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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 Morrisson, 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 to 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"—Habgood-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 Habgood-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 Habgood-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 to 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

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