# 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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## OUTLINE

Place, Truth and Memory sites
Place, Truth and the Novel
The place we speak from and the truth we speak
    Precolonial truths or untruths
    Multicultural alternative truths
    The conundrum of truth and precarious place in refugee literature

## TEXT

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>.

## INDEX

**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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Christine Vandamme is a senior lecturer at Grenoble Alpes University, where she teaches British literature in the nineteenth century as well as postcolonial literature in the 20th and 21st centuries. Her field of expertise is that of space, place and literature but also space, place and identity, from a narratological and deconstructive perspective but also with a particular interest in the ideological, political and ethical implications of such spatial representations. She has published extensively on Joseph Conrad, Malcolm Lowry and Patrick White. She published a book on Conrad's *Lord Jim* in 2004 and co-edited a volume on *Tropes and the Tropics* in Conrad's fiction in 2010. She also co-edited *Science and Empire in the Nineteenth Century* in 2010. Lately, she has published mostly on the representation of space and place in Australia with a particular focus on the "bush", whether literary (Henry Lawson, Patrick White, David Malouf) or pictorial (Sydney Nolan, Russell Drysdale). Her last collective volume was published in

2021, together with co-editor Andre Dodeman: *Space, Place and Hybridity in the National Imagination,* in the English-speaking postcolonial world.
She also published an article dealing with related issues in 2014: "'So little more than voices': Conrad, Modernism, and Resistance", *Conradiana*, vol. 46, no. 3, autumn 2014, pp. 179–194.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/060310928
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ISNI : http://www.isni.org/0000000431653346
BNF : https://data.bnf.fr/fr/14500849