite dans sa jeunesse : plusieurs observateurs⁹ notent ses séquelles. Elle-même les évoque discrètement dans ses lettres¹⁰ ou ses carnets de guerre. De même, un des premiers rapports d'inspection de l'Éducation Nationale y fait allusion à demi-mots. Peut-être pour cette raison Léonie Villard passe-t-elle le baccalauréat ainsi que le certificat d'aptitude à l'enseignement de l'anglais et l'agrégation d'anglais tardivement, dans la vingtaine. Elle réussit l'agrégation l'année de ses trente ans.

- 5 Mais il faut surtout retenir qu'accéder à un tel niveau d'étude est rare pour une jeune fille de son époque, d'autant que Léonie Villard n'est pas issue d'une famille bourgeoise. Son père est employé de commerce, l'un de ses grands-pères est commis négociant à Lyon, l'autre est tailleur à Saint-Barthélémy-de-Beaurepaire. Nommée au lycée de jeunes filles de Lyon dès l'obtention de l'agrégation (désormais Lycée Édouard Herriot) en 1908, elle soutient et publie sa thèse sur Jane Austen en 1915. Après une année comme maîtresse de conférences à l'université de Grenoble entre 1921 et 1922, Léonie Villard est ensuite nommée professeur à l'université de Lyon, où elle bénéficie assez vite d'une chaire de littératures anglaise et américaine. Elle y effectue toute sa carrière universitaire jusqu'à sa retraite en 1948 à l'âge de 70 ans. De 1941 à 1944 durant l'Occupation, comme elle est fonctionnaire et âgée de plus de cinquante ans, Léonie Villard est mise à la retraite d'office, selon une loi promulguée sous Vichy en octobre 1941. Je dois à Isabelle von Bueltzingsloewen d'avoir partagé sa découverte que Léonie Villard avait été employée de manière clandestine par l'université de Lyon pour effectuer des « cours complémentaires » de 1941 à 1944, avec un traitement sans doute moindre que celui de professeur d'université dont elle bénéficiait jusque-là, ce qui explique probablement pourquoi dans son journal de guerre Léonie Villard relate ses difficultés quotidiennes à se nourrir et à accéder au marché noir. Mais c'est aussi parce qu'elle n'a cessé d'enseigner de 1941 à 1944 que le doyen de son université peut, après-guerre, appuyer sa demande de réintégration. En octobre 1944, elle réintègre en effet la chaire de

littératures anglaise et américaine qui avait été entre temps transformée en chaire de sanskrit et de grammaire et attribué à un autre collègue. Léonie Villard reprend à la rentrée 1944 le chemin de l'université de Lyon, jusqu'en 1948 où elle fait valoir ses droits à la retraite.

- 6 Léonie Villard n'a toutefois pas dit son dernier mot, car elle reprend à cette date ses voyages aux États-Unis, commencés avant-guerre grâce à une Bourse Carnegie en faveur de la paix internationale et donne cours et conférences, non seulement à Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts), mais aussi à Hunter College (New York City) et d'autres établissements de l'est des États-Unis, jusqu'en Virginie. Dans cette période, elle publie plusieurs articles, maints comptes rendus de lecture et trois ouvrages¹¹, en particulier sur les échanges entre la France et les États-Unis et sur le théâtre américain. Cette activité foisonnante et ininterrompue jusqu'à sa mort est reflétée dans le fonds de sa bibliothèque. C'est aussi à cette période, à la fin des années cinquante qu'elle dactylographie les deux carnets de guerre écrits en anglais à l'intention de ses amis et collègues anglophones entre 1940 et 1944, dans deux petits carnets bleus. Plus tard, elle confie les feuillets dactylographiés à Helen Patch, sa collègue et amie de Mount Holyoke College en lui demandant de les publier, ce qui n'a jamais été le cas.
- 7 Les articles publiés dans le présent recueil reviennent en détail sur l'œuvre de Léonie Villard. C'est donc au fonds¹² de sa bibliothèque que je souhaite ici désormais consacrer quelques lignes.
- 8 Ce fonds est remarquable pour plusieurs raisons. Il faut noter tout d'abord qu'il ne comporte que des titres en anglais. On peut sans doute imaginer qu'un autre fonds, en français, a existé et disparu. Le legs à l'université de Grenoble était donc ciblé et organisé. Par souci de clarté dans l'exposé du contenu du fonds, il est possible de l'envisager sous la forme de quatre niveaux. Mais il convient de préciser avant tout que chaque ouvrage est tamponné « fonds Léonie Villard » et signé, sur la page de garde, de la main de Léonie Villard, une signature manuscrite, élégante, en cursives inclinées, de bas en haut et de gauche à droite sur la page, parfois presque à la verticale, comme si le livre avait été tenu à l'horizontale le temps de tracer ce paraphe.

- 9 Le premier niveau d'ouvrages dans ce fonds concerne les ouvrages classiques qui caractérisent la formation traditionnelle d'un-e angliciste : l'ensemble de l'œuvre de Shakespeare parfois dans diverses éditions et de nombreux ouvrages critiques sur son œuvre, Jonathan Swift, Coleridge, Keats, Yeats, G. B. Shaw, *Ulysses* et *The Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man* de Joyce que par ailleurs Léonie Villard n'appréciait pas¹³ ; mais aussi Lord Bolingbroke, les poèmes de Blake, ceux de Matthew Arnold, et les œuvres complètes de ce dernier ainsi que de Francis Bacon, le philosophe. Il faut souligner l'ancienneté de certaines éditions tout à fait remarquables. Ainsi certaines éditions des pièces de Shakespeare datent de 1812 et celle des ouvrages de Jonathan Swift de 1781. Le fonds Léonie Villard contient également toute l'œuvre de Jane Austen et des ouvrages critiques sur l'œuvre de cette dernière, de même pour celle de Virginia Woolf. Les liens entre Léonie Villard et ces deux romancières sont abordés dans les articles de Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou et de Valérie Favre dans le présent volume.
- 10 Le deuxième niveau d'analyse du fonds concerne les ouvrages offerts par des amis ou collègues, le plus souvent parce qu'eux-mêmes sont auteurs, bien qu'il s'agisse parfois simplement de livres que le donateur ou la donatrice a appréciés et souhaite partager. Les donateurs sont parfois des étudiants, fiers de transmettre à leur ancienne professeure leur thèse publiée ou tout autre ouvrage ; parfois des collègues, des amis d'outre-Manche ou d'outre-Atlantique ; parfois aussi des éditeurs qui lui envoient un livre en échange d'un compte rendu. Ainsi, à l'intérieur de très nombreux ouvrages, non loin de la signature manuscrite de Léonie Villard sur la page de garde, parfois sur la page de titre à l'intérieur du livre, on retrouve une dédicace manuscrite. Parmi les très nombreuses personnes qui dédicacent un livre à Léonie, on peut citer entre autres Dorothea Bullen, Ruth Dean, Jules Desseignet, Bel. El., Jean Jacquot, Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies, Monique Parent, Helen Patch, Jean R. Poisson, J. A. Roche, Edmund West, E. Whitehair, Isabelle Woodruff : un ensemble de connaissances amicales disparate entre la France, l'Angleterre et les États-Unis.
- 11 Le troisième niveau d'analyse du fonds concerne des ouvrages écrits par Léonie Villard elle-même¹⁴. Le quatrième niveau, enfin, est constitué des ouvrages que Léonie Villard lit pour se détendre, des

romans policiers ou d'autres lectures moins classiques et moins sérieuses. On peut ainsi relever *Pemberley Shades* de D. A. Bonavia-Hunt, *Jane, Our Stranger: A Novel* de Mary Borden, et parmi tant d'autres qui montrent que Léonie Villard lisait également pour se détendre, des ouvrages de John Braine, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, pratiquement tous les romans d'Ann Bridge et de Dorothy Sayers dont elle écrit dans son *Journal de guerre* (Villard 2024, 218) qu'ils la soutiennent particulièrement durant les derniers mois de la guerre. Comme le rappellent Margaret Jones-Davies et Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou dans leurs articles respectifs, c'est de nouveau vers Jane Austen que Léonie Villard se tourne lorsque la libération de Lyon se fait attendre à la fin de l'été 1944 et qu'elle n'a pu rejoindre sa maison d'Oussiat (Villard 2024, 218-219).

- 12 Les articles réunis dans ce recueil font suite à la journée d'études organisée à l'Université Grenoble Alpes le 26 octobre 2023 en même temps qu'était inaugurée l'exposition¹⁵ « Autour du fonds Léonie Villard » à la bibliothèque SoCLE, retraçant l'enquête biographique et bibliographique menée sur les traces de Léonie Villard. Cette enquête m'a permis de rencontrer et d'échanger avec de nombreux chercheurs, chercheuses, historien·ne·s et archivistes en France et aux États-Unis dont les noms figurent dans la section « remerciements » du *Journal de guerre*, à laquelle je renvoie les lecteurs du présent volume. Il est certain que ce sont ces rencontres qui ont donné à ce travail collectif toute sa valeur. La journée d'étude du 26 octobre 2023 a réuni deux historiennes spécialistes de Lyon et de la période de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Valérie Potheret et Isabelle von Bueltzingsloewen, ainsi que trois spécialistes de littérature : Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou, qui comme Léonie Villard fit sa thèse de doctorat sur l'œuvre de Jane Austen ; Valérie Favre, spécialiste de Virginia Woolf qui fut un premier relais outre-Manche de la voix de Léonie Villard ; Margaret Jones-Davies, spécialiste de Shakespeare, mais également fille d'une ancienne étudiante de Léonie Villard, Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies. Filleule de Léonie Villard, Margaret Jones-Davies est également une lectrice admirative de *La muraille bleue*, un roman inédit que Léonie Villard écrit dans les années soixante et que cette dernière lui avait confié.
- 13 C'est par la littérature que je choisis d'ouvrir ce volume, car Léonie Villard avait consacré sa thèse à Jane Austen. Dans son article

consacré à la thèse de Léonie Villard sur l'œuvre de Jane Austen (1915), Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou rend hommage à Léonie Villard, pionnière dans le domaine de l'anglistique, mais également à celle qui rédigea la première thèse en France sur Jane Austen, choix qui révèle dès ses premiers pas comme chercheuse une sensibilité certaine pour l'histoire des femmes. Cette sensibilité particulière parcourt tous les articles de ce recueil, au-delà même des articles traitant de Léonie Villard, femme de lettres. Dans son article sur l'influence réciproque entre Léonie Villard et Virginia Woolf, Valérie Favre s'interroge sur l'invisibilisation de Léonie Villard et de ses écrits et sur le sens à donner à la critique élogieuse que fit Virginia Woolf de l'ouvrage que Léonie Villard publie en 1920 sur la femme anglaise dans la littérature (Villard 1920). Margaret Jones-Davies s'intéresse dans son article à *La muraille bleue*, un roman inédit que Léonie Villard lui a transmis dans les années soixante, démontrant à la fois la grande culture de Léonie Villard, mais également son intérêt pour la liberté des femmes et le courage dont elles ont su faire preuve au cours de l'histoire. Cette préoccupation taraude Léonie Villard dans le *Journal de guerre* où, bien qu'elle ne puisse s'engager activement dans la Résistance, elle fait de son mieux pour contribuer à des actions ponctuelles et partager avec qui veut l'entendre ses analyses des émissions de la B.B.C. L'article d'Isabelle von Bueltzingsloewen sur le *Journal de guerre* analyse le regard de Léonie Villard sur ces événements historiques, en particulier pour ce qui concerne son récit de la vie quotidienne à Lyon durant les années de l'Occupation mais également ses actions de résistance depuis son appartement de la rue Tronchet. Le journal de Léonie Villard est ici le point de départ d'une recherche en micro-histoire qui permet de redonner à Léonie Villard une place dans l'histoire de cette époque à Lyon comme femme, comme résistante de l'ombre et comme professeure d'université. Enfin Valérie Portheret revient tout particulièrement sur l'entrée du 16 septembre 1942 dans le *Journal de guerre* (Villard 2024, 120-121) au sujet du sauvetage des enfants du camp de Vénissieux auquel Léonie fait allusion. Valérie Portheret replace le rôle que des personnalités telles que Léonie Villard et ses amis ont pu jouer à l'époque et la conscience que les Lyonnais, comme le reste des Français, avaient de ce qui se jouait pour les enfants juifs en particulier. En resituant Léonie Villard dans le contexte historique, socio-culturel et littéraire qui fut le sien, chacun

de ces articles contribue ainsi à lui donner la visibilité qu'elle mérite et permet à chaque lecteur de se rappeler que parmi les ouvrages de la bibliothèque de l'Université Grenoble Alpes, existent toujours, et sont consultables par chacun·e les ouvrages du fonds Léonie Villard.

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NOTES

1 Pour une biographie plus détaillée de Léonie Villard, voir la préface et la postface dans Villard (2024).

2 Ces travaux font partie du projet « Léonie Villard » financé et soutenu par la Commission Culture et Aide aux Projets 2023 de l'Université Grenoble Alpes et l'AAP de l'IdEX 2023. Le projet « Léonie Villard » a permis de financer une exposition (automne 2023), une journée d'études (26 octobre 2023) « Autour du fonds Léonie Villard » et de contribuer à la publication du *Journal de guerre : Lyon sous l'Occupation, 1940-1944* (Villard 2024).

3 Parmi eux, sans doute Jean-Georges Ritz et Paul Baratier, professeurs à Grenoble. En outre, le fonds Paul Baratier est parfois mélangé avec celui de Léonie Villard (voir aussi Page 2021).

- 4 Au sujet de l'histoire de l'anglistique en France, voir le projet HEPISTEA qui s'intéresse « à la question de la structuration d'une communauté académique en "langues", à partir de l'exemple des études anglophones, et à l'historicité de ce processus de construction » : <<https://anglistique.hypotheses.org/hepistea>>.
- 5 Une biographie plus complète est rédigée dans la postface du *Journal de guerre* (Villard 2024).
- 6 Je remercie ici Anne Page qui m'a communiqué les données concernant Léonie Villard recueillies dans le fonds Mouchon. Ces éléments, pour l'essentiel reconstitués à partir du dossier professionnel de Léonie Villard conservé aux Archives nationales et que Laurent Joly m'avait transmis fin 2022, recoupent les éléments que j'ai également pas à pas reconstitués avec l'aide de Béatrice Amieux, Valérie Favre, Margaret Jones-Davies, Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou, Valérie Portheret et Isabelle von Bultzingsloewen. Même si les éléments fournis par la fiche « Léonie Villard » du fonds Mouchon comportent les dates essentielles concernant la biographie de Léonie Villard, ce sont les détours et les questionnements, ainsi que toutes les rencontres physiques ou virtuelles, en France, en Angleterre et aux États-Unis qui ont fait tout l'intérêt de cette enquête, donnant chair à ce travail sur les traces de Léonie Villard.
- 7 Villard, Marie Joséphine (1868-1869), Cécile Rose (1870-1905), Berthe Marie (1871-1933) et Léon (1873-1942).
- 8 Ces deux enfants sont issus du premier mariage de leur père Léon Villard avec Marie Michelle Delorme (1842-1877).
- 9 Dossier professionnel de Léonie Villard, rapports d'inspection, Archives nationales (site de Pierrefitte sur Seine).
- 10 Je remercie Margaret Jones-Davies de m'avoir communiqué la correspondance personnelle entretenue entre sa mère, Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies, et Léonie Villard dans les années d'après-guerre et jusqu'à la fin des années soixante.
- 11 Cf. Villard (1952), Villard (1957a), Villard (1957b) et Villard (1964).
- 12 Une liste détaillée des ouvrages contenus dans le fonds est disponible au format Excel auprès des bibliothécaires de la bibliothèque SoCLE.
- 13 Correspondance personnelle de Léonie Villard à Margaret Jones Davies.
- 14 Je renvoie ici à la bibliographie détaillée ajoutée à la fin du *Journal de guerre* (Villard 2024) et au catalogue BELUGA de la bibliothèque

universitaire de l'Université Grenoble Alpes : <https://beluga.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/discovery/search?vid=33UGRENOBLE_INST:UGrenoble>.

15 Exposition installée du 26 octobre au 26 novembre 2023 à l'entrée de la bibliothèque SoCLE, Université Grenoble Alpes. Commissaire de l'exposition : Marie Mianowski. Quelques photos sont reproduites dans le *Journal de guerre*, « Carnet photographique » (Villard 2024).

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La thèse de Léonie Villard : *Jane Austen, sa vie et son œuvre (1775-1817)* (Lyon : A. Rey / Paris : A. Picard & Fils, 1915)

Léonie Villard's Doctoral Thesis: Jane Austen, sa vie et son œuvre (1775-1817)
(Lyon: A. Rey / Paris: A. Picard & Fils, 1915)

Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou

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TEXTE

Introduction

- 1 En parcourant l'exposition virtuelle intitulée « À la conquête de la Sorbonne : Marie Curie et autres pionnières » sur le site numérique de la bibliothèque interuniversitaire de la Sorbonne, une triste évidence s'impose : le nom de Léonie Villard n'est pas mentionné, sa carrière pourtant exceptionnelle d'enseignante-chercheuse a tout simplement été oubliée, alors même que cette exposition recense l'identité des premières femmes ayant accédé au grade de docteur en France¹. La bibliographie renvoie néanmoins à un article de Carole Christen-Lécuyer² consacré aux premières femmes diplômées, licenciées et doctoresses de l'Université de Paris : en annexe, à côté de la date « 1921 » figure enfin une « Melle Villard », « nommée maître de conférences d'anglais à Grenoble », puis « à Lyon » « en 1924 », avant d'obtenir, en 1930, « la chaire de langue anglaise et de littérature américaine » ; mais il n'est fait aucune mention de l'admirable réussite de Léonie Villard à l'agrégation d'anglais, où elle fut reçue première ex-aequo en 1908, ni de sa soutenance de thèse en Sorbonne, amphithéâtre Quinet³, en février 1915. Les deux thèses répertoriées avant la référence à la nomination de « Melle Villard » à Grenoble en 1921 sont celles, toutes deux soutenues en 1914, de « Melle Duportal⁴, reçue docteur ès lettres avec la mention très honorable », et de « Melle Zanta⁵ », « docteur en philosophie ».
- 2 Seule Françoise Huguet fait état, dans son étude sur « Les thèses de doctorat ès lettres soutenues en France de la fin du XVIII^e siècle à 1940⁶ », du travail de recherche de Léonie Villard, citant à la fois sa thèse principale, *Jane Austen, sa vie et son œuvre (1775-1817)*, et sa thèse complémentaire rédigée en anglais, *The Influence of Keats on Tennyson and Rossetti*.
- 3 Il est donc grand temps de rendre à Léonie Villard l'hommage qu'elle mérite, d'autant qu'elle fut une véritable pionnière dans le champ disciplinaire de l'anglistique dont elle explora sans relâche et sans se limiter à un genre littéraire ni à une période, de nombreux domaines de recherche : littérature britannique et américaine scrutées au triple prisme du roman, de la poésie et du théâtre, grammaire anglaise analysée à l'aune des « principales idées psychologiques » qui en sont

« l'armature cachée » (Villard 1957b, 35), histoire des idées et des échanges entre la France et les États-Unis entre le ^{xvi}^e et le ^{xix}^e siècles (Villard 1952), sans oublier sa sensibilité particulière à l'histoire des femmes, qui la conduisit, entre autres, à s'intéresser à la vie et à l'œuvre de Jane Austen ⁷.

- 4 C'est cette thèse, remarquable par son érudition, innovante par son sujet et étonnante par certaines de ses réflexions qu'il s'agit ici de redécouvrir, en gardant bien à l'esprit le contexte singulier de l'époque où elle fut rédigée, afin de se prémunir de tout jugement anachronique. En effet, on ne mesure guère à quel point le fait même de soutenir une thèse sur la vie et l'œuvre d'une femme, *a fortiori* une simple romancière dont Léonie avait d'emblée perçu la modernité ⁸, représentait en soi une entreprise novatrice et audacieuse, au début du siècle dernier. À titre de comparaison, les thèses soutenues en 1914 à Paris par Jeanne Duportal et par Léontine Zanta s'intitulaient respectivement *Études sur les livres à figures édités en France de 1601 à 1660* et *La renaissance du stoïcisme au ^{xvi}^e siècle*, des sujets apparemment plus « sérieux ».
- 5 Dès lors, différentes questions ne manquent pas de surgir : comment Léonie Villard justifie-t-elle son choix d'une romancière britannique presque inconnue en France en 1915 ? Que révèle sa bibliographie au sujet de la réception de l'œuvre austénienne en France, en Grande-Bretagne et aux États-Unis, tant par le grand public que le milieu universitaire et la critique, entre 1811 et 1913 ? Peut-on considérer qu'il s'agit là de la première thèse de doctorat soutenue sur Jane Austen dans le monde, de par son ampleur ? Enfin, quelles sont les idées principales de cette thèse et quelles approches privilégie-t-elle ?

Jane Austen, une romancière « presque ignorée » en France

La table des matières : de la vie à l'œuvre

- 6 Lorsqu'on découvre l'un des exemplaires de cette thèse de 396 pages, approuvée le 8 janvier 1914 en vue de sa publication, par A. Croiset, doyen de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Paris, et par L. Liard, vice-recteur de l'Académie de Paris, on ne peut qu'être frappé par l'ampleur du travail accompli par Léonie Villard, comme en témoignent la pertinence de sa bibliographie ainsi que la structure équilibrée de la table des matières : à l'image du titre, ce travail entendait mettre en valeur les liens entre la vie et l'œuvre de Jane Austen tout en replaçant les romans dans leur contexte littéraire, idéologique et social. Pour la première partie consacrée à la vie de Jane Austen, l'approche choisie est donc plutôt chronologique, tandis que la seconde partie privilégie une analyse thématique portant sur « Les femmes dans le roman et le roman féminin au XVIII^e siècle », puis sur « La peinture de la "gentry" dans le roman de Jane Austen », abordée dans deux chapitres distincts : « Les hommes et la vie active » et « Les femmes, l'amour et le mariage ». Trois autres chapitres intitulés « La psychologie », « L'art », « L'humour et la satire » précèdent la conclusion qui analyse à la fois « La valeur et la portée de l'œuvre de Jane Austen » ainsi que « Ses résonances dans le roman féminin de l'ère victorienne ». Comme le résume Isabelle Bour, la structure de cette thèse s'inscrit dans la continuité des travaux académiques du siècle précédent : « Villard's critical approach is still in the socio-thematic Tainean style which prevailed in the late nineteenth-century » (67).

La préface : « Faire revivre l'image charmante d'une grande et parfaite artiste »

- 7 Dans sa courte préface de deux pages, Léonie Villard part d'un constat simple pour justifier sa démarche intellectuelle : Jane Austen est injustement méconnue en France, « presque ignorée » de la critique et du grand public (3). Ce que l'on sait d'elle tient donc à de maigres références datant du siècle précédent :

Quelques pages de critique datées en 1842 où la « sensibilité douce » de Jane Austen est mentionnée parmi les qualités dont les femmes au XVIII^e siècle parent le roman féminin en Angleterre ; d'autres pages écrites en 1878 où la figure de Jane Austen est esquissée [...] une série de traductions publiées de 1815 à 1824 [...] voilà ce qu'on connaît chez nous d'une romancière que l'Angleterre compte parmi ses plus parfaits artistes de lettres et que l'originalité aussi bien que le mérite de son œuvre font qualifier d'incomparable. (3)

Dès les premières lignes pointent à la fois l'estime ressentie par Léonie Villard à l'égard de la femme de lettres et son admiration pour la qualité de ses romans, ce qui ne l'empêchera pas de faire parfois preuve d'une forme d'agacement, au fil de la thèse, au regard de certains manquements qu'elle décèle chez Austen.

- 8 Plusieurs décennies avant l'émergence du « phénomène Jane Austen » porté par une culture médiatique mondialisée friande des adaptations filmiques de ses romans, cette préface nous renseigne utilement sur ses prémices, puisque Léonie Villard précise d'emblée qu'en Angleterre, l'œuvre d'Austen « est l'objet d'un véritable culte » au début du XX^e siècle (3). Déjà ! a-t-on envie d'ajouter, mais il est vrai que cet engouement, d'abord essentiellement masculin, n'avait cessé de croître au cours du XIX^e siècle, depuis la critique élogieuse rédigée par Walter Scott dans la *Quarterly Review* lors de la parution d'*Emma* en 1816, suivie par celle de l'archevêque anglican de Dublin, Richard Whately, en 1821 — deux références majeures dûment répertoriées par Léonie dans sa bibliographie (394). D'autres écrivains et hommes politiques, tels Coleridge, Tennyson et Macaulay, rendirent hommage au talent d'Austen pendant la période victorienne, mais c'est le critique littéraire George Saintsbury qui, dans sa préface à l'édition de *Pride and Prejudice* publiée par George Allen en 1894, inventa le terme de « Janeites » pour désigner les plus fervents admirateurs de la romancière : en excellente chercheuse, Léonie avait bien relevé l'importance de cette édition qui figure également dans sa bibliographie (392).
- 9 Le passage où Léonie Villard précise son approche et justifie son travail présente un double intérêt. Si, par la circonspection et l'humilité qui s'en dégagent, il semble faire écho à certaines déclarations d'Austen sur les limitations inhérentes à son art, il nous

permet, par ailleurs, de mieux mesurer, en filigrane, le difficile positionnement des premières étudiantes en thèse, qui semblent contraintes à un véritable exercice d'équilibriste :

À côté des biographies où la vie de Jane Austen est reconstituée aussi exactement que le permet la destruction d'une partie sans doute considérable et certainement très importante de sa correspondance, il nous a semblé qu'une nouvelle biographie, sans s'appuyer sur des documents inédits et sans apporter aucune révélation nouvelle, trouverait son excuse et sa raison d'être dans la manière dont elle présenterait des faits et utiliserait des documents déjà connus. Cette nouvelle biographie ne saurait tenter d'être une étude de psychologie littéraire — les lettres et les romans de Jane Austen ne contiennent point d'énigme et les yeux clairs qui nous sourient du fond de deux précieux portraits ne cachent point de secrets, — son but est seulement de faire revivre l'image charmante d'une femme qui, à ses moments de loisir, fut une grande et parfaite artiste. Dans le récit de sa vie, nous avons essayé de mêler, comme ils s'y mêlèrent en réalité, les joies familiales, les succès mondains d'une jeune fille spirituelle et jolie, l'amour des chiffons, du bal, de la parure, et la composition de six romans aujourd'hui classiques. (3-4)

- 10 Alors que la plupart de ces affirmations apparaissent désormais complètement dépassées, réductrices, voire déplacées, notamment à l'aune de la critique féministe, il faut se garder de tout jugement anachronique, eu égard à la teneur des écrits sur Austen, que ce soit en France ou en Grande-Bretagne, publiés en amont de la thèse de Léonie Villard. D'ailleurs, dans la partie socio-thématique consacrée à l'œuvre romanesque, Léonie adopte une approche résolument plus moderne en intégrant les questions de la condition et du rôle des femmes à l'analyse de la représentation d'une société en pleine transition, tant en termes de classes que de valeurs :

Dans la partie consacrée à son œuvre, nous avons tenté de dégager du roman de Jane Austen à côté de sa valeur psychologique et littéraire, une peinture de la famille et de la société anglaise dans une classe qui subsiste encore, mais dont les traditions et l'esprit disparaissent rapidement sous la poussée de forces nouvelles et hostiles. De plus, à l'heure où la condition et le rôle de la femme soulèvent les plus graves problèmes, il a paru intéressant d'étudier chez les héroïnes de Jane Austen une conception de la vie féminine

et une vision de la société dont un siècle de transformations morales et sociales nous sépare aujourd'hui. (4)

- 11 Les derniers paragraphes de la préface ne peuvent qu'émouvoir les spécialistes d'Austen au ^{xxi}^e siècle, puisqu'ils ne pourront jamais se prévaloir du privilège d'avoir rencontré les fils de James Edward Austen-Leigh, neveu de Jane Austen et auteur de la première biographie qui fit date, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) :

Pour la première partie de ce travail, le livre récent de MM. W. et R.A. Austen-Leigh, nous a fourni quelques indications précieuses, et l'hospitalité si aimable des habitants de « Hartfield » nous a permis, non seulement de consulter des lettres et documents originaux, mais aussi de connaître quelque chose du milieu dans lequel Jane Austen vécut et qu'elle donna pour cadre à son œuvre.

Les autorisations très obligeamment accordées par MM. Macmillan and C^o pour le « Mémoire de Jane Austen » et par Lord Brabourne pour les « Lettres », nous ont permis de faire au cours de cette étude les citations nécessaires. Pour le portrait de Jane Austen reproduit d'après une des illustrations de « Chawton Manor », nous adressons nos meilleurs remerciements à M. W. Austen-Leigh et à MM. Smith and Elder. (4)

Les remarques de Léonie Villard sur l'hospitalité des habitants de « Hartfield » témoignent aussi de sa liberté de mouvement puisqu'elle avait pu se rendre en Angleterre à de nombreuses reprises pour consulter des documents originaux et acheter des livres nécessaires à sa recherche.

Les études austeniennes entre 1811 et 1913 : que révèle la bibliographie établie par Léonie Villard ?

- 12 Léonie Villard précise d'emblée que sa bibliographie de cinq pages est le résultat d'une sélection rigoureuse, où seuls figurent les ouvrages critiques qu'elle juge les plus pertinents :

Cette bibliographie ne contient pas une liste complète des innombrables éditions modernes de l'œuvre de Jane Austen. Elle ne vise qu'à donner une liste des principales éditions ainsi que des principaux ouvrages de critique inspirés par cette œuvre. Quant aux articles de magazines et de revues qui ont paru depuis 1871, leur nombre est trop considérable — et leur valeur souvent trop minime — pour qu'on ait essayé d'en donner ici la liste. (391)

- 13 Cette bibliographie nous permet de comprendre comment s'est constituée la renommée de Jane Austen en Grande-Bretagne et aux États-Unis, de la parution anonyme de *Sense and Sensibility*, en 1811, à celle du dernier ouvrage critique cité, *Jane Austen: A Criticism and Appreciation* (Percy Fitzgerald, London : Jarrold & Sons, 1913). Austen avait, en effet, décidé de publier son premier roman avec l'unique mention « By a Lady » tant elle craignait d'apparaître comme « une bête sauvage » aux yeux du public et de compromettre la réputation de sa famille. C'est son frère Henry qui révéla enfin l'identité de la romancière à l'origine de *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), de *Mansfield Park* (1814) et de *Emma* (1816), dans la courte notice biographique qui accompagnait la publication posthume de *Persuasion* et de *Northanger Abbey* en 1818.

Les traductions

- 14 Comme le montre la bibliographie élaborée par Léonie, les premières traductions des romans, à commencer par *Sense and Sensibility*, paraissent en France dès 1815. Cependant, la version proposée par Isabelle de Montolieu, femme de lettres, romancière et traductrice suisse, et intitulée *Raison et Sensibilité ou les deux manières d'aimer*, relève alors moins d'une traduction que d'une réécriture parfois très fantaisiste, mais qui contribua à faire circuler le nom de Jane Austen en France et en Suisse. La bibliographie dresse ainsi la liste des traductions les plus connues, dont la fidélité au texte d'Austen n'était souvent que très relative, comme l'indiquent les sous-titres choisis : *Le Parc de Mansfield ou les trois cousines*, traduit de l'anglais par H. V., Paris, 1816 (4 vol., in-12) ; *La nouvelle Emma, ou les caractères anglais du siècle*, traduit de l'anglais, Paris, 1816 (4 vol., in-12) ; *La famille Eliot, ou l'ancienne inclination*, traduction libre de l'anglais par Mme de Montolieu, Paris, 1821 (2 vol., in-12) ; *Orgueil et Prévention*, traduit de

l'anglais par Mlle X... (Eloïse Perks), Paris, 1821 (3 vol., in-12) ; *Orgueil et Préjugé*, traduit de l'anglais, Genève et Paris, 1822 (4 vol., in-12) ; et *L'abbaye de Northanger*, traduit de l'anglais par Mme H. F. (Hyacinthe de Ferrières), Paris, 1824 (3 vol., in-12). S'il était également possible de se procurer en France les romans d'Austen dans leur version originale, comme le faisait Léonie, dans une librairie de Lyon, ils n'étaient guère recherchés tant la scène littéraire française était déjà riche d'auteurs célèbres et prolifiques. De plus, la médiocre qualité des éditions françaises contribuait à donner une image déformée de l'œuvre d'Austen. On note qu'aucune traduction nouvelle n'est mentionnée entre 1824 et 1882. La première traduction française de qualité fut, en effet, celle de *Northanger Abbey* par Félix Fénéon, qui ne parut qu'en 1899 sous le titre *Catherine Morland*. Si Léonie Villard connaît bien toutes ces traductions, elle leur préfère cependant les éditions originales des romans, dont elle se délecte grâce à sa maîtrise de la langue : elle n'en cite pas moins de trente-six en bibliographie, ce qui témoigne à la fois de sa parfaite connaissance du marché de l'édition et de sa passion pour l'objet livre, comme en atteste son fonds.

Les ouvrages de critique

- 15 Dans la partie consacrée aux ouvrages de critique, elle mentionne, juste après Scott et Whately, le Pr. Philarète Chasles, de l'institut de Paris, puisqu'il fut le premier universitaire français à évoquer le nom de Jane Austen dans un article intitulé « Du roman en Angleterre depuis Walter Scott », publié en 1842 dans la *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Austen y est expédiée en quelques mots dénués de pertinence, entre deux références condescendantes à Miss Ferrier et Miss Burney : « Miss Ferrier déploya une prédilection marquée pour la satire des ennuyeux et des sots, Miss Austen un mélange de sensibilité douce, et Miss Burney une malice très spirituelle » (Chasles 194). C'est cette formule peu judicieuse et surannée que Léonie reprend à dessein, dès la première phrase de sa préface, pour montrer que son travail vient combler une lacune, d'autant que Chasles réduit ces trois femmes de lettres à n'être que les « petites-filles » de Richardson (Chasles 194).
- 16 Les « autres pages écrites en 1878 où la figure de Jane Austen est esquissée » font référence à l'article de Léon Boucher, « Le roman

classique en Angleterre », également publié dans la *Revue des Deux Mondes* à la suite d'une nouvelle édition, en 1877, du *Memoir of Jane Austen* qui avait ravivé, en France, un certain intérêt pour la romancière. Quelques années avant de mourir, James Edward Austen-Leigh (1798-1874) s'était attelé à la rédaction de ses souvenirs alors que la génération qui avait côtoyé sa tante disparaissait et qu'il devenait urgent d'écrire une notice biographique aussi complète que possible, étayée par les documents familiaux encore détenus par la fratrie. Si les questions se multipliaient, à la fois dans le cercle familial et au-delà, sur la personnalité, le caractère et la vie amoureuse d'Austen, il s'agissait aussi de contrôler le récit familial tout en faisant mieux faire connaître sa vie et son œuvre à un lectorat victorien captivé par les romans foisonnants de Charles Dickens, d'Elizabeth Gaskell ou de George Eliot — des auteurs qui avaient une parfaite connaissance de l'œuvre austenienne⁹. Tandis que le succès de ce *Memoir* publié en 1870 joua un rôle majeur dans la réception des romans d'Austen, il influença également l'image que le lectorat avait de l'autrice, représentée comme une humble *spinster* qui, tel l'ange victorien du foyer, écrivait uniquement pour distraire sa famille, et non dans une perspective professionnelle visant à se constituer un revenu tout en élevant le genre romanesque. Cette première biographie, qui figure naturellement dans la bibliographie de Léonie (392), fit l'objet de plusieurs éditions par Richard Bentley entre 1871 et 1877, agrémentées par la publication tardive de *Lady Susan*, seul roman épistolaire d'Austen et que Léonie prend le soin d'analyser dans sa thèse. Ce *Memoir*, cité par Léon Boucher en tête de son article, est donc à l'origine des lignes que le critique français consacre à Austen en 1878, dont il reconnaît, presque à contrecœur, l'extraordinaire renommée :

On lui a longtemps préféré, dans l'art de peindre les mœurs, des rivales heureuses dont la génération présente sait à peine les noms ; mais aujourd'hui c'est de son côté que penche la balance, et, si ses contemporaines autrefois célèbres eurent du talent, on est bien forcé de reconnaître que seule elle eut du génie. (Boucher 450)

17 Certains jugements péremptoires de Boucher, lorsqu'il affirme que les romans d'Austen « ressemblent à son existence : ils sont sans prétention et sans éclat » (Boucher 455), expliquent peut-être,

comme le montre la bibliographie de Léonie, l'absence d'intérêt critique pour la romancière en France, entre 1878 et 1914. Or, elle connaît au même moment une renommée croissante en Grande-Bretagne, avec la parution à Londres, en 1882, de *Jane Austen and Her Works*, de Sarah Tytler – pseudonyme choisi par la célèbre romancière écossaise Henrietta Keddie pour certaines de ses publications.

Premiers travaux universitaires aux États-Unis et en Allemagne

- 18 En 1883 paraît aux États-Unis le premier travail universitaire sur Jane Austen, qui s'apparente d'ailleurs plus à un long essai qu'à une dissertation visant à obtenir le grade de docteur. Si Léonie ne mentionne pas ce précédent académique dont elle n'eut sans doute pas connaissance, il fait désormais partie du champ des études austeniennes pour des raisons aussi évidentes qu'étonnantes¹⁰. Comme l'explique Devoney Looser dans *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017), l'auteur de ce premier travail universitaire sur Austen était un brillant étudiant américain, William Henry George Pellew (1859-1892), qui avait découvert Austen dans les années 1880 lors de cours dispensés par un arrière-petit-fils de Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Sergeant Perry, alors professeur de littérature à l'université de Harvard et critique littéraire proche de Henry James (Looser 182). La thèse de Pellew prouve que l'œuvre de Jane Austen était déjà considérée, outre-Atlantique, comme suffisamment respectable et édifiante pour être enseignée à des étudiants masculins lors de conférences consacrées à la littérature anglaise du XVIII^e siècle, à une période où les humanités s'ouvraient à la littérature britannique des siècles précédents tout en conservant leur ancrage dans les classiques grecs et latins. Pellew publia sa thèse sous la forme d'un essai d'une cinquantaine de pages, intitulé *Jane Austen's Novels* (1883). Léonie aurait incontestablement apprécié les nombreuses références de Pellew à Richardson, Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis, Fielding, Burney et Edgeworth, preuve de sa vaste culture littéraire, tout comme certaines de ses remarques sur le style si précis d'Austen, qui savait éviter tout artifice pour « décrire avec précision ce qu'elle voyait¹¹ ». Henry James, à qui Pellew avait envoyé son livre, salua, dans leur

correspondance, cette initiative de passer « cette délicieuse Jane » au crible d'une approche scientifique, même s'il trouvait que Pellew faisait encore preuve de trop de modération dans ses critiques envers Austen, jugée bien inférieure à George Eliot et Charlotte Brontë (Looser 187).

- 19 La deuxième thèse, d'une centaine de pages, consacrée à Jane Austen et au développement du roman bourgeois au XVIII^e siècle, ne figure pas non plus dans la bibliographie de Léonie Villard puisqu'elle fut rédigée en Allemagne, en 1910, par Julius Frankenberger : « *Jane Austen und die Entwicklung des Englischen Bürgerlichen Romans im Achtzehnten Jahrhundert* » (*The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe* xxiv).
- 20 La thèse de doctorat de Léonie Villard apparaît, par conséquent, comme l'une des trois premières au monde, si ce n'est la première par son ampleur, avec ses 396 pages. Il s'agit incontestablement de la première thèse sur Austen à avoir été rédigée par une femme en vue de l'obtention du grade de docteur ès lettres.

Leslie Stephen et la canonisation d'Austen

- 21 Léonie Villard ne manque pas d'indiquer une référence majeure qui marque une étape essentielle dans la reconnaissance de l'œuvre d'Austen : en 1885, l'historien Leslie Stephen, éditeur du *Dictionary of National Biography*, l'ouvrage de référence sur les figures importantes de l'histoire du Royaume-Uni, y fait figurer Austen dès la première édition — aiguisant sans doute également la curiosité de sa fille, Virginia Woolf, pour la romancière.
- 22 Le regain d'intérêt pour Austen passe alors à nouveau par les États-Unis, lorsque Oscar Fay Adams, originaire de Boston, entreprend de nouvelles recherches : en 1889, il se rend en Angleterre, dans le Hampshire, pour prendre des photos des lieux où elle vécut, rencontrer les membres survivants de la famille afin de publier en 1891 *The Story of Jane Austen's Life*, également mentionné par Léonie, qui répertorie minutieusement les références les plus significatives. Elle mentionne aussi le livre de Constance Hill, deuxième autrice britannique après Tyler à s'intéresser à la vie d'Austen dans

son ouvrage *Jane Austen, Her Homes and Her Friends* (1902) : en 1900, cette londonienne partit sur les traces de la romancière, dans son Hampshire natal, accompagnée par sa sœur Ellen, artiste en charge des illustrations du livre. Ses rencontres avec les neveux d'Austen lui permirent de lire les trois volumes de lettres originales qu'ils avaient réussi à regrouper, ainsi que d'autres documents familiaux.

- 23 En France, en revanche, ni le lectorat ni la critique ne semblent plus s'intéresser à Austen au tournant du siècle, comme le démontre la bibliographie de Léonie, qui s'arrête en 1913. Elle ne peut donc mentionner ni la monographie sobrement intitulée *Jane Austen* que Kate et Paul Rague consacrent à la romancière en 1914 afin de la faire connaître en France, ni l'ouvrage de Bassi, *Medaglioni letterari: la vitae le opere di Jane Austen e George Eliot* qui paraît en Italie la même année. Si le livre de Kate et Paul Rague présente de fines analyses psychologiques des personnages des romans, la thèse de Léonie s'en distingue par son ancrage sociologique et thématique.

La thèse de Léonie Villard

- 24 Comme l'écrivit si bien Jane Austen en exergue de *Northanger Abbey*, qu'elle avait pris soin de réviser en 1803 et en 1816 en vue d'une nouvelle tentative de publication, de nombreuses années se sont écoulées depuis l'achèvement de ce travail et pendant cette période, « les usages, les livres et les mentalités ont considérablement changé » (Austen XLIII). Ainsi en est-il manifestement de la rédaction des thèses depuis 1914, car ce qui frappe le lecteur contemporain, dès les premiers paragraphes, est le ton plus poétique et bucolique que scientifique choisi par l'impétrante, qui nous plonge immédiatement dans l'Angleterre des paysages de Constable et de Gainsborough :

« Austenland »

De vastes prairies, couvertes d'une herbe fine et drue d'un vert intense ; des haies touffues d'où s'élèvent de distance en distance de grands arbres au feuillage épais ; des chemins sinueux et encaissés dont l'étroit ruban grisâtre se perd au milieu de tant de verdure ; à l'horizon, des collines basses, profilant leurs lentes ondulations sur un ciel d'un bleu léger, voilé de brume ; dans l'air et mêlé aux fraîches senteurs végétales, le silence vivant et bruisant de la campagne,

avec la voix du vent dans les branches, des chants d'oiseaux et des bourdonnements d'insectes ; parfois un village aux quelques maisons basses groupées autour d'une église surmontée d'une massive tour carrée ; tels sont les éléments essentiels du paysage dans cette partie du Hampshire dont la ville de Basingstoke est le centre. Pas une brusque échappée, pas une perspective inattendue pour donner une note de force, un accent d'originalité à ce décor riant et doucement monotone ; tout est grâce et langueur, silence et sérénité, dans cet aimable coin de terre dont l'activité de l'homme n'a jamais troublé la paix. Entre le réseau des hautes branches et la vaste étendue des gazons mouillés, le temps semble s'être endormi depuis des siècles comme dans un asile de la tranquillité d'antan — a haunt of ancient peace. Et, dans ce coin perdu du Hampshire, maintes petites paroisses sont encore — ou à si peu de chose près — ce qu'elles étaient il y a plus d'un siècle.

Aussi n'est-il pas difficile au voyageur parcourant les environs de Basingstoke qu'on a si joliment appelés « Austenland » — la terre de Jane Austen — de retourner à plus de cent ans en arrière et d'évoquer des scènes et des figures d'autrefois. (5-6)

- 25 À cette description idyllique où « les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent » en une douce unité, Léonie ajoute des souvenirs de lectures picaresques pour peindre l'arrivée, plutôt burlesque, des parents Austen au presbytère de Steventon :

Le chemin de Deane à Steventon, deux villages à sept ou huit milles de Basingstoke, était alors comme aujourd'hui, très étroit et bordé de haies vives ; il était, de plus, creusé de si profondes ornières qu'une voiture légère n'aurait pu s'y aventurer sans courir le risque de verser. La femme du révérend George Austen, recteur de Steventon, voulant rentrer chez elle après une courte absence et trop souffrante pour faire la route à pied fut, dit-on, obligée de s'installer sur une charrette emplies de meubles destinés au presbytère. Assise sur un matelas de plumes au sommet d'une pile de tables, d'armoires et de chaises, la jeune femme arriva à Steventon dans cet équipage qui semblait emprunté à quelque cortège d'un « Roman comique ». L'incommodité d'un tel mode de transport suffit sans doute à lui enlever pour longtemps l'envie de tenter d'autres pérégrinations, car, de 1771 à 1801, les Austen demeurèrent à Steventon ou ne s'en éloignèrent qu'à de longs intervalles et pour des voyages à peine plus

importants que ceux du Vicaire de Wakefield passant de la chambre bleue à la chambre brune. Ce fut au vieux presbytère de Steventon – aujourd'hui depuis longtemps démoli – que Jane Austen, le septième enfant du révérend Austen, naquit en 1775, là aussi qu'elle passa vingt-cinq ans de sa vie et écrivit la moitié de son œuvre. (6)

- 26 Cet incipit étonnant, qui ouvre la partie consacrée à la vie de Jane Austen, revendique ainsi son double ancrage dans une culture nourrie de multiples références littéraires et dans une réalité étayée par des anecdotes prosaïques tirées du « roman familial », pour mieux donner à voir et à ressentir concrètement le milieu qui permit l'émergence de l'œuvre austenienne. C'est donc à une lecture croisée de différentes sources que cette biographie vivante et foisonnante nous convie.

L'intérêt pour les conditions économiques et sociales

- 27 Comme dans tous les romans d'Austen, le cadre bucolique cède vite la place à des considérations matérielles qui anticipent d'ailleurs les préoccupations de la critique contemporaine, lorsqu'est évoqué le statut social de la famille :

Le révérend George Austen appartenait à une classe privilégiée du clergé anglican [...] composée soit de cadets de nobles maisons pourvus des plus fructueux bénéfices dont pouvait disposer le chef de leur famille, soit de jeunes gens de moindre naissance pour qui de riches parents achetaient une cure. [...] Les membres de cette classe se trouvaient, dès leur entrée dans les ordres, en possession d'un revenu qui suffisait à leur assurer une existence conforme à leurs goûts et à leur éducation. (6-7)

Il s'agit là d'une vision plus optimiste que réaliste de la situation financière des Austen, dont le problème majeur fut justement l'inadéquation récurrente entre leur statut et l'état de leurs finances, mais Léonie Villard n'avait pas accès aux documents utilisés dans les biographies ultérieures. Si elle a raison de classer les Austen dans un « milieu provincial et traditionnaliste, simple de mœurs et aristocratique de tendances » (12), son analyse reste exagérément manichéenne quand elle affirme qu'à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, « la gentry

qui demeurerait à l'écart de tous les grands courants de la pensée ou de l'opinion, n'était ni atteinte, ni même menacée par la misère et les angoisses que faisaient naître, dans tous les autres milieux, les dangers de la situation politique » (47).

Jane, vue par Léonie

- 28 Lorsqu'elle s'applique à cerner la personnalité de Jane Austen, Léonie Villard mentionne d'abord l'influence de son milieu social et familial :

Son savoir ne fut jamais ni étendu ni profond, mais du moins elle n'entendit à Steventon que ce langage correct soigné dont se servaient alors les gens de bonne éducation. Elle apprit à parler et à écrire dans un style dont la simplicité même était une élégance, cependant que son jugement et son sens du ridicule trouvaient à s'exercer dans l'observation des faits de la vie journalière. (20)

- 29 Elle rend par la suite hommage à « l'honnêteté scrupuleuse » de la jeune femme qui se refusa à envisager une union où « l'intérêt compterait pour beaucoup et l'amour pour rien ou peu de chose » (42). Son analyse subtile du sentiment amoureux révèle sans doute aussi une affinité d'expérience avec Austen, restée célibataire comme elle :

La nature de Jane Austen était de celles chez qui l'éclosion du sentiment est lente et tardive. Il faut à de pareilles natures, vives et saines, mais qui veulent avant tout connaître le spectacle de la vie et se plaisent au jeu divers des apparences, qu'elles aient dépassé la première jeunesse pour voir l'amour et la tendresse fleurir en elles. Le développement de leur sensibilité se produit peu à peu sous l'influence des forces de la vie, et, mieux encore que dans le bonheur et la joie, il s'opère sûrement dans la douleur ou dans la tristesse d'un bel espoir déçu. (43)

- 30 En revanche, Léonie ne peut cacher son agacement face au manque de compassion et de charité envers les plus démunis qu'elle décèle dans certains comportements d'Austen, dont elle admire tant, par ailleurs, le « clair génie » (185) :

Son indifférence envers ce qui n'atteint ni elle ni les siens s'accompagne d'un trait qui choque et semble indiquer dans son être moral une pauvreté, une sécheresse regrettable : elle ne sait pas laisser parler en elle la pitié humaine. Elle donne aux siens affection et dévouement, mais elle ne fait là qu'élargir son égoïsme puisqu'elle se refuse toujours à donner un mot de sympathie, une pensée de compassion, aux douleurs que ses yeux ne verront point. Son bon sens, ordinairement si juste, et son esprit pratique ont ici quelque chose d'étroit, de mesquin, qui font souhaiter de trouver à leur place moins de raison et plus de tendresse. (49)

- 31 De même, Léonie Villard regrette qu'Austen ait négligé de représenter les classes inférieures dans ses romans : « Pour elle, il existe dans le monde une classe de gens qui sont nés pour être pauvres, mal nourris, asservis à toutes les besognes trop basses ou trop rudes pour les créatures d'essence supérieure dont la gentry et l'aristocratie se composent » (216). Enfin, elle déplore l'absence totale d'intérêt pour les animaux dans son œuvre : « Sur ce point, sa sensibilité et, partant, son art, sont en défaut. Elle ne dit rien des animaux parce qu'ils ne lui inspirent ni intérêt ni affection. La comédie de salon qu'est son roman ne fait aucune place à la vie des bêtes » (337). Ces remarques sont étonnantes par leur modernité puisqu'elles anticipent l'émergence actuelle des « études animales » (*animal studies*), un champ de recherche en plein développement dont les analyses portent sur les relations anthropozoologiques et sur les représentations de la place des animaux dans la culture, l'art ou le langage.
- 32 Comme son modèle, Léonie sait autant jouer de la pointe acérée que de la touche exquise lorsqu'elle évoque, par exemple, les difficultés rencontrées par Austen à Bath en termes de créativité : « Son génie était de ceux qui ne s'expriment que dans l'isolement et la quiétude, alors que, loin de toute activité extérieure, l'être se donne tout entier à saisir le jeu et le ressort secret des apparences » (117).

L'œuvre d'Austen dans la littérature du XVIII^e siècle

- 33 La deuxième partie de la thèse propose des analyses psychologiques, sociales et sociologiques souvent fines et subtiles des romans

d'Austen et de leurs héroïnes, dont Léonie montre la spécificité en les comparant aux personnages féminins de Richardson, de Goldsmith ou de Fielding qui incarnaient plus un idéal moral préconçu que des qualités naturelles individualisées (295). Le panorama qu'elle brosse de la littérature du XVIII^e siècle depuis Daniel Defoe rend compte des grandes étapes ayant jalonné l'évolution du genre romanesque, qui se détourne un temps du réalisme sous l'impulsion romantique, pour explorer le merveilleux ou le fantastique à travers des scènes de mystère et de terreur gothiques, tandis que le roman féminin continue à trouver sa matière dans la vie contemporaine. Pour Léonie Villard, la complexité et l'intérêt du genre romanesque à cette période tiennent à ce qu'il s'enrichit « de toutes les variations que brodent sur une trame commune l'activité humaine et le jeu des événements », reflétant ainsi « les apparences et l'âme même du siècle » (187).

- 34 C'est dans cette partie qu'apparaissent les idées principales de sa thèse qui met clairement en évidence les liens entre Austen et les romancières qui l'ont inspirée, comme Frances Burney et Maria Edgeworth. Si elle n'évoque guère la portée politique inhérente au développement du « roman féminin » créé par « Miss Burney », elle perçoit judicieusement l'importance de cette romancière dans l'histoire littéraire puisque c'est avec *Evelina* (1778) que « le jugement des femmes sur la vie et leur vision du réel reçoivent dans le roman une expression directe et vraie » (187) : en effet, le roman féminin mêle peinture de la société et analyse psychologique, tout en trouvant « sa matière dans la vie contemporaine » faite de considérations matérielles. Léonie estime, en outre, que la réussite d'Austen tient à sa capacité à créer des héroïnes qui « vivent et agissent dans un milieu psychologique peu différent du nôtre » (295), tout en étant dotées d'une « spirituelle vivacité » et d'un « charme dont personne avant elle n'avait su parer la femme sans l'élever au-dessus du commun niveau de l'humanité » (296). Quant à l'humour d'Austen, qui demeure modéré, juste et délicat, il « a l'inestimable pouvoir d'illuminer, à mesure qu'il les atteint, les existences les plus plates » (367).

L'étude psychologique

- 35 C'est dans les passages consacrés à l'étude psychologique que se déploie toute la finesse d'analyse de Léonie Villard, qui rend un hommage appuyé aux « instantanés psychologiques » dont Austen nous laisse le soin de dégager la signification plus large (301). Si, à la première lecture, ses romans semblent appartenir au genre de la comédie de mœurs, leurs représentations subtiles et nuancées les rapprochent de la comédie de caractères, où « l'étude psychologique orientée vers l'individuel arrive à la vérité universelle » (307). Léonie a le sens de la formule quand elle écrit, par exemple, au sujet d'Elizabeth Bennet, qu'il y a chez cette héroïne « quelque chose qui échappe à l'analyse, une force mystérieuse, une vertu secrète qui la dépasse elle-même » (61). Cependant, sa connaissance si précise des personnages représente parfois un écueil puisqu'elle les évoque comme s'ils étaient réels : « Elizabeth sait que la raillerie, lorsqu'elle n'est ni amère ni méchante, est la meilleure arme contre l'orgueil, la prétention et la sottise » (63). Or, elle s'en rend si bien compte qu'elle se justifie en remarquant que « la vérité des situations et du dialogue est telle que les personnages du roman deviennent bientôt pour nous des figures familières, et les Bennet, Mr. Collins ou Lady Catherine revêtent à nos yeux l'aspect des gens rencontrés dans la vie réelle » (69). Car, affirme Léonie, « l'étude psychologique n'est pas seulement un de ces éléments dont l'œuvre est faite, elle en est la substance même, à laquelle l'art et l'humour ont prêté leurs formes » (298). Dans une magnifique formulation qui annonce l'aspiration de Virginia Woolf à traduire l'insaisissable de l'expérience intérieure dans son flux et sa complexité, Léonie Villard explique que « là où l'auteur de *Clarissa* n'avait trouvé matière qu'à de monotones et lourdes analyses, la pénétration et l'intuition de Jane Austen atteignent au rythme même de la vie intérieure » (301), réalisant « dans sa sphère étroite et baignée d'une si pure lumière, quelque chose du "vouloir vivre" moderne » (318).
- 36 La thèse de Léonie Villard est remarquable de subtilité quand elle saisit que toute l'œuvre d'Austen manifeste « une attitude nouvelle du romancier devant le réel », où « pour la première fois, la transposition de la vie à l'art s'opère dans le roman sans que le rythme, l'accent et les couleurs de la réalité soient altérées » (381).

La soutenance

- 37 Le 6 février 1915, Léonie Villard soutient sa thèse de doctorat sur Jane Austen, en Sorbonne, devant un jury forcément masculin, composé du Doyen Croiset et de Messieurs Legouis, Reynier, Morel, Verrier et Cazamian. Dans leur rapport de soutenance, les membres considèrent que cette thèse représente « un bel exemplaire de ce qu'on peut appeler désormais les “humanités anglaises” », d'autant qu'ils ont apprécié « les qualités les plus sérieuses de culture générale, de méthode et d'élégance littéraire » de l'impétrante. On y lit aussi que Léonie Villard a « montré ce mérite assez rare qui consiste à ne pas répondre à côté de l'objection. Elle est modeste, non de parti-pris, mais par intelligence et par probité¹² ». Le jury lui attribue donc le grade de docteur ès lettres, avec une mention très honorable à la majorité de 4 voix contre 2.

Postérité

- 38 Rédigée en français et publiée au moment du déclenchement du premier conflit mondial, la thèse de Léonie Villard ne connut malheureusement pas le même écho que son ouvrage ultérieur, *La Femme anglaise au XIX^e siècle et son évolution d'après le roman anglais contemporain* (Paris, Henri Didier, 1920), qui fit l'objet d'un compte rendu rédigé par Virginia Woolf (mais publié anonymement) le 18 mars 1920 dans le *Times Literary Supplement* sous le titre « Men and Women¹³ ».
- 39 Cette thèse lui valut cependant d'être lauréate, en 1917, du prix littéraire Rose-Mary Crawshay décerné par l'Académie britannique nouvellement créée, en 1902 : d'une valeur de 100 livres sterling, ce qui représentait une somme non négligeable à l'époque, ce prix était « destiné à récompenser tous les trois ans la meilleure étude de littérature anglaise écrite par une femme ». Le journal *Le Temps* du 22 septembre 1917 mentionne une telle distinction, à la demande du ministère de l'Instruction publique, dont les représentants félicitent « Melle Villard », alors « professeur d'anglais au lycée de jeunes filles de Lyon », pour « sa remarquable étude récente sur la vie et l'œuvre de Jane Austen », tout en se réjouissant du « libéralisme qui anime le conseil de l'Académie britannique et de l'estime en laquelle il tient la

critique de nos anglicisants ». Ironie du sort, on peut lire, sur la même page, l'annonce du décès de Louis Liard, recteur honoraire de l'Académie de Paris, qui avait approuvé la publication de la thèse de Léonie (*Le Temps*, 22 septembre 1917, 3)¹⁴.

- 40 Dans leur *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* publiée en 1924, les professeurs É. Legouis et L. Cazamian, membres du jury de soutenance, empruntent manifestement des expressions à la thèse de Léonie lorsqu'ils évoquent, par exemple, le style de Jane Austen, « baigné de lumière » (927), mais sans la citer. Seule une brève référence à son nom et à sa thèse, « (J.A.) », figure à la fin d'une note de bas de page au milieu d'autres indications bibliographiques (note 1, 926), et sans plus de distinction.
- 41 Ce n'est qu'en 1953 que le critique Noel J. King évoquera cette thèse dans son article intitulé « Jane Austen in France », publié dans *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, reconnaissant enfin l'apport de Léonie Villard aux études austeniennes sur le plan international.
- 42 En France, il faudra attendre 1975 et les commémorations du bicentenaire de la naissance d'Austen pour qu'une autre thèse lui soit enfin consacrée. Tandis que Léonie Villard expliquait dans sa préface que son travail « ne saurait tenter d'être une étude de psychologie littéraire », Pierre Goubert choisit, soixante ans plus tard, de rédiger sa thèse sur ce sujet. Son *Étude psychologique de la romancière* ne mentionne que brièvement le travail de Léonie Villard, dans la bibliographie annotée, pour les raisons suivantes :

Nous n'avons encore jamais eu l'occasion de faire référence dans notre ouvrage à la thèse de Léonie Villard. Cette omission est due au moins autant à l'orientation particulière de cette étude qu'à un état de l'information qui a beaucoup changé depuis 1915 et ne saurait nous faire oublier la lecture d'un des livres les plus fins et les plus agréables à lire qui aient été écrits sur notre auteur. (Goubert 493)

- 43 On note enfin qu'en 2017, la maison d'édition Routledge s'est intéressée au travail de Léonie avec la parution d'un livre intitulé *Jane Austen: A French Appreciation* (Léonie Villard et R. Brimley Johnson), où seule une partie de la thèse traduite en anglais est publiée.

Conclusion

- 44 La thèse de Léonie Villard va bien au-delà de l'objectif modestement énoncé dans la préface, qui n'entendait proposer qu'une « nouvelle biographie de la romancière » : avec une intuition sûre et fulgurante, cette pionnière des études austeniennes avait décelé, dès 1914, l'importance que prendrait Jane Austen dans l'histoire littéraire. Elle ne cessa de s'interroger sur les multiples raisons qui expliquent l'attrait exercé par cette œuvre romanesque et qui tiennent, en partie, à « quelque chose de miraculeux », comme « ce pouvoir d'échapper au temps et de ne point être atteint par les fluctuations du goût, lequel à toutes les époques a caractérisé les œuvres que l'on s'accorde à nommer classiques » (Villard 1957a, 225). Cependant, c'est dans ses carnets de guerre que Léonie Villard rend peut-être son plus bel hommage à Jane Austen, alors qu'elle évoque la crainte de bombardements imminents, le 10 mai 1944, dans un contexte marqué par l'abatement et l'épuisement :

Il y a quatre ans, pour le plaisir d'éprouver un frisson de peur, nous lisions des romans policiers. Nous sommes désormais bien trop anxieux et angoissés pour lire et seules les histoires les plus banales sont les bienvenues. [...] À la campagne, j'ai relu Jane Austen et je lui sais gré de ce monde paisible qu'elle a su conserver intact, pour nous qui vivons dans ce chaos et ce marasme. (Villard 2024, 10 mai 1944, 218-219)

- 45 Cette capacité particulière de l'œuvre austenienne à nous soustraire aux tensions de la réalité, voilà, sans doute, l'une des clés les plus pertinentes pour expliquer à la fois son intemporalité et son succès persistant, en notre époque troublée.

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NOTES

1 <https://nubis.bis-sorbonne.fr/s/les-femmes-a-la-conquete/page/76_premieres-conquetes>.

2 <<https://doi.org/10.3917/tgs.004.0035>>.

3 <<https://recherches.archives-lyon.fr/media/fb575199-499a-48b6-9ede-08baea56a213.pdf>>, p. 48.

4 Et non « Melle Duporal » comme indiqué dans cet article.

5 Et non « Melle Zantal ».

6 <<http://rhe.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/?q=theses-record/2357>>.

7 Au seuil de cet article, je tiens à remercier chaleureusement notre collègue Marie Mianowski : c'est grâce à son sens de l'observation, à son intuition et sa ténacité remarquables face au portrait anonyme et invisibilisé de Léonie Villard — presque oublié, dans une salle du bâtiment Stendhal de l'Université Grenoble Alpes — que nous pouvons désormais commémorer le parcours si inspirant de celle qui fut aussi une femme d'exception. Alors que ma recherche s'intéresse aux transmissions symboliques chez les romancières britanniques des XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles, je suis d'autant plus émue de participer à cet hommage qu'il s'est avéré riche d'étonnantes synchronicités tissées sur trois décennies, tant en termes de retrouvailles, avec Margaret Jones-Davies et Valérie Favre, que de lieux, où la figure de Léonie n'a cessé d'affleurer en filigrane : à l'université de Grenoble, d'abord, où j'ai fait une partie de mes études supérieures, mais sans avoir eu connaissance, en tant qu'étudiante, de l'existence de Léonie Villard, ni de la présence des 2 600 ouvrages qu'elle avait transmis ; puis à Reading, où elle se rendait souvent et où l'université de Grenoble envoyait encore ses étudiants via le programme Erasmus en 1996 ; enfin, à la Sorbonne, amphithéâtre Quinet, où j'ai préparé l'agrégation, sans me douter que Léonie avait soutenu sa thèse à cet endroit même, ni que je soutiendrais également une thèse consacrée à Jane Austen, en Sorbonne, 90 ans après elle.

8 Voici ce que Léonie Villard écrit en 1957, à l'occasion d'une recension : « Jane Austen accomplit une œuvre, qui, dans son aspect social, contient en germe un des gains les plus précieux — la conquête de l'indépendance économique mise à part — de l'émancipation féminine et de l'égalité nécessairement relative qui s'établira plus tard entre les deux moitiés du genre humain. Car, lorsqu'on prend la peine de le remarquer, Jane Austen applique dans son œuvre les mêmes normes de jugement à tout ce qui est humain, que son observation porte sur des personnages féminins ou masculins. » (Villard 1957a, 223)

9 En 1859, le compagnon de George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, avait rendu un hommage appuyé à Austen dans un article intitulé « The Novels of Jane Austen » (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 86, juillet 1859, p. 99-113), mais il ne figure pas dans la bibliographie de Léonie Villard.

10 Comme le souligne Devoney Looser, Pellew est également passé à la postérité pour une autre bien étrange raison, inhérente à sa capacité à communiquer, depuis l'au-delà, avec une medium américaine bien connue des spécialistes du paranormal : « Pellew's beyond-the-grave communication came through 'the most famous, most trustworthy, direct-voice medium who ever lived', Leonora Piper (1859-1950), known as the 'human telephone to the spirit world'. Pellew's spirit was said to inhabit Mrs. Piper's body, using her hand to write down his words, in what was called 'automatic writing'. [...] In the 1890s, the author of the first Jane Austen thesis became the era's most prominent visitor from the great beyond. » (Looser 191-192).

11 George Pellew insiste à différentes reprises sur la spécificité et la modernité du style austenien : « Austen's ability to describe accurately what she saw » (*Jane Austen's Novels* 47), « she anticipated the scientific precision that the spirit of the age is now demanding in literature and art » (49). Dans un ouvrage ultérieur intitulé *Woman and the Commonwealth; or, A Question of Expediency* (1888), Pellew défend par ailleurs le droit de vote des femmes en des termes que Léonie Villard aurait trouvé inspirants et réconfortants : « For one individual, or for any number of individuals, to assign arbitrary, definite limits to the activity of another or of others, is an act of bigotry and injustice obviously indefensible on scientific principles. The so-called 'proper sphere' of women has, moreover, been perpetually changing. In the time of Jane Austen it was thought improper for women to write novels, twenty years ago it was thought improper for women to study medicine and

anatomy, and even to-day there are many people who think it improper for women to lecture. » (25-26)

12 Dossier professionnel de Léonie Villard (AN F17 25235), Archives nationales (Site de Pierrefitte).

13 Voir l'article de Valérie Favre dans le présent volume.

14 <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k243041x/f3.item.zoom>>.

RÉSUMÉS

Français

En 1915, Léonie Villard soutint la première thèse consacrée à Jane Austen en France, publiée sous le titre *Jane Austen, sa vie et son œuvre (1775-1817)*. C'est ce travail de recherche qu'il s'agit ici de redécouvrir dans ses différentes dimensions, en gardant bien à l'esprit le contexte singulier de l'époque où il fut rédigé : ainsi, comment Léonie Villard justifie-t-elle son choix d'une romancière britannique presque inconnue en France en 1915 ? Que révèle sa bibliographie au sujet de la réception de l'œuvre austenienne en France, en Grande-Bretagne et aux États-Unis, tant par le grand public que le milieu universitaire et la critique, entre 1811 et 1913 ? Peut-on considérer qu'il s'agit là de la première thèse de doctorat soutenue sur Jane Austen dans le monde ? Si l'objectif, modestement énoncé dans la préface, était de ne proposer qu'une « nouvelle biographie de la romancière », cette thèse remarquable par son érudition, innovante par son sujet et étonnante par certaines de ses réflexions va bien au-delà et prouve que Léonie Villard avait d'emblée compris l'importance que prendrait Jane Austen dans l'histoire littéraire.

English

In 1915, Léonie Villard defended the first doctoral thesis on Jane Austen in France, published under the title *Jane Austen, sa vie et son œuvre (1775-1817)*. This paper thus seeks to present the various aspects and ideas of this research work, bearing in mind the context of the period in which it was written in order to better comprehend Léonie Villard's specific approach: how does she justify her choice of a British novelist who was virtually unknown in France in 1915? What does her bibliography reveal about the reception of Austen's novels in France, Britain, and the United States, by the general public, academics and critics alike, between 1811 and 1913? Can Villard's work be considered as the first doctoral thesis on Jane Austen in the world? Although the aim, modestly stated in the preface, was simply to offer a "new biography of the novelist", this thesis, remarkable for its erudition, innovative for its subject and surprising for some of its reflections, actually goes much further as it also shows that Léonie Villard

understood from the outset the importance that Jane Austen would take on in literary history.

INDEX

Mots-clés

thèse de Léonie Villard, Austen (Jane), études austeniennes, histoire de la critique, littérature XVIIIe siècle, littérature XIXe siècle

Keywords

Léonie Villard's doctoral thesis, Austen (Jane), Jane Austen studies, reception studies, eighteenth-century literature, nineteenth-century literature

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Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou est maître de conférences en études anglophones à l'Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, membre du Centre d'histoire du XIX^e Siècle (Université Paris 1-Sorbonne Université) et membre associée au laboratoire PHARE (Université Paris 1). Spécialiste de l'œuvre de Jane Austen, elle lui a consacré de nombreux articles et deux ouvrages : *La représentation de l'argent dans les romans de Jane Austen. L'être et l'avoir* (collection « Des idées et des femmes », dir. Guyonne Leduc, L'Harmattan, 2012) et *Between Secrets and Screens: Sentiments under Scrutiny* (CNED / PUF, 2015). Ses recherches s'intéressent aussi à l'évolution des représentations liées à l'argent, à l'économie et à l'héritage chez les romancières des XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles — Eliza Parsons, Frances Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot — à une époque où les femmes étaient largement exclues de la production de la richesse et de la transmission du patrimoine.

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« The Proper Upkeep of [Our Foremothers'] Names » : Léonie Villard sous la plume de Virginia Woolf, et vice versa

“The Proper Upkeep of [Our Foremothers'] Names”: Léonie Villard through the Eyes of Virginia Woolf, and Vice Versa

Valérie Favre

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PLAN

« Could it be the great scholar, could it be [L— V—] herself? »

Léonie Villard au prisme de Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf au prisme de Léonie Villard

TEXTE

- 1 Romancière moderniste, essayiste prolifique, féministe engagée : différentes Virginia Woolf circulent dans les salles de classe, les rayonnages de bibliothèque et de librairie, les médias et les imaginaires culturels. Mais l'on y croise bien rarement Virginia Woolf la journaliste « au cœur de son temps » (Bernard 7), à qui l'on doit d'innombrables articles et comptes rendus critiques publiés tout au long de sa carrière dans de nombreux journaux et magazines, des deux côtés de l'Atlantique. Pourtant, c'est bien de cette Virginia Woolf-ci qu'il s'agit ici.
- 2 Le 18 mars 1920, Virginia Woolf publie dans l'hebdomadaire britannique *The Times Literary Supplement* un compte rendu anonyme intitulé « Men and Women » (voir Woolf [1920] 1988, 192-195), consacré à un ouvrage paru la même année, de l'autre côté de la Manche : *La Femme anglaise au XIX^e siècle et son évolution d'après le roman anglais contemporain*, par Léonie Villard (voir Villard 1920). Ce compte rendu woolfien a depuis fait l'objet de multiples rééditions en langue anglaise et d'une traduction française

par Sylvie Durastanti, sous le titre « Hommes et femmes » (Woolf [1920] 1983), paru il y a plus de cinquante ans maintenant. En dépit de son extrême brièveté, « Men and Women » évoque des questions qui seront amenées à jouer un rôle prépondérant dans l'œuvre woolfienne, notamment dans la réflexion que l'autrice mène sur les femmes, la littérature et l'histoire. Aussi ce texte est-il souvent évoqué par les spécialistes de Woolf qui s'intéressent à sa pensée féministe et à sa réflexion sur le genre (au sens de *gender* en anglais), mais on ne peut malheureusement pas en dire autant de l'ouvrage qui fit l'objet de ce compte rendu woolfien, *La Femme anglaise au XIX^e siècle*, ou de son autrice, Léonie Villard.

- 3 Ce constat me conduit durant l'été 2021 à m'intéresser à Villard, en vue du colloque *Virginia Woolf, lectures françaises*¹. C'est dans le prolongement de cette réflexion que s'inscrit le présent texte. Après avoir évoqué ma rencontre fortuite avec Léonie Villard, j'interrogerai l'éclairage que Virginia Woolf, son compte rendu de *La Femme anglaise* et sa pensée féministe apportent sur Villard puis, vice versa, l'éclairage que Léonie Villard, *La Femme anglaise* et l'oubli dans lequel ce texte et son autrice sont tombés apportent sur l'œuvre de Woolf et son héritage.

« Could it be the great scholar, could it be [L— V—] herself? »

- 4 C'est sous la plume de Virginia Woolf que je croise pour la première fois le nom de Léonie Villard, à l'automne 2018, au cours de la rédaction de ma thèse de doctorat consacrée aux postérités littéraire, féministe et critique de *A Room of One's Own*. Ma réflexion porte alors sur la place de ce célèbre essai woolfien sur les femmes et la fiction dans l'œuvre de l'autrice britannique. Je n'ai que très peu de souvenirs de ma première lecture de « Men and Women », une lecture sans doute effectuée un peu rapidement, tout absorbée par la recherche d'éléments annonçant la réflexion développée dans *A Room of One's Own*. Cela se manifeste dans ma thèse où je mentionne le compte rendu de Woolf tout en omettant de préciser le titre de l'ouvrage qu'elle y évoque et le nom de son autrice (voir Favre 2021, 48), et participe ainsi bien tristement à l'invisibilisation de Léonie Villard au sein du champ académique. Pourtant, l'idée même

que Woolf a consacré un compte rendu à un ouvrage écrit par une universitaire française, somme toute sa contemporaine, opère une sorte de cristallisation dans mon esprit, puisque près de trois ans plus tard, lorsque la Société d'études woolfiennes publie un appel à communications pour son colloque consacré aux lectures françaises de Woolf, je pense très vite à ce compte-rendu, et entame mes premières recherches sur Léonie Villard.

- 5 Force est de constater que les informations alors disponibles en ligne – une brève page Wikipédia, une notice IdRef, quelques lignes de Claude Boisson dans son histoire de l'anglistique à Lyon (voir Boisson) et l'article *in memoriam* publié en 1971 dans *Études anglaises* (voir Jones-Davies et al.) – étaient lacunaires et bien souvent contradictoires. On pouvait y lire que Villard était née en 1878 ou en 1890, qu'en 1908 elle avait été la première femme à obtenir l'agrégation d'anglais où elle avait été reçue première ou deuxième, avant d'avoir soutenu à Paris en 1914 ou en 1915 sa thèse de doctorat : les sources aisément disponibles ne s'accordaient guère. L'enquête menée par Marie Mianowski, et la biographie qui en est issue, assortie de la traduction du journal de guerre² de Villard, sans oublier l'exposition et la journée d'études consacrées au fonds Léonie Villard qui se sont déroulées en octobre 2023 à l'Université Grenoble Alpes, ont permis à Léonie Villard de sortir de l'oubli. Ce processus n'est pas sans évoquer ce que Woolf nommait dans le manuscrit de *A Room of One's Own* : « the proper upkeep of names » (Woolf 1992, 24), c'est-à-dire « le maintien en bonne et due forme des noms³ ».
- 6 *A Room of One's Own*, essai considéré depuis plusieurs décennies comme un classique de la littérature et de la critique féministes, est particulièrement célèbre pour la réflexion que Woolf y déploie sur les conditions matérielles de la création et sur la nécessité qu'elle y énonce, pour les femmes aspirant à écrire, de disposer d'un lieu à elles et de cinq cent livres de rente par an. On évoque aussi souvent l'idéal androgyne que Woolf associe au génie littéraire, ou encore la fable tragique de la petite sœur du grand William Shakespeare. On fait plus rarement place au propos que Woolf élabore dans ce texte sur l'histoire et son écriture, et sur la place que l'histoire fait aux femmes, et à leurs noms.

- 7 Le *proper upkeep of names*, le maintien en bonne et due forme des noms des femmes qui nous ont précédé·e·s : voilà bien, selon Woolf, ce qui fait défaut à l'historiographie, dont les silences ont exclu les femmes de notre mémoire collective. C'est également ce qui fait défaut à la littérature et à la tradition littéraire, où les femmes, comme Woolf s'attache à le souligner tout au long de *A Room of One's Own*, quand elles ne portent pas un pseudonyme d'homme, sont réduites à l'anonymat et à l'oubli, voire au silence.
- 8 Le *proper upkeep of names*, le maintien en bonne et due forme des noms des femmes qui nous ont précédé·e·s, c'est bien la nécessité critique, dans tous les sens de ce terme, que l'universitaire féministe états-unienne Jane Marcus a tâché de mettre en lumière dans un essai intitulé *Virginia Woolf, Cambridge, and A Room of One's Own: "The Proper Upkeep of Names"*. Dans cet essai, Marcus interroge la place octroyée aux femmes au sein de l'université, à Cambridge et ailleurs, via ce processus de maintien du nom, dont Marcus ne cesse de souligner la dimension symbolique — « It is in colleges that the "proper upkeep" of names is practised, with plaques and monuments and statues and rooms with names on them » (Marcus 12) — mais aussi la dimension éminemment genrée : « It is as if the tradition of keeping up men's names is deeply connected with the keeping down of women's » (51). Aussi, c'est avec une pugnacité teintée de mélancolie que Jane Marcus évoque l'effacement des femmes de l'histoire de l'université de Cambridge dans son essai : l'effacement de Woolf et des conférences qu'elle y a données, l'effacement des femmes qui luttèrent pendant près d'un siècle pour leur véritable inclusion au sein de cette institution, mais aussi l'effacement de l'universitaire britannique Jane Ellen Harrison, étudiante puis professeure à Cambridge, bien souvent considérée comme la première femme à avoir véritablement fait carrière universitaire en Angleterre. Si l'on en croit Jane Marcus, c'est d'ailleurs à l'absence de commémoration de Jane Harrison au sein de son université, que Woolf vient répondre lorsqu'elle convoque la figure spectrale de J— H — au sein du premier chapitre de *A Room of One's Own* :

Somebody [...] but in this light they were phantoms only, half guessed, half seen, raced across the grass [...] and then on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden, came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great