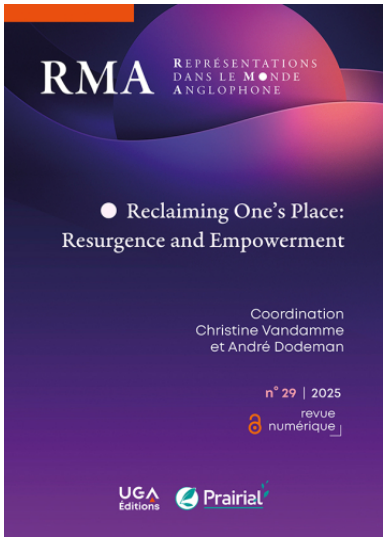

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Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

Se faire une place : résurgence et pouvoir

Edited by Christine Vandamme and André Dodeman

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INTRODUCTION

This volume is the result of the one-day conference organized by the LISCA research group at Université Grenoble Alpes in November 2024. The conference focused on the concept of resurgence as the artistic and hermeneutic phenomenon that enables texts to make certain forces and positions stand out or rise to the surface. This volume seeks to explore moments of epistemological break when the invisible becomes visible, when one's gaze can settle and concentrate on what was, until then, lost in the background, made invisible or objectified as part of the landscape. In addition, American author Eddy L. Harris has done us the honour of being present at the conference and we have decided to publish his presentation and some of his conversations with colleagues and students.

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Introduction. — Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

Se faire une place : résurgence et pouvoir

Christine Vandamme and André Dodeman

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TEXT

Acknowledgements
First we would like to thank Eddy L. Harris, an eminent writer known for his reflections on American identity and its complex relations to the black community, who generously accepted to be part of the project from the conference itself to the final publication. It has been a great honour and pleasure to be able to discuss essential political and ethical issues with him and to then be able to share his views with the general public. We would also like to thank Grégory Benedetti, Vincent Bucher and Cyril Besson for their respective contributions in either contacting Eddy L. Harris in the first place (Grégory), agreeing to interview Eddy L. Harris (Vincent) and last but not least, organising the conference and helping out in the reviewing process (Cyril). We also owe abundant thanks to the LISCA research team and the ILCEA4 research centre for supporting the project both financially and with their trust and enthusiasm. Lastly, we would like to express our special thanks to the Représentations dans le monde anglophone editorial team, especially Estelle Rivier for her warm support of the volume project and her close proofreading of the final manuscript as well as Victoria Robert for her very thorough and time-consuming work in uploading the issue on Prairial.

1 Why should we take an interest in "resurgence" and what do we mean by "resurgence"? This is a question that was the object of a one-day conference organised in Grenoble last 21 November 2024. More than 15 years before, the same issue was examined but from a slightly different angle by the 48th SAES annual Conference held in Orléans in 2008. The call for papers that was issued for the occasion defined resurgence as follows: "The principle of resurgence presupposes the existence of an underground movement and flow leading to a certain point of emergence; the tension between depth and surface, disappearance and reappearance, latency and manifestation."[1]

In other words, the river metaphor suggested that language, artworks and cultural or historical developments, like an underground river, have an epiphanic dimension enabling old forms, references, canonical texts or iconic places to resurface, with a new meaning or force. But the power dynamics at work in such processes were barely mentioned and this was precisely one of the main objectives of the conference organised at Université Grenoble Alpes. The political, social and environmental dimensions of such a concept of resurgence cannot be separated from the related power-knowledge studied by Foucault, especially at a time in history when both ecological concerns and Indigenous epistemologies re-emerge with even more urgency. The articles collected in this volume focus on such environmental and political concerns and specifically span a wide range of postcolonial cultures, from the settler colony of Australia to the United States and India, all of which share narratives of dispossession and displacement that have been challenged by the re-emergence and resurgence of Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews predating colonialism. Such issues are closely linked to that of the place acknowledged or denied to other people and cultures. How do these silenced voices, effaced bodies and submerged memories or histories come back with a vengeance through artworks? What links can be made between the idea of knowing one's place and reclaiming it on the one hand and resurgence and empowerment on the other?

2 The main objective of the conference was to show that such underground currents of resistance, resilience and deep transformative powers had always been there, beating, pulsing, throbbing. Inviting black American author Eddy L. Harris to speak about his canoe journey down the Mississippi was thus both a great honour for Grenoble and a perfect occasion to discuss such issues revolving around the flow of history along the Mississippi River, how it came to stand for the nation as a whole and could be partly reappropriated or at least claimed by the minorities who had up till then been partly effaced in the grand narrative of the American nation: the black minority Eddy L. Harris is speaking for but also the Native Americans themselves who resurface beautifully under his pen. Hearing him speak about his journey down the Mississippi and the social and political vision underpinning it was such a moment of

poetic and political emergence and resurgence. Like many travel narratives and memoirs, Harris's *Mississippi Solo* is about sharing the stories of Americans whose voices are rarely heard outside of their home towns and it challenges our assumptions about American society and identity. When starting out on his canoe journey down the Mississippi River, Harris encourages his fellow American citizens to go to places they considered inaccessible or forbidden for them to enter:

> […] there is no place on earth where I can't go, where I don't belong, and nothing I can't do. Forget about taboos and accepted patterns and fears—even common sense. The only restrictions are the ones I (we all) put in place. (14)

Questioning such restrictions enables Harris to draw a more nuanced portrait of America that has been constantly shaped and reshaped by its relationship with a river system so steeped in American history and culture. The River, like the mother country, ultimately carries down all of its citizens and invites them to write their own page of their nation's history and destiny. Whether white and a Mark Twain or not, adventure is present in every single page, and humour as well, and deep humanity. Eddy L. Harris writes for all the Americans who have a dream, that of feeling part of the same imagined community in the sense Anderson gave to the phrase. He gives everyone a place, even "river rat(s)" like himself: "Even the barge pilot waved down on me and this made me feel especially joyous. I was one of them. A river rat. A river *man*. And we shared a river in common" (90). Eddy L. Harris uses the Mississippi as an emblem of the nation he would like to be proud of and participate in building.

3 Resurgence has to do with regaining power and recognition for all of those who have been dropped in the dark well of history and colonial or neocolonial processes more particularly. Postcolonial criticism emerged precisely from this resistance to monological discourses of empire and nation which remapped the world along binary structures and relegated the colonized and the subalterns to the realm of the undeveloped and the savage. As Homi Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, "the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of

administration and instruction" (101). These established systems had devastating effects on the colonized peoples who were brutally assimilated and acculturated. This not only involved displacement and land dispossession but also the destruction of millennia-old knowledges, epistemologies, and cultural practices that were central to their survival and the cohesion of their communities. The lasting legacy of colonialism and slavery has led many thinkers, theorists and intellectuals to call for a decolonisation of our mind, gaze and perception, not to mention the transmission of histories and memories. In their introduction to the first issue of *Postcolonial Literatures and Arts*, Sandeep Bakshi, Christine Lorre and Kerry-Jane Wallart recall that decoloniality "presents an option which is opposed to eurocentrism, seen as a perspective that relegates other knowledge systems to the peripheries" (6). Today, the change in perspective and the resurgence of knowledge systems that contest the authority of late capitalist societies and challenge the profit-driven interests of global corporations has paradoxically led to the resurgence of authoritarian discourses which threaten the very stability of democratic countries. Such discourses thrive on nostalgia and romanticized images of a glorious past and eventually aim to go back to a simplified vision of the world. The latter is defined by binary oppositions and stereotypical representations that plan to put individuals and communities alike back in their "place". Backlash effects and resurgent discourses such as these recall the importance and centrality of "place" in postcolonial studies which address the entangled questions of justice, equality and the need to secure a safe place for all human and nonhuman beings or entities. While traditional forms of colonial domination seem to have receded in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of political decolonization, Bill Ashcroft reminds his readers that such forms have simply lived on in the guise of globalization, "grounded [like imperialism] in systems of domination that emerged from, and characterize, European modernity" (213). Reclaiming one's place in the world and securing a planet fit to support life in all its diversity can be seen as an appropriate countermeasure against the overpowering thrust of globalization which tends to promote the idea of an ultimate homogenization of cultural and political practices —"the inevitability of humanity merging into a single self", ignoring the fact that not everyone, or every community for that matter,

supports the idea of “free-market economics”: “In the narrowest possible sense [… globalization] applies to a very recent, electronically unbounded version of free-market economics” (Niezen 36).

4 Unsustainable visions of the future, whether based on images of globalism which makes itself “at home in motion rather than in a place” (Ashcroft 213) or on those of “liquid modernity” (Bauman), seldom consider the communities who foster and defend a different representation of the connection between the human, nonhuman and spiritual worlds. Postcolonial criticism has endeavoured since its inception to pay particular attention to the Indigenous communities of settler colonies like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand for instance. Jeff Corntassel reminds his non-Indigenous readers that Indigenous identities are “place-based” and that resurgence is crucial to their cultural regeneration, empowerment, and existence. In his words, “Being Indigenous today means struggling to reclaim and regenerate one’s relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization” (88). Many Indigenous cultures are struggling to promote a relational ontology that defines the human and the nonhuman in terms of relation as opposed to the Western anthropocentric approach to the natural world that tends to reorganize the world in hierarchical terms. These relational ontologies and epistemologies lie at the centre of artworks that highlight the importance and centrality of place in Indigenous cultures, so much so that Canadian professor Warren Cariou uses the term

> *territory* as a way of conceptualizing this unity of land and narrative. In [his] usage, territory can be understood as the ground of culture; the living, nurturing, relational medium in which Indigenous communities flourish, and also the entity or being(s) from whom Indigenous people learn their responsibilities. Territory is a relation, or rather a plural and ongoing set of relations. (4)

This unity of land and narrative characterizes many written and visual works by Indigenous communities. In fiction, artists like Haisla and Heiltsuk writer Eden Robinson, Ojibwe writer Richard Wagamese or Alexis Wright of the Waanyi nation, only to name a few, have tackled the many ways in which stories and land are intricately

woven into the fabric of each community. These different epistemologies resonate even more strongly today in a global context of international tensions around the exploitation of fossil fuels and the control of natural resources like water.

5 The very first article of this volume will thus present Eddy L. Harris's talk on *Mississippi Solo* and the exchanges he had with the audience afterwards as a general preamble to the question of place, resurgence and empowerment: how can and should the Mississippi River be rediscovered and explored as *territory*? How about considering the Mississippi River as a social experiment and laboratory where to scrutinise the difference between nationalist ideology and grand narratives on the one hand and human fraternity and exchange on the other? Eddy L. Harris set himself a simple goal: he wanted to test how "the *country* would treat [him]" (Harris's own words in his keynote speech) and was reassured the outcome was often much more friendly and generous than he would have expected. Eddy L. Harris starts his inaugural lecture with a very personal take on the re-election of Donald Trump and the way it seemed to once again resuscitate the pro-slavery past of the American nation, leaving him to wonder whether he himself, as a black American, had "a place in that place". And his conclusion is quite simple and sums it all up:

> What the birds and the trees and bees have learned and have to teach us—and what one man alone in his canoe can learn—is that each of us is small and each of us is big and each of us has a place. In this world. In this country. Along that river—my place as much as anyone else's.

6 The volume then turns to those "birds" and "trees" and "bees" and the question of ecopoetics. The first two articles study how contemporary Indigenous writers and poets cope with the devastating results of colonialism but in a creative fashion. The poetry and literature that focus today on the environment are part of a broader set of postcolonial and ecocritical concerns about sustainability and the compatibility between globalization and neoliberalism on the one hand and the protection of natural habitats on the other. For Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, postcoloniality and the environment have become inseparable insofar as colonial superstructures sought to dominate and exploit the

environment before subjecting its people to imperial norms. For DeLoughrey and Handley, the texts studied in the light of postcolonial ecocriticism "suggest that since the environment stands as a nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is a constitutive aspect of postcoloniality" (8). In a collective effort to promote relational ontologies, more and more ecocritics are turning towards the study of the environment and the nonhuman world, including plant and animal life.

7 Such ecocritical concerns are discussed in the first article by Anne Le Guellec which studies a single poem by Indigenous Australian poet Ellen van Neerven about the immemorial agency of trees entitled "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest": the whole poem revolves around the same object/subject—trees in a *forest*—in all their complex networks of relations with their environment, both human and non-human. Ellen van Neerven is a poet of Mununjali Yugambeh and Dutch heritage whose poem deconstructs the whole ideology consisting in considering trees as a mere commodity in complete disconnection with the *forest* of which it is a living part. Van Neerven restores agency to trees so they may be reconsidered from within Australian Indigenous ontologies more generally. To that extent such use of the *ship-shaped hole* metaphor both deconstructs western colonial and settler ideology and enables Mununjali Yugambeh ontologies to resurface and re-emerge with even more power and vitality. The use of Paul Ricœur's concept of "living metaphor" was far from self-evident in a context where decolonising our minds and critical tools is sometimes falsely associated with the systematic rejection of any major western white philosopher or critic not having worked on related issues previously, but this would mean undervaluing the power of Ricœur's illuminating insights into the hermeneutic powers of poetry and poetic language, which van Neerven herself so expertly handles.

8 In the second article, Charlène Corolleur actually furthers such reflexions in analysing the poetry of three main contemporary Indigenous Australian poets, Ellen van Neerven, Jazz Money, and Evelyn Araluen, after the 1919–1920 massive bushfires that led to the death of some one billion native animals and the disappearance of an area "greater than the size of South Korea or Scotland and Wales

combined" (Chester 245). Corolleur replaces such poets in their political and epistemological context in offering a very detailed and comprehensive synthesis of Indigenous ecopoetics worldwide, from Australian thinkers, scholars and writers to South American or Canadian ones (from Deborah Bird Rose or Alexis Wright to Craig Santos Perez or James Tully). She shows how in their poetic strategies and choice of *subject*-matter, the three poets reactivate a sacred fire that far from burning down immemorial Indigenous Australian narratives and epistemologies, contribute to their rebirth and resurgence from the burning coals of devastation.

9 The second section of this volume discusses issues of cultural identity and political representation by focusing first on Hari Kunzru's rereading of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* in his novel *The Impressionist* and then on an interview with Eddy L. Harris who generously answered questions on his latest essay *Confession américaine* and the related questions of place, resurgence and empowerment. Both Élodie Raimbault's study of Kunzru's *The Impressionist* and Harris's *Confession américaine* work together to illustrate how stereotypes, social constructs, and prejudices of the past have to be continually revisited and put to the test of space and time. First and foremost, in the third article of this volume, Élodie Raimbault defines resurgence as a means to re-examine the politics of the colonial world at the turn of the twentieth century and evince the silences of imperial rule in India and, especially, the physical and psychological violence it entailed. She demonstrates that Kunzru's *The Impressionist* is a form of "memorialization of past violence" that emerges from the intertextual resonance between the two novels that tackle the problematics of subjective identity and its formation in the colonial world. Thanks to the remarkably malleable category of the picaresque novel, protean heroes like Kim and Pran, both characterized by liminality and marginality, enable their authors to explore the interstices of colonial discourse to better highlight its fragile rigidity in the face of ever-shifting identities that seek to adapt to their subaltern positions. In Kunzru's hypertext, resurgence also rhymes with the reversal of the Orientalist gaze which can function as a "powerful postcolonial strategy", even though the novel shows that the identity of his hero is shattered beyond repair and "resonates with the postcolonial issue of the fluidity of identity". Such fluidity

also characterizes Harris's own definition of resilience and courage, the courage and dignity of Harris's mother when she decided not to give up on American ideals such as freedom, equality and justice for all, even when a white estate agent refused to have her visit houses in the Northern part of town reserved for whites: "[…] years of faith, hopes and expectations were dashed by the refusal of a stupid man, […] a lifetime of lies and violence which resurfaced despite her unceasing efforts to keep them at bay. She also had believed in them" (*Confession* 28, our translation). And yet, and this was his mother's credo as well as his own, what is more important is to decide where you are going: "It might be important to know where you came from. I prefer to worry about where I'm going" (interview). And yet, in many former colonies or formerly colonising nations which built their wealth on slavery, the past cannot be easily forgotten as it leaves deep traumatic scars which the last two articles closely scrutinise, whether in the US or in the United Kingdom.

10 The fourth article of this volume revisits the collective and intergenerational trauma caused by slavery in the United States. In Myrto Charvalia's "Waking up the Ghosts: Trauma Resurgence as a Possibility in Jesmyn Wards's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*", resurgence takes the form of the ghost or the revenant who returns to the tangible present to better illustrate the overwhelming spectrality of slavery. Ward's novel includes a ghost figure named Richie whose "specter encompasses not only his individual strife and tortuous life in prison, but also the lives of all those black people who were lynched, tortured, raped, silenced, enslaved". The novel shows that seeking to bury the traumatic memory of slavery can only result in the resurgence of spectral figures that call for individual and collective reparation and subsequent empowerment. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy demonstrates that many black people decided to focus on narratives of origin set in a reassuring African past to overcome the highly traumatic experience of slavery. The risk, he writes, is that "slavery, which is so deeply embedded in modernity, gets forgotten and the duration of a black civilization anterior to modernity is invoked in its place" (190). Seeking to discard slavery from the collective unconscious no doubt explains why the recurrent episodes of vomiting in Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* become a powerful somatic metaphor for the collective need to expel and conjure memories of

abjection. However, as the title of the novel suggests, coming to terms with slavery involves putting literacy aside and returning to art forms and practices that accompanied slave culture in the United States. Paul Gilroy reminds us once again that "the power and significance of music within the Black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language" (74). The song form ultimately becomes a "call for the unburied" to rise to the surface and remember collectively.

11 In the next and last article of the volume, Kathie Birat gives an illuminating and deeply perceptive analysis of the related themes of resurgence, voice and identity in Caryl Phillips's *Lost Child*. There is no actual ghost in Phillips's novel but definitely a sense of haunting: the story revisits Emily Brontë's original *Wuthering Heights* to have the past resurface for better or for worse to explain how variously alienated figures such as a mother and her two mixed race children adapt to a world that still bears the dark legacy of phallocracy and racism. Phillips uses two main storylines, that of Brontë's Heathcliff as the son of a female black slave barely surviving in the streets of Liverpool and Mr Earnshaw, the owner of Wuthering Heights on the one hand, and that of a single white mother, Monica, whose two sons and herself have been abandoned by the disillusioned African-Caribbean husband and father. Heathcliff's difficulties at being recognised and gaining respect despite his ultimate success at becoming a country squire and acquiring *Wuthering Heights* are then somehow reduplicated in Monica's sons' own history. One of them suffers bullying and even disappears, probably after having been molested and killed while his brother succeeds but is haunted by his brother's demise, his father's betrayal and his mother's extreme vulnerability. As Kathie Birat shows, through a clever use of different modulations of narrative voice from psycho-narration to narrated monologue, Phillips manages to have Britain's past as a slave-trading country resurface but in different manners according to the way each character copes with such traumatic past.

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NOTES

1 “Le principe de résurgence présuppose l’existence d’un trajet souterrain qui conduit vers un point d’émergence ; la tension entre profondeur et surface, disparition et réapparition, latence et manifestation” (General presentation of the conference in preparation of the 48th SAES annual Conference in Orléans in 2008, *Bulletin de la* SAES, no. 83, p. 26. <https://saesfrance.org/arc/pdf/saes83.pdf> [last accessed 8 July 2025]).

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Christine Vandamme is currently working as an Associate Professor at Université Grenoble Alpes in France. Her field of expertise is that of space, place and literature but also space, place and identity, both personal and national, with a particular interest in the ideological, political and ethical implications of such spatial representations. She has published extensively on colonial perceptions of space and place in Joseph Conrad's writings but has also further specialized in the study of spatial representations in Australia, a nation whose relatively condensed colonial history illustrates many colonial, post-colonial and even decolonial issues. She co-edited with André Dodeman a collective volume on place and national identity in 2021, *Space, Place and Hybridity in the National Imagination*, as well as a volume on *The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth* in 2024.

Christine Vandamme est actuellement maître de conférences à l'Université Grenoble Alpes. Elle est spécialiste de littérature moderniste britannique (Joseph Conrad en particulier) mais aussi de littérature australienne dans son rapport à la terre (de Henry Lawson à David Malouf ou encore Alexis Wright). Ses recherches portent sur le colonial, le postcolonial mais aussi le dialogue entre différentes cultures et épistémologies, au-delà même d'une simple approche décoloniale. Elle a co-édité avec André Dodeman un ouvrage collectif portant sur les représentations spatiales et la question de l'identité nationale en 2021, *Space, Place and Hybridity in the National Imagination*, ainsi qu'un numéro de revue sur les liens unissant le lieu, la terre et ses déclinaisons et usages successifs et les tensions que de telles pratiques et représentations ont pu créer avec les premières nations (*The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth* en 2024).
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/060310928
HAL : https://cv.archives-ouvertes.fr/christine-vandamme
ISNI : http://www.isni.org/0000000431653346
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André Dodeman is currently working as an Associate Professor at Université Grenoble Alpes in France. He wrote his PhD on Hugh MacLennan's novels in 2008 and published various articles on English-Canadian writers. He co-edited six volumes on postcolonial literature and culture and works in close collaboration with Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. He is a member of the research group ILCEA4 at Université Grenoble Alpes.

André Dodeman est actuellement maître de conférences à l'Université Grenoble

Alpes. Sa thèse de doctorat a porté sur l'œuvre de l'auteur canadien Hugh MacLennan, et il a publié des articles sur plusieurs auteurs canadiens anglophones. Il a également codirigé six ouvrages dans le domaine des études postcoloniales et est membre de l'unité de recherche de l'Université Grenoble Alpes, l'ILCEA4. Il travaille en partenariat avec la Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador au Canada.
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Conference given by Eddy Harris at Université Grenoble Alpes — “Reclaiming One’s Place: Resurgence and Empowerment” (21 November 2024)

Eddy L. Harris and Vincent Bucher

OUTLINE

Collective exchange

TEXT

Hello everybody.

And thanks for coming.

My name is Eddy Harris and I am here to…

Actually, I don’t know why I am here.

I don’t know what I am supposed to do.

No one gave me an instruction manual.

So what am I doing here?

It’s an existential question.

What if you, as an individual, had one day to save the world—what would you do?

I mean, what one thing would you focus on and do?

It’s not an apocalyptic question. I’m not asking you to save the world from a gigantic meteor strike or to avoid the next world war and bring about world peace or to save the planet from pollution or moral destruction…

Or am I?

I never thought of that before the other day. I got a message—out of the blue from someone I do not know—and he asked me: why do you write?

It kind of goes along with the question why are you here? Why do you do what you do?

In short, you do what you do because it is who you are.

If in fact what you do is who you are, and if you flip that statement, then what you get is that who you are is what you do.

I like to fool myself into thinking I am a free man, that I can do what I want, that in fact I am the master of my fate. With that in mind, as a traveler with as much time on my hands as I need, I will never hesitate to help someone, woman or man, with heavy bags trying to make the stairs to the train platform. In fact, I seek them out. I am always on the lookout for someone who needs help. That, I continually tell myself, is who I am. And I constantly remind myself of it by always staying alert to someone in need. When I don't help, when I turn away, when I pretend not to see that old woman struggling with that heavy load, then I become someone else. Then I am not the person I profess to be and want to be.

Or am I?

What if my train is about to leave and I'm in a hurry? What if, at the end of that train ride, there is an important *rendez-vous* waiting?

In my heart, I tell myself that the me who is me and who is truly free, will allow himself to miss that train and be true to who he is, true to who I am.

But can we always be so authentic, so integral.

I think—at least I hope—that there is or can be a cleavage between who we are and at least some of the things we do.

Does telling a lie make me a liar?

There must be some leeway, some gap that allows for nuance.

And yet…

And yet…

If I were a Jew in Nazi Germany before the war or even after it and I got on a bus, how would I feel knowing that to my right and to my left the persons sitting next to me likely were members of the Nazi party? How much nuance would I allow them? How much wiggle-room between them as persons and them as self-interested voters?

Does self-interest negate the bigger picture?

I think of this now as we are just off the elections in the USA and if I were there, how would I feel knowing that on a bus ride across Iowa or across Kansas or Wyoming or just about anywhere, the person to my right or the person to my left likely voted for a convicted felon, an adjudged rapist, a purported racist, an insurrectionist, a misogynist and an anti-American masquerading as a pro-American patriot hugging the American flag?

Can I as a Jew in Germany trust my Nazi neighbors to not live their politics? To not vote to send me to the extermination camp and the gas chamber? To be in the Nazi party, that was what you were voting for.

Pre-war? The answer is No.

During the war? Certainly not.

As a Jew in Germany after the war, how could I ever feel that I had or have a place in that place?

As an American who is black, given the history of injustice and discrimination and exclusion and terror and extermination perpetrated against minorities in the USA, and yet knowing no other place as home and having no other place to call my homeland, did I—do I—really have a place in that place? Can I feel like I belong there?

The election of Barack Obama gave us some hope that yes—yes, given the history of torture and tribulation, that yes we had made progress—much progress—and that yes, we had managed to carve out a place in that place which was our place as much as it was any other American's place.

The election of Donald Trump threw cold water on the warm smoldering coals before they could catch fire and burst into a blaze.

With Obama on the way out and Trump on the horizon, I took my second canoe trip down the Mississippi River and one of the questions I wanted to ask and have answered for me was: if we are what we do and do what we are, are we as well how we vote?

Can I vote with the Nazis and not want the extermination of the Jews, knowing full well that the extermination of Jews is part of the program?

Can I vote with the Nazis and not be one of them?

Can I join the Ku Klux Klan and know full-well what their programs and policies are and still claim that I am not a racist?

Can I turn a blind eye to the cross-burnings, to the lynchings, to the mistreatment and discrimination and profit from an unfair system and dismiss it as someone else's worry, when in fact what I'm subtly saying to those victims of that treatment is that I don't care, or less subtly I agree with them—whoever they are—you don't belong here? That is the message.

Can I vote for Trump based only on my own narrow concerns and not see the bigger picture?

You are what you eat, says the catchphrase. Are we, as well, how we vote?

Of course, there are nuances.

Voting for the candidate who promises lower taxes is one thing.

Voting for the proponent of separating families and putting people in holding camps is another.

Voting for a candidate who calls for exclusion or elimination or extermination or whose values go against the purported values of the society I want to create, is that not something else? Does it not make us an adherent to those policies if we vote for that candidate?

A candidate sets a tone.

A vote carries that tone into the atmosphere and into the ether and it infects the body politic.

With Obama in the rearview mirror and Trump on the horizon, I took my second canoe journey down the Mississippi River, right through

the heart of Trump-country, to test whether we are how we vote or whether there is some separation between our public lives and our private lives, how we vote and how we live. I wanted to see how the country would treat me—alone and vulnerable in a canoe.

I recently received another message from an anonymous someone who suggested—no, who demanded—that I stop talking about *Mississippi Solo*—Enough already with that book!—suggesting that I move along, get on with something else—as if I hadn't moved on, as if I hadn't written other books on other topics.

Well maybe I have and maybe I haven't.

I have written other books but I wonder if I've moved on to other topics.

Some critics—and readers too and bookstores—have classified me as a travel writer.

While it is true that in all but one of my books, place is central to the story, neither place nor movement is what the stories are about.

Some also say that I write about race and about identity—which is also true.

What I think I write about, and why I am not as appreciated in the US as I am in some other places, is that I write about the intersection of many simple things—like place, like identity, like thermo-nuclear physics and quantum mechanics and sp3 orbitals…

… —I just threw that in to see if you were paying attention—

… but if you put enough simple things inside a simple story, it makes for a denser kind of simplicity that Americans do not seem to appreciate.

Mississippi Solo is a very simple story.

It is the story of a young man at a particular point in his life, a kind of mid-point where decisions not only about the future have to be made, but about who the person in the canoe wants to be and ultimately is going to be.

It is about what one man can learn about himself when he is all alone and in unfamiliar territory and doing unfamiliar things like canoeing

and camping and talking to strangers.

It is about whether a city-boy, surrounded by noise and activity all the time, can find a place in nature, in solitude, where he can be himself and more importantly, face adversity and face fear and find out who he is.

It is about solitude.

We live in society.

We are surrounded by noise and other people and all sorts of distractions. And sometimes the noise and the distractions keep us from living, keep us from experiencing and keep us, often, from interacting—and certainly from interacting with strangers.

But even as we are not interacting, we are not alone—not alone within an individual solitude.

Solitude was important to the *Mississippi Solo* journey. If any one thing was clear during that journey, it was that at the end of the journey I would either like or would not like—or even like to be—the person who was in that canoe with me, my constant companion with whom I would spend every second of every day of the rest of my life.

When you are alone, truly alone with nothing but your thoughts to distract you, you come to see yourself more clearly and recognize the things that need to be changed.

Or not.

That to me was the main aspect of the *Mississippi Solo* journey.

Solitude.

And yet…

We live in society. We are not solitary units, self-contained and self-sufficient.

The interactions, the encounters were just as important as the solitude. They create a secondary theme to the *Mississippi Solo* journey.

The lone individual in a modern society dealing with what we call the natural world and trying to take some lessons from it.

What lessons?

There are things you learn from being alone that you cannot learn on a crowded street while you try to dodge pedestrian traffic.

There are things you learn by being in the natural world.

The most important lesson, possibly, is the lesson of simplicity and cooperation.

The birds and the beasts and the trees don't exalt themselves because they live in luxury apartments in Haussmanian buildings in Paris and work in super-structure skyscrapers in New York and fly from continent to continent in metal tubes with wings and communicate over long distances via cellphone and computer and have artificial intelligence do their thinking for them and robots doing the work for them, nor because they've conquered the seas and conquered the skies and space and all the species and put them all to work for us as food, as fodder, as cogs in a profit-making scheme.

What the birds and the trees and bees have learned and have to teach us—and what one man alone is his canoe can learn—is that each of us is small and each of us is big and each of us has a place.

In this world. In this country. Along that river—my place as much as anyone else's.

I invite you to seek out the photos of Kathryn Cooper, photos which are beautiful as art and simply stunning. But what is even more impressive than the images themselves is what's on display: the magnificent miracle of nature and the natural world at work, huge flocks of starlings, all of them working together, all of them, I suppose, having a role, each with a place in their world.

Richard Buckminster Fuller once said that nature never fails. Nature complies with its own laws. Nature is the law.

Break the law, pay the penalty.

Which brings me back to the initial question: what am I doing here? What are we all doing here?

Collective exchange

Vincent BUCHER. — Okay, thank you very much for that and thank you for having accepted our invitation, despite what your friends said, to revisit well-trodden grounds and coming back to the Mississippi in a way, via the Alps which is kind of unsettling. I'll bounce back on what you said but I just wanted to start with the fact that even though you're coming back to familiar ground, hopefully we'll make you discover new territories as well, but certainly for me that's the case. I'm not used to talking to living authors, usually they're dead, in the pages of the book.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Give me time, give me time, I'll get there.

Vincent BUCHER. — I know, but I'm very happy that I get this opportunity as well, given I'm not accustomed to this exercise, it's a bit of an adventure for me for sure. We'll see how that plays out.
I was worried in particular, preparing for this, when I came across a passage in chapter 11, when you arrive at Lake Bemidji and meet the character of Emily, who is a recurrent figure throughout the book, and you say p. 56: "Talking to strangers is funny. You want to get to know them, to hear what they have to say but [… you] don't want to pull out a tape recorder and shove a microphone under somebody's nose. (Besides, all that stuff was in the canoe.) The best you can hope for is a good memory and a feel for how the stranger talks. Cadence and word choice. You can jot down notes and recollections later." So, I guess we have it all wrong: you have a microphone under your nose, you even have a camera in front of you, but I do hope that we're going to rise to the occasion and manage to start a proper conversation. But more seriously I feel like this is a good place to start, because it intervenes on p. 56 at the moment when you say that your journey has begun, and for me, that's the impression that I had also, because around this idea of conversation —the ambiguity of the term, the way you use it—I saw something of a principle for your book, or a rule of writing in the way in which you think of the literary, and particularly, I saw in it something like a paradigm which made your book closer to the Mississippi, mimetic almost in a way, and so far as you define it p. 90 in these terms as well, you tell us: "the river […] is a strange kind of cleft,

one that strangely unites instead of dividing. A river that unifies north and south the same as it connects east and west—rather than creating an impasse—even though this linking bridge is two thousand miles long and a great distance across. […] Different phases in a man's life which, because it touches the lives of so many others along the way, actually connects those lives. A great-grandfather, a church elder, an old man sitting day after day on the same bench in a small town. You might never have paid much attention to him. But he has his effect. The river can't help but connect, like the old man touching lives however subtly. Or like a national purpose. Like a favorite baseball team. Like poverty. Something shared. A common understanding. Different in intensity and meaning perhaps to each who share it, but a common language that holds together like a delicate infrastructure" and, thinking back to that, I wonder if you're not that old man; and particularly coming back to the conversation that you started having about the identity between what we do and what we are, and why you write, I wondered if your writing isn't a perpetual search for this art of conversation, particularly with people with whom, technically, you shouldn't have them. This is something that recurs throughout the book and that we're going to come back to, I would argue, particularly with these predecessors of the Trumpians of today that you encountered in the south, whether they have more to say, whether you can start a conversation despite how they vote and what they do and if there's not a possibility for something that could be shared despite these ideologies and obstructions.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Well, certainly those conversations are necessary and part of the problem with not having those conversations is that it leads us to a definite separation between people who cannot come together; when you canoe down the Mississippi River, politics is not part of the conversation. The conversation revolves around: "who are you?", "what are you doing?" and "why are you doing it?" As I canoed through Trump country one of the things I noticed was the generosity of all the people, almost every person I met explored some aspect of generosity with me. Which is what evokes that question: are we how we vote? Clearly if I'm in this part of the country and these people are voting for Trump, they should not treat me as nicely, as gently as they did and yet they do. So how then can we have a

conversation that gets us beyond politics and just into the humanity of an encounter? Yes, I am that old man who is connecting lots of people who find in me, without knowing it, a kind of nexus, a place where … they're coming into me and coming out of me in my next encounter with someone else. I'm also on the search for who I am and who these other people are too. It is, I think, the journey that we're all on. We're all in some way nexuses for all these conversations that develop over time, things come in and things go right out, and we're merely reflections of those interactions.

Vincent BUCHER. — In that sense, I would maybe bounce back on what you said and ask if the conversations that you had notably with the character of Don who you meet at the end of your journey, are still possible today. There is a passage that I find quite striking at the end, it's around p. 240 where you have this secret conversation that you do not transcribe in a way that's striking, and talks about interracial romances in a way that's slightly problematic, to say the least. Then you go on, on the following page, to say "he told me secrets as if I were an old friend. Or better, he talked with the freedom of speaking to a stranger he never expected to see again. When I traveled on my way, I would be taking his secrets with me. I would not be around to look at him and to judge him nor for him to feel the judging. And I would not be around to tell. He was safe. And yet he knew I was a writer and would be writing." At least the possibility for something existing beyond that divide that comes to the surface here. There is a mutual respect and the preservation of the intimacy of that moment. Do you believe that that kind of encounter and that kind of conversation is possible today?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I think those kinds of conversations happen all the time. What's interesting about Don, the most interesting thing about Don, is that he volunteered that he was a racist, he did not like black people, then in the course of our encounter he said something really stupid, in that, "you're different". I am not different, I am still black, and yet he dropped the curtain of his racism to have this encounter and again, open his doors to a certain kind of generosity, it was amazing. So, if we all had that kind of conversation, if we all recognized that yes, the man in front of us is racist but he doesn't see me as, in his particular version, "black", he just sees another person

who, in this case, needed something to eat, we could all get past these preconceptions that we hold. We need to have those conversations. The problem I think, one of the problems, is we don't have these face-to-face, one-to-one encounters and so we can live with these stereotypes like Don had before he met me. Now for some reason he thinks I'm different but maybe he thinks I'm different because he never talked to another black person. Not true, because he lives in Arkansas, and he's surrounded by black people, but he cut himself off from the black community, so he never had these kinds of conversations, and I forced him into an encounter, which changes his aspect at least vis-à-vis one person.

Vincent BUCHER. — In that sense, the possibility for change in your novel is always problematic or tempered, I would say. There's this moment where you come across pollution in the river and you say "I can't change it, I won't burden myself with these sorts of things" and similarly, on the question of race, you similarly point out that you can chip at it little by little but technically it won't change…

Eddy L. HARRIS. — But that's not true because it will change. It changes Don, it changes every individual. Every book that I write, every encounter that I have, changes the world in some small incremental way, it changes the world one reader at a time. It's not the broad change that's going to sweep pollution out of the Mississippi River, but it is one guy picking up a tin can that is floating on the water. And it is still an effort to clean up the river, it is still an effort to break down these barriers, and it happens all the time. One quick anecdote from the second journey: one night I arrived in some small town, and I didn't feel like pitching my tent. I walked up into town which was closed for the season, and I see a woman cooking in the kitchen through her window. And it's an old kind of Alfred Hitchcockian motel. And I knock on this woman's door, and when she opens it, the first thing out of my mouth was "what's for dinner?" and then we had a conversation that had nothing to do with anything except what she was cooking, the fact that I needed a room, she opened up this little hotel which was closed for the season, I had no idea how she votes, right in the middle of Iowa which is Republican red, definitely now Trump country, and yet she did not see a Democrat or a black person or anything else except a guy who's in a canoe who needed a place to stay. Whatever barriers or

preconceptions she may have had, and I don't know if she had any, disappeared and it was just her and me.

Vincent BUCHER. — I hear this, but I just wanted to bounce back on your point because I think it loops back to what you're saying about questions of abstraction and scale. So, if we remain at a great level of abstraction, the Mississippi is just a dot on the line and your novel shows that that's not the case; at a distance, all blacks are the same and all southern whites are the same just in the same way. And I think what exemplifies the ambivalent nature of your politics on this subject is that you temper the possibility of change by replacing it—in the novel at least—by the idea of making an impression. I think it goes both ways, there's receiving the impression of the encounter and making an impression. There's almost something physical and tactile to it. It's also connected to photography and I think your obsession with images kind of plays to that. But most of all I feel that making an impression entails a sort of change or transformation that will manifest itself down the line, that isn't fulfilled immediately, that resists abstraction. If you head to the south and want to make a change, you are not going to create the space for the encounter to happen, or allow for this reciprocal possibility of making an impression. This idea is present in that initial quote that I read about conversations. You say "you don't remember what people say, we remember the cadence of what they say and we get a sense for who they are". My idea is that at least part of what you do refrains from the political in that sense or is at the very least wary of the possibility for change and transformation understood in a sort of broad abstract sense. I was wondering if that goes back to the argument that you were making about how abstraction makes encounters impossible as well.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — It is not political what I do and at the same time it is very political, it passes beyond the non-political into the political in such a way that because of who I am and because of these interactions and the impressions that I make, a white person in Iowa or in Mississippi is bound to have a different impression that goes beyond whatever preconceptions he or she may have had before. It is not specifically political because I don't go in and say, "who do you vote for, and why did you vote for that guy?" It is just a simple conversation about having something to eat that transforms a

moment into something larger. There's no intention, it is just a conversation with anybody that transforms into something else.

Vincent BUCHER. — Yes, and the conversation often ends kind of abruptly and we never know how this impression travels or at least there's almost this sense that time has to do the work, kind of like the river itself, and this conversation with you leaves an impression as well. But what I find striking is this obsession with reciprocity. Your character—because it's no longer you, the young you—is constantly obsessed—to a point that can almost become annoying at times—of being seen, of being recognized as a hero, hiding when he is not. He is always obsessed by this idea of leaving a mark, of making an impression, and very often it's associated with photographs. At the other end of the spectrum, characters like Emily or Don, retrospectively leave an impression to the point where, despite them being identified as strangers and remaining strangers, are qualified as friends. And I think that what distinguishes that logic of conversation and how it replicates itself physically in the work, is precisely through the reciprocity of these minute non-abstract impressions that open the chink perhaps between who we are and what we do, that little space that you were mentioning. It doesn't redeem what people are, how they act, but it does represent a possibility. And going back to the beginning of our conversation, I was wondering if that space still exists precisely in a world of the internet, of non-physical interaction, where—and this is something that you resent perhaps—ideology prevails at the expense of conversation. Does it not curtail the possibility of making an impression in that sense? And that's kind of what we were saying, is it possible to still have these conversations, today?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — It is absolutely possible to have these conversations, and I think absolutely central to have these conversations. And yes, there is a reflective quality to them, I am as impressed as they are, I am as impressed of them as they are of me, I presume. And as forgetful of them, too, and I wonder if Don, if he's still alive, would have any recollection of my passing through his neighborhood, his section of the river. I have no idea, all I can do is do me, all I can do is what I do. Yesterday morning I blocked the sidewalk from some woman who was walking with a stroller, and I stopped, and I pushed myself against the wall so that she could pass.

And she recognized that I was doing this, that I was waiting for her to go by. If you ask her today if a big black man in a blue sweater stopped to let her pass, she would say no, but in that moment, the big smile she threw at me indicates that she recognized a moment of humanity, that I was doing something for her that I did not have to do. I could have forced her against the curb. She was as happy to be receiving as I was to be giving. These are the reflective quality of these kinds of interactions. They mean nothing in the grand scale of things but maybe they mean everything. And that's how I try to live my life, it's how I work, it's one of the things I take away from this journey down the Mississippi River, this river trip changed me. I'm very shy, I do not talk to strangers, or did not talk to strangers readily. But because there's a black man in a canoe, people come to me.

When I took my next, third big trip, which was a motorcycle journey into the American south, it was a beautiful motorcycle, a BMW which was rare in the States, people came to me to talk. I didn't have to go out of my way. And it was just brilliant. Whether it's the motorcycle or whether it's me alone traveling around this thing. These little interactions: some guy I'm talking to in a boat shop in North Carolina gives me the keys to his house, a white guy, gives me the keys to his house, and says "there's beer in the fridge, there's a hammock on the porch, knock yourself out, I'll be home at five o'clock". These things changed me. And now I am on the lookout for them all the time. And one of the reasons I stepped aside to let this woman and this "poussette" go by, is that I'm looking for them all the time. My interaction with the world is to step out of the way and let somebody go by, to help somebody with a heavy bag, it means nothing in the grand scheme of things, but I think it means everything.

Member of the AUDIENCE. — Thank you for a fascinating talk and presentation, for those who haven't read the book, I'm sure they are struck by the gentleness and the human kindness you show in your speech, however I must say that as a European, I was struck at the beginning of the journey by the fact that you're very prepared, that you have a gun—

Eddy L. HARRIS. —very prepared? Yes, I had a gun, but I would not call anything I ever did prepared; if I were prepared, I would not have left from Northern Minnesota in October.

Member of the AUDIENCE. — But I was struck by the casual—to me it seemed almost casual—how can I say this—swerve into violence with the incidents of the feral dogs and the two deer hunters, and it seems that you were fully prepared and you were fully prepared to protect yourself and somehow it was very different from your usual trust in people and the fact that you are open to people, and I wondered at how quickly you could change and switch into defensive mode?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I took that gun, not for protection; my whole ethos of that journey was living the way someone in the nineteenth century would live and I was expecting to hunt and fish as I went down the river. Otherwise, if I were looking for protection, I would have carried a .357 magnum or a .44, I would not have carried a .22, that's a caliber you use for shooting rabbits. I just happened to have this gun when these guys basically attacked me. And yes, I was prepared, I am, even when I'm not preparing, I am sort of prepared because I am not small. My exterior carcass gives the impression that I am prepared, so I am not aggressed very often, that is a kind of protection. So, I'm allowed to go into these spaces in most cases because this exterior protects me from anybody else's aggression. That is a kind of preparation too, unintended, as unintended as the pistol I carried because I was not using that pistol for protection. Which explains partly as well why on the second journey I refused to carry a gun, I knew I wasn't going to be hunting, first of all, and secondly the question of how would I have gotten out of that situation if I didn't have a gun was always on my mind. It would've changed everything possibly. Maybe, they being who they were, would've been even more aggressive, maybe I wouldn't have gotten out as safely as I did, or maybe I would've had to find another way to defuse the situation, part of the problem in America today is too many people have guns, and they reach for the gun before they reach for the alternative. So, I don't need a gun in that same situation now because I know I can find another way to get out of this scrape.

Member of the AUDIENCE. — For me there is something interesting in what you're saying because in my opinion the roots of racism is that you have to prove something to others before interacting. If the first movement they have is a bit distant, you then have to be

smiling and gentle and kind, and it is like the first step, it is a bit sad somehow.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I don't know if I have to be gentle and smiling, I think I just am pretty gentle and I smile a lot. And why not, if that's what is necessary to make that first step, why not do it? It costs me nothing. I'm happy to play, since we're all in this game together, why not do my part to defuse a situation before the situation becomes a situation? In my hotel where I'm staying now, yesterday afternoon it's just smiles and jokes and when I go into the place or go out, everybody is smiling because of something I did or said when I first checked into this place, why not? If you go to a hotel breakfast room in the morning, everybody walks in and says "bonjour", it's just something that you do, so why not say "bonjour" with a smile? A smile changes everything. And I'm not afraid of racism, racism is out there, why not do my part to try to un-racialize the world?

Member of the AUDIENCE. — Do you think, with the conversations that you're having and those interactions, that people who might have voted for Trump in the first place will now interact with minorities more as they realise they themselves are undergoing the same process of being more and more excluded? And will they decide not to vote for Trump this time?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I don't know why people vote for Trump, I cannot figure it out, but part of it, I think, is the media, a media bias, depending on what news you watch, you're watching MSNBC on the left and you're watching Fox News on the right and you're just getting constantly bombarded and re-bombarded by the same info-echo and you're not going outside your bubble to find something else, and once you're inside that bubble and you believe what's going on, then you're cooked. And somebody mentioned earlier today that Rupert Murdoch controls the news trade in Australia, he controls pretty much the news trade in America too. And social media is a damaging thing as well.

Vincent BUCHER. — After talking about politics for a bit I wanted to come back to literature, being a literature aficionado or, rather, a professional of literature. Throughout your book there is this recurrent meditation about whether you have anything to say which I think is sort of key to your writing. This is very American,

very Emersonian in a way, in its emphasis on experience and a certain mistrust of the literary. I was wondering if your relationship to the literary is something you keep at bay; it's a conversation that you don't really want to have, or rather you seem to want to emancipate yourself from that conversation. I'll just explain what I mean. It's that in all the books that you write—and particularly *Mississippi Solo*—you choose eminently literary places to explore. We do get a hint of the literary when you mention figures like Hemingway or Twain. You even use the fact that T. S. Eliot was a native of St. Louis, which is always interesting given how different he is from the two other figures mentioned. But it's striking to see how precisely you refuse to engage with that corpus. I think it's fairly late in the novel that you start reading a book on the edge of the river. Out of curiosity I was wondering what that book was and if it has left an impression on you to this day, but it nevertheless remains striking that you never choose to name it. I was wondering if, more broadly, you were trying to unburden the river from its literariness. Because you mention that the river is burdened by history, it's burdened by legend, it's burdened by text, and if there's not an effort here to attain a sort of wilful innocence. Innocence would thus not be a state but something you strive to accomplish but that can never be fully achieved. Just like your text always struggles with these legendary texts and legends of the Mississippi, your interactions with the people you meet on the way are similarly fraught with preconceptions, texts, culture, legend. In a way, are you not trying to unburden the river of its literariness?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — It's something I never actually thought about, so whatever I do, it's not a conscious decision. And I have to make a huge confession here: once I finish writing a book, I no longer know what's in that book, I've forgotten it already. So, the other day I was on this TV program "La grande librairie" and this guy asks me a question about the interior and I don't know what he's talking about because I've forgotten the book, it is almost immediate, the moment I leave a book and start something else, I have forgotten the previous book. There are only certain sections of a particular text that strike me and mostly it is those parts of the text that people ask me about,

and I have to keep refreshing my memory about them. Otherwise, I don't know.

Vincent BUCHER. — So, you don't know what you were reading on the Mississippi River?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I have no idea; I couldn't even tell you that I was reading on the Mississippi.

Vincent BUCHER. — That is striking. So more broadly how do you choose the places that you explore in your books? Do you choose places that are so marked by text, literature, legends, that you need to overcome this burden to really engage with them? Is that something that you do deliberately? Is that part of a broader effort at the heart of your writing. and more specifically with regards to that idea that the Mississippi is burdened by history and burdened by everything it has to carry, and the way in which your text tries to unburden it—we'll see if we can come back to how your character in the book also tries to unburden himself of a number of things, in particular of identities, that's why when you said earlier that you work on identities I kind of disagree; I don't think that identity is central given how your character always evades the question—but I was wondering if that was a deliberate effort, why choose these spaces?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I choose them not because of their literariness, and not because of the burden of literary history but because of the burden of history. The Mississippi River, two times, Africa, one time, and maybe it's the burden that's on my shoulders and not the burden that's on anybody else. But the Mississippi is important in American history, I'm an American, it's the most important waterway, to me, in the world. Africa, as a black American living in America, coming from that ancestral home, Africa means something, but what? So let me go find out. Harlem, I could have picked any American city, Harlem means something, it certainly means something literarily, but it also means something culturally for black Americans. Paris, as well, when I write about Paris it's from a black American perspective. It all comes back to the me that's writing this book and encountering these places that have these burdens attached to them, but it is not necessarily a literary burden, it is a historical, cultural significance.

Vincent BUCHER. — Okay, in that sense, I'm going to reformulate my question though I hear what you are saying but, do texts make an impression on you? Are there texts that you could quote, and more specifically, I was curious of your relation to Eliot. What impression did he make on you?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Yes, Eliot starts this book. Another writer, great writer. I'm not a great writer.

Vincent BUCHER. — But he's very literary and that's also striking in terms of contrast in particular when compared to Twain and Hemingway who are far more predictable references.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Hemingway shows up in this book and in the next book as well and probably the next book. Hemingway is a ghost-like figure that hovers through my work because as a writer and an American writer living in Paris, of course Hemingway is in the forefront of my literary thinking, I want to be like Hemingway, I want to live this grandiose life and do these crazy things that Hemingway did.

Vincent BUCHER. — The reference to Hemingway is interesting because even though you claim to emulate his style it is actually his character, his lifestyle, that actually interests you. The literary ends up being evacuated very quickly. Just to finish on that point—the fact that you describe him as a ghost—which echoes your book directly. Yet again, this is a ghost you quickly dispel, and that conversation never happens. There is this striking, surreal moment where he appears to you and you feel his breath on your ear as if he were about to impart something to you but it never materialises. The figure of Lincoln is used in a very similar way as well. The literary can never really resurface. In that sense, the references to Hemingway are perhaps somewhat misleading in the book but I'm much more intrigued by your reference to Eliot insofar as this is not expected. It's not a reference that is bound to your object but it's rather something that you bring to it. Yes, Eliot is a child of the Mississippi for sure, but he left there long ago and his relation to culture, literature and the text is, at least on the surface, very far from the writing of experience of Hemingway for example. On the surface he seems also very far from your own relation to writing and reading. Where's the real conversation going on? Could it

perhaps be more with Eliot than with Hemingway, isn't there something misleading about that, and more broadly are there other texts, other authors, with whom you're having a secret conversation that you're not telling us about, perhaps?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Well, I'm having a conversation with Faulkner as I'm driving about in the south on my beautiful blue BMW motorcycle, I'm having a conversation with Hemingway on this river, with Mark Twain on this river, I'm having a conversation with all the literary influencers who are in me from my education. T. S. Eliot is not someone I would have a conversation with, but he is part of my youthful education because I was raised by British monks in St. Louis who for some reason thought Eliot was British because he lived in London for a long time and that is part of my literary education, as was Hemingway, as was Thornton, as was… you name it. But I'm not actively having conversations with them except to underscore that they are in me somehow and you cannot talk about the Mississippi River without talking about Mark Twain, you cannot talk about an American writer being an adventurer without having a conversation with Hemingway, but I think that's as far as it goes. I'm not interested in exploring Hemingway's work in my work, I have read enough Hemingway, it's good enough for me, I have read Eliot, I have read lots and lots of Faulkner, but I don't have to have a conversation with these ghosts.

ABSTRACTS

English
This conversation is the result of the one-day conference organized by the LISCA research group at Université Grenoble Alpes in November 2024. The conference focused on the concept of resurgence as the artistic and hermeneutic phenomenon that enables texts to make certain forces and positions stand out or rise to the surface.

Français
Cette conversation est le fruit de la journée d'étude organisée par le LISCA à l'Université Grenoble Alpes en novembre 2024. La journée d'étude s'est concentrée sur le concept de résurgence en tant que phénomène artistique et herméneutique qui fait que certains textes font ressortir ou remonter à la surface des dynamiques et des positionnements qui étaient déjà là sous une

forme « dormante » et qui se voient réactivés à un moment donné dans une épistémè particulière.

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Mots-clés
place, identité, solitude, nature, rencontres, conversation, Mississippi Solo

Keywords
place, identity, solitude, nature, encounters, conversation, Mississippi Solo

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Eddy L. Harris is a critically acclaimed author, lecturer and filmmaker who loves traveling, meeting new people and sharing his experiences and adventures with his readers. He keeps challenging and interrogating the place each of us occupies in their respective communities and homelands. In his first novel *Mississippi Solo* (1988), he offers a wonderful account of his canoe journey down the Mississippi River as well as a reflection on what being American means, especially as a black American navigating on this most iconic river. The journey and the book give him the opportunity to explore American founding myths and core values as well as the deeply conflicted heritage of the Civil War and slavery. In his next three works alternating autobiographical details and a larger reflection on black American experience and identity in both the States (*South of Haunted Dreams* in 1993 and *Still Life in Harlem* in 1996) and in relation to Africa (*Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*, 1992), he offers a poignant, sincere and often incisive analysis of all its complexity and richness. His next three books were published both in English and in French: *Jupiter et moi* (2005), *Paris en noir et black* (2009) and *Confession américaine* (2024), thus confirming his deep attachment to France. *American Confessional* is an essay offering a bitter-sweet account of the contradictions—and also the "lies" (the subtitle of the reflexive piece is *House of Lies*)—that have haunted the American nation from its birth to the present day.
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in modernist poetry with particular interest in the long poems by T.S. Eliot, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. His questions to Eddy L. Harris discuss—and invite the author to recontextualise—his engagement with the notions of place, identity and history for black Americans as presented in his first novel *Mississippi Solo*. The page references are to the following edition: Eddy L. Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, London: John Murray, 2021.
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Resurgence and Ecopoetics

Metaphor as a Vehicle for the Resurgence of a Minority Ontology in “A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest” by Ellen van Neerven

La métaphore comme vecteur de résurgence d’une ontologie minoritaire dans « A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest » d’Ellen van Neerven

Anne Le Guellec-Minel

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OUTLINE

TEXT

1 Alexis Wright has recently received a remarkable shower of literary awards for her latest novel *Praiseworthy* (2023) and the body of her work: the Queensland Literary Fiction Book Award, the 2024 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, the 2024 Miles Franklin Award and the 2024 Stella prize, the 2024 Melbourne Prize, as well as the British-based 2023 James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In October 2024, when the next Nobel Prize winner for literature was being chosen, Alexis Wright’s name was among the favourites. All this critical acclaim is the due recognition of Wright’s literary achievement and her important role as campaigner for Indigenous land rights. However, the fact that her work is being singled out in this way may seem to imply that no other Australian, let alone any Aboriginal Australian writer is in a position to take up the torch of literary excellence. Like Oodgeroo Noonuccal before her, Wright has been very vocal in her warnings about the ever-increasing dangers Indigenous culture has had to face. In both her non-fiction and her fiction work, Wright has played a crucial role as a collector of oral

narratives from older generations, now dead, who, like the spirits in *Carpentaria* (a novel that harbours "the big stories and the little ones in between", 12) were desperate to pass on their stories as countless generations had done before them. Sadly, the unanimous celebration of Wright's literary achievements is not really indicative of an improvement in Australia's political recognition of Indigenous voices, as the negative outcome of the 2023 "Voice to Parliament" campaign has shown. This is why an over-exclusive focus on her work could be problematic: it might suggest that Wright, who belongs to an older generation and has had first-hand experience of historic land rights struggles, is more "authentically Aboriginal" than the many younger writers. This article offers a close reading of just one of Ellen van Neerven's poems, to show how, albeit in radically different ways than Wright's lyrical, swirling, flowing prose, younger voices continue to fight against dispossession and cultural erasure. In line with North American Indigenous theories of resurgence, this article will show how Ellen van Neerven's poetic writing in *Throat* achieves far more than a lament of the negative impact of colonisation. While they say the title of the collection references the harsh realities that "burn at the back of [their] throat",[1] their short, pared-down poem "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest" simultaneously converts into a creative resource the negative space hollowed out by the coloniser, asserts the survival of Indigenous ontologies, and performs grounded normativity (Coulthard) by requesting from the reader the kind of ethical interpretative effort that Paul Ricœur associated with the "living metaphor".

2 The first part of the study will look into how in *Throat*, the poems remind the reader of the existence of an alternative view of the colonising event and voice an alternative ontology, thus resisting colonial erasure. Next, the focus will centre on Ellen van Neerven's use of the sailing ship, that ubiquitous icon of the British colonisation of Australia, to portray a historic violation whose impact reverberates into deep time as well as into the present, but also to undermine the positive values associated with nautical phrases in the English language. The third part of the study will start from Ricœur's discussion of the iconicity that is specific to the poetic metaphor and of the type of hermeneutic participation it demands of the reader, in order to show how the semantic deconstruction/reconstruction

process called for by the "shipshape" metaphor constitutes a form of action-writing that is part and parcel of the Indigenous resurgence movement.

Not "Footnotes on a timeline" (33): denouncing the invisibilisation of Indigenous presences

3 Ellen van Neerven is an award-winning writer, educator and editor of Mununjali Yugambeh and Dutch heritage. Their first book, a short story collection entitled *Heat and Light* was published in 2013, and their first book of poems, *Comfort Foods* in 2016. Their first play, *Swim*, premiered in Sydney in July 2024. *Throat* (2020) is Ellen van Neerven's second poetry collection, and this article will look more particularly at "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest" which belongs to the collection's second themed part: "Whiteness is always approaching".

4 Van Neerven belongs to a vibrant, young generation of Aboriginal writers that includes Evelyn Araluen, Jazz Money, Mykaela Saunders, and Alison Whittaker. These writers are all still in their early thirties but, faced with the cultural loss resulting from past and ongoing assimilationist policies, and the environmental degradation of their peoples's traditional land by extractive capitalism, their work often takes the form of a lament for lost Country and a much depleted cultural environment.

5 Such a state of affairs is the result of colonisation processes (land theft, displacement, assimilation) that Australian historian and scholar Patrick Wolfe identified as specific to settler colonialism, and famously termed the "elimination of the Native" (Wolfe 2006). Since settler colonialism is geared towards an appropriation of the land, the denial of prior Indigenous occupation is a prerequisite within the framework of liberal legal theory (Moreton-Robinson 20). As Wolfe puts it, the Indigenous presence is "an *absent centre* that structures settler discourse even in contexts that do not manifestly concern things Indigenous" (Wolfe 270, italics mine).

6 Interpreting Mark Rifkin's notion of "settler common sense" as a "taken-for-grantedness" which is "sustained and reaffirmed" by the "routine ways in which settlers tacitly [...] re-enact the dispossession of Indigenous people in their daily lives", Wolfe insists, however, that settler colonialism is not a definitive and irreversible historic moment, but an ongoing process which can be fought (270). Indeed, North American theories of Indigenous resurgence propose to counteract settler-colonialist processes by abandoning recognition-oriented protest in favour of the assertion of what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard in *Red Skins, White Masks* calls "grounded normativity":

> Indigenous struggles against capitalist imperialism are best understood as struggles oriented around the question of land—struggles not only for land, but also deeply informed by what the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship (which is itself informed by place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge) ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way. (60)

7 What is striking about van Neerven and other writers of her generation is not only the enduring strength of their engagement in trying to overturn the still on-going economic, social, environmental and political oppression of Indigenous communities, but also their understanding that as Coulthard puts it, settler-colonisation has "rendered [Indigenous] populations too small" to generate *alone* the political leverage required to simultaneously block the exploitation of peoples and homelands and construct ethical alternatives to capitalism. "This reality", Coulthard writes,

> demands that we continue to remain open to, if not actively seek out and establish, relations of solidarity and networks of trade and mutual aid with national and transnational communities and organizations that are also struggling against the imposed effects of globalized capital. (173)

In "Call a Spade a Spade" (39), van Neerven goes further, inviting the non-Indigenous/settler reader to the type of truth-telling exercise ("call it invasion not settlement /call it genocide not colonisation [...] don't say 'no worries' say 'I worry' / for the future or our country, our

environment / if we fail to listen and to act") that can give a truer meaning to the classic Australian colloquialism: "call yourself a mate".

A poetic subversion of the sailing ship as a vessel of colonial positivity

8 Several poems of van Neerven's collection *Throat* feature ships in a way that explicitly pushes back against the celebratory dimension of that foundational icon. Australia Day, which is celebrated on the 26th of January each year, marks the 1788 landing of the First Fleet and raising of the British flag at Sydney Cove. As a precursor of the arrival of the First Fleet, Captain Cook's landing at Botany Bay in 1770 is another highly symbolic historic event which has firmly anchored the two-masted sailing boat in the Australian national imagination. It is no surprise, therefore, that ships should also feature in van Neerven's poems.

9 Among these, "Paper ships" (126–129), which explicitly mourns the social and environmental effects of colonisation, posits the Indigenous perspective as a counterpoint to the official celebration of the event: "Australia marks the 250th anniversary / of a landing in two views / the view from the ships / and the view from the shore" (127).

10 Linking the original moment of invasion with the enduring need to fight against the settler imaginary, the poem performatively reverses conventional nautical phrases such as "casting off" and common-use synecdoches ("hands" for sailors, "masts" for ships) and turns them into a call for decolonising action rather than as a symbol of British colonisation: "The ships my grandmothers saw / didn't stay in the sea […] it takes all of our hands / to cast the settler imaginary off / lift the masts off / out of the dirt" (128).

11 The stanza mentioning the masts is followed by four lines contrasting these markers of colonialism with the living trees that are bound to a collective "we" in reciprocal relationships:

> the tree and us are one / we breathe together
> we look after trees / like they look after ones / some are
> our ancestors / we belong to them
> we give to the trees / to receive / they are our life / and death (129)

By contrast, colonisation and climate change are explicitly presented as synonymous, and the name of Cook's ship (HMS *Endeavour*) is appropriated to reverse the coloniser's white saviour claim:

> Can you guess two 'c' words / so closely connected, they are the same? / *Cook* and c…? Nice try. / *colonization* and *climate change*
> Fight one and you fight them both / we *endeavour* to save this world / guided by elders restoring / old science and medicine (127, the italics are the author's)

In "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest" (35) van Neerven's critique is aimed at extractivism, linking the ship with the damage inflicted to the forest from which the former's different parts are sourced.

12 The poem is made up of three stanzas of free verse, that increase in length from 7 to 8 to 9 lines. The first and shortest stanza, which begins with "Such a sad sight" and ends with "the deforested floor", precisely references how different species of trees were cut into various ship parts: "pine […] into masts / elm into keel and stern post / white oak into hull, floors and futtocks" (ll. 3–5).

13 The second stanza refers to the deep hurt left in the forest by the extraction of the wood needed for building a ship: "While the ship sails in southern seas / the ship-shaped hole / thousands of years deep / aches and aches" (ll. 9–11). It also concisely illustrates the long-term social and environmental fallout of extractivist attitudes: "the people burn their furniture to stay warm" (l. 12) alludes to the poverty of those who are unable to profit from a liberal economy, while the German word "waldsterben" references dieback in "commercial forests" (ll. 14–15).

14 Dieback is a form of forest decline that was particularly severe in Germany in the 1980s, hence the poet's use of the German word here. While forest ecosystems are too complex for the direct causes of dieback in multi-species forests to be identified, the lack of

biodiversity in commercial forests is a determining factor as it facilitates the propagation of pathogenic insects, fungi and bacteria. The wood industry's choice to plant commercial forests to replace the native forests that are still being harvested is thus an aberration in terms of sustainability. Van Neerven's unexpected use of the German word for the phenomenon is a reminder that there is no place, however remote from the historic industrial centres, that is not impacted by global capitalism. It is also a nod to the semester she spent teaching in Bremen, Germany, which she says gave her the opportunity to go to Europe and see the Black Forest from which sailing ships were sourced, and think about historic colonisation "from that end" for once, rather than the on-going effects of settler colonialism in Australia (Rose).

15 Both stanzas provide a kind of factual information that is unusual in a poem. But the third and longest stanza makes clear the reason for this use of shipbuilding and forest management terms.

16 In the first line of the stanza "[n]o consent was asked from the materials of 'discovery'" (l. 16), the inverted commas question the epistemological equation between European exploration and universal knowledge. The line is also a reminder that unlike other colonies where treaties were signed, in Australia the Indigenous peoples never formally agreed to their dispossession. By mentioning "materials" rather than people, the line also critiques the European view of the non-human realm as inert and devoid of agency. While European ship-makers were mainly concerned with the end-products and how the material properties of various kinds of wood could best be used, the following lines deploy an alternative ontology, pointing to the linguistic continuity that exists in Yugambeh language between the tree and the boat that is made from it:

> In Yugambeh our names for boat and
> tree that makes the boat are the same
> material handled with care
> spirit lives
> in the same name (ll. 17–20)

The holism of Yugambeh ontology is thus succinctly contrasted with the European compartmentalised view of the world that separates

means and ends, matter and spirit, and paradoxically holds the "material world" in complete metaphysical contempt. The commercial injunction "handle with care" is here given a much more profound spiritual value: the tree and boat are to be respected and *handled with care* because of their social and spiritual importance, not their market value.

17 The lack of punctuation and the layout of the lines in this passage allow for various ways of saying and interpreting them: should the reader just understand that Yugambeh names for boat and tree are the same, or also that they "are the same material handled with care"? Is the word "lives" in "spirit lives / in the same name" a verb or a noun? Such ambiguities invite the reader to pay attention to alternative clusters of meaning; and paying attention is all the more relevant as the phonetic similarity between "name" and "same" not only insists on the respect paid to the tree that grants mobility on water, but also points towards a non-arbitrary concept of language: words expressing the essence of the subject they represent. All these uncertainties are encapsulated in the question on which the poem closes, revealing the poet's feeling of disorientation in a badly damaged environment:

> so do I call you tree or mast
> as I walk through the wood
> full of so many ship-shaped holes? (ll. 22–25)

The last line of the stanza and the poem places the words "full" and "holes" in polar positions highlighting the oxymoronic and ultimately absurd dimension of the commonly used phrase: "to be full of holes". Addressing the forest, the poet seems to oscillate between two worldviews because of the play on the word "wood". While in one worldview the forest is nothing but a mass of inert wood waiting to be molded by human agency, the wooded area can also be understood to be a living, sentient entity that required so many years to come into being that the hurt received in the modern era reverberates far back into the past.

18 The line-by-line analysis of the poem reveals how van Neerven deftly upturns colonial preconceptions of progress and conquest, and points to Yugambeh values and practices as powerful alternatives. But

the particular power of this short poem also stems from its ingenious, and as it were visual, undermining of the iconic sailing ship that is central to Australia Day celebrations, and is identified by some as a colonial ideologeme.

19 As mentioned earlier, the sailing ship as point of origin of the settler nation is ubiquitous both in official ceremonies and images, as well as in more critical visual representations of the arrival of the First Fleet, and of the so-called "discovery" of the continent by Captain Cook. One example of the former kind of representation is Algernon Talmage's "The Founding of Australia. By Capt Arthur Phillip RN Sydney Cove, Jan 26th 1788", a monumental painting that is part of the Tate collection. The finished painting is not on display at the Tate, but the original 1937 sketch hangs in the Mitchell Library (the State Library of New South Wales). In this painting Arthur Phillip, the new governor of the New South Wales colony, is shown with a few other officers toasting the Union Jack while it is being raised for the first time. Several tree stumps in the foreground signal the civilising replacement of a missing vegetal verticality by the flag mast on the left and the ship's masts in the middle ground on the right. In the 2019 first season of the TV political drama *Total Control*, the Indigenous director Rachel Perkins has her main character, the newly-appointed feisty senator Alex Irving (played by Deborah Mailman) gaze critically at this sketch she comes upon while trying to find her way around Parliament House: this short scene foreshadows how hard she will have to fight the system to throw light on an Indigenous death-in-custody scandal. In Michael Cook's 2010 critical and iconoclastic photographic projects which comprise "Undiscovered #4" and #8, and "Broken Dreams #3", the ship is even more pointedly associated with settler colonial symbolic but also material, social and political violence. The photographer's choice to reintroduce Indigenous people in the series featuring the iconic British ship makes such power dynamics particularly striking.

20 In the colonial representations, however, the power dynamics are generally muted and naturalised: when a landing is portrayed from the sea, because of the laws of perspective, the ships' masts dwarf the vegetation on land; when the scene is focalised from the land, the single ship visible in the offing reminds the viewer of church towers and spires in European landscape art, the mast standing as a

reassuring marker of spirituality and civilisation within a natural environment. Such portrayals also posit the ship near or close to the vanishing point, making it a point of origin and therefore inscribing Australian settlement within the British history of seafaring, exploration and conquest. The ship serves as a visual trope for the beginning of British settlement in Australia, and it also has such a marked presence in the English language, as van Neerven's poem ironically points out, that it can be considered as an "ideologeme".

21 Fredric Jameson defines an ideologeme as a "specific narrative paradigm [that] continues to emit its ideological signals long after its original content has become historically obsolete" (186):

> [T]he most archaic layer of content continues to supply vitality and ideological legitimation to its later and quite different symbolic function. […] What persists into contemporary narrative is sedimented ideologized narrative form.
> The ideologeme […] exists nowhere as such. [I]t vanishes into the past […] leaving only its traces—material signifiers, lexemes, enigmatic words and phrases—behind it. (201)

Jameson's point about the lasting, *in absentia*, ideological power wielded by the ideologeme is particularly apt when studying "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest".

22 It is a well-known fact that because of England's signal history as a naval nation, a great many nautical words and phrases of the sailing ship age are still in use as metaphors in the English language today. Some of these are still relatively transparent, such as "across the bow", "above board", "to clear the deck", "to batten down the hatches" or "to run a tight ship", while some, that do not explicitly contain references to a ship or its parts, are less easy to identify as having a nautical origin, such as "hand over fist". The fact that such words are still in use over 150 years after steam ships replaced sailing ships attests to the enduring strength of the schemes that gained pride of place in the national idiom when Britain's nautical power was at its peak.

23 In "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest", it is another nautical phrase that is rewritten in a way that completely undermines its original meaning. "Ship-shaped hole" appears four times in the poem, once in

the title and then in each stanza. Furthermore, its strategic position in the first and last lines of the poem clearly makes it a core concept of the poem. The phrase is derived from the adjective “shipshape” and its original form “ship-shapen” was first recorded in a 1644 Seamans Dictionary written by Sir Henry Manwaring, an English lawyer, soldier, author, seaman and politician. [2] Manwaring used the word to discuss a ship’s rake, that is to say the overhang of the hull at both ends of the keel. “[F]or the Rake aftward-on (it being of no use for the Ship, but only for to make her Ship shapen, as they call it, they give as little as may be) which commonly is about a fourth or fifth part of her Rake foreward-on.” Manwaring makes clear that construction conventions about a ship’s rear were purely aesthetic, remarking that a wall-rear “makes a Ship within board much the roomier, and not the less wholesome Ship in the sea if her bearing be well laid out.

24 Yet the meliorative adjective “ship-shaped”, shortened to “ship-shape”, came to mean “arranged properly as things on board ship should be; trim, orderly” (OED). The Royal Navy’s much celebrated discipline, usually considered to be one of the reasons for its excellence, probably contributed to the semantic shift from the aesthetic appreciation of a ship’s outline to an idea of moral orderliness. The expression was further extended to “ship-shape and Bristol fashion” in the early 19th century when Bristol became the major west-coast port of Britain.

25 *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle* (London, 1839) published this explanation of the phrase:

> The point of the compliment thus paid to the tars of Bristol has been used as a sort of oral goad to emulation, the effect of which, however, as a stimulant to exertion, may be supposed to have a different action on the mind of those to whom it is applied, according to their temperament and idiosyncracy [sic]. The present race hold their claim to the character of good seamen, and equally to the local distinction of pugilistic combatancy! (166)

Beyond nautical orderliness the phrase thus came to encapsulate not only good seamanship but also exemplary pugnacity. A modern user of the qualifier “ship shape” may not be aware of the values that were once associated with it. But its laudatory dimension remains clear, a

fact which attests that the great regard for the British Navy endures in the English language.

26 The deconstruction of the qualifier in the poem is therefore particularly strategic. By replacing the strong past particle ("shapen") by a weak one ("shaped"), the phrase lays the groundwork for a shift in perspective away from the naval ideologeme, drawing the reader's gaze to the damage done to the living forest environment instead.

27 The Museums of History of New South Wales website indicates that at the time of the First Fleet's voyage, about 12,000 British commercial and naval ships were plying the world's oceans. In contrast to this large number, the fleet of 11 ships that arrived in Botany Bay in 1788 was comparatively small. What the first stanza of van Neerven's poem invites us to remember, however, is that a single ship is made up of a large variety of dismembered trees.

28 It is generally estimated that in the 18th century about 4,000 oak trees were needed to build a three-master warship, the equivalent of 30 to 40 hectares of woodland. This is not counting the other species of trees needed for different parts, nor the fact that an acre of uniformly mature oak trees is a figment of the extractivist imagination. In 1790, the Royal Navy had about 300 ships in its ranks, each with an average service life of only twelve years—much less time than it takes an oak to grow to maturity (Thorne). It is no surprise therefore that great quantities of wood resources used in the construction of British ships came from outside of the British Isles, spreading the ecological impact of British military and commercial ship-building to Europe, the Americas, India, and later Australia: "Beyond Britain's borders, trade in masts, planking, oak, pitch, and tar demanded far more from woodland sources than were ever felt at home, and stretched the Royal Navy's reach to diverse ecosystems around the world" (Melby, part VII).

29 Shifting the focus away from the celebrated icon of British imperialism as van Neerven does in the poem, and focusing instead on its ecological impact, the gaping hole left by its sourcing in native forests, is therefore highly relevant. This hollowing out of the positive value of the shipshape metaphor arguably belongs to the process of resurgence as defined by Indigenous resurgence theories, in that it encourages the reader to rethink exploitative attitudes to the

environment. As we shall see, van Neerven's unsettling use of a well-known metaphor is confirmation that, following Paul Ricœur's analysis of the poetic metaphor, poetry is indeed a tool for heuristic action.

Performing artistic resurgence

30 On a first reading, the image "a ship-shaped hole" is reminiscent of a great variety of visual effects, ranging from the cartoonish, to Magritte's surrealist hollowing outs. Magritte's stated intention was in fact to draw the viewer's attention to the illusionist nature of pictorial representation (as in the famous 1929 "The Treachery of Images", also known as the "This is Not a Pipe" painting), and cast doubt on the nature of appearances, both in artistic representations, and in reality itself. To a certain extent, van Neerven's metaphorical (de)construction does the same thing, inviting the reader to look beyond, or through the trivial icon of imperialistic pride.

31 In his seminal work *The Rule of Metaphor*, French philosopher Paul Ricœur defended the idea of a realist function for poetry. Drawing on the Aristotelian conception of language as a predicative system that invents meaning, as well as on the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, he was keen to reaffirm the inventive and forward-looking nature of language, its dynamic openness to that which eludes conceptual reason, or rather the conventional "semantic grids" (234) on which concepts are constructed.

32 Revisiting American philosopher Paul Henle's analyses, Ricœur reflected on the particular iconicity of the verbal metaphor, defining it as a way of thinking about something by considering something similar, which is the iconic mode of the signified. But as Ricœur noted, following Henle, contrary to the visual metaphor, in language the iconic element of the metaphor is not presented, simply described: "nothing is displayed in sensible images, therefore; everything, whether associations in the writer's mind or in that of the reader, takes place within language" (223).

33 This allows the metaphor to function according to two modalities of meaning: on one level, it functions literally, pointing at an object or a

situation. But it also functions iconically, "indirectly designating" another similar object or situation:

> Precisely because the iconic representation is not an image, it can point toward original resemblances, whether of quality, structure or locality, of situation, or, finally, of feeling. In every case, the thing in focus is thought of as what the icon describes. Thus, the iconic representation harbours the power to elaborate, to extend the parallel structure. (224)

Ricœur regretted, however, that Henle gave in to "an emotionalist theory" of the metaphor, limiting its poetic function to the extension of double meaning from the cognitive realm to the affective, and argued instead in favour of the metaphor's "capacity for further development on the cognitive plane itself" (224). Indeed, Henle's analysis circumvented the need to choose between a theory of logical absurdity and an iconic theory. The logical clash on the literal level leads the reader to look for a meaning beyond the lexical meaning: according to Ricœur, "metaphor is not quite the clash itself, but rather its resolution":

> One must therefore "work out" the parallelism between situations that will guide the iconic transposition of one to the other. This activity has become useless in the case of conventional metaphors, where cultural usage decides on the figurative sense of certain expressions. It is only in living metaphors that one sees this activity at work. (225)

Exploring further the "working out" activity required by the "living" metaphor from a productive perspective, Ricœur picks up on Gilbert Ryle's concept of a "category mistake" ("the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another") and argues that the metaphor should be seen as a "planned category mistake":

> Can one not say that the strategy of language at work in metaphor consists in obliterating the logical and established frontiers of language, in order to bring to light new resemblances the previous classification kept us from seeing? In other words, the power of

> metaphor would be to break an old categorization, in order to establish new logical frontiers on the ruins of their forerunners. (233)

Contrary to theories that would restrict the poetic metaphor to a gesture towards an unsayable Romantic ideal, or a way of establishing a "mood", Ricœur's analysis leads him to extrapolate from the metaphor's capacity to destabilise existing categories (on which specific epistemological assumptions are dependent) and to hypothesise "that the dynamic of thought that *carves its way* through already established categories is the same as what engenders all classification" (233, italics mine).

35 In line with Ricœur's analysis of the metaphor as a heuristic tool, I would like to argue that van Neerven's metaphorical hollowing out of the colonial ideologeme of the sailing ship achieves much more than a simple denunciation of the values the original "ship-shape" expression carries. It also invites the reader to abandon the settler-mentality categories that construct the natural, non-human world as inert, atomised and available for exploitation.

36 In the poem, what colonial conquest and the exploitation of natural resources leave behind is not "nothing", defined as a simple absence or lack of what was there before. The void that "the ship [that] sails in southern seas" has opened in the forest is not a mathematical negative space, nor the logical, as well as material binary opposite of the ship that now is. As in Magritte's paintings, the excavation of a shape in the texture of reality questions the very nature of this "reality". This "ship-shaped hole" demands that the forest be seen as a living—but also as a deeply traumatised—being: "the forest / still recovering from the fright of colonisation" (ll. 2–3). Instead of being the total sum of discrete items juxtaposed in one place, the forest is portrayed as a collective being endowed not only with feelings, but also memory. This conversion of a gaping hole into the ghostly yet enduring evidence of a past trauma that continues to send shockwaves through the living human and non-human collective is characteristic of the way Indigenous resurgence art denounces the settler colonial injunction to forget and "move on".

37 The particular power of the recurrent "ship-shaped hole in the forest" metaphor in the poem comes from the fact that it is not just

an unusual, isolated and ultimately ornamental statement (which is a common definition of the metaphor). This metaphorical expression belongs to what Ricœur—extending the theory of metaphor to that of models—refers to as a "metaphorical network" (288).

38 The ship-shaped hole in the living flesh of the forest that the poem draws attention to is not an anthropomorphic, vaguely holistic approximation. If it were, van Neerven would not venture to describe the hole left by colonial extraction as being "thousands of years deep" (l. 35), for such a vast time reference is likely to raise questions in the reader's mind. British colonisation in Australia began less than 250 years ago, and even though there are some tree specimens around the world that are known to be between 3,000 and 4,000 years old, they are rarities. It is therefore unlikely that the native trees cut down to build ships in Australia were typically "thousands of years" old. Furthermore, how could felling trees some 200 years ago to build sailing ships still be hurting the forest in the present? The mention of the thousand-of-years-deep hole that still "aches and aches" therefore calls for re-categorisation.

39 One way of doing this would be to accept that the "tree" category does not necessarily refer to a singular, separate object, but that it can be biologically part of a collective organism. Some trees, like the North American quaking aspen, grow in what botanists call clonal colonies. Each plant is technically separate since it has its own root system, but they propagate by cloning themselves rather than by seeding. In Tasmania, the endemic Lomatia tasmanica, commonly known as King's Lomatia, are plants that can grow up to eight meters tall and that can individually live up to 300 years. But collectively the Lomatia are considered to be one of the oldest living plants as it has been cloning itself for at least 43,600 years, and possibly for as long as 135,000 years. Not being fire-resistant, and also because they are difficult to keep alive in cultivation, the Lomatia are now considered to be critically endangered. However, individual Lomatia stems are much too slim to be of any use for building a ship. Besides, the poem specifically refers to pine, white oak and elm trees, none of which species form clonal colonies. So, unless one is prepared to dismiss the time reference as being purely figurative, it is necessary to find other ways to make sense of the metaphor.

40 Another way of understanding the lines would be to read them as a reference to the antiquity of primary forests such as the Gondwana forests, some remnants of which stand on the New South Wales-Queensland border, on lands traditionally owned by the Yugambeh peoples. Gondwana forests are so named because the fossil record indicates that the plant and animal species now living there are the same as in the time of Gondwana (the vast landmass that joined the Indian and the Australian tectonic plates, among others, until some 96 million years ago). The website of the South Queensland Lamington National Park ("Woonoongoora" in the Yugambeh language) cites "timber-getters" as those who "spearheaded the onslaught in the search for cedar—'red gold'" from the 1870s onwards: "By the century's end, most of the red cedar, crows ash and white beech trees had been harvested from the area surrounding what is now Lamington National Park and the coastal lowland rainforest had been destroyed."[3] The heavily-logged Gondwana rainforests of New South Wales and Queensland have generally been replanted with highly flammable eucalyptus trees, thus further endangering the surviving primary rainforests, since global warming has made fire events more frequent and devastating in Australia. The 2019–2020 megafires, for instance, spread to rainforests that had never been burnt before. Being aware of these facts helps the reader understand why "the ship-shaped hole in the forest" could be both "thousands of years deep" and still be aching in the present.

41 Both of these readings, however, perpetuate the objectifying gaze Western industrialised societies cast on the natural environment: the forest is understood to be a living ecosystem that can be heavily and durably impacted by human activities, but it remains separate, enclosed in the non-human category. The third stanza of van Neerven's poem succinctly deconstructs such assumptions. The line "No consent was asked from the materials of 'discovery'" links together Aboriginal peoples whose consent for their so-called "discovery" was not asked for, and the "materials" that is to say the wood from the forest. Here the Aboriginal peoples and the forest are the interchangeable objects of colonial predation, which, as Judith Butler puts it, denies them their "grievability", and therefore deprives them of their status, their "value" as living beings: "Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life

appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (14).

42 The next lines, however, shift to a different form of continuity between the human and the other-than-human. Instead of both categories being objectified, in Yugambeh culture, tree and boat are acknowledged as subjects endowed with names and spiritual life, just like humans. The caretaking practice of "walking on Country" is alluded to in the last lines when the poetic persona addresses the trees as a way to assess their shared hurt.

43 In his study of the psychological and social impacts of colonisation on Indigenous peoples in Canada, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred wrote that "colonialism is best conceptualized as an irresistible outcome of a multigenerational and multifaceted process of forced dispossession and attempted acculturation" (43). This forced dispossession and cultural disconnection have led to what he describes as "political chaos and social discord", yet he identifies "the real deprivation" as "the erosion of an ethic of universal respect and responsibility that used to be the hallmark of Indigenous societies" (43). Agreeing with Alfred's view that losing their ethical priorities constitutes Indigenous peoples's greatest deprivation, Jeff Corntassel argues that:

> Being Indigenous today means struggling to reclaim and regenerate one's relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization. […] Indigenous resurgence means having the courage and imagination to envision life beyond the state. […] This shift means rejecting the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and recognition, and embracing a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices. How one engages in daily processes of truth-telling and resistance to colonial encroachments is just as important as the overall outcome of these struggles to reclaim, restore, and regenerate homeland relationships. (88–89)

44 The struggle for the sovereignty of First Nations has often had as disappointing outcomes in Australia as in Canada, which is why resurgence theories prove as relevant in both places, shifting the focus of the struggle away from trying to fit the legal and ontological categories of the settler State, and reasserting instead Indigenous epistemologies through the performance of cultural relationality.

In the introduction to *Indigenous Resurgence: Decolonization, and Movements for Environmental Justice*, Jaskiran Dhillon insists Indigenous knowledge is inextricably linked with a distinctive mode of life. He expands on its daily performative dimension, distinguishing it clearly from the kind of last resource "off ground" lore fetishised by urban societies who imagine it can protect them from ecological disaster:

> Indigenous knowledge is not a noun; it is not a commodity or product that can be drawn upon as a last-ditch effort to be integrated into a battalion of adaptive solutions to save us all. To acquire this knowledge means entirely shifting our current patterns of living in the everyday: it is cumulative and dynamic, adaptive and ancestral, and it is produced in a collective process that is fundamentally centered on the way one relates. (2)

45 Such a focus on performing cultural caring relationships with what remains of First Nations' homelands is all the more vital because of the extent of ecological and cultural degradation. In "A Love like Dorothea's", writing back to Dorothea McKellar's 1906 lyrically nationalistic poem "My Country", Alison Whittaker has her poetic persona lament: "I never lived in time to love a love like Dorothea's […] I can't get past the concrete and my blak[4] tongue's gone all slack". The weight of despair at all that has been lost makes the process of "embracing a daily existence of place-based cultural practises" (Corntassel) particularly arduous, but such an embrace is precisely what reaffirms "homeland relationships". In a powerful article published in the *Guardian* on the occasion of the 2019–2020 fires, Alexis Wright invited all Australians to interpret the heavy pall of smoke that hung over their cities as a call to mourn the destruction of Country: "A dense haze of smoke crawled over Melbourne and embraced us for a day in its lonely pilgrimage, inviting us to contemplate its mourning rite, its long prayer" (Wright 2019). At a time when Australian citizens, state and federal authorities were mainly concerned with cleaning up, rebuilding and restoring what today passes as "normality", Wright was alluding to the Aboriginal smoking ceremonies that are part of traditional forms of grieving. By inviting her fellow Australians to mourn publicly for the flora and fauna that had been destroyed, Wright was pushing back against

colonial and neoliberal extractivist agendas that treat most human and non-human lives as if they were dispensable because "un-grievable" (Butler). Although younger Aboriginal writers like van Neerven do not enjoy the same global public visibility as Wright today, the poetic economy of their writing also manifests a resurgent energy which invites the reader on a hermeneutic journey that calls for a redefinition of ontological categories, and attests to the survival of relational, place-based modes of existence.

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NOTES

1 Interview with Tessa Rose, at the 2020 Sydney Writers' Festival, <https://omny.fm/shows/sydney-writers-festival/ellen-van-neerven-throat>.

2 Pascal Tréguer, "shipshape and Bristol fashion" entry in *Word Histories*, <https://wordhistories.net/2017/10/18/shipshape-bristol-fashion/> (accessed 7 June 2025).

3 <https://parks.desi.qld.gov.au/parks/lamington/about/culture>.

4 The word was coined by multi-media artist Destiny Deacon to reclaim the colonialist epithet and express an urban Aboriginal identity that was authentic.

ABSTRACTS

English

In line with resurgent theories about First Nations peoples (Coulthard, Corntassel), this article shows how Ellen van Neerven's poetic writing in *Throat*, specifically in "A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest", does not merely lament the negative impact of colonisation but transforms the negative space hollowed out by the coloniser into a creative resource. The poem succinctly reminds the reader of the existence of an alternative view of the colonising event and voices an alternative ontology. At the same time, the sailing ship, that positive vehicle of British colonisation in Australia Day celebrations, is inverted to represent a historic violation the impact of which reverberates far back into deep time as well as into the present. The

final part of the study builds on Paul Ricœur's discussion of the iconicity that is specific to the poetic metaphor and of the kind of hermeneutic effort it requires of the reader (*The Rule of Metaphor*), in order to show how the semantic deconstruction/reconstruction process called for by the "ship-shaped" metaphor constitutes a form of heuristic action-writing that is part and parcel of Indigenous resurgence.

Français
Dans la lignée des théories sur la résurgence, appliquées aux peuples des Premières Nations (Coulthard, Corntassel), cet article montre comment l'écriture poétique d'Ellen van Neerven dans *Throat*, et plus particulièrement dans « A Ship-Shaped Hole in the Forest », ne se contente pas de déplorer l'impact destructeur de la colonisation, mais transforme l'espace négatif creusé par le colonisateur en une ressource créative. Le poème rappelle succinctement au lecteur l'existence d'une vision alternative de l'événement de la colonisation et exprime une ontologie alternative. En même temps, le voilier, ce « véhicule » idéologique positif de la colonisation britannique si présent dans les célébrations de l'Australia Day, est inversé pour représenter une violation historique dont l'impact se répercute loin dans le passé ainsi que dans le présent. La dernière partie de l'article s'appuie sur l'analyse que fait Paul Ricœur de l'iconicité propre à la métaphore poétique et du type d'effort herméneutique qu'elle exige du lecteur (*La Métaphore vive*), afin de montrer comment le processus de déconstruction/reconstruction sémantique appelé par la métaphore dans le poème constitue une forme d'écriture-action heuristique qui fait partie intégrante de la résurgence autochtone.

INDEX

Mots-clés
théories de la résurgence, ontologies autochtones, la métaphore, Ricœur (Paul), herméneutique

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Ecopoetic Resistance in the Poetry of Ellen van Neerven, Jazz Money, and Evelyn Araluen: Resurgence and the Claim for a Decolonial Inhabitation

Résistances écopoétiques dans les poèmes de Jazz Money, Evelyn Araluen et Ellen van Neerven : résurgence et revendication d'un habiter décolonial

Charlène Corolleur

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OUTLINE

TEXT

1 Set against the backdrop of the climate crisis, the poems of Ellen van Neerven, Jazz Money, and Evelyn Araluen expose the violence of colonization and interrogate past, present and future Australia with an insightful First Nations' eye. Widely acclaimed recently, these three young poets are often seen as inheritors of the environmental activist poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, Lionel Fogarty [1], and Alexis Wright. First Nations poetry remains peripheral to the mainstream Australian literary market despite significant publications and associated activities which gained visibility with the advent of social media. [2] Yet, contemporary First Nations writers represent a dynamic ingression as they go on the attack against modern Australia's myth-making and continuing politics of domination that are perceptible in its history, literature and relations to the land.

2 The poems gathered in *Dropbear* (Evelyn Araluen, 2021), *How to Make a Basket* (Jazz Money, 2020), and *Throat* (Ellen van Neerven, 2020) address a wide range of subjects related to ecological concerns in the wake of the devastating 2019–2020 bushfires that swept across the territory. Inevitably, some First Nations people's lands that were passed down from generation to generation, through *songlines*, languages and kinship networks were affected. Their works also explore how First Nations people are positioned within a landscape that has been eroded by settler colonialism, unfairly occupied, and reshaped through colonial toponymy.

3 Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her influential work *Decolonizing Methodologies* examines how colonialism has shaped Western ways of thinking and research methods. She argues that knowledge production needs to be reoriented to center Indigenous perspectives, values, and goals. For Smith, decolonization means reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and ways of living. It is an effort that challenges the very foundations of colonial power:

> The acts of reclaiming, reformulating and reconstituting Indigenous cultures and languages have required the mounting of an ambitious research programme, one that is very strategic in its purpose and activities and relentless in its pursuit of social justice. (Smith 142)

In the context of Australia which is a settler-colony built on frontier violence and the systemic erasure of First Nations knowledges, Smith's approach invites a reconceptualization of place, not as a geographic location defined by colonial cartographies, but as a relational nexus embedded in memory, kinship, and responsibility. She foregrounds the need for epistemic justice: the validation of Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being that have been systematically silenced or co-opted by colonial processes. Her work therefore offers a powerful lens through which to read the poetry of Ellen van Neerven, Jazz Money, and Evelyn Araluen, whose texts resist settler-colonial narratives not only by exposing environmental degradation but by asserting Indigenous sovereignty, epistemology, and ontological difference.

4 The present article also draws on the Aboriginal concept of Country which is powerfully articulated by Deborah Bird Rose in her influential work *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. She describes Country as a living, relational entity sustained by reciprocal relationships between people, non-human beings, and ancestral forces. As she writes, "Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; heart's ease" (Rose 7). In Aboriginal epistemologies, Country is a sentient presence that participates in the production of meaning, memory, and story. It is a co-creator of life and knowledge and dynamic site of interdependence, challenging colonial understandings of land as inert, vacant, or disconnected from life. Building on this relational approach of place, it is undeniable that literature plays a critical role in reconfiguring our ways of inhabiting the world.

5 Considering its colonial past and the ongoing contestation around belonging and placeness, Australia offers a significant site for decolonial ecological inquiry. Indeed, the country's environmental policies and narratives have often been shaped by settler-colonial frameworks that perpetuate the dispossession of First Nations peoples and their knowledges. Mainstream environmentalism in Australia (and globally) is frequently embedded in Western epistemologies that abstract "nature" from cultural, spiritual and ancestral relations to land. From a decolonial perspective, this model of environmentalism is not only limited but hegemonic as it reproduces the logics of extractivism and settler futurity. Such epistemologies allowed to maintain settler access to land and cultural erasure through apparently benevolent environmental projects and inevitably led to the marginalisation of traditional ecological knowledges. It also reinscribed colonial hierarchies, especially when First Nations' voices are co-opted or silenced within environmental discourse. In this light, the problem is not merely ecological degradation, but epistemic violence that denies alternative epistemologies and ontologies of land and life.

6 In this respect, the poetry of van Neerven, Money, and Araluen offers a vital intervention. While these authors do not identify as environmental activists in the conventional sense, their work participates in a global movement which Canadian First Nations

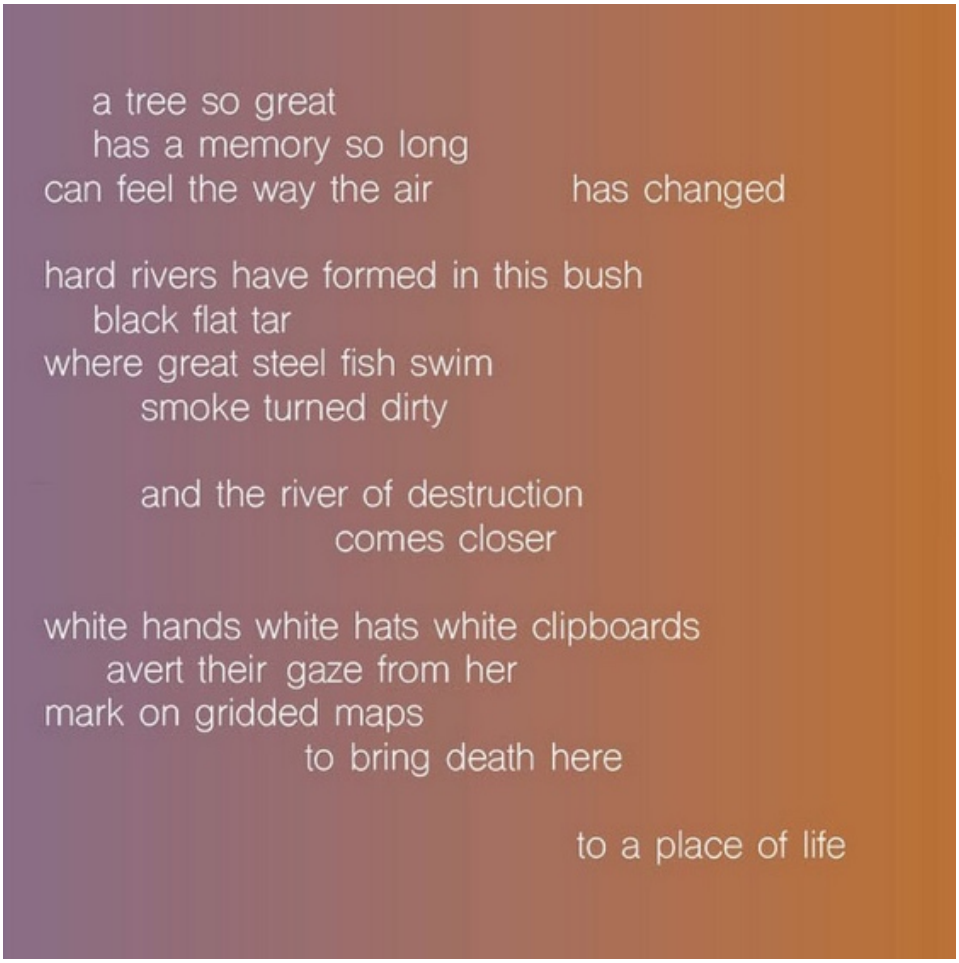
scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson defines as a "project of resurgence" which is a deeply grounded, community-based process of cultural, political, and ontological renewal rooted in First Nations' knowledges and land-based practices. For Simpson, resurgence is not a reaction to colonial violence, nor is it framed as a pathway toward reconciliation or integration within settler institutions. Rather, it constitutes "a radical and complete overturning of the colonial structure of dispossession" (Simpson 10), aimed at regenerating First Nations' presence and autonomy on terms that are not dictated by the settler state. Through this lens, the poetic interventions of van Neerven, Money, and Araluen can be seen as articulating alternative modes of dwelling and knowing that resist both the material exploitation of land and the discursive erasure of First Nations sovereignties. Their work offers powerful acts of reclamation of place, but also of narrative, temporality, and epistemology. For instance, in her poem "To the Parents", Evelyn Araluen directly rejects the liberal framework of reconciliation and the settler narrative of irreparable rupture, demanding instead: "No reconciliation. No rupture. Just home" (Araluen 2021, 87). This call for continuity and presence responds in part to Alexis Wright's question in an article published in *The Guardian* in 2018: "How do you find the words to tell the story of the environmental emergency of our time?" The issue raised in the whole article is clearly linked with epistemological authority: whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate, and whose histories are permitted to shape the discourse of ecological crisis?

7 Drawing on First Nations epistemologies and relational understandings of Country, this article examines how the poetry of Ellen van Neerven, Jazz Money, and Evelyn Araluen contests dominant (neo)colonial notions of place and environmental thought. Their work challenges the universalizing logic of mainstream environmentalism and rejects extractivist ideologies rooted in colonial dispossession. The analysis also adopts a dual perspective by reading their poems both as expressions of Indigenous ecopoetics and as decolonial acts that resist settler narratives and assert First Nations presence and sovereignty.

Getting rid of the colonial *oikos*[3] and letting the Law and the Dreamtime resurface

8 2019 and 2020 were the worst years on record for the planet, and the bushfire seasons that Australia experienced illustrate this unprecedented crisis. According to the Australian Public Service Commission, the tolls rose to 33 human deaths, more than one billion native animals and plant deaths, 113 species threatened with extinction. 5,900 buildings were destroyed including over 2,800 homes and sacred sites. In two years, over 18 million hectares were burnt. These figures show how catastrophic in scale and impact these fires were both for the people and for nature. Despite First Nations people in New South Wales and Victoria only representing 3.4% of the total population[4] they had greater exposure to bushfire smoke because of poor living conditions and lack of support from the government. First Nations peoples, including children, experienced trauma and developed respiratory issues. Yet, bushfires have always been a feature of the natural environment in Australia, and in the past, Indigenous cultural burning may have helped reduce the intensity of fires. For thousands of years, First Nations peoples nurtured and protected their country, but brutal invasion and the destruction of resources drastically altered the ecosystems in a short time and profoundly impacted practices of land management. Furthermore, sacred lands are still being destroyed by state government as was the case in October 2020 when direction trees (which are sacred trees that carry the spirits of the ancestors) were cut down to build a highway in Western Victoria. This event is evoked by Jazz Money[5] in "Sweet Smoke", the opening poem of their debut collection *How to Make a Basket*. Also posted on their Instagram account, the author expresses their grief at the loss of their country; and calls for social and climate justice:

Figure 1. – "Sweet Smoke", posted on Jazz Money's Instagram account (October 2020).



9 The final line ("to a place of life") points to the colonial tendency to perceive certain environments as lifeless, ignoring the living presence and significance of these places within First Nations ontologies. In reality, these were and remain sites of complex ecological and cultural life, many of which continue to be destroyed despite growing awareness of the climate crisis. Yet, the poets do not limit themselves to depicting loss. Their work also challenges the logic of capitalist greenwashing by exposing how environmental rhetoric is often used to mask ongoing extractivism. Crucially, their poetry invites us to reconsider what it means to destroy a place. The felling of a tree, within First Nations frameworks, is not a neutral act. It can signify the erasure of a relational and storied space. In this sense, the destruction of non-human beings like trees is inseparable from the

destruction of place, as these beings are integral to the living networks that constitute Country.

10 In “PYRO”, Evelyn Araluen also considers the 2020 bushfires as she writes from a desk “COVERED IN ASH” from her “THRICE-BURNT CHAR OF HOMELAND”. This poem, which seems to mimic a news bulletin or a tweet, is a capitalized text denouncing the irony and hypocrisy of the Government who constantly boast they will solve the environmental crisis: “/ SCOTT MORRISON SITS SANGUINE IN A WREATH OF FRANGIPANI // […] // AGAIN AGAIN WE ARE TOLD TO BE GRATEFUL FOR THIS GIFT AS IF THE MACHINE HAS FIREPROOFED ANYTHING BUT ITSELF //”. And while First Nations people are at the forefront of the ongoing ecological crisis, ministers merely keep on changing suits for their official meetings as Ellen van Neerven deplores in their satirical poem *Politicians Having Long Showers on Stolen Land*. However, while fire can lead to major human, species and habitat loss, it can be a source of restoration when it is managed by First Nations people.

11 In this respect, the three selected books resonate with what poet and CHamoru scholar Craig Santos Perez conceptualizes as Indigenous ecopoetics. Perez defines his approach as one that examines literature as a vital space for expressing Indigenous identity and environmental belonging. In *Navigating CHamoru Poetry*, he writes: “I root my analysis within the scholarship of Pacific, postcolonial, trans-Pacific, and Indigenous ecopoetics to demonstrate how literature that focuses on the environment is an important site for articulating Indigenous identity” (Perez 42). He explains that Indigenous ecopoetics foregrounds themes of interconnection between humans, non-human species, and the land and that it considers water and territory as foundations of Indigenous genealogy, identity, and community. Moreover, it interrogates colonial and capitalist representations of nature as inert and commodifiable, using ecological imagery to challenge extractivist paradigms. Finally, Indigenous ecopoetics restores a sense of sacred relationality with the Earth, conceptualizing land as ancestor, healer, and site of resistance, care, and belonging.

12 The three poets studied here carry these principles in their writing. Their poems are rich with ecological images and ancestral metaphors

that indict Western exploitative attitudes. Interestingly, they also push Indigenous ecopoetics in more overtly political and formally experimental directions. Indeed, van Neerven, Money and Araluen refuse conciliatory narratives and directly confront settler-colonial structures of power. While the poems certainly seek to heal wounds of the past and care for Country, they pointedly withhold any facile reconciliation with colonial history. The lands they evoke are, as Araluen writes, "drenched in a history of settler violence" (Araluen 2021, 6); a reality that no amount of nostalgic pastoral sentiment or folkloric romanticism can paper over. In place of settler-centric "green" narratives, these poets demand truth-telling and uncompromising resistance, making their art a site of decolonial witnessing rather than a peaceful resolution.

13 Australian scholar Amanda Johnson observes in her article "Writing Ecological Disfigurement: First Nations Poetry after 'the Black Grass of Bitumen'" that today's First Nations poetry critiques "proleptic environmental mourning, simplistic environmental apocalypticism and compromised visions of political reconciliation" (1). Johnson points out that Araluen (and her peers) condemn tokenistic [6] "greening" efforts and reconciliation rhetoric that fail to restore Indigenous sovereignty. She also highlights Araluen's metaphor of "potplanting in our sovereignty", which encapsulates how settler society tries to "embellish and fix" colonial realities by grafting Western concepts (plants, laws, culture) onto Indigenous land without ceding real power. By invoking the absurd image of a potted plant in sovereign ground, Araluen ridicules reconciliation efforts that do not uproot colonial power. In this light, the work of Araluen, Money, and van Neerven shifts the conversation from reconciliation to reinvigoration. Through linguistic, spiritual, and ecological practices, they offer reclamations of time, of space, of language, of relation.

14 Besides, through the praxis of poetry, the three poets evoke certain overlooked practices about land management to revive and promote land-based knowledge and relationship with their ancestral land. Storytelling and orality are part of that revitalization. Moreover, for them, environmental destruction and social oppression have equally affected their habitat, a hypothesis which is notably found in Ghassan

Hage's 2017 book *Is Racism an Environmental Threat*? The critic sums up his own studies in the following terms:

> In my book *Is Racism an Environmental Threat*?, I argue that ecological crisis and racism are both grounded in what I have called "generalized domestication": a mode of dominating and exploiting nature and people. I offer a critique of generalized domestication, and I highlight the existence of other modes of relating to nature and to each other [...]. (Hage 2021, 188)

15 In *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, civil and environmental engineer and political scientist Malcom Ferdinand also defines the concept of colonial *oikos* as a violent way of inhabiting the Earth; a mode of dwelling based upon ownership, extraction, and control, whose devastating impact affects not only the environment but also societies worldwide. This is the reason why he feels ecology should replace environmentalism in taking into account political and social aspects as well. In "Why We Need a Decolonial Ecology" Ferdinand points out that our way of tackling climate change is too restrictive and eludes other aspects:

> [...] Talking about ecocide, for example, creates an intergenerational fabric (we connect our actions to the lives of our children, we take responsibility for our legacy, we negotiate that of our parents), but this fabric is thought about in environmentalist terms, rather than social and political ones. (Ferdinand 2020)

In other words, climate change should be envisaged as a social challenge as much as a scientific challenge. Indeed, anti-racism, anti-colonial, feminist and environment movements have all highlighted the dominant structures of modernity. The issues these movements are facing lead them to reconsider the Western mode of experiencing the world including interactions with human and non-human communities. From that assumption, Ferdinand conceptualizes a decolonial ecology that holds protecting the environment together with the political struggles against (neo)colonial domination, systemic racism, and misogynistic practices. Although the three poets do not formally align with Ferdinand's framework, their poetics echo several of its central claims and especially the critique of Western ontologies of control

and their refusal of settler-environmental paradigms. Indeed, their poems seek to eschew simplistic views on environmentalism imposed by the knowledge system of the West that will only focus on one place of dwelling on Earth. They also refuse a unilateral ontology that is based on domination, the exploitation of the land and of First Nations Peoples.

16 The three poets follow a decolonial pathway: a return to the *oikos* corresponding to a Global South perspective. This change in paradigm means not only to be open to alternative forms of structures, practices, or belief systems, but also to explore liminal spaces, new modes of signification and poetic effects by interweaving genres to develop relational narratives in which places are no longer settings but actual topics in their poems in the sense that places and the land can perceive things and have an agency of their own. As Alexis Wright observes in her 2018 essay "Hey Ancestor!", what Western thought might term the *oikos* is known to First Nations as Country; an "inter-woven law country" wherein land and Law are one and the same. In Wright's words, the true measure of sovereignty is the collective responsibility of caring for that living land: "That's real sovereignty kind of thinking. True ownership. Comes with responsibility. Caring. Respect" (Wright 2018). She also emphasizes that sovereignty is not a matter of legal title or a National Day of Celebration, but an everyday commitment to uphold the Law of the land. This insight resonates deeply with the poetry of van Neerven, Money, and Araluen, who treat Country as an agentive participant in their writing. By explicitly invoking Wright's concept of "real sovereignty" grounded in Country, the three poets reinforce a decolonial understanding that the environment is not a passive space but a source of law, history, and spiritual truth; a living entity to which humans owe reciprocity and respect.

Re-planting First Nations' connection to the land

17 In her book *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Indigenous Australian Professor of Law Irene Watson provides a compelling Indigenous framework regarding the notions of place. For her, land is not property but a living being, and place is not

a fixed point but a continuous relation of obligation, spirit, and memory. Watson also articulates a vision of land and law that is inherently relational, spiritual, and processual:

> Raw Law is not written. It is lived. It is the first law, the law of land, of relation, of obligation, of memory. It is embedded in Country, in the way we speak, walk, relate, and exist. It is not located in time the way the white law is. It does not need to be made visible to be valid. (Watson 23)

Her concept of "Raw Law" emphasizes that law is not imposed but lived, originating from the land itself and the relationships it fosters. Another foundational notion in many First Nations cultures of Australia that informs this ontological and epistemological grounding is the *Dreaming*. This concept constitutes a dynamic relational system, where every element (human, animal, landscape, or ancestral being) is involved in a network of reciprocal obligations and presences. Not only does it refer to ancestral creation stories, but it continues to shape responsibilities and modes of being in relation to Country, thereby linking land, law, and knowledge in a non-linear temporality.

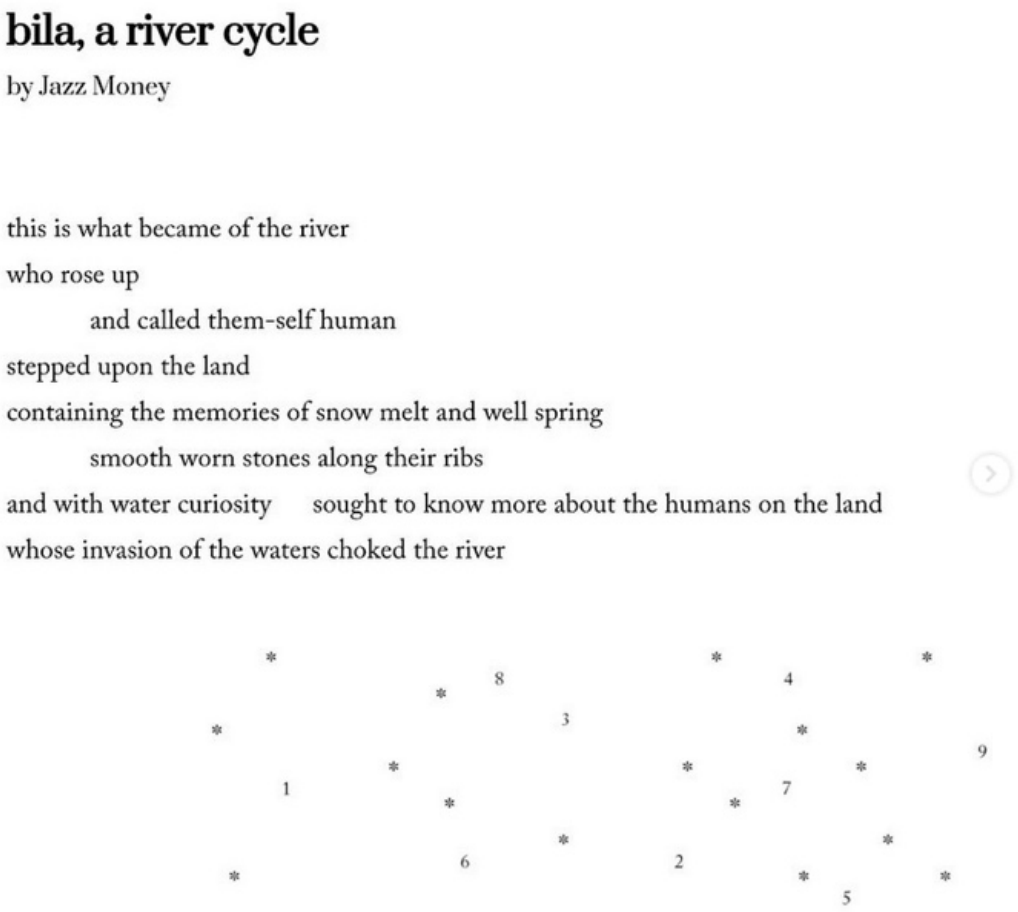
18 In "The Waking Desert: When Non-Places Become Events", French anthropologist Barbara Glowczewski explores how Indigenous ontologies see desert places as "sites of becoming" instead of unproductive "non-places" only valuable as places of possible extraction of "fossil fuels" and "mineral deposits" (4-5). This mode of relation undermines the extractivist rationality that instrumentalizes land as property or resource. It echoes Malcom Ferdinand's concept of "decolonial ecology", which challenges the colonial *oikos* by proposing an ethics of cohabitation grounded in responsibility and interconnectedness.

19 Since the early 2000s, relational epistemologies have emerged as critical alternatives to Eurocentric paradigms, especially those that frame land through notions of ownership and objectification. Scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith or Leanne Bestasamosake Simpson have foregrounded Indigenous knowledge systems as rooted in embodied relationships with land, memory, and kin. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems are rooted in relational

ontologies in which Country is a sentient presence, an agent of memory, meaning, and story.

20 Similarly, in *Dropbear* or in *How to Make a Basket*, rivers or inland seas are provided with an agency and sentience which connect both human and non-human entities. Sometimes, the agency of the country itself withholds a possible reconciliation between the settlers and First Nations people as "the water carries immemorial, a river without peace will not let you pray" (Araluen 2021, 84). Thus, a resisting force arises both from people and nature to oppose any trace of the modern world's hold as well as the relentless structure of settler-colonial violence. This defiance is also manifested in the structures of their poems which are characterized by repetitions, patterns and loose punctuation. In *bila, a river cycle*, Jazz Money uses mislineation as well as a sort of *bio-mimetic* technique to go beyond the metaphor and defy the Western conception of space and ways of inhabiting the Earth in the image of the colonial *oikos*:

Figure 2. – "Bila, a river cycle", posted on Jazz Money's Instagram account, January 2021 (*How to Make a Basket*, 59).



21 Here, the lines are stretched to suggest the continuance and cyclical renewal of the bila/river (situated in Wiradjuri country) that is not used as a picturesque background but more as a place for connection in an act of meaning-making. The environment is read as the ground of spiritual and cultural belonging. Most importantly, the water resurfaces, rises up to confront the settlers and their impacts upon the land. The poem also sweeps across the page, breaking on its way its expected linearity and its own finality (its *telos*) with the absence of punctuation and the abrupt run-on-lines in improbable places. This is all the more striking as the stars/asterisks themselves are once again somehow disrupted by the mysterious adjunction of numbers with no apparent order, hierarchy or logic. So in such a short poem, there is both the resurfacing of the Dreamtime and its inherent harmony and flow, and the sense of an unaccountable

disruption whose impact is still difficult to assess, the human "invasion of the waters" which "choked the river". Interestingly, Jazz Money somehow reclaims the dual and original significance of the word *bila*, which both refers to the Milky Way and a pool of water that is cut off from the river. [7] The incorporation of the worldview of the *Dreaming* signals the presence of resurgence through reconnection with ancestral narratives. Beyond the aesthetic and symbolical aspect, the evocative topography of the poems that is found in the poets' collections attempts to mimic the diversity of their country which is marked by layers of imposed colonial toponymy, interrupted transmission, and contested meanings. For these young poets, the landscape is fragmented by historical violence and cultural dislocation. The settler naming of places remains a powerful tool of domination, obscuring First Nations' presence and undermining relational modes of knowing. It is a remnant of the colonial *oikos* that forced First Nations people to "dress in translation" (Araluen 2021, 10) meaning that their identity is expressed through the imposed language of the colonizer for it is "hard to unlearn a language, to unspeak the empire" (Araluen 2021, 8). These two lines suggest both constraint and disguise: to speak in English is to adopt a form that conceals or distorts the original voice, shaped by relational ontologies and Country. Yet the metaphor also carries an ironic charge, hinting at a strategic performance—a way of navigating and unsettling settler discourse from within. In this sense, Araluen's poetics expose the tension between linguistic survival and resistance, making visible the limits of colonial language to fully carry First Nations knowledge and memory.

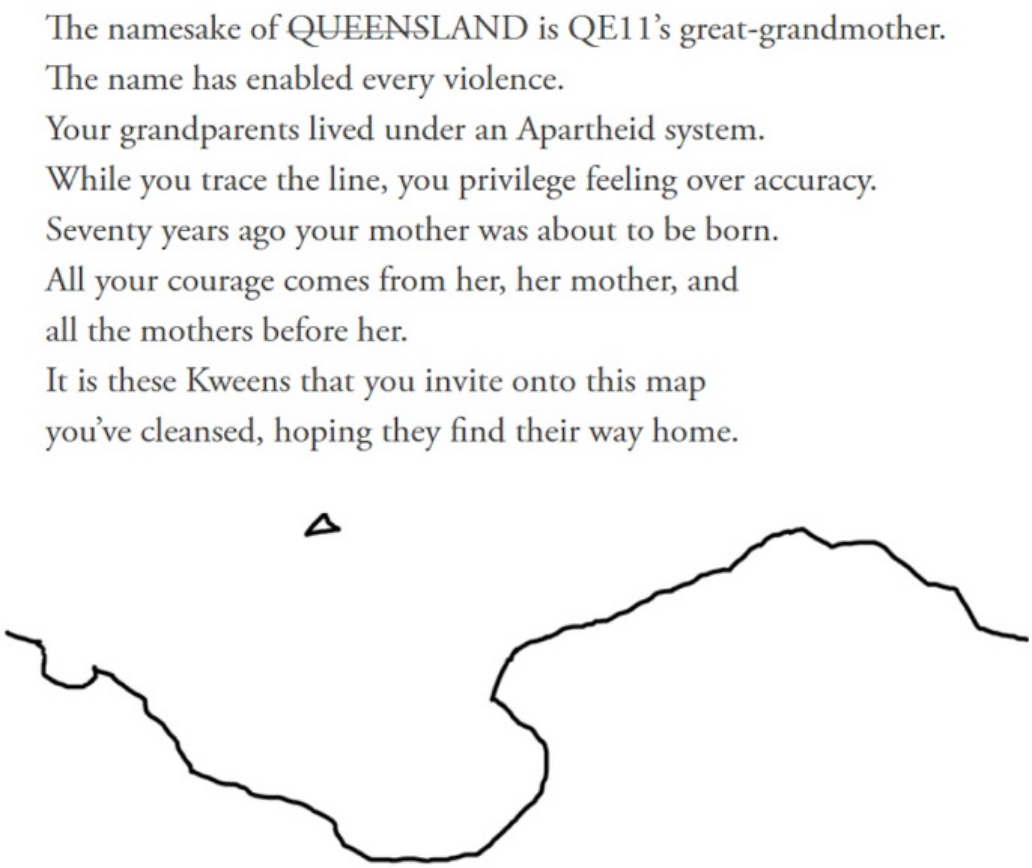
22 But even though the authors can only talk back to their oppressor in English, they question the transplanted language and parody it with the use of fragmentation, satire and puns. By including words and phrases from Yugambeh (van Neerven), Wiradjuri (Money) and Bundjalung (E. Araluen), the authors reject the language of the colonizer and demonstrate how sometimes re-learning a lost language is a way to return to their own *oikos* and place, to find their entire identity by reclaiming it. Undeniably, the use of First Nations languages in poetry allows to reassert the ontological relation between language and country, as James Tully suggests in his article "Reconciliation Here on Earth" when he notes that language is not

separate from nature—it has an interdependent and reciprocal relation with it instead.

23 Recently, Australia adopted dual names for cities as an attempt to restore First Nations place naming as Calla Wahlquist explained in her 2022 article "The Right Thing to Do: Restoring Aboriginal Place Names Key to Recognizing Indigenous Histories". Some projects invite First Nations people to share the story behind their place names. Activist and writer Bruce Pascoe for instance supports this decolonizing process as it helps to unlock past stories and First Nations narratives which are essential in acknowledging both their sovereignty and their connection to Country. The Dreamtime and *songlines* provided a set of blueprints for each living or non-living form and numerous place names refer to animals, plants and the features of sacred sites. In other words, First Nations peoples created toponyms corresponding to stories of past events that are still re-actualized in the present by way of practices that do take place, rituals that celebrate them, and the dreams that visit the local people.

24 First Nations territories should be respected for their specificity and unique signification and language, and their sacred dimension revitalized through ritual for "language is empty without ceremony" (van Neerven 28). However, renaming places is not self-evident. The linguistic reconnection is a persisting struggle that will require adaptabilities and will unsettle the Australian toponymic system, for even if First Nations' placenames have survived the onslaught of British annihilation of Indigenous languages and cultures, many Australians are not aware of their meanings or origins. In relation to that situation, in 2021 van Neerven wrote three unreleased poems which can be found on the website *Red Room Poetry*.[8] They were part of a larger project called *Kweensland: Sovereign Bodies and the Colonial Nation-State*. The second poem ("Kweensland. 2.") takes a keenly acerbic look at the colonial toponymic heritage and by erasing the word Queen, van Neerven points out that renaming and/or misspelling a place is no longer a tool of the oppressor. Naming a place is not a neutral practice, it has a political dimension as it imposes a specific imaginary. Once again, the typography plays a significant role and embodies decolonial praxis by focusing on First Nations ancestry, resistance and sovereignty.

Figure 3. – Ellen van Neerven, “Kweensland. 2.” (December 2022).



25 In the third poem, van Neerven spells out her critique of mapping and place naming, making the settler readers’ sense of placeness challenged. The final lines offer words of resilience and resistance to First Nations readers: a new perspective of inhabiting the lands by revitalising their culture to regain their sovereignty: “To place is not to perfect / To stay, to keep on, is something we must do.” With this poetic project, van Neerven explores the impact of performative naming which annihilated First Nations communities. By erasing and miswriting words in the first selected poem, the poet challenges the settler’s logic of mapping that dictates what must be visible and what should remain concealed, what is considered as legitimate presence and what is cast as marginal.

26 Since the late 20th century, Indigenous scholars and artists have invited us to rethink mapping not as an act of possession but as a

practice of relation and responsibility. Mykaela Saunders, in "The Land Is the Law: On Climate Fictions and Relational Thinking", shows how Aboriginal s*onglines*, literature, and art function as spatial practices that conserve and revitalize Country through memory, ceremony, and kinship: "Our s*onglines*—which form the oldest continuing transnational literatures—are designed to conserve Country through human stewardship, and to revitalize it through ceremonial activation" (23). From this perspective, mapping becomes an expression of care and accountability rather than control. It is an ethic that resists the settler colonial gaze and affirms enduring responsibilities to ancestral places. It also acknowledges that Country is both a sovereign land and a living network to which First Nations belong and from which they derive their identity and responsibility. [9] This implies that maps must be decolonized, and that cartography should become an epistemological practice that includes a different relationship to Country. The selected poems testify to this transformative and decolonizing ecopoetics that contemporary First Nations poets work to craft. Through subversive language and inventive poetry, these texts materialize a deep resurgence in First Nations' culture and knowledge to protect their lands, to defend their cosmogonies (which acknowledge the place of non-humans in the world and ask for climate and social justice). The concerns about the dispossession of First Nations peoples and land exploitation account for the incorporation of decolonial theories in First Nations' ecopoetics. As both humans and non-humans face ongoing changes in their lives and landscapes, displacing the colonial worldview that forged hierarchies between races, genders and lands is a necessary step to strategize renewal and continuity within First Nations communities.

27 There is, however, a fundamental issue: how, in practical terms, can these First Nations writers' poetic praxis prepare the ground for other possible relations between the land, the people, the plants, and the spirits? Can it facilitate the resurgence of alternative imaginaries in view of tackling the current ecological crisis?

Decolonial ecology: is it only a symbol or a metaphor?

28 In “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor”, published in 2012, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that decolonization should become a radical project that cannot be reduced to metaphorical or symbolic acts. Unlike numerous approaches that tend to define decolonization as a shift in culture or pedagogy, they insist on its material and political dimensions—a message that clearly resonates in the works of Ellen van Neerven, Evelyn Araluen, and Jazz Money. Indeed, caution must be exercised when using the term “decolonization” as its meaning could be co-opted by non-First Nations and could ultimately undermine its goals. The three poets are fully aware of that pitfall since their poems expose how such acts of appropriation perpetuate colonial harm and erase First Nations’ agency. With regards to that, even if Evelyn Araluen’s poetry aligns itself with decolonial ecopoetics, she raises the issue that First Nations’ writers might “[…] run the risk of foreclosing decolonization to an academic elite by coding it purely within poetics and academic practice” (Araluen 2017). Indeed, in the absence of activism or direct environmental action, the theory may remain purely metaphorical. In her poem “Breath”, Evelyn Araluen pointedly asks, “What use is a poem in a museum of extinct things, where the Anthropocene display is half-finished?” (Araluen 2021, 77) which serves as a self-reflexive question about poetry’s efficacy concerning ecological collapse. This remark finds a sharp parallel in Ellen van Neerven’s satirical poem “ecopotent”, which refuses to participate in ecopoetics when it is no more that sheer “ecopornograph[y]:

> Dugai asks me
> To pen poems
> For ecopoetics journal
>
> whatttttt you think words will save trees?
> […] label your art ecopoetic
> I think it really is
> Ecopornographic
>
> Just call me ecopessimistic

> Kick me out of the conference
>
> (Van Neerven 66)

By voicing such skepticism, both Araluen and van Neerven underscore the political limitations of poetry (and scholarly discourse) as vehicles for ecological action. Van Neerven's satire and critique are strongly felt in "ecopotent" which concludes by an anonymous person advising the poetic persona to write poems that could be labelled "ecopoetic" even though they themselves consider such type of poetry "ecopornographic"—a biting indictment of performative "eco" aesthetics. In the end, both poets insist that decolonial ecopoetics must associate language with tangible action, rather than remain confined to page or academy.

29 To deal with this dilemma, the poets do not simply resort to social media, a practice that could lapse into self-promotion and/or performative activism, a self-serving support to a cause. They also facilitate cultural projects through the creation of publishing houses, anthologies, artistic displays, workshops etc. In 2022, Evelyn Araluen called for national plans to advocate First Nations' literature in a submission for the National Cultural Policy and mostly to officialize consultations with their communities in decision making and cultural projects developments. Indisputably, decolonial theories should benefit First Nations peoples under severe ecological pressure and help them prepare living sustainably in a world where they do not simply survive but thrive on their lands. Decolonial ecology should not remain at the symbolic level, where metaphors may also serve settler discourse. Such metaphorical engagements often leave intact the foundations of the colonial *oikos*. By contrast, the poets discussed here resist the ontological frameworks of extractivism and ruthless capitalism imposed by the settler-colonial worldview. In this perspective, the decolonial inhabitation theorised by Malcom Ferdinand does not simply oppose the colonial *oikos*; it constitutes a radical reconfiguration of Western conceptions of place, environment, and knowledge. Rather than a binary inversion, it demands a transformation of the very foundations of Western epistemology and political economy and calls for an end to the paradigm of extraction, accumulation and growth that sustained imperial domination and environmental degradation.

30 In *Rewriting the Mainstream*, Nyoongar elder Rosemary van den Berg advised academics to be humble and listen to Indigenous people more: "Academics who work in the field of literature should consult Aboriginal sources and read Aboriginal texts; and listen to the people" (van den Berg 120). This text, which was published in 1995 still resonates today, all the more as the Voice proposal was rejected in October 2023. [10] Victims of setter-colonial power are best placed to articulate and manage their current living conditions, past experiences, and paths to achieve emancipatory aspirations: self-representation by First Nations authors and community participation could more effectively address ongoing violence which affects both the land and its inhabitants (including non-human entities).

31 Writing in a land up in flames has convinced both leading and emerging authors that they now urgently have to unsettle ideological and material manifestations of colonialism by combining words and actions. Poetic resurgence, as seen in these authors' works, delineates possible futures in which First Nations' knowledge is acknowledged not as peripheral but as central to rethinking ecological and cultural futures (without idealizing or instrumentalizing these poetic acts). It is a poetic and political gesture that supports ongoing forms of activism and deepens First Nations' expressions of relationality with land as a continuation of enduring knowledges and practices for inhabiting the Earth in respectful and sustainable ways.

32 As Alison Whittaker noted in the foreword to the 2020 poetry anthology *Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today*, "First Nations Writing Is on Fire!", Jazz Money, Evelyn Araluen, and Ellen van Neerven develop poetic practices that articulate ecopolitical resistance within First Nations' ontologies. Their poetry performs a form of cultural and territorial resurgence by reactivating ancestral narratives, oral traditions, and land-based knowledge systems. Far from offering a reconciliatory discourse or symbolic activism, their work engages with poetry as a space of intervention, where language becomes a vector of presence, responsibility, and refusal. Through innovative formal choices and multilingual strategies, they reassert Country as a site of meaning, memory, and sovereignty. In doing so, they contribute to a broader

praxis of decolonial inhabitation that resists settler-colonial structures and sustains relational bonds with land, beyond metaphor.

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NOTES

1 Both Kevin Gilbert and Lionel Fogarty can be regarded as fundamental ecopoetic voices in Aboriginal literature as their poems often portray land as alive and responsive. See John Charles Ryan’s article “‘No More Boomerang’: Environment and Technology in Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Poetry”.

2 In their report *First Nations and People of Colour Writers Count*, Natalie Kon-Yu and Emily Booth reveal that in 2018, 3% of all books published in Australia were authored by First Nations writers, with a 1% representation in the poetry genre. Strikingly, 90% of published works were authored by individuals who could not be identified as First Nations, People of Colour, or International First Nations writers. These figures underscore a deep structural imbalance within the Australian publishing industry, despite increasing public interest in First Nations' voices and the prominence of certain First Nations authors on prize lists and reading programs. Indeed, the presence of First Nations writers has become more noticeable, particularly since the 2010s. Events such as the Sydney Writers' Festival, Melbourne Writers Festival, Brisbane Writers Festival, and Blak & Bright First Nations Literary Festival have created platforms for Indigenous voices. Visibility, in this context, must be understood not only as representation, but as a question of access, authorship, authority, and the redistribution of institutional power.

3 In Ancient Greek, the term *oikos* refers to the household, dwelling, or more broadly the organisation of one's relation to land and life. In modern ecological thought, it forms the etymological root of "ecology" and has been critically revisited to interrogate the hierarchical and proprietary logics embedded in settler-colonial relationships to place.

4 As stated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2022.

5 Jazz Money is a non-binary poet who uses the pronouns she or they.

6 Marie Kondrat in her article "Le tokénisme ou les écueils de la visibilité" ("Tokenism, or the Pitfalls of Visibility") defines the term as the superficial inclusion of individuals from marginalized groups into dominant structures, serving to present an image of diversity without addressing systemic inequalities. This practice often reinforces existing power dynamics by expecting these individuals to represent their entire group and conform to predefined roles, rather than challenging the structures that perpetuate marginalization.

7 And later gave the word *bilabang* in its anglicized version.

8 *Red Room Poetry* is a non-profit organization supporting and advocating First Nations poetry. The three poets regularly post unreleased poems on their website.

9 This perspective resonates with the concept of "Aboriginal realism" as discussed in Johnson's reading of Evelyn Araluen and Lionel Fogarty. In their

work, realism does not function as a representation of the "real" in the Western literary sense, but rather as a mode of asserting the reality of Indigenous cosmologies, ontologies, and temporalities that have persisted despite colonial attempts at erasure (Johnson 3).

10 The 2023 *Australian Indigenous Voice* referendum was a constitutional referendum held on 14 October 2023 in which the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice was rejected.

ABSTRACTS

English

Like Oodgeroo Noonuccal in the 1960s and 1970s, Jazz Money, Ellen van Neerven, and Evelyn Araluen renew the political and poetic activism of Australia's First Nations. Their writings that range from poetry, fiction, essays and literary reviews, provide counter-narratives to the dominant discourse through a decolonizing lens. The three authors revitalize ancestral oral traditions inherent to First Nations cultures and thus run counter to, and challenge inherited and persisting structures of neocolonialism, capitalism, masculinism, and the entangled systems that sustain them. By adopting a decolonial framework (particularly Malcom Ferdinand's decolonial ecology) and drawing on First Nations epistemologies and their relational conception of "Country" (understood as a living entity that binds together land, memory, law, and responsibility), this article analyses the poetic strategies employed by van Neerven, Money, and Araluen to unveil (neo)colonial modes of dwelling on Earth and to critique dominant environmentalist discourses that exert hegemonic influence over literature, the arts, and activism. Their poetry seeks to recapture the rhythm of First Nations orality, drawing on the subversive power of language in a poetic tension, and a yearning for a decolonial mode of inhabiting Country.

Français

À l'instar d'Oodgeroo Noonuccal dans les années 1960 et 1970, Jazz Money, Ellen van Neerven et Evelyn Araluen renouvellent le militantisme politico-poétique des Premières Nations d'Australie. Leurs écrits, riches et polyformes (de la poésie à la fiction, en passant par la publication d'essais et de critiques littéraires), constituent autant de contre-récits au discours dominant, à travers une approche décoloniale. Ces trois poète·sses ravivent les traditions orales ancestrales propres aux cultures autochtones et interrogent ainsi les formes renouvelées du néocolonialisme, du capitalisme, du masculinisme, et des systèmes d'oppression qui les sous-tendent. En adoptant une approche décoloniale (notamment l'écologie décoloniale de Malcom Ferdinand) et en mobilisant les cadres de pensée autochtones et leur conception relationnelle du « Country », entendu

comme une entité vivante liant terre, mémoire, loi et responsabilité, cet article analyse les stratégies poétiques mises en œuvre par van Neerven, Money et Araluen pour dénoncer les modes (néo)coloniaux d'habiter la Terre. Leurs textes s'attaquent à l'hégémonie d'un discours environnementaliste dont l'influence se fait nettement ressentir dans les domaines de la littérature, des arts et du militantisme. Leur poésie cherche à retrouver un rythme propre à l'oralité des peuples premiers et à exploiter la puissance subversive du langage dans un élan poétique vers un habiter décolonial du monde.

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Cultural Identity and Political Representation

Empowering the Colonial *Picaro*: Resurgences of Kipling's Picaresque Novel in *The Impressionist* (2002) by Hari Kunzru

Dire la puissance du picaro *colonial : résurgences du roman picaresque kiplingien dans* The Impressionist *(2002) de Hari Kunzru*

Élodie Raimbault

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OUTLINE

TEXT

Introduction

1 By starting *The Impressionist* with an epigraph from Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim*, Hari Kunzru acknowledges from the onset the intertextual dimension of his novel.

> "Remember, I can change swiftly. It will all be as it was when I first spoke to thee under Zam-Zammah the great gun—"
> "As a boy in the dress of white men—when I first went to the Wonder House. And a second time thou wast a Hindu. What shall the third

> incarnation be?"
> —Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*. (Kunzru 1)

The dialogue originally appears in chapter 5 between an orphan boy raised by an Indian woman, Kim, and an elderly lama, his friend and mentor who travels across Northern India in search of the Buddha's holy river. In the early chapters, 13-year-old Kim discovers his white ancestry, and is recognised by the British as the son of an Irish soldier. The lama bears witness to spectacular changes in the boy's social identity as Kim learns how to transform his appearance and his behaviour, so that others will believe he belongs to any community, social class, caste or ethnicity. Wishing to take advantage of his hybrid identity, the British take over Kim's education to turn him into a spy. In particular, they teach him how to impersonate countless different ethnicities and social groups so as to travel through India without being identified as a British agent.

2 The character's ability to change identities has become a core motif in the tradition of detective stories. [1] Also a prominent element in texts representing the colonial situation, this motif mirrors colonial patterns of mimicry and hybridity, as defined by Homi Bhabha:

> [...] colonial mimicry is the desire for a formed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. [...] The line of descent of the mimic man can be traced through the works of Kipling, Forster, Orwell, Naipaul [...]. He is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English. (Bhabha 85–86)

While learning to take part in colonial regulation and power by otherizing himself culturally, physically and linguistically, Kim consecutively experiences an exhilarating sense of empowerment and an identity crisis. His talent for indeterminacy paradoxically both facilitates and compromises his participation in the Great Game. [2] In *The Impressionist*, Hari Kunzru's main character, Pran, shares many of Kim's characteristics, but takes even further the ambivalence of

mimicry, that is "at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 86), and ultimately threatens the imperial power.

3 Pran's trajectory in the 1920s echoes Kim's search for his true identity. Pran is also a half-outsider: the secret offspring of Forrester, a British colonial surveyor, and Amrita, an Indian woman who died in childbirth, Pran was raised as the spoilt son of a high-caste Hindu who had unwittingly married the pregnant Amrita, until his mixed origins are dramatically revealed and he is brutally cast away at the beginning of the novel. Facing many hardships and bearing witness to historical events, the orphaned youth moves through space and up the social scale, trying to survive and find his place in India, in England and finally in Africa, by impersonating successive identities.

4 Kunzru was awarded both the Betty Trask Award and the Somerset Maugham Award for *The Impressionist* (2002). Born in England to an Indian father of Kashmiri descent and a British mother, Kunzru grew up in the suburbs of London, graduated in philosophy at Warwick university, and now lives in New York. The great success of his first novel set him on the path for an international literary career. He "moved between worlds socially as well as geographically, and […] [his life journey has] also made it possible for [him] to discuss places of economic and cultural power with an insider's gaze" (Jeanniard du Dot 16). Often described as one of the new voices of postcolonial literature, in that he explores the point of view of racialized outsiders like Pran, Kunzru is "fascinated by the porousness and speed of the contemporary world, where identity is uprooted from its geographical soil and dispersed through the circuits of global capital" (Childs and Green 61). Writing the story of Pran, Kunzru engages with picaresque texts by Cervantes, Voltaire, Thomas Nash or Henry Fielding (Kunzru and Aldama 113–114) and with canonical colonial intertexts, among whom Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, E. M. Forster's A *Passage to India* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. In particular, he repurposes Kipling's dynamic motifs of travel, hidden identity and self-definition.

5 In both *Kim* and *The Impressionist*, the main characters' social trajectories can be read as a story of empowerment of subalterns. [3] Despite a movement of social elevation that echoes the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, the picaresque frameworks of both novels

create limitations to and variations from such an archetypal storyline. Moreover, Kunzru's 21st-century rewriting of a colonial story generates a resurgence of certain aspects of the imperial experience that were kept hidden, or implicit in the hypotext. The title *The Impressionist* indicates that the novel deals with impersonation; identity changes indeed structure the succession of chapter headings specifying the names Pran adopts (in turn, "Pran Nath", "Rukhsana", "White Boy", "Pretty Bobby", "Jonathan Bridgeman", "Bridgeman, J. P. (Barab.)") until the last chapter which bears the novel's title. It also raises the issue of performance, suggesting Pran becomes a kind of entertainer, playing on the slippage between mimicry and mockery. The cultural reference to Impressionists must also be interrogated: artistic Impressionism explored new ways to represent the material world and the impressions of the moment and, in like fashion, Kunzru's text explores the relationships between memory, perception of the outside world and identity.

6 The ways in which Kunzru's text converges with Kipling's will first be studied, considering how the type of the picaresque character is repurposed in the postcolonial context. Kunzru also builds upon the open, loose structure of Kipling's novel, taking further the latter's analysis of how imperial structures can be seen as "the machinery of imperial government" (Kunzru 98) which creates new identities. Finally, the specificity of Kunzru's version of the tale of the colonial *picaro* will be analysed: in particular, his materialist approach of history and his ability to make the imperial reality resurface through a material imagination include a discussion of imperial violence precedingly suppressed by Kipling.

The postcolonial reclaiming of the picaresque

7 Bart Moore-Gilbert expressed the idea that "the enduring appeal of *Kim* for South Asian writers, and its flexibility as a template, is indicated in its recurrence as an intertext in *The Impressionist* (2002) by Hari Kunzru" (47). The idea that *Kim* provides a prototypical narrative of the postcolonial search for identity is also explored by other critics, among whom Muhammad Safeer Awan, who argues that Kipling's linguistic inventions inspired many Indian and

Pakistani authors: [4] "Kipling must be acknowledged as a source of inspiration, at least in terms of the employment of a 'hybrid' language, for a number of writers who adopted (and adapted) English as the medium of their creative writings" (2–3). Although Kunzru does not strictly speaking belong to such a group of writers, as he was born in England and English is his own native language, he purposely uses such kiplingian strategies to convey the impression of a vernacular language in an English text, with phrases emphasising idiosyncrasies in the speech of Indian characters, words seemingly translated from Urdu or Hindi, or vernacular words transliterated in the Latin alphabet; for instance, the photographer who partakes in Pran's misfortunes at a Nawab's palace is called a "picture wallah" (Kunzru 87). Kipling's *Kim* also was prototypical of postcolonial narratives in its revitalization of picaresque tropes, among which the choice of a rogue as the main character.

The *picaro*

8 The picaresque derives its name from the Spanish *picaro*, meaning "rogue". The genre is a kind of biting satire, centred on the career of a hero who lives by his quick wits. Usually he is clever, cautious, and not without malice. Claudio Guillén writes that "the *picaro* both incorporates and transcends the wanderer, the jester, and the have-not" (67). He mingles naiveté and awareness, simplicity and cunning. Kim is presented as a cheerful version of the *picaro*: a friendly, witty, funny and easy-going boy, nicknamed "Little friend of all the world" (Kipling 155), he lives among the crowds. In *The Impressionist*, Pran immediately appears much more malicious and dangerously self-centred. Due to "his arrogance or his unappealing practical jokes" his household considers him a threat: "the boy was a curse" (Kunzru 28–29). Pran is witty and resourceful, but also dishonest, immoral, and cynical. He attempts to rape a servant under the eyes of her own mother, Anjali, who brings about his downfall. Presented by the narrator as "personifying fate, doom, justice, karma and all manner of other vast impersonal forces given to crushing antlike mortals underfoot" (Kunzru 38), Anjali was present on the day when he was conceived and is the last remaining witness to the truth of his origins. She belatedly reveals his true identity as a

bastard so as to punish Pran for his attack against her daughter, which leads to his banishment from the household.

9 Pran's trajectory as a *picaro* suddenly turns him into a subaltern, in Spivak's sense of the term. Exiled from his early life of luxury as the pampered son of a high-caste, conservative and very distinguished Kashmiri lawyer, Pran has to start his career as an impressionist at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, lonely and without the ability to speak for himself. Over the course of the first chapters, Pran becomes in turn a beggar, a prostitute, a slave. In the section of the novel during which Pran is named Rukhsana, he is kept in a palace *zenana*, an area where women and girls are secluded, and is to be turned into a eunuch. The debased luxuries enjoyed by the colonists and the upper classes create a grotesque parody of Orientalist literature which turns into a bleak realistic story of sexual violence and slavery.

10 Pran's experience is much more violent than Kim's. While Kim's hardships as a vagabond and a disoriented orphan are alleviated by his numerous friends' support, Pran has to cope with a hyperbolic accumulation of bullies and attackers, beginning with his family circle but gradually including the whole city:

> Pran lies in the dust, smelling the onion-stink on his clothes. A crowd gathers, fascinated by the unprecedented events unfolding before their fortunate eyes. The chowkidar brandishes a lathi and Anjali gives a reprise of her miscegenation speech, adding that the evil boy has, to cap it all, just caused Pandit Razdan's untimely death. Then the door is slammed shut, the bolt drawing across it with a heavy metallic rasp. […] Out of the crowd arcs a lump of dung, which hits him, hot and wet, on the back of the neck. (Kunzru 41–42)

Pran loses his privileged communal identity as he is cast away and despised by even the lowest castes. When he is told that he looks Eurasian, he tries to ask for help from the Anglo-Indians [5] of the Agra Post and Telegraph Club. Through the eyes of Eurasian character Harry Begg, the narrator shows how the Anglo-Indian community practises a form of colonial mimicry that Kunzru satirises by highlighting how it makes the rhetoric of racism and imperial hierarchies resurface:

> They, the Anglo-Indian community, know where their loyalties lie. They know which side of themselves they favor. They wear their hats and read all they can of Home and avoid the sun like the plague, feeling pain with every production of melanin in their skin. Of course they do not call it that. They have other names. Dirt, grubbiness. (Kunzru 47)

Despite his physical resemblance to the Anglo-Indians, Pran is driven out of the club and beaten by Harry Begg, in a fit of rage. While he ironically fails to join this biological community, it is precisely the same Anglo-Indian talent for mimicry that will enable Pran to survive in an exceedingly violent environment, and to move up socially.

11 As per Bhabha's analysis of the ambivalence of mimicry, it appears that Pran's talent stems both from a necessity to conform and from a desire to mock: once he understands his new hybrid identity, Pran takes advantage of the colonial system, and his story is a vehicle for satire. The satirical dimension of both *Kim* and *The Impressionist* corresponds to the *picaro*'s traditional role of exposing the flaws of his contemporaries, like a jester. [6] Hybridity and mimicry apparently empower the *picaro* characters of Kim and Pran: imitating the British enables them to navigate the strict social framework of the Raj. It also transforms them into archetypes experiencing an existential identity crisis originating in the colonial encounter.

Structural similarities

12 In *Literature as System*, Claudio Guillén explains how the genre of the picaresque has evolved from a simple, linear sequence of episodes focused on the *picaro*, a structure he describes as

> […] loosely episodic, strung together like a freight train and *apparently* with no other common link than the hero. Since *Lazarillo*, however, other narrative devices have been superimposed on this basic structure. The use of recurrent motifs, circular patterns, and incremental processes is particularly frequent in the picaresque. The first-person form supplies an additional framework. These various devices create an objective or a subjective order beneath or above the linear sequence of events. […] This type of narrative allows for

> endless stories-within-the-story. It can have a sequel, or remain incomplete, or both. (84–85)

Such highly intricate structures abound in both *Kim* and *The Impressionist*. In his memoirs, Kipling described his novel as "of course, […] nakedly picaresque and plotless" (Kipling 1991, 133). This provocative statement specifies the story's basic structure, particularly the picaresque forms of the episodic structure and the open ending. However, the frequent interspersion of micro-narratives [7] gives the novel a more intricate form, despite its apparent shapelessness.

13 The motif of mosaic-building has a metatextual function in *Kim*, suggesting that the reader's hermeneutic role is to piece together many episodes and thus reveal the whole image. Kim's master Lurgan breaks an earthenware pot in front of his eyes and then teaches Kim to train his mind to visualize both the broken object and its intact form.

> There was one large piece of the jar where there had been three, and above them the shadowy outline of the entire vessel. He could see the veranda through it, but it was thickening and darkening with each beat of his pulse. Yet the jar—how slowly the thoughts came!—the jar had been smashed before his eyes. (Kipling 201–202)

The mental reconstruction of the shattered form is provoked by a syncretic vision, even if it is based on an illusion. Kim almost magically visualizes the complete form, but does not forget that the fracture is real. The ideal and the real are simultaneously revealed to him. Not only does Kim prove able to see beyond appearances and to look for a motif behind the disorder of reality, but he also starts learning how to piece together his own broken identity, which is alluded to allegorically here.

14 This motif of the mosaic is also one of the prominent intertextual echoes that appear in *The Impressionist*. In a scene when the character is in an altered state of consciousness, like Kim in the preceding quotation, Pran's sense of self is similarly described as being "in pieces" and "[a] pile of Pran-rubble":

> Pran moving outwards from the centre, gathering momentum. Whoever might be in charge, it is certainly not him. "Him", in fact, is fast becoming an issue. How long has he been in the room? Long enough for things to unravel. Long enough for that important faculty to atrophy (call it the pearl faculty, the faculty which secretes selfhood around some initial grain), leaving its residue dispersed in a sea of sensation, just a spark, an impulse waiting to be reassembled from a primal soup of emotions and memories. Nothing so coherent as a personality. Some kind of Being still happening in there, but nothing you could take hold of.
> You could think of it in cyclical terms. The endless repeated day of Brahman—before any act of creation the old world must be destroyed. Pran is now in pieces. A pile of Pran-rubble, ready for the next chance even to put it back together in a new order. (Kunzru 65)

After showing the limitations of the metaphor of the pearl, which figures identity as a precious, layered and self-made unit, Kunzru reuses the image of the broken whole in a more radical manner, suggesting that the ideal unit cannot be recreated once it has been broken, and that only a new, restructured, hybrid identity may emerge out of this scene of desolation.

Rewriting the imperial identity-making machine

A critique of empire

15 The structures of empire are pictured in *Kim*, particularly the Anglo-Indian educational system when Kim is sent to school to better adopt his social identity as a *Sahib*: "St Xavier's looks down on boys who 'go native all-together.' One must never forget that one is Sahib, and that some day, when examinations are passed, one will command natives" (Kipling 173). The school instructs future administrators of the Raj technically and morally, shaping their consciousness of being imperial executives. Janet Montefiore has shown how Kim's Jesuit education aims at "emulat[ing] the aristocratic Roman virtues of *gravitas* and authority" (Montefiore 114). Teaching Western Enlightenment, notably via the study of arithmetic and cartography,

St Xavier aims at giving Anglo-Indian students the strength to resist what Europeans saw as Indian magical thinking through a "rational" mastery of reality.

16 Yet, Kipling does not fundamentally present the imperial structures as oppressive. They are not the reason for Kim's lack of stability: the cause is rather to be found in the circumstances of his birth and early youth, following the framework of the picaresque plotline that favours notions of chance and fortune. Conversely, Kunzru's critique of Empire anatomizes the imperial ability to shatter individual identities, a destruction shown to be relentless. Kunzru pictures the Empire as "a vast machine in which subjectivities are produced, fixed in place and re-circulated" (Childs and Green 69), foregrounding the absurdity of the process of identity-making. In a transitory phase, Pran survives by becoming "Pretty Bobby", a young man who entertains British soldiers, ingratiating himself by playfully imitating their various accents. A self-taught chameleon, Pran loses himself while imitating others, gradually becoming more and more spectral:

> Bobby's capacity for mimicry helps in his world. He can reduce British Other Ranks to fits by imitating regional accents. Oroight there, mate? Och, ye dinnae wanna worrit yersel'. Now then, sirs, if you please to follow me I know a very good place… Bobby deals in stereotypes, sharply drawn. […]
> Bobby is a ghost, haunting thresholds, pools of electric light. He hovers at the limit of perception, materializing in his collar and tie like someone only semireal, ethereal enough to trust with your secrets, safe in the knowledge that he would melt in direct sunlight. (Kunzru 231)

Kunzru's use of eye-dialect is reminiscent of Kipling's in his early Anglo-Indian short stories, published in the 1880s and 1890s. Kipling made an impression upon his metropolitan readers due to his realistic exoticism, visible particularly in the imitation of a variety of Anglo-Indian, Indian, and British dialects. Janet Montefiore interprets this in the context of the emergence of modernist experimentations:

> Proto-modernist mimicry is closely bound up with Kipling's imperial theme through the way his writing "layers" its standard English against the lively oral vernaculars: the Irish brogue and stage

> cockney spoken by his soldiers (turned later to very different modernist ends by T. S. Eliot and Bertolt Brecht) and the rich, archaised English which is Kipling's approximation to the Indian vernacular mixture of Urdu and Hindi […]. (112)

Indeed, in both *Kim* and *The Impressionist*, the characters' multilingual abilities and their mutability lead to their existential instability, as they experience identity as a performance which challenges the notion of a core self.

17 After stealing the administrative identity of an Englishman, Jonathan Bridgeman, and making sure that he can physically pass as white, Pran travels to England and discovers that he needs to practice innumerable rituals denoting Englishness. To ensure the quality of his performance in a selective public school, Pran applies to his own life the academic methodologies of anthropology and sociology, taking fastidious notes about social behaviour and upper-class etiquette.

> The school is a machine for producing belonging, and accordingly everything is done in groups, from showering in the morning to the composition of essays in evening prep. Every gesture of Jonathan's day is honed to its functional minimum by two hundred years of institutional evolution, like some upper-class version of Mr Taylor's factory system. […] In his notebook he writes, *Englishness is sameness*, and, *The comfort of repetition*. […] Jonathan notes all this down: *nobility of discipline*, *respect for religion important but belief optional*, *check your plate first*. His notes spread out into all areas of school life, from the rules of rugby football to the construction of a jam sandwich. Week by week his understanding of this world improves, the white spaces on his map filling up with trails and landmarks. (Kunzru 306–307)

This explicit comparison of the school system's moulding of identities to Taylorism suggests it partakes in the oppression of individuals like an industrial process. Pran's mastery of European methodologies is also signalled by the reference to cartography in the Conradian metaphor of the white (or blank) spaces which appears in *Heart of Darkness*.[8] Pran maps the territory of Englishness, preparing for his conquest of Jonathan's social class. Knowing in detail about his new environment helps his performance of whiteness and Englishness in general, but also, more crucially, of a specific class

ethos. Kunzru analyses Pran's adaptation to a high-end English education in prep school and in Oxford as a scientific endeavour that mirrors the imperial strategies for using the European explorers' scientific findings in the fields of cartography, ethnography and philology. This exemplifies Foucault's articulation between power and knowledge: Pran uses his knowledge to conquer England, and his performance of Englishness causes him to really experience Englishness, in turn making him more English.

Reversing Kipling's "fantasy of the white subject"

18 In an interview, Hari Kunzru explained his parodic intertextual intentions:

> *Kim* is the fantasy of the white subject who can see the hidden easternness of things. I wanted to change that round, to make western whiteness the exotic thing. […] I wanted to write in praise of the unformed and fluid. [9] (Feay 17)

Kipling's empowerment of his *picaro* does express an Orientalist desire to know India so as to conquer it: *Kim* offers the Western reader the pleasure of identifying with a white character who has a genuinely endotic [10] relationship to India, thus fulfilling the "fantasy of the white subject". Kunzru's comic reversal of this Orientalist gaze is one of his parodic tropes, found in the first page of the section "Jonathan Bridgeman", where Europe is ironically exoticized and eroticized: "Ah, the mystic Occident! Land of wool and cabbage and lecherous round-eyed girls!" (Kunzru 281). Such a reversal could be considered as a powerful postcolonial strategy, critical of Orientalism, yet the brevity of the passage and its comic tone blunt the sharpness of the criticism, by caricaturing the issue.

19 Kipling's Orientalist inclination to scatter in his fiction information about vernacular languages, religions, and other Indian particulars actually exceeds the mere creation of picturesque local colour: his type of idealized realism has been repeatedly acknowledged as predominantly truthful by Indian and Anglo-Indian readers. For instance, the complexity of the character of the lama proves Kipling's

ability to fully characterize a Buddhist, and to ground his story in reality. The lama, a scholar and a priest, teaches the Buddha Dharma and strictly follows his pilgrimage; yet, his contact with Kim and a variety of other characters leads Kipling to develop the character's interpersonal relationships, showing him as able to learn from others and to adapt to his companion's cultural outlook.

20 However, when Kim's ability to take on different identities is likened to reincarnation, the references to Hinduism or Buddhism are deceiving: the lama's interpretation of Kim's shifting identities in terms of incarnations (in the epigraph chosen by Kunzru for instance) is incorrect. Kipling suggests that Kim's shifting identities are a kind of transmigration determined by his *karma* and that they are caused by the Indianness of his life. In fact, his identity changes are pragmatic, elusive, and superficial. The incessant transformations lead Kim to experience a deep but temporary identity crisis, which cannot be interpreted as a form of retribution for past actions, therefore fundamentally differing from reincarnation. Kim's crisis is likened to a hypnotic trance that does not lead to any illumination:

> A very few white people, but many Asiatics, can throw themselves into a mazement as it were by repeating their own names over and over again to themselves, letting the mind go free upon speculation as to what is called personal identity. When one grows older, the power, usually, departs, but while it lasts it may descend upon a man at any moment.
> "Who is Kim—Kim—Kim?"
> He squatted in a corner of the clanging waiting-room, rapt from all other thoughts; hands folded in lap, and pupils contracted to pin-points. In a minute—in another half-second—he felt he would arrive at the solution of the tremendous puzzle; but here, as always happens, his mind dropped away from those heights with a rush of a wounded bird, and passing his hand before his eyes, he shook his head. (Kipling 233–234)

21 In *The Impressionist*, Pran's successive identities are also called "incarnations", but always superficially, in relation to the metaphors of clothes (Kunzru 283) or skin covering and hiding the character: "Maybe he should revert to an earlier incarnation. Or should he go on? Is Sweet's blackness another kind of skin he could put on and

inhabit?" (Kunzru 403-404). Although Pran's attempts at empowering himself through his talent for impersonation are repeatedly thwarted, his indomitable persistence highlights the force of another fantasy: contrary to that of the white subject identified by Kunzru in *Kim*, the fantasy of the *picaro* concerns his ideal ability to free himself of all social, racial and gender constraints. Ironically, when taking part in a debate, Pran (now Bridgeman) is overwhelmed by his impersonation and shocks his audience by using the caricatural kiplingian cliché of the white man's burden:

> J. P. Bridgeman [...] responding to Mr Barker's mention of the importance of the League of Nations, treated the House to a long and somewhat otiose statement of the White Man's mission to "farm the world". [...] he stood up and began to speak about America, a speech which soon became about the West and then slid into the clash of colour and the tide of racial movement on the shores of humanity and whiteness whiteness whiteness until he realized what he was doing and sat down. Sometimes it just comes out, the guilt. He has to watch for it. (Kunzru 335)

22 Psychologically and symbolically, Pran fails to achieve the *picaro*'s freedom from social and racial categories. Echoing Kunzru's avowed desire to "praise the unformed and fluid", the impressionist's strategies of empowerment repeatedly end up in failure, Pran's inability to fix his identity resonates with the postcolonial issue of the fluidity of identity.

Resurgence of the colonial world

The material imagination

23 Hari Kunzru explained how he used the picaresque to recreate the colonial world from a satirical point of view, using his character as a pretext:

> I was writing a picaresque very consciously with books on my mind like *Tom Jones*, *Candide*, and Nash's *The Unfortunate Traveller*. The central character is very much this type of hero—an outsider with a skewed pair of eyes looking on a crazy world. And, like the

> heroes of picaresque novels, he is something of a blank slate; he lacks an identity. So, the colour of the book doesn't come out of any psychological depth of his character, but rather as he moves from set-piece scene to set-piece scene as the pageantry of empire plays out all around him. (Kunzru and Almada 113)

24 In the picaresque, as Guillén argues, there is a "general stress on the material level of existence or of subsistence, on sordid facts, hunger, money. […] Hence a profusion of objects and details. There are no *relicta circunstantia*—no topics, persons, or things unworthy of interest and compassion" (83). Accordingly, Kunzru produces highly detailed descriptions and realistic narrations of momentous natural phenomena and traumatic events, using internal focalization and impressionistic notations to heighten the evocation of the materiality of events. Numerous passages from *The Impressionist* detail bodily functions, physical pain or pleasure.

25 In the section "White Boy", Pran, disoriented and uninformed, discovers the immediate aftermath of the 1919 Amritsar massacre—the internal gaze focuses on details, objects and his sensory perceptions, in the present tense. The narrator then enlarges the perspective and intervenes in the passage to offer a comprehensive evocation of the historical event, from other points of view:

> Pran is left standing by a charred heap of rubble, the ruined shell of the Alliance Bank.
> Terrible things happened here. Horrors. The place bears its memories near the surface, memories of heavy wooden bank furniture dragged out on to the street and doused in kerosene. The image of Mr Thompson, the manager, his screaming face blackening in the flames as he is cremated by the chanting mob. […] All around the city, memories. Burning and looting. After the banks, the post office. The police station. The English shops in the Hall Bazaar. White men beaten to death. Mrs Easdon, the zenana hospital doctor, splashing her face with a bottle of black ink, struggling into a sari while downstairs bottles were smashed in the dispensary and the Anglo-Indian nurses raped. Elsewhere, in the quiet town of Jalandhar, the general's dinner party is interrupted by a telegram. (Kunzru 177)

The picaresque focus on material details and the fluidity of shifting points of view are impressionistic; due to shock, the character's visual perception is disconnected from his ability to interpret phenomena. An analepsis detailing the moment of the massacre foregrounds the visual perception of a secondary character, with a metaphor which creates emotional distance:

> The soldiers knelt and for the briefest moment, like a premonition, there was silence.
> Then, without warning, they started to fire.
> Das saw the first wave of bodies fall, a breath of wind
> rustling a cornfield. Then he was caught up and pulled away.
> (Kunzru 177–178)

The impressionistic description of the scene viewed by Pran is accompanied by the narrator's decoding of the events. The cultural references introduced by the narrator—for instance, the toponyms Amritsar (Kunzru 175) and Jallianwala Bagh (Kunzru 178) and the pro-independence slogan "*Mahatma Gandhi ki-jai*" (Kunzru 176)—contextualize the story and heighten the reader's impression that the story is colliding with history. The micro-narrative about a white woman hurriedly trying to protect herself against Indian rapists by wearing a sari and darkening her complexion echoes the rape endured by Pran, also disguised in a sari (Kunzru 86), during the previous section.[11] The motif of rape also works as an intertextual echo to Mutiny Novels, a sub-genre of Anglo-Indian historical fiction set during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, in which many stories of interracial disguise are to be found in the context of violence against women. Among common tropes of the Mutiny Novel, Jaine Chemmachery highlights the Gothic combination of sensationalism, "excess in representation and graphic detail", with the motif of unspeakable horror, "[constructing] the event as both horrific and impossible to narrate" (7). The intertextual resurgence of this colonial genre helps the reader interpret the scene of violence witnessed by Pran in Amritsar as a cornerstone in the history of modern India, but the ideological reversal between colonialist Mutiny Novels and *The Impressionist* leads us to understand in a different light Indian acts of violence against British representatives of the Raj.

History and memorialization

26 *The Impressionist* does not use trivial details and material perceptions only as tools for building historical realism. The novel's focus on materiality also participates in the creation of a literary site of memory. Pierre Nora's concept of "*lieux de mémoire*" considers the crystallization of memory around an entity which has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of a community. Historical novels certainly entail both a reconstruction and a commemoration of history, becoming sites of memory if they reach a significant audience, as Kunzru's novel did. Following Nora's typology, Kunzru's approach of the historical novel can be seen as modern and polyphonic, in the sense that it is an "attempt to write a history in multiple voices. […] a history less interested in causes than in effects; less interested in actions remembered or even commemorated than in the traces left by those actions and in the interaction of those commemorations" (Nora XXIV). In this perspective, Pran's status of *picaro* enables Kunzru to represent the violence of the 1919 massacre and to question the ways in which it can be memorialized. As Maëlle Jeanniard du Dot explains:

> […] through Pran's gaze, the crumbling of imperial power is made visible and observable, whereas he "hurries past" the place where Indian protesters were killed. […] the fires of the riots and of the massacre convey their own erasure, leading to memories that are "near the surface" yet require the active observation of traces in order to be excavated. (96–97)

27 The *picaro*'s agency is limited, but his ability to see and remember leads to a resurfacing of past events, particularly of traumatic scenes. Taken as a rewriting of *Kim*, Kunzru's novel appears strikingly explicit: mentioning and describing the violence of the British Raj constitutes a response to Kipling's choice to suppress and ignore such events in his idealized vision of the colonial situation.

28 It seems particularly apt that the 1919 massacre is evoked in a scene set on the location of the massacre, but a few days after it. The process of resurgence is shown to arise from the material traces left behind and Pran's discovery of Jallianwala Bagh transforms the text

into a site of memory of colonial violence, that needs to be acknowledged as such. The text shifts from historical narrative in the preterit ("Soon bodies were strewn over the parched brown grass. That was how it started") to the present tense of memorialization on the next line: "Gradually the city walls materialize through the heat haze" (Kunzru 176).

29 This process is contrasted to other modes of memorialization in the novel. From the perspective of the *memsahibs* who managed to escape, the events of Amritsar are interpreted in teleological and patriotic terms: "something in these memsahibs has been elevated by their plight. It connects them to history, to their grandmothers of the Mutiny, to the symbolic destiny of the Englishwoman in tropical climes, which is to make do, to endure" (Kunzru 183). The heroization of suffering colonial representatives is another common trope of the Mutiny novel, which expresses the ethos of the Anglo-Indian social group in which Kipling was raised. By contrast, Pran's sufferings remain individual, unheroic, and useless in his search for a community.

30 When Pran studies in England as Jonathan Bridgeman, the narrator playfully alludes to another missed opportunity: while he could have been considering the meaning of history and the dynamic notions of individual and national identity, his professor only presents a conventional view of English history through pageantry and essentialist generalizations:

> His place in the history sixth could have been useful, allowing him to add a diachronic understanding of his subject (Englishness) to the synchronic. But in the sleepy classroom of Mr Fox, pipe-smoker and Sunday painter, history is not so much about change as eternal recurrence. The boys are taught to trace the destiny of their island through a series of devotional tableaux, jewel-like moments which reveal essences, principles, axioms drawn out of race and blood. (Kunzru 307)

This aestheticization of England, shown to be idealized, ahistorical and eternal, evokes stereotypical Orientalist images. The text thus criticises historians like Mr Fox for considering history as passive and repeated remembrance. Hari Kunzru's novel aims at a more

ambitious, active process of memorialization. Writing *The Impressionist* as a literary site of memory, Kunzru participates in the postcolonial movement foregrounding the decolonial impact of bearing witness to past colonial societies. He has thus managed to respond to postcolonial needs and create an accessible story that renews and subverts the traditions of 19th-century historical fiction.

Conclusion

31 Hari Kunzru's rewriting of Rudyard Kipling's novel plays on the readers' expectations, repurposing the picaresque and the popular adventure tale in the postcolonial context. The social pressure of the colonial context on a picaresque character is analysed in both novels, which use fiction and the motif of identity changes to engage with the readers' fantasy of escaping the limitations of constrained identities. The postcolonial specificity of Kunzru's version of the tale of the colonial *picaro* entails a materialist approach of history and a powerful discussion of imperial violence precedingly suppressed by Kipling.

32 Despite paying homage to the traditional genres of the picaresque and the historical novel, *The Impressionist* can be seen as an example of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in *Poetics of Postmodernism*. Indeed, the novel both parodies the grand narratives of the British empire produced in the 19th century, that are its main intertexts, and offers a resurgence of those texts. Its play on intertextuality and its conscious confrontation of history with metafiction suggest that it challenges literary canons from the inside.

33 Because Kunzru merges a historical approach with the picaresque, the shift towards allegory in the final section of the book finds its place in this discussion of memorialization. Pran is taking part in a British anthropological expedition studying the Fotse society in Africa, when he undergoes a crisis, abandons his scientific activity and again changes his identity. The scene of Pran's scarification at the hands of a sorcerer is intended to end his infinite search for identity, "orienting him, linking him irrevocably to the time and the place these marks are being made, so that wherever he may drift or fall asleep, he will always be in relation to this instant" (Kunzru 461): the scar is called a "braille of scar tissue" (Kunzru 465) in the final

paragraph, signalling the crucial association of materiality and text. Like a scar, the novel acts as a form of memorialization of past violence, whose resurgence determines the subject's identity.

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NOTES

1 The character of Strickland, introduced by Kipling in several short stories and in *Kim* as one of the young spy’s teachers, is an undeniable ancestor of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, both for his predisposition for disguise and for his qualities as a virtually unofficial detective, on the fringes of regular administration, wandering freely among the local population.

2 The phrase “Great Game” refers to the Anglo-Russian rivalry in central Asia and to the diplomatic, military and intelligence actions conducted in that context. See P. Hopkirk, *Quest for Kim. In Search of Kipling’s Great Game* and T. Ter Minassian, *Sur l’échiquier du Grand Jeu. Agents secrets et aventuriers (xvx^e^-xxi^e^ siècles)*.

3 The term “subaltern” refers to the lower social classes and those displaced to the margins of a society; in the colonial context, a subaltern is a native person subordinated due to their community, class, caste, race, ethnicity, or gender. The field of Subaltern Studies is a branch of

postcolonial theory aiming to reveal the suppressed history of the subalterns of empire. G. C. Spivak explained that contrary to other oppressed classes, the subaltern is silenced, has no history and is thus prevented from collectively organizing. See G. C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*; and I. Merle, "Les *Subaltern Studies* : retour sur les principes fondateurs d'un projet historiographique de l'Inde coloniale".

4 Giving examples of appropriation of English by Indo-Pakistani writers, Muhammad Safeer Awan lists Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Ahmed Ali in the colonial period, and Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh, in the post-1947 period. Among their strategies of appropriation and indigenization of English, he lists "glossing, untranslated words, syntactic fusion, code-switching, vernacular transcription, lexical innovation, translation equivalence and contextual redefinition" as directly inspired by Rudyard Kipling's writings (Awan 4).

5 In *The Impressionist*, the term Anglo-Indians means "Eurasians" and does not refer to the English who have settled in India as in Kipling's stories.

6 "The *picaro* […] observes a number of collective conditions: social classes, professions, *caractères*, cities, nations. This rogues' gallery has been a standing invitation to satire. And, of course, to comic effects. […] Let us not forget that the *picaro* himself is the narrator and the satirist. As a 'half-outsider', his moral credentials are equivocal, though not his expert sense for fraud and deception" (Guillén 83–84).

7 On Rudyard Kipling's structural use of micro-narratives, see É. Raimbault, "Invention d'un espace textuel et littéraire", in *Le géomètre et le vagabond*, pp. 239–242.

8 *Heart of Darkness* is an explicit intertext of Kunzru's. The metaphor appears in this famous passage: "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. […] True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names; It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery —a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" (Conrad 8).

9 Quoted in M. Jeanniard du Dot, p. 48.

10 "Endotic" describes something that is banal and familiar, as opposed to exotic.

11 In the section "Rukhsana", Pran is held captive in the zenana of the palace at Fatepur. The prince offers him to the British Major to be raped, so as to blackmail the Major to forward a political plot (Kunzru 92).

ABSTRACTS

English

Hari Kunzru set his first novel *The Impressionist* (2002) in the colonial period and played with imperial intertexts. By starting his historical novel with an epigraph from Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim*, Hari Kunzru explicitly acknowledged that *The Impressionist* is a rewriting: not only does the character of Pran share many of Kim's characteristics, but as *picaro*-types they also both indicate a generic approach to travel narrative that is specifically picaresque. Pran's trajectory in the 1920s echoes Kim's search for his true identity. A half-outsider, Pran is the offspring of a British colonial surveyor and an Indian woman, raised as if he were a high-caste Hindu until his mixed origins are dramatically revealed and he is cast away as a stranger by his Hindu family. Facing many hardships and bearing witness to historical events, the orphaned youth moves through space and up the social scale, trying to find his place in India, in England and finally in Africa, by impersonating successive identities. With Pran's story Kunzru repurposes Kipling's dynamic motifs of travel, hidden identity and self-definition, bringing to the fore issues of mimicry and hybridity in a book which reworks *Kim*'s episodic and open-ended structure. This paper considers how Kunzru's rewriting of Kipling conveys his interest in the postcolonial questioning of stereotypes and social constructs: Kunzru makes the colonial world reappear in its materiality, developing Kipling's material imagination to even greater lengths by including explicit scenes of violence through a profusion of details having to do with objects and the body. Kunzru starts a dialogue between *Kim* and his novel, between satire and moments of pastiche, leading to a consideration of postcolonial identity that goes beyond issues of inclusion. The novel subverts the grand narratives of the British empire and offers a resurgence of memory. Associating materiality and text, *The Impressionist* acts as a form of memorialization of past violence.

Français

Hari Kunzru situe son premier roman, *The Impressionist* (2002), dans la période coloniale et joue avec les intertextes impériaux. En commençant son roman historique par une épigraphe du roman *Kim* (1901) de Rudyard Kipling, Hari Kunzru reconnaît explicitement que *The Impressionist* est une réécriture : non seulement le personnage de Pran reprend-il de nombreuses

caractéristiques de Kim, mais en tant que *picaros*, ils témoignent tous deux d'une approche générique du récit de voyage spécifiquement picaresque. La trajectoire de Pran dans les années 1920 fait écho à la quête de Kim pour sa véritable identité. Pran est le fils d'un géomètre colonial britannique et d'une Indienne. Il est élevé comme s'il était un hindou de haute caste jusqu'à ce que ses origines hybrides soient dramatiquement révélées et qu'il soit rejeté comme étranger par sa famille hindoue. Confronté à de nombreuses épreuves et témoin d'événements historiques, le jeune orphelin évolue dans l'espace et parcourt l'échelle sociale, essayant de trouver sa place en Inde, en Angleterre et enfin en Afrique, par le biais d'identités successives. Avec l'histoire de Pran, Kunzru reprend les motifs dynamiques du voyage, de l'identité cachée et de l'autodéfinition de Kipling, mettant en avant les questions de mimétisme et d'hybridité dans un livre qui retravaille la structure épisodique et ouverte de Kim. Cet article examine comment la réécriture de Kipling par Kunzru traduit son intérêt pour la remise en question postcoloniale des stéréotypes et des constructions sociales : Kunzru fait réapparaître le monde colonial dans sa matérialité, développant encore plus l'imagination matérielle de Kipling en incluant des scènes explicites de violence, via une profusion de détails liés aux objets et aux corps. Kunzru entame un dialogue avec *Kim*, entre satire et pastiche, qui débouche sur une réflexion sur l'identité postcoloniale qui dépasse les questions d'inclusion. Le roman subvertit les grands récits de l'empire britannique et propose une résurgence de la mémoire. Associant matérialité et texte, *The Impressionist* constitue une forme de commémoration de la violence passée.

INDEX

Mots-clés
Kunzru (Hari), Kipling (Rudyard), picaresque, littérature postcoloniale, intertextualité, mémoire

Keywords
Kunzru (Hari), Kipling (Rudyard), picaresque, postcolonial literature, intertextuality, memory

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Discussing Resilience, Resurgence and Reclaiming One's Place with Eddy L. Harris

Entretien avec Eddy L. Harris sur les questions de résilience, de résurgence et de place

Eddy L. Harris, Christine Vandamme and Inès Mayoud

TEXT

1 Eddy L. Harris is an American writer with a strong attachment to France. He was born in Indianapolis, then grew up in Saint Louis, Missouri, and has always been a traveller, to Europe, Africa and back home. He has chosen France as his adoptive country and has been living in Pranzac, a small village in Charente, for some twenty years now but also spent long periods in Paris before. When he accepted to answer our questions, we thought it would be very appropriate to discuss his latest release, a fine and thought-provoking essay written in English and then translated into French, *House of Lies. American Confessional* (*Confession américaine*). The volume deals with the *lies* which have accompanied the development and growth of the newly independent American nation which upheld the ideals of freedom and equality when the American founding fathers themselves kept their slaves and only emancipated very few of them. He gives Thomas Jefferson as a case in point who only set two of them free out of the 600 he owned and goes on to ponder:

> They—the people who decide such things as who is and who is not venerable, who does and who does not belong, what is and what is not right—wanted and still want me to venerate this man and the others who founded the country [...] even though they clearly didn't see a *place* for me in this country, then or now, even as Jefferson made one of his slaves his concubine, creating children with her and contributing to the metissage of the nation—a metissage which too many, and the nation itself, do not seem to want to recognize. (*American Confessional* [1] 33)

2 The essay thus revolves around the difficulty of defining oneself as American when the nation considers that you do not belong, whether as black, native American, Latino, female or LGBTQ+, among other marginalized and ostracized communities. When Eddy L. Harris started writing his first novel *Mississippi Solo* (1988), such preoccupations were already very much present but he felt that it was up to him to actually challenge such racialized assumptions. The narrative recounts his journey down the mythical river in a mode alternating picaresque episodes, moments of intense poetic contemplation and philosophical meditation and unforgettable conversations with the people he bumps into and provokes into a real encounter and sincere exchange. In his second novel *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992) he explains his disappointment and sense of alienation when travelling in Africa and realizing he didn't have much in common with the people he was meeting and discussing with. His third novel *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride Through Slavery's Old Back Yard* (1993) was inspired by yet another journey, down to the South again, but this time on a motorbike, in search again of his forebears and the roots of slavery-related racism. During the journey he finds the manumission papers of his great-great grandfather, a slave in Virginia. He then published *Still Life in Harlem* in 1996, with a focus on his family again, his father in particular, as well as black identity. His next three books have been published by the Liana Levi publishing house both in English and in French: *Jupiter et moi* (2005), *Paris en noir et black* (2009) and *Confession américaine* (2024). In this very last book Eddy L. Harris precisely confronts the idea of "reclaiming one's place", the central issue at the core of our conference and RMA issue. His books perfectly illustrate the paradox analyzed in French philosopher Claire Marin's essay on *place* and *being in one's place.* [2] She sheds light on the difference between the social injunction to remain "in one's place" and the intimate conviction such a place is not actually "your" place, but only a place that other people want you to keep. "Knowing one's place is about being silent, not talking about what one is not supposed to understand or feel concerned about even if it stares you in the eye", she says (Marin 33, my translation). Ironically enough, those who have been told to "know their place" like Eddy L. Harris or his father will precisely be the ones who know for a fact that they should not avert their gaze any longer nor keep silent: such issues do

concern them and look them in the face, *ça les regarde*. Eddy L. Harris is precisely one of those restless travel writers who cannot stay put for long, whether literally or figuratively. But in the end, if he was to follow another famous travel writer's aesthetic credo, which was "to make you hear, to make you feel" [3] and above all "to make you see", he would no doubt choose to conclude on making people "feel" rather than "see". Eddy L. Harris, contrary to Joseph Conrad, would opt for Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's choice of feeling rather than seeing, or at least seeing with one's heart: "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes" (*Le Petit Prince* [4] 76, my translation).

***

Ines MAYOUD. — When *Mississippi Solo* was published, *Library Journals* described you as a "combination of Mark Twain's Huck and Jim", whether in personality or in appearance; you seem to oscillate between the identity other people attribute you and the one you feel. Is this something you feel profoundly, this attempt of people trying to determine your identity for you, or seeing you in a different way than you see yourself, is it omnipresent and how do you experience it?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I suppose I feel it—you can't help but notice it—but I don't really pay attention to it, neither in my professional life or in my personal life. I rarely read reviews of my books and even when I do I only skim; and I don't read interviews and articles written about me. It's too easy to let yourself be influenced by what other people think of you and call you. A travel writer? No, I'm not. But I do travel and sometimes my writing includes my travels. A memoirist? I use my memories as a source but that's not the only aspect. You have to be careful so that as a writer and as a person, you don't want other people to define you or you'll find yourself locked in a narrowing tunnel.

Ines MAYOUD. — A lot of people today are looking for their identity. It has become a recurring question in our society. People on the search for a foreign heritage are mostly white people, glad to find another culture that they belong to according to a certain percentage of their blood and declare themselves of a dual identity

and adding a hyphen to their nationality "Italian-American", "German-American"… But on the other hand, people of colour have always been attributed the hyphen without asking for it. They are "Asian-American", "African-American" and asked the same question on a regular basis: "Where are you actually from?" Where would you draw the line between those two groups of people? The ones looking for their heritage, and most of the time bragging about their heritage diversity, and the ones who are attributed a heritage who most of the time don't even know about it and or don't seem to really care that much. Am I wrong to assume that this is not so crucial for you? While it is important to know your heritage and be proud of your culture, is there a point where white people benefit from double standards in which being a mix of two white cultures is considered fashionable, while mixed-race people suffer from discrimination and racism?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I'm not sure I would draw a line between those groups—if I understand correctly and the two groups are those who seek to classify themselves as having hyphenated heritage and those whose hyphens are imposed. It is the hyphen itself that I find absurd. First of all, it seems that too many people embrace the hyphen—even when the hyphen is not explicitly there: I'm Irish, they'll say, or Italian or German—whether they know it or not, and they stop where the hyphenation suits them. Otherwise, if they were to dig deep enough and go far back enough, they would find hyphens they never imagined and maybe never wanted. (That could be an argument for mandatory DNA testing: to dispel the notion of any kind of racial or ethnic purity—surprise surprise.)

The phenomenon continues with persons on whom the hyphen is imposed and sooner or later they too come to embrace the hyphen. Otherwise, they would resist.

In the end, it is either a way of offering or even suspecting a kind of double-allegiance, a subtle way of suggesting a way out if things go to hell, and a not-so-subtle way of suggesting that someone doesn't really belong.

It is true that I place no importance on cultural heritage but I'd go even further by saying it's all imaginary and useless. Except for maladies that might show up in some sort of hereditary testing, what

real difference does it make if my ancestors recent or far back came from Slovenia or northern Italy or southern Spain or Morocco. First of all, I live where I live and no matter how much I might want to carry on certain traditions, those traditions get watered down over time. Secondly, any study of history would show that cultures not only collide, they mingle and get shared, influence and alter the cultures they touch and are touched by. Hamburgers are so prevalent now in France, I can't get a decent hot-dog, which itself has origins not necessarily in France. And pizza is everywhere.

I'm still waiting for someone to give me a definition of culture better than the one I offered in, I think, *Still Life in Harlem: what we do as a people that tends to define us as a people*—or something like that. Like food traditions and like dance traditions and like language which affects but doesn't determine how we think and how we see the world. But what if I don't dance the Sardana *en frente de la catedral de Barcelona* on a Saturday evening or what if I do a little Irish folk dancing? What if you don't speak the language OR what if you do? What if you've been living out of your supposed culture almost as long as you were in it and are immersed in another culture, its food and its language? Should a parent who has adopted a Haitian infant try to keep that Haitian teenager in touch with his birth-culture even though knowing he will never return to Haiti, even though everything about him, except a few racial features (maybe!) says Brit? Or would it have been better not to have adopted at all?

Cultural identity is a way to cling to what was—however irrelevant—and to try to put up a barrier that separates and excludes and I prefer the freedom to choose.

It might be important to know where you came from. I prefer to worry about where I'm going.

Ines MAYOUD. — When your father voted for Reagan in 1980, he quickly regretted it when taxes were indeed lowered but only for rich people and he understood he was being lied to. You explain that he didn't vote for him again in 1984, but most of his electors did again, despite being equally lied to, electing him for a second term. Today, with Trump's second term, we can see a growing number of people regretting their votes. They were voting for harder conditions for people of color, for immigrants, for LGBTQ+

people, but are very early in the mandate realizing that this will apply to their lives as well. An increasing number of white women voting for Trump are now realizing that Trump sees them not as white people, but as women only; not as part of a dominating group, but one of the minorities. To what extent do you think history repeats itself, does it take two terms to be able to see the true face of the person you elected? And how can marginalized groups vote for someone they know will restrict their rights?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — History doesn't repeat itself. It is simply that people make the same mistakes—which probably speaks more to the human condition and a certain kind of religiosity, maybe, or wishful thinking—a refusal to repent, a refusal to see, in fact, what's right in front of your eyes and falling for the myth and the make-believe. People are pretty gullible, it turns out. If we weren't, advertising wouldn't work and wouldn't even be necessary. It's a lot easier to believe the dressed-up lies than to confront what's real and what might be painful. There's always the hope that…

Christine VANDAMME. — Would you consider that whereas the founding myths of the Frontier and the American West have tended to deprive first Nations of their rightful place on American territory on the one hand, while denying the enslaved part of its population any part in such a manifest destiny on the other, the Mississippi River on the contrary could act and did act as a unifying elemental force and symbolic feature connecting people to each other and reclaiming a place for each?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — Founding myths and modern realities have deprived many peoples and groups of their rightful place. That is essentially the promise and the failure of the United States. And the way politics works these days is to actively separate people instead of connecting them or allowing them to connect. The depriving of Indians and the denying of formerly enslaved populations is, in fact, part of the same mechanism and returns us to the question of who does and who doesn't belong. That denial is, in fact, a form of slavery-extended: limitations on movement and ownership and participation.

Christine VANDAMME. — You often present the Mississippi River as some sort of God: what difference would you make between that type of God and the type of God President Trump pays allegiance

to? Is it the same God and if not, to what extent do they fundamentally differ?

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I would not presume that Trump pays allegiance to any sort of god—except money and power. He pretends, but watching him answer questions about religion, about the Bible, about any sort of spirituality and it is quite clear he's just blowing smoke to fool his Bible-toting followers.

If the river is any sort of god at all, it represents to me, anyway, a kind of universality, the kind of Gichi Manidoo (as the Algonquins would call the Great Spirit) that joins mankind and nature—which was part of my experience on the river, both times. It was quite amazing to be so much a part of that natural world and at the same time to feel such a sense of communion with most of the people I met along the way. That was the god I encountered on the river—the Great Unifier—and exactly the opposite of the god that Trump and his followers seem to adhere to as they do all that they can to separate people and keep them at each other's throats. Divide and conquer!

Christine VANDAMME. — When you deliberately chose some thirty years ago to use the term "black American" or "BlackAmerican" ("Noiraméricain") rather than African-American, you explain in *American Confessional* that it was misunderstood as if it was already impossible in the States at least to consider "nuance" (32). When you embarked on a canoe to face the great Mississippi River didn't you consider it an essential part of your poetic and political project to precisely get rid of all that legacy of slavery, whether from Africa, the Caribbean or elsewhere, to simply introduce yourself as a black American deciding to go down to his birthplace in the South? Going down the mythical river from its own source to its successive human manifestations along the way might have been a way to explore other possibilities for the nation to develop. Didn't you simply try to reclaim a place for black Americans like you, however humble that place might be, in the flow of American history? A place that would have been, or could still be, another than that of victimization, violence and racism but of exchange—the ebb and flow of conversation and mutual respect and shared intelligence. The place of a better future, the River as a social

utopia or testing ground or an Imaginary that would replace or complement that of the Frontier.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — The only thing I claim deep down is to be an American carrying with him all this glorious, tragic and painful history. I don't see myself as a hyphenated American but a 100% American, and the idea is certainly not to obliterate the history of slavery but rather to express a concern and desire that all Americans should acknowledge and embrace it themselves. They should understand that we live within the shadow of such a past instead of trying to either turn their backs on it or deny it altogether. From this recognition, we should and could all build a new identity. The river is neither a utopia nor a place of amnesia but a place where people can meet, talk, get to know each other without the dangers of the Frontier and without any appetite for conquest.

Christine VANDAMME. — At one point in your essay *American Confessional* you ask yourself why your work did not get the acclaim and popularity that it obtained in other countries than your own, in France in particular and you wonder whether you might simply have been ahead of your time, a "prophet" of sorts (46), as you put it with your recognisable humour and subtle irony. When considering the ever increasing interest in blue humanities these days as a strong nexus of social and political rebirth and reconnection, one cannot help thinking indeed that your vision for the American nation, a river people which, like the Mississippi, has always crossed currents, cultures and ethnicities, been animated by a mysterious and throbbing heart possibly irrigating new avenues for a reunited and reconciled nation, could have been both prophetic and inspiring instead of ending up bogged down in the muddy swamps of ignorance, intolerance and indifference.

Eddy L. HARRIS. — I think that finally, the country as well as its people were not ready yet, and are not ready today either, to have this conversation—a conversation that would examine our history and debate who we are and how we came to the place we are now. This is not necessarily complicated in my opinion but one needs to be ready and open to new possibilities. The moment could have emerged during Barack Obama's first campaign but it was prevented

by the Birther-movement launched by Trump which questioned Obama's nationality, repeating ad nauseam the second name of the president—Hussein. Trump also openly mocked another candidate's lineage when he called Elizabeth Warren Pocahontas. In both cases it was implied none of them were truly Americans. With such a political approach it is impossible to shape a united country, a reunited and reconciled nation. Maybe people should have listened to me and I am not intending any irony here.

NOTES

1 The page references are from the Kindle edition of the book: Eddy L. Harris, *House of Lies. American Confessional*, translated by Grace Raushl, Paris: Liana Levi, 2024.

2 Claire Marin, *Être à sa place. Habiter sa vie, habiter son corps*, Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2022 (*Being in One's Place. Dwelling in One's Life and Body*, my translation).

3 "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything" (Joseph Conrad, preface to the *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Penguin, 1989, p. XLIX).

4 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard/Folio, 1999.

ABSTRACTS

English
The following exchange is the result of a series of questions that were asked to Eddy L. Harris in the wake of the conference by Christine Vandamme, associate professor, and Inès Mayoud, an MPhil student in English studies at the time. And the introductory part was written by Christine Vandamme.

Français
Cette section est le fruit d'une collaboration et d'un échange entre l'auteur Eddy L. Harris et Christine Vandamme, maîtresse de conférences à l'UGA ainsi qu'Inès Mayoud, alors mastérante en première année à l'UGA. La première partie d'introduction à l'entretien a été rédigée par Christine Vandamme. La série de questions auxquelles Eddy L. Harris a répondu

tourne autour des sujets suivants : l'identité américaine, la difficulté à réconcilier promesses politiques et rêve américain d'une part avec, par ailleurs, une réalité basée sur l'exclusion, un déni de l'héritage historique ainsi qu'une manipulation systématique de l'électorat. Il voit dans la difficulté, voire l'incapacité, de la nation américaine à garantir à chacun sa place légitime l'échec originel de sa promesse. Eddy L. Harris explique par ailleurs qu'il ne s'intéresse pas beaucoup à l'identité culturelle lorsqu'elle implique une fixation sur le passé plutôt qu'un élan vers le futur. Son désir de se voir désigné comme noir et américain ou noir-américain a souvent été mal compris, voire source de tensions avec la communauté dite « afro-américaine » alors qu'elle reflète son éthique de vie : vivre le présent sans oublier l'héritage historique mais en tentant de revitaliser ce présent, de le ré-enchanter afin de tracer d'autres perspectives d'avenir. Se faire le chantre et le « prophète » d'une Amérique qui saurait se réinventer à hauteur de ses idéaux. Il s'agit ainsi pour lui de favoriser la conversation, le débat, mais aussi de cultiver la communion et l'harmonie avec la nature. La métaphore du Mississippi devient emblématique d'un nouveau mythe fondateur basé sur le mouvement mais pas celui d'une conquête comme c'était le cas avec le mythe de la Frontière, mais une mise en branle qui soit celle de la participation de chaque citoyen, quelle que soit son identité culturelle singulière. Car, dit-il, les cultures ne font pas qu'entrer en collision, elles se mélangent, s'influencent mutuellement et finissent par transformer les cultures mêmes avec lesquelles elles entrent en contact.

INDEX

Mots-clés
identité, culture, mensonges nationaux, noir américain, appartenance, réconciliation, Confession américaine

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identity, culture, national lies, black American, belonging, reconciliation, American Confessional

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Eddy L. Harris is a critically acclaimed author, lecturer and filmmaker who loves traveling, meeting new people and sharing his experiences and adventures with his readers. He keeps challenging and interrogating the place each of us occupies in their respective communities and homelands. In his first novel *Mississippi Solo* (1988), he offers a wonderful account of his canoe journey down the

Mississippi River as well as a reflection on what being American means, especially as a black American navigating on this most iconic river. The journey and the book give him the opportunity to explore American founding myths and core values as well as the deeply conflicted heritage of the Civil War and slavery. In his next three works alternating autobiographical details and a larger reflection on black American experience and identity in both the States (*South of Haunted Dreams* in 1993 and *Still Life in Harlem* in 1996) and in relation to Africa (*Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*, 1992), he offers a poignant, sincere and often incisive analysis of all its complexity and richness. His next three books were published both in English and in French: *Jupiter et moi* (2005), *Paris en noir et black* (2009) and *Confession américaine* (2024), thus confirming his deep attachment to France. *American Confessional* is an essay offering a bitter-sweet account of the contradictions—and also the "lies" (the subtitle of the reflexive piece is *House of Lies*)—that have haunted the American nation from its birth to the present day.
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Christine Vandamme is currently working as an Associate Professor at Université Grenoble Alpes in France. Her field of expertise is that of space, place and literature but also space, place and identity, both personal and national, with a particular interest in the ideological, political and ethical implications of such spatial representations. She has published extensively on colonial perceptions of space and place in Joseph Conrad's writings but has also further specialized in the study of spatial representations in Australia, a nation whose relatively condensed colonial history illustrates many colonial, post-colonial and even decolonial issues. She co-edited with Andre Dodeman a collective volume on place and national identity in 2021, *Space, Place and Hybridity in the National Imagination*, as well as a volume on *The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth* in 2024.
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Inès Mayoud
Inès Mayoud is an MPhil student in English studies at Université Grenoble Alpes. She is now in her second year and works on the writings of Katherine Mansfield and the way she managed to transcend pain and turn it into a source of inspiration for her works. Being thus working on the related issues of trauma, illness and resurgence in writing, she offered to take part in the organisation of the conference and the ensuing interviewing process with Eddy L. Harris. She read *Mississippi Solo* and *American Confessional* as well as various interviews with the author and articles centred on his books. The idea was to select questions that

would be most appropriate to further the reflexion on resurgence and empowerment in Eddy L. Harris's works.
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Resurgence and Trauma

Waking up the Ghosts: Trauma Resurgence as a Possibility in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)

Le réveil des fantômes : la résurgence du traumatisme comme vivier des possibles dans Sing, Unburied, Sing *(2017) de Jesmyn Ward*

Myrto Charvalia

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OUTLINE

TEXT

Introduction

1 The publication of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* granted Jesmyn Ward the National Book Award for Fiction for a second time, but most importantly it rendered the transgenerational predicament of black families' lives in the South more visible, fortifying the sense of hope to the people of her community. Aligning with Alexandre Gefen's affirmation that contemporary writing[1] privileges its "therapeutical" angle (11), Ward's novel bears on revisiting the post-plantation South, and restoring the traumatic past of mass incarceration. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* enters into the realm of the literature of reparations and empowerment, as the novel seeks to "patch" the profound wound that chronic injustice regarding minorities and the generalized feeling of antiblackness have left in the history of the United States. For Gefen, "identifying, and acting upon global wounds [...] are at the

epicenter of contemporary literary projects", a double inducement whose genealogy can be traced in "diverse aesthetic traditions", namely in social empathy, in what he calls "mystic empathy", in coping with grief or in writing about catastrophes (11, 13, my translations). Although Ward's novel revisits intergenerational trauma, it does not seem to conform with the examples that Gefen has pinpointed. The aforementioned literary explorations mostly focus on singularities, which eventually give access to the communal. Ward's point of departure, nonetheless, is the sedimentation of trauma and injustice that a family faces—a miniature societal schema and prerequisite to the formation of more complex entities—an example that she uses to shed light upon community empowerment.

2 Notwithstanding its "therapeutical" or "reparative" nature, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is far from being a "soothing" novel. Ward chooses very carefully the identities of her characters, providing a spatiotemporally heraldic book; the rapid sedimentation of the present (or what Pierre Nora called the "acceleration of history" [2]), as well as the tracing of future expectations, spring from the re-emergence of the past. In the novel, the past is not only echoed, it re-emerges in an embodied way with the return of Richie, the ghost of Pop's close friend from his prison time at Parchman.

3 The use of the ghost in the novel serves multiple purposes: it bonds the past with the present and future of the narration; Richie's first-person diegesis transforms the book into a polyphonic account of individual and social trauma; simultaneously, it adds another layer to the depiction of a multicultural South where the presence of spirits surpasses the "supernatural" or the "folkloric" and becomes part of the cultural specificities of the area. Most significantly, however, Richie encompasses a multimodal kind of resurgence.

4 Resurgence being the main hinge or point of departure, in this paper I wish to explore what is at stake when the trope of the specter, a commonplace in Southern Gothic, [3] is revisited in contemporary fiction. [4] Placing *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in the Southern Gothic tradition is relevant but such venture would call for a diligent elaboration (lengthier than this text). Instead, the focal point of this analysis is to read Richie's apparition as a textual leap which surpasses individual trauma as well as the supernatural and the

grotesque—recurrent elements of the Southern Gothic—to provide another interpretative possibility. Similar to Beloved in Morrison's eponymous novel, his spectral resurgence underpins collective racial injustice, and the "disposability" of black bodies. The profound sense of annihilation will be discussed as the initial trigger of, and the locus of preparation for Richie's apparition. Related to the mendacity and doggedness [5] of the spectral figure, Richie's mischievous resurgence and eventual ostracism will be also explored. Eventually, the figure of the specter or the revenant will be associated to Gefen's elaboration on the possibilities of the literature of reparations (11).

"The goat is inside out": spectral preparations

5 There is something unsettling that permeates the opening scene of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Jojo, a thirteen-year-old mixed-race adolescent, follows his grandfather Pop/River Red outside the house to help him slaughter a goat and prepare its meat:

> I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I've earned these thirteen years, so Pop will know I'm ready to pull what needs to be pulled. […] I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today's my birthday. I grab the door so it don't slam, ease it into the jamb. (1)

In Jojo's articulation, death and birth merge dialectically. Wanting to prove that he is mature and courageous enough, he accompanies his grandfather in the killing and evisceration of the goat on the very day of his birthday. Simultaneously, not wanting to wake up Kayla, his baby sister, and Mam, his grandmother who is suffering from cancer, he tries to exit the house as gently as possible. The novel begins with the promise of an uninterrupted calm tinged by rustic tones of southern life, but as Jojo and Pop are about to slaughter the goat, a subtle yet unsettling energy, an unhomely thing seems to lurk behind the scene of initiation: "I try to look like this is normal and boring" (6), he says, but the act of killing will very soon bring into play Jojo's understandable vulnerability as a child:

> I know it's stomach and intestines, but all I can see is […] the soft eye of the goat and then I can't hold myself still and watch no more, then

> I am out of the door of the shed and I'm throwing up in the grass outside. My face is hot, but my arms are cold. (6)

Initially, Jojo is desirous to show his experienced steadiness. By eviscerating the animal, he thinks that he faces the image of death. But the grotesque scene, tinged with the color of hot animal blood and the foul smell of the goat's entrails, makes him empty his stomach. Referring to desire and the state of the abject, Julia Kristeva contents how "apprehensive, [the subject's] desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (4). It seems that Jojo is himself unconsciously "apprehensive" of the animal's fungibility; his vomiting is a coping mechanism for the grotesque eeriness he experiences since his young self cannot yet accommodate the experience of death. Hence, the evocative scene of the goat's evisceration or Jojo's failed initiation into "death-learning" are followed by his need for storytelling: the young narrator asks his grandfather to tell the story of his past—a prison story that he has repeated to Jojo many times but that never seems to come to its end: "Pop, you going to tell me about you and Stag again?" (16). In other words, the image of blood resuscitates a need for reassurance, which Jojo tries to quench by asking to hear his grandfather's story. Most importantly, however, the goat's and Jojo's "turning inside out" connote the spectral re-emergence of Richie and Given further on in the novel. Both the dissecting and gutting of the animal and the movement of the fluids from the inside to the outside could metaleptically hint at the "revenant's" movement whose presence springs from the invisible chronotope of the past to the visible present. In other words, his abjection could be an indicator, or a "sign" to use Avery Gordon's words, of an elusive event that permeates the scene to the point of haunting it (Gordon 8).

6 Greg Chase reads Pop's lesson as a "modeling [of] the art of humanely killing a goat", an art that Jojo needs to master in order to survive in the environment of antiblackness of the novel (212). The boy's invisibility is accentuated from the opening chapter of the book, where Jojo reflects on the behavior of his racist grandfather, Joseph, "the man who ain't never once said my name" and his father, Michael: "Back then I didn't realize how Michael noticed and didn't notice, how sometimes he saw me and then, whole days of weeks, he didn't" (10). Pop's lesson could be an act of empowerment of his young grandson,

but could also allude to death's proximity, a fact that has permeated Pop's lifetime and is proved to be true for Jojo too who almost gets shot by a policeman on the family's way back home from Parchman. Isolated by the policeman, scared Jojo reaches in his pocket to touch the gri-gri bag his grandfather made for him, but the officer translates his gesture differently, believing that the boy carries a gun:

> I feel Pop's bag in my shorts, and I reach for it. Figure if I could feel the tooth, the feather, the note, maybe I could feel those things running through me. Maybe I wouldn't cry. [...] *But then the cop has his gun out, pointing at me. Kicking me. Yelling at me to get down in the grass. Cuffing me.* Asking me, "What you got in your pocket, boy?" as he reaches for Pop's bag. (170, emphasis added)

During the goat's preparation, Pop's gestures have a gentle quality in them, as if the animal's death was an inevitability which he then interrelates to Pop's tormented past and the unjust but inevitable death of his son, Given. Boasting about his hunting skills, Given goes hunting with some white youths, but when he manages to win a bet and kill a buck with his bow first, Michael's slow-witted and irritable cousin ends up shooting him fatally. The sheriff dismisses Given's death as a "hunting accident" (50), concealing under the heavy gravestone of history yet another unprosecuted case of a young black man's murder. Lucy Arnold goes as far as to say that Given's death aligns with the dehumanizing state where "a human is substituted for the intended prey" (229), a logic reminiscent of slavery. From then on, his parents, Philomène and River, will lead a life of bitter grieving, and his sister, Leonie, will suffer from the loss of her brother that re-emerges as a ghost every time she consumes drugs: "Three years ago, I did a line and saw Given for the first time" (51).

7 The disposability of the animal's life, which is soon downgraded to meat, is paralleled to the disposability of black life in the inhospitable South, where a single instance of the boldness of youth may cut a black man's life short. Unfortunately, Given is not the only absence River has had to endure in his lifetime. At the age of fifteen, River was sent to Parchman penitentiary for sheltering his mentally unstable and delinquent brother, Stag. During his years as a prisoner, River befriended a twelve-year-old boy, Richie, who was sent to prison for having stolen food for his sick and famished siblings: "Richie, he was

called. Real name was Richard, and he wasn't nothing but twelve years old. He was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat" (21). Richie's passing acquires the nature of a traumatic burden in Pop's heart which he carries in the form of a fragmented story into his late years.

8 Consequently, Jojo's somatic vulnerability gives access, although partially, to Pop's traumatic past. The act of vomiting functions as a metonymic reenactment of the suffering black body, an element that has impregnated Pop's life from his teenage years well into parenthood. As a matter of fact, Pop loses his friend, Richie, to a raging lynching mob: "They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing" (255). To prevent Richie from utmost agony, Pop decides *he* will be the executor. Years later, his son, Given, will be killed for having bragged about his bow skills and having won the bet, Michael's white cousin shooting him dead out of jealousy. Like Given's body which hit the floor next to the dead buck, an image rendering animal and their death equal, Richie's dead body lay next to lynched Blue, who had been skinned like an animal after "they […] had cut pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose" (254). Hence, when gutting out the goat, Pop's careful gestures elucidate pieces of a past where the black body "[was] literally disassembled, through ritual lynching" to the point of losing its human characteristics (Lloyd 248). The idea of death being more urgent than life for black youths, whether at the hands of a lynch mob or Pop, consolidates the notion of human fungibility. This translates Richie and Given's deaths into the consequences of white people's shortcomings. Consequently, Richie's unburied body, and subsequent lingering state, together with the injustice behind his death, contribute to his spectral transformation.

9 Announcing the resurgence of the past through bodily rejection is recurrent in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*. In fact, in Ward's fiction, vomit acquires the position of an overarching trope that can be traced to her earlier novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), where Esch's father falls sick and his body abjures to hold any fluids in. His sickness foreshadows the ravaging hurricane Katrina which mirrors his condition accordingly. In fact, when Esch contemplates on her destroyed neighborhood, she describes how the bay from her

childhood memories has now "swallowed" (Ward 2011, 178) her neighborhood, Bois Sauvage, and spat it out in pieces:

> With all the trees gone, it is easy to see that we are approaching the train tracks, the same train tracks that carried the trains we heard blowing raucously when we were younger, swimming in the same oyster-lined bay that came in and swallowed Bois, swallowed the back of St. Catherine, and *vomited it out in pieces*. (*Salvage* 197; emphasis added)

10 In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, stomach sickness announces the arrival of another uncomfortable incident. As in the opening scene, the trope permeates the family's long journey to Parchman for Michael's release too. Unable to hold any fluids down, Kayla's sick stomach, her vomiting, could be read as a rejection of the problematic mother figure [6] but also as a preparation for something unfathomable, or "indigestible", like the blue Powerade she drinks, which makes her vomit a blue fluid (100). Indeed, on their way back from the road trip, Jojo and Kayla realize that a liminal presence has accompanied them in the car; it is undeniably that of Richie, who, having felt Pop's generational presence, has been resuscitated. His re-emergence happens gradually: when Kayla sees birds picking the ground for worms, Jojo realizes that the shadowy figures with the benched backs look like humans:

> I look out at the fields but I don't see birds. I squint and for a second, I see men bent at the waist, [...] looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me. (125)

Jojo is unaware of the signification of the men in the fields that look like a "murder of crows" and pays little attention to the "one shorter than the rest" but for the not-yet-ghost Richie, the scene constitutes a point of anagnorisis. However, his re-emergence, which will be discussed in the next part, encompasses more than an individual story of sadness and brutality; in fact, I read his haunting exhumation as a possibility, or a source of empowerment for the new generation, as I will argue later in this paper.

Ghosts, social haunting and the meanness of the dead

11 The reasons behind Richie's resurgence are neither auspicious, nor do they chime with Given's. Given's ghost is the product of drug-induced hallucination and his sister's incomplete mourning; he re-emerges only when Leonie uses narcotics, something that Marco Petrelli interprets as a way to protect Leonie when she is in danger or about to take the wrong decision, providing an "ethereal yet enduring support" (322). These traits yield a beneficial angle to his ghostly presence. Despite his hallucinatory point of departure, he represents the void that his absence has caused to Leonie. He, therefore, is a personal ghost: Leonie's lost "object of love", whose loss she has not yet processed (Abraham and Torok 427). Given's fabrication by his sister is further confirmed by Abraham and Torok's statements that ghosts are human inventions made in order to "objectify" […] "the lacuna" that "the concealment of the object of love's part of life has created in us" [7] (427, my translation). Failed mourning makes Leonie carry her dead brother inside her, in the form of a crypt (427). Richie, however, does not belong to this category of spectral entities. Even if he represents Pop's traumatic past of cruel, juvenile incarceration at Parchman, his emergence extends to the communal level.

12 The aftermaths of tracking down Pop's grandchildren and his insisting on "going home" (*Sing* 131) are as dubious as the very notion of "home" in Ward's novel. While at Parchman, Richie's urgent decision to escape is inspired by his need to return "home" (126); nevertheless, even after what he used to call "home" has been effaced, he clings to the remaining substitute of family, namely, Pop or River Red, as he was nicknamed in prison: "Him, my big brother. Him, my father", and "That I knew him when he was called River Red" (135, 136). The absence of home and Richie's desperate need to belong somewhere draw his spirit to Leonie's car. For the ghost's reclamation of a "place" in the world, temporal circumstances further facilitate his resurgence. Avery Gordon contends that being in a spectral state also "affects being in time" which means that liminal entities transgress the accepted temporal conditions of present, past

and future (xvi). In chapter six, Richie describes how before coming back to the present, he lingered weightless in a liminal space:

> In the beginning, I woke in a stand of young pine trees on a cloudy, *half-lit day*. I could not remember how I came to be crouching in the pine needles, soft and sharp as boar's hair under my legs. *There was no warmth or cold there. Walking was like swimming* through tepid gray water. *I paced in circles.* I don't know why I stayed in that place […]. (134, emphasis added)

Nonetheless, upon remembering Pop, "[Richie] drop[s] from [his] flight, the memory pulling [him] to earth" (136). The "magnetic" power of traumatic memory, so powerful it outweighs forgetfulness, raises specters and alters the notion of time (Gordon xvi). What differentiates Richie's rise from Given's is that the former's is related to a socially, rather than individually, unavowable fact. For Gordon, traumatizing events—in this case, mass incarceration and insufficient law enforcement—are sources of haunting, as "to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects" (190). After all, ghosts are only "signs" that designate that something larger, haunting, is taking place, as she states at the beginning of her groundbreaking book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (8).

13 Temporal circumstances do not only include Richie's memory reacquisition, as I argued earlier, but also Pop's state. Mam's health has deteriorated greatly, and the potential repercussions of Michael's homecoming can only be seen with great skepticism. In a word, with Pop's home under siege, Richie's resurgence not only intensifies the family's peripeteia, but has been induced by its very "ill" state. As Gordon suggests: "These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view" (xvi). With Pop preoccupied by the new problems that have arisen in the household, she pushes his traumatic past aside, a gesture that renders Richie even more obstinate.

14 Initially, the ghost returns in an attempt to belong somewhere, to "go home" as he repetitively claims (*Sing* 126, 131, 255). His pursuit carries the egotism and malevolence concomitant to the "revenant" in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. Drawing on the stage

directions of *Hamlet*: "Enter the Ghost, Exit the Ghost, Enter the Ghost, as before", Derrida elaborates on the spaciotemporal specificity of the specter: "A question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because *it begins by coming back*" (13, emphasis added). Having returned to the present, Richie urges Jojo to persuade his grandfather to confide in him the end of his story, namely Richie's death at Parchman, a fragment that Pop refuses to unveil. Richie explains to the young boy that the reason he needs to know the entire story is because it will help him to get back home, but his statement is dubious:

> "I guess I didn't make it." Richie laughs, and it's a dragging, limping chuckle. Then he turns serious, his face night in the bright sunlight. "But I don't know how. *I need to know how.*" He looks up at the roof of the car. "Riv will know." "*It's how I get home.*" (181, 182, emphasis added)

Eventually, when his grandfather shares the end of the story he explains that during his last interaction with Richie, he promised to take him home, only to kill him with his knife: [8] "'I'm going home, Riv?' […] 'Yes, Richie, I'm a take you home', I said. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck" (*Sing* 255). In lieu of leaving Richie suffer in the hands of the lynching mob, Pop kills his friend. By placing it in the context of Jim Crow-era Parchman, Greg Chase alludes to the possibility Pop has to get rewarded or even freed for having killed a black delinquent, since his "act […] could easily be read by prison authorities as contributing to their project of racial control" (212). Nevertheless, the old man is driven by remorse for many years after: "I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out" (256). Another act of violence with similar consequences, committed for the purpose of agency is traced in Morrison's *A Mercy*, where "minha mãe" gives away her daughter Florens to Jacob Vaark, as she sees in him the possibility of a life away from the obscenities and sexual abuse of D'Ortega's tobacco plantation: "Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes" (*A Mercy* 158). Her seven-year-old daughter is unable to read through her mother's act of abandonment, an event

that haunts both mother and daughter for life. To draw a parallel, unable to understand that Pop offered Richie a dignified and less painful death, Richie resorts to repressing the circumstances around his death from his memory. Consequently, the fact that for black people death and abandonment acquire the status of an ultimatum transcends time. To wit, similar mechanisms around agency are used both in pre-national America, in the case of *A Mercy*, and in post-plantation United States, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

15 Chronic injustice and black life fungibility truly contribute to Richie's spectral profile that goes beyond gothic or supernatural traits. First he is bound to the social violence that requires a 12-year-old boy who stole food to be sent to Parchman—a place that years after Michael describes as "no place for no man. Black or White. Don't make no difference. This a place for the dead" (*Sing* 96). But Richie's specter encompasses not only his individual strife and tortuous life in prison, it is also emblematic of the lives of all those black people who were lynched, tortured, raped, silenced, enslaved. His rising makes him a "social figure" (Gordon xvi) that has "register[ed] the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present" (Gordon 8). Hence, the specter transcends its representational cocoon—dead Richie—and instead becomes a point of conflation that Gordon calls a "dense site" where "history and subjectivity make social life" (8).

16 Spectral resurgence echoes historic injustice toward black and ethnic minority people; nevertheless, the mendacity that characterizes spectral entities persists in Richie's case too. As psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok have theorized, the phantom's resurgence is not related to the uncovering of the truth, but to the maintenance of a buried secret. Resonating with Abraham and Torok's work, Colin Davis also argues that "ghosts are liars" whose eventual plan is to further repress the secret in question that haunts the future generation and not simply the carrier: "its effects are designed to mislead the haunted subject and to ensure that its secret remains shrouded in mystery" (Davis 10). Thus, transgenerational trauma takes the form of a secret transferred among a family or community, in this case, the existence of secret in Richie's death is known to Jojo, but because the secret is never really shared, its haunting power eventually prevails, leading to its transformation into a "phantom".[9]

The phantom is then known to the child, who soon becomes a "phantom carrier" (Berthin 5).

17 Howbeit, after learning the truth of his death, Richie's ghost will not go away; in fact, he will try to disrupt the fragile balance in Jojo's family so as to prevail. With Jojo being haunted by Richie, Pop's secret eventually emerges to the surface as the ghost's personal request. Similar motifs can be traced in many ghost stories, namely in *Hamlet*: the ghost of the dead king does not simply return to unveil the truth of his poisoning to his son, but to haunt him asking for revenge. Accordingly, in *Beloved*, the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter re-emerges to visit her, an act that leads to a longed for anagnorisis. Nonetheless, after tasting Sethe's motherly nurture, Beloved's ghost becomes insatiable: "[Denver] saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved […], everything except her basket-fat stomach" (285). Beloved threatens Sethe's physical and mental health (292), as Sethe becomes "listless and sleepy with hunger [to the point that] the flesh between her […] forefinger and thumb fade" (285); Beloved also moves Paul D out of household (134); and isolates Denver who becomes the observer of her mother's demise (285–286).

18 Both in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* and in *Beloved*, the unquenchable perseverance of the specter leads to its ostracism. Once he has taken hold of his full story, Richie turns to Pop's loved ones. Vainly trying to quench his thirst for belonging, the ghost will not leave; instead it seeks a new mother figure in Pop's dying wife, Philomène/Mam: "'He want Mam!' [Michaela] screams" and "'Says he want me to be his mama'" (262, 265). Found hanging "half off the bed, half on" (263), Mam is attacked by Richie, the "bird" that only Kayla can see in the bedroom, which is now permeated by the eerie smell of death: "The room smells like Mama has been turned inside out. Like piss and shit and blood" (263). Using the same olfactory and visual imagery as at the beginning of the novel, Ward prepares the reader for Mam's scene of passing. Already preyed upon by Richie and her illness, Mam is conquered and her deathbed transforms into a liminal space where ghosts become visible: at first Leonie can only see her brother's ghost but soon she will discern the figure of the "black bird" Kayla refers to:

> There's no time. This moment done ate it all up: the past, the future. Do I say the words? I blink, and up on the ceiling there is a boy, a boy with the face of a toddler. I blink again, sand scouring my eye, and there is nothing. (267)

Eventually ushering "Maman Brigitte, Mother of all the Gede. Mistress of the cemetery and mother of all the dead" (268), Leonie manages to put an end to Mam's unnatural suffering with the help of her Hoodoo traditional knowledge. Her litany redresses the initial interstitial state of time: "Time floods the room in a storm surge" (269), helping her ailing mother to leave the world and the ghosts that haunt her. Leonie's litany manages to terminate Mam's suffering as her son, Given "come[s] with the boat" to get her (269), but it is not clear if Richie's ghost has been affected in the same way. As the latter has started haunting Jojo even before his apparition through Pop's stories, his conjuring has yet to fully take place. Instead, a few days later, the animals of the forest, whose voices are audible to Jojo, bring the news of Richie's return, or, more precisely, the news of his static state: "Another day, a large white snake drops onto the path in front of me […] The rasp of scales against bark: *The boy floats and wanders. Still stuck*" (280).

Haunting as a possibility

19 Richie's resurgence even after he has been ousted from the house could be interpreted in various ways: "Until I see the boy laying, curled into the roots of a great live oak, looking half-dead and half-sleep, and all ghost" (280). Still visible to Jojo, Richie's needy specter lurks in the forest for its next chance to belong somewhere, namely the family's next moment of weakness—something that is arguably possible as after her mother's death, Leonie spends less and less time sober with her children. Looking weakened, "half-dead, half-sleep", Richie's banishment resembles the end of *Beloved* after the neighborhood's women come to conjure her out of 124 Bluestone Road. Her visible traces are gone and yet her ghost has not fully disappeared:

> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. *The rest*

> *is weather.* Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but the wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. (*Beloved* 324; emphasis added)

"Curled into the root of a great live oak" Richie's mingling with the forest's vegetation, where he "floats and wanders" (280), echoes Beloved's movement out of the house and her transformation into "weather": into the "unaccounted for" and barely noticeable backdrop of history and social memory. And although "by and by all trace is gone" and everything is gradually forgotten, the specter of Beloved is dislocated but not completely gone. As a matter of fact, since the only remainder of Beloved's communal exorcism is mere "weather", her liminality acquires an all-encompassing quality. This idea could be reinforced by Christina Sharpe's exploration of weather, for whom it is "the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (104). Thus, "weather" and the atmospheric shifts of nature carry the haunting memory of antiblack violence that refuses to be completely effaced, instead it becomes unnoticeably ubiquitous.

20 By the end of the book, Richie tries to attain "home" anew and this time by becoming part of the "song": "'I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could'—the word sounds like a ripped rag—'become something else. Maybe, I could. Become. The song.'" (281). The song is an element that had been scarcely explored up to that moment in the novel although it features in the title. Richie's initial resurgence has caused great trouble to Jojo's family. It shocks Leonie and causes her violent feat against her son instead of articulating her thoughts: "*What you seen, boy, what you seen?*" (272). It disappoints Mam who wished the first ghost she would see upon her last living moments would be Given's: "'I always thought—' […] 'It would be your brother.' […] 'The first dead I see …'" (265). And it brings great pain to Pop who has to cope with the loss of his wife at the same time as the terrible memories of his prison times are resuscitated:

> […] looking where she looked when she died, his eyes staring, heard him calling her name, a name I hadn't heard said since before the cancer: *Philomène*. And then: *Phillie*. And then I knew what he was doing when he thought us asleep. (279)

As much as this is true, his haunting comes together with a possibility for resilience and, eventually, change. This hope can be traced throughout Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* where, as she suggests, haunting opens the door for "something-to-be-done", an element that differentiates haunting from trauma, she argues (Gordon xvi).

21 Undoubtedly, by the end of the book Leonie's alienation, together with the embracing of her drug-addiction leave but small space for hope. Her fall has been carefully constructed throughout the novel, at first indicated in her mitigated interest in her children's welfare during the trip; and then, in her failure to practice the traditional knowledge that her healer mother tried to pass down to her. Conquered by her unfinished grief of family members, her figure concentrates a sense of rejection and futility. She is afflicted by the gravitational forces of loneliness, drug addiction and social exclusion to such an extent that Leonie vacillates in a liminal state where she rejects all social roles and physical functions: "*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe*" (*Sing* 274). But it is because of the mother figure's alienation that her children find ways of self-agency. Jojo supports his sister ever so actively, and, most importantly, two-year-old Kayla manages to "sing" Richie home, impersonating the resilience of future generations when it comes to facing the past or the uncertainty of the future.

22 Kayla's song echoes Gefen's statement about reparatory narratives, as new writers seek to rewrite what was historically left out and to give voice to those silenced—in a word, to "sing" the little that is left of history's "cenotaph" (Gefen 222). "When the writer comes too late to intercede in matters of the present", Gefen poignantly suggests, "then it is the wounds of the past that he aims at healing" (221, my translation). Ward transposes the task of healing to Kayla. But before exploring her contribution toward the end of the novel, it should be underlined that ghostly resurgence would not lead to new possibilities but to obstructions, had Mam not bequeathed her traditional knowledge of Hoodoo and Haitian Vodou practices, to Leonie and, indirectly, to her grandchildren. Jojo and Kayla manage to see something that for the rest of the characters remains invisible, impalpable, non-existent. They see Richie's transformation from an invisible bird into a ghost in human shape; Jojo is able to converse with him, despite being unable to make him go: "You got what you

came for. Now get" (268). One of the key characteristics of Hoodoo is that it seeks to seal the foundations of community through family by strengthening their sense of "spiritual belonging" (Arnold 226). This is exactly what Mam and Pop have accomplished through their methodical nurturing, encouraging their grandchildren to be available or well disposed toward "otherness". Besides, the different African spiritual practices on the American Gulf Coast are characterized by the "intertwined relationship between human and non-human" (227) which reinforces their availability to events that are seen as supernatural, fictitious or even fake in Western epistemology. This relationship is extensively explored in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*; from the very beginning Jojo is able to listen to the animals speak or think, an ability that was passed down by Mam: "When I was younger, my mama complained about her stomach, how she had ulcers. They was sounding to me, saying, *We eat*, *we eat*, *we eat*; I was confused and kept asking her if she was hungry" (41).

23 Jojo and Kayla's engaging with their spiritual heritage throughout the novel functions as a preparation for the last chapter. As shown earlier, Richie's ghost has merged with the dense vegetation of the forest, expanding next to Pop's line of property. Richie explains to Jojo that he thought Pop's testimony would help him attain home and disappear, instead, he is indeterminately blocked in the present: "I can't. Come inside. I tried. Yesterday. There has to be some need, some lack. Like a keyhole. Makes it so I can come in" (*Sing* 281). The ghost is bound to its liminality, but its inability to surpass its traumatic past further corroborates its collectivity. Richie says that "there has to be some need, some lack", confirming Gordon's elaboration on haunting as something more than individual trauma. Indeed, Richie's ghost is bound to linger on earth exactly because his resurgence is not exclusively linked to Pop's and Richie's forced incarceration stories. Instead, Richie's ghost is elevated, encompassing the "law enforcement specter" in its borderline presence Lloyd explains (247), or becoming, according to Petrelli, "a reluctant symbol of unredressed anti-Black violence" (322). To a certain extent, his ghost represents not only the chronic injustice against black life in the United States, but also the way this injustice is actually a mutation, an "afterlife"[10] of slavery (Hartman 6).

24 A glimpse of possibility to redress the traumatic past can be found in the last chapter of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, when both Jojo and Richie seem unable to surpass the burdens of history: "'There's so many' Richie says. His voice is molasses slow. 'So many of us,' he says. 'Hitting. The wrong keys. Wandering against. The song'" (282). Richie momentarily loses his human traits climbing a tree "like a white snake" (282). It is precisely at that moment that a sighing tree unfurls in front of Jojo; its branches are full of ghosts "perch[ing] like birds, but look[ing] as people" (282). The use of the tree is not accidental. It conveys both the Hoodoo cultural belief that spirits reside on trees and the racially targeted practices of lynching, where the victim is hung and tortured, and vice versa. In a word, the use of the tree full of ghosts could allude to "the condition of haunting in this Mississippi landscape" (Lloyd 250).

25 Hanging from the branches, the ghosts narrate their stories of unfathomable suffering which bound them to their liminality, representing the multiple dark angles of history:

> They speak with their eyes: He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe. (282–283)

A momentary tabula rasa of traumatic memories, Kayla listens to the ghosts' testimony, and responds. She offers to bandage their festering wounds in the way she can, providing a powerful song, a call for the unburied to accompany her and to sing. Her song, "of mismatched, half-garbled words, [which is] nothing that [Jojo or Pop] can understand" (284) becomes an embodied "speech act" whose urgency does not so much lie in its meaning (locutionary act), but in the force it emits (illocutionary act) and in its power to convince (perlocutionary act) (Austin 120). The performativity of Kayla's babbling transcends conventional speech ("nothing that I can understand") outmatching the ghosts' haunting stories. What is more,

it should be highlighted that her vocal improvisation is especially meaningful when placed in the context of the tradition of jazz music. Her "mismatched" lyrics of her improvised song are reminiscent of "scat singing",[11] for instance; and the fact that her song comes as an answer to the ghosts' speech alludes to the "call and response" technique, reaffirming the importance of orality in African American literature and music.

26 Adopting Mam's stance, "the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam" (284), Kayla reaffirms the power of her ancestry offering an alternative way to converse with the ineffable. Her song, only decipherable by the liminal presences inhabiting the tree, has the power of a remedy that alleviates their bitterness and sorrow, "enabl[ing] the ghosts to relinquish some of the trauma" they carry (Lloyd 250). Lastly, her song confirms Derrida's suggestion that for the "intellectual" the only way to "learn to live" is to learn to live with the ghosts (221). Jojo's sister manages to make the ghosts comply with reality, offering them a kind of "home", a new sense of belonging in the world leading to the novel's powerful closure: "*Home*, they say. *Home*" (285).

27 Taking a decisive step, Kayla offers to "mother" those ghosts, calming them from their malicious energy and offering reminiscence. Echoing the title, her act of singing becomes her very first instance of empowerment, ascertaining her being-into-place and offering a link between past and future. Thus her "memory-work" is registered at a level of corporeality bringing *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* closer to the contemporary "embodied" and "material" ways to commemorate the past, to use Lloyd's terminology (251, 252). Ultimately, her song brings calm; it makes the ghosts "smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (*Sing* 284).

Conclusion

28 Despite his mendacious nature, Richie's apparition and eventual ostracism clear the ground for possibility. Accelerated by Richie's intervention, Mam's death does not contribute to Richie's fading; instead his ghost remains chained to a liminal space. Richie mingles with the background, gets to be part of an all-encompassing atmosphere, echoing once more Beloved's exorcism and her

becoming part of the "weather". In the last chapter, Richie is depicted as part of a spectral whole that inhabits a sighing tree, a symbol of Southern scenery and of the legacy of spectacle lynching. Hence, the ghost magnifies its point of departure to verify its nature as a "sign" of greater haunting (Gordon 8). To a certain extent, Richie's ghost is a collective social figure, exposing America's recent past of racial terror to the present, and showing the persisting image of black life as an easily disposable one, which Morrison referred to as "fodder" ("Unspeakable Things" 161).

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NOTES

1 His elaboration begins with literature but goes beyond it, hence the imprecision.

2 In his article "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*", Pierre Nora defined the "acceleration of history" as a "rapid slippage of the present

into a historical past that is gone for good" (7). The importance of the present wastes away while the past gains more and more ground.

3 The term southern Gothic refers to a literary genre prevalent in the South of the United States since the 19th century. It is considered an evolution from European Gothic. Edgar Allan Poe had been recognized as the first "Southern Gothic" writer (he was inspired by the landscape of Virginia), yet it was William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor who consolidated and modernized the genre. Appropriated by African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Jean Toomer, Alice Walker or even Octavia E. Butler, their work led to a re-invention of its potential: the "grotesque" and the "supernatural" elements of the Gothic, among others, transformed into tools of representing the horrendous reality of antiblackness as well as the legacy of slavery in the area. For more, see Bjerre.

4 Some modern Southern Gothic novels are: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), to name but a few.

5 In *L'Écorce et le noyau* (2009), Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok chart the dead men's reasons behind their return: "more often than not, they return to lead the living into an ill-fated trap, or to send them down some tragic spiral" (426, my translation).

6 Teenage motherhood as well as motherhood and addiction or precarity feature among Ward's recurrent themes. Leonie's problematic motherhood, Michael's absence as a father figure, and their drug-addiction are of considerable significance in *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*. As for *Salvage the Bones*, teenage motherhood and precarity have been explored by Chiara Margiotta and Zsuzsanna Lénart-Muszka in their respective papers in *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays* (edited by Sheri-Marie Harrison, Arin Keeble, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo, Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

7 In the original: "Un fait est certain : le fantôme — sur toutes ces formes — est bien l'invention des vivants […]. Une invention [qui] doit objectiver […] la lacune qu'a créé en nous l'occultation d'une partie de la vie d'un objet aimé."

8 Pop liberates Richie by killing him; a similar ambivalence of freedom overarches in the African American tradition of spirituals. For example, in *Swing Low*, *Sweet Chariot*, the return home, and the sentiments of

liberation it carries, are achieved through death. This detail adds a cultural layer to any interpretation of the scene. For more, see Andres.

9 In their work, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok use the term "phantom". In this paper, I use the terms "ghost" and "specter" interchangeably. It should be mentioned, however, that Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren draw a distinction between the two, relating the former to more "mundane" entities. They argue that the use of the term "specter" is often prioritized because of its association to issues of visibility and vision. For more, see Blanco and Peeren.

10 According to Saidiya Hartman, slavery is still politically [sic] relevant not because of an obsession with a long-gone past but because a "racial calculus" still disparages black life (6). This is what she calls the "afterlife" of slavery.

11 Scat singing is a vocal improvisation technique widely used in jazz music. Generally, it is when a singer emulates the sounds of musical instruments (namely of the trumpet). It is easily identifiable in Ella Fitzgerald's performance of *How High the Moon* in 1966, or of *One Note Samba* in 1969, and in Louis Armstrong's *Dinah* in 1933. For more about the genealogy of scat singing, see Tonelli.

ABSTRACTS

English
What is at stake when the trope of the specter, a commonplace in the genre of the Southern Gothic, is revisited in contemporary fiction? In this paper, I argue that Richie's apparition surpasses the supernatural, representing much more than individual trauma. His spectral resurgence fights against collective racial injustice, and refuses the "disposability" of the black body, echoing Beloved's specter, in Morrison's eponymous novel (1987). Related to the mendacity of the spectral figure, Richie's mischievous apparition seeks to break the fragile balance in Jojo's family, an act leading to his ostracism. Based on Avery Gordon's idea of the specter as a "social figure", Richie's ghost will be examined as a case of agency or "counter-resistance" for the next generation, represented by the children in the novel.

Français
Qu'est-ce qui est en cause lorsque le trope du spectre, un lieu commun du « Southern Gothic », est revisité dans la fiction contemporaine ? Dans cet article, je montre que l'apparition de Richie dépasse le cadre du surnaturel et représente bien plus qu'un traumatisme individuel. Faisant écho à Beloved dans le roman éponyme de Morrison (1987), sa résurgence spectrale

combat l'injustice raciale collective et refuse l'idée d'un corps noir « jetable ». Liée à l'imposture de la figure spectrale, l'apparition espiègle de Richie cherche à rompre l'équilibre fragile de la famille de Jojo, un acte qui conduit à son ostracisme. S'inspirant de l'idée d'Avery Gordon selon laquelle le spectre est une « figure sociale », le fantôme de Richie sera examiné comme un cas d'agentivité ou de « contre-résistance » pour la génération suivante, représentée par les enfants dans le roman.

INDEX

Mots-clés
spectre, réparation, résurgence, hantise, Ward (Jesmyn), littérature africaine américaine, southern studies

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Rewriting Slavery: Resurgence and Emotion in Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child*

La réécriture de l'histoire de l'esclavage : résurgence et émotion dans The Lost Child *de Caryl Phillips*

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OUTLINE

TEXT

1 Resurgence, when applied to the past and particularly to historical trauma, can suggest the persistence and repetition of pain, but also the acts of resistance and rebellion which signal the overcoming of historical trauma. From this point of view, the rewriting of works from the past can contribute either to the revisiting of pain or the envisioning of avenues for overcoming its consequences. In his novels, plays and essays, Caryl Phillips has made liberal and frequent use of intertextuality and rewriting as ways of exploring the connection between past and present and the persistent effects of slavery. His adaptation of John Newman's ship's log in *Crossing the River* (1993) allowed him to expose the gaps and silences contained in a form of writing initially meant to account for potential losses in a purely financial perspective. *Cambridge* (1991), in its intertextual echoes of the slave narrative, gives resonance to the silences in Emily Cartwright's account of her experience on her father's Caribbean plantation. In several recent novels, Phillips has approached intertextual relations more directly as a form of rewriting. *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) rewrites the life of Jean Rhys from a perspective that focuses more on her difficulty in

communicating than on her writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) narrativizes the life of an African American entertainer, Bert Williams, who has completely disappeared from the American consciousness. In these two novels, rewriting continues to involve an exploration of the relevance of slavery to an understanding of people and events which may not appear to have any direct connection to it. In *The Lost Child* (2015), Phillips goes one step further, actually suggesting a rewriting of one of the classics of English literature, *Wuthering Heights*, in a way that links the mysterious origin of Heathcliff to the history of slavery.

Resurgence and rewriting

2 In considering Caryl Phillips's novel *The Lost Child* as an example of the way in which the rewriting of classics can permit the resurgence of the past, it can be useful to take into account the possible meanings and connotations of the term "resurgence" in opposition to other terms that have been used in a similar context, such as "reclamation" and "revision".[1] In talking about the writing of the novel, Phillips has mentioned the emotional connection between his own childhood in Leeds and his use of *Wuthering Heights* as intertext. He has explained how news coverage of "the Moors murderers"[2] when he was a child became confused with his impression of the moors in his reading of *Wuthering Heights*:

> I remember whispered adult conversations about Ian Brady and Myra Hindley—the Moors murderers. A decade or so later, when I was a brooding adolescent trying to hide from my parents and lose myself in literature, the forbidding moors came back into view courtesy of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. To my mind, both off the page and on it, the ethereal, shadowy, moors bespoke danger. I remember searches for bodies on the television news and disturbing photographs in newspapers, and although the evil culprits were apprehended I was acutely aware that all the bodies were never discovered and there was therefore no real closure to this unspeakably malevolent episode. (Phillips, "Finding the Lost Child" 2015)

The author's remarks suggest that his reading of *Wuthering Heights* as an adolescent produced a resurgence in his mind of the horror

associated with the murders he had heard about as a child. If seen in this perspective, it is clear that an aesthetics of resurgence relies on an emotional as well as an intellectual connection with the past. This approach suggests the relevance of observing the way in which Phillips creates an emotional relation to the past as a means of emphasizing the impact of slavery on situations which seem far removed from the historical context in which it existed. [3] This requires taking into account not only the thematic "matrix", which Roberta Wondrich sees as "produc[ing] a critique of the displaced history of oppression and amnesia of the West" (2020, 295), but also the narrative texture which transforms resurgence into an emotional experience. Wondrich describes the narrative structure of the novel as "prismatic", a structure in which "the text and its characters reverberate through each other" (306–307). I believe that more attention needs to be paid to the narrative technique of the novel, to the voices that Phillips creates as a bridge between the intellectual task of comparing and collating narrative threads and the emotional experience of being confronted with the consequences of the past.

3 *The Lost Child* revisits the past by rewriting the story of Heathcliff's mysterious origins in a way that suggests a connection to the history of slavery. The opening and closing chapters of the novel present a man whom the reader will come to identify as Mr. Earnshaw, who fathers a child with a former slave encountered in Liverpool, suggesting that the child is actually Heathcliff. These scenes involving Mr. Earnshaw and Heathcliff of course invite one to think of the moment in *Wuthering Heights* when Mr. Earnshaw returns from a trip to Liverpool and presents Heathcliff to his family. In the words of Nelly Dean,

> We crowded round, and over Miss Cathy's head I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; big enough both to walk and talk: indeed, its face looked older than Catherine's; yet when it was set on its feet, it only stared round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand. I was frightened, and Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors: she did fly up, asking how he could fashion to bring that gipsy [4] brat into the house, when they had their own bairns to feed and fend for?
> (Brontë 1847, 31)

4 The final pages of *The Lost Child* pick up once again the thread of *Wuthering Heights*, showing Mr. Earnshaw returning home on foot accompanied by a character we suppose to be Heathcliff. Within the frame of this intertextual connection, Phillips tells the story of a woman named Monica who has two sons, Ben and Tommy, with a man from the West Indies she met at Oxford. The story of Monica's divorce, her return to Leeds, her struggle to take care of her two sons alone, their placement in foster care, the disappearance of Tommy, and Monica's gradual mental decline constitute the main story line. In the middle of the novel a chapter entitled "Family" approaches the connection to *Wuthering Heights* from a different angle by focusing on the Brontë family and the lack of communication between Emily's brother Branwell and his father, thus extending the theme of lost children to include the Brontë family. The rewriting of *Wuthering Heights* in *The Lost Child* serves both to specify the link between the lost children of the novel and the context of the slave trade, which is not explicitly evoked in Brontë's novel, and to expand the idea of lost children to include the long-term consequences of the slave trade in the social context of twentieth-century Britain. Intertextuality serves as a means of bringing back the past in a way that illuminates its hidden recesses while at the same time exploring its connection to the present.

Thinking and feeling: Phillips's multiple narratives

5 Anyone familiar with the fiction of Caryl Phillips will immediately recognize a narrative strategy based on the juxtaposition of apparently disparate story lines which are made to resonate in the mind of the reader "through a narrative poetics that weaves together fiction with the biographical and the intertextual in a very knowing, apparently contrived but ultimately effective way" (Wondrich 2020, 300). Ledent and O'Callaghan also emphasize the way "Phillips asks readers to build bridges between the different narratives that make up this novel and others" (Ledent and O'Callaghan 2017, 240). The upshot of this approach to Phillips's use of intertextuality is an emphasis on what Wondrich calls "the interpretive challenge of assembling and combining them [the narrative strands] into a further

act of reading" (2020, 300). This view of Phillips's strategy for exploring the relevance of classics like *Wuthering Heights* to the lasting effects of slavery emphasizes the intellectual effort involved. Terms like "matrix" and "prismatic" present the novel under the guise of a puzzle to be pieced together by an alert and informed reader. [5] While this view of the novel reflects an important dimension of Phillips's artistic strategy, it does not necessarily take fully into account the effect of Phillips's narrative choices and his attention to the way in which what Wondrich calls "the immediate form of readerly experience" (303) contributes to the resurgence of the past. There is a general tendency in the interpretation of Phillips's novels to pay greater attention to the way in which his stories construct broad patterns of meaning than to the textual experience of reading. The most explicit example of this approach to the reading of Phillips's fiction can be found in Rebecca Walkowitz's book *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015). Walkowitz uses the notion of translation as a metaphor, or model, for the processes involved in the writing of novels that she sees as being more concerned with questions of reception than those of expression. For her the notion of translation makes it possible to conceptualise the narrative strategies of novels dealing with issues of migration and circulation in a global context, what she calls "world-shaped novels" (2015, 125):

> Above all, world-shaped novels explore translation by asking how people, objects, ideas, and even aesthetic styles move across territories, and how that movement alters the meaning and form of collectivity. (Walkowitz 2015, 123)

From this perspective, intertextuality is also a form of translation, since it involves looking at one work in its relevance and relation to another one (in other words translating *Wuthering Heights* by suggesting its relevance to the effect of the slave trade on families).

6 Caryl Phillips is one of the authors discussed by Walkowitz, who describes Phillips's novels as "anthologies" "both in their shape and in their accumulation of circulated objects" (128). This approach to Phillips's fiction places the reader's activity of collation and comparison at the very center of the author's narrative strategy. As Walkowitz asserts:

> Approaching Phillips's novels through the history of the anthology, we can see why his work might be more committed to an aesthetic of arrangement than to an aesthetic of expressivity. (135)

While Walkowitz's overall argument is convincing, her insistence on arrangement, on the idea that any narrative "functions comparatively" and "has to be translated" (134) minimizes Phillips's use of narrative voice in ways that may appear unjustified and unbalanced. By returning, precisely, to the idea of "expressivity", one can observe the ways in which Phillips transforms resurgence into a "readerly experience" which is not simply an exercise in "re-reading" or collation, comparison, and all of the terms evoked by Walkowitz, but also an exploration of the relation between voice and emotion. While the relation between the stories he tells is crucial to their impact, the narrative voices he creates, including those of his narrators, play an essential role in shaping the reader's relation to the events being recounted. Walkowitz seems to deplore the absence in Phillips's novels of what she calls "unmediated voices" (123). Yet Phillips, like many other contemporary novelists, understands that the voice as pure presence is unattainable. The gap he makes perceptible between the desire for self-expression and the capacity for achieving it allows the reader to perceive the emotions underlying the complex relations between the characters.

7 In Phillips's narrative project of using intertextuality to explore the aftermath of slavery, the family plays an important role. One of the most serious effects of slavery was the dislocation of families, which in the novel is illustrated by Heathcliff's separation from his mother at her death. By evoking *Wuthering Heights* as an intertext, Phillips places the question of slavery at the centre of his representation of several families both past and present. He thus brings the trauma of separation to the surface through a form of resurgence that suggests the historical roots of the social problems affecting contemporary families.

8 The nineteenth century novel, whatever its cultural or national association, is essentially a history of families, whether you think of Balzac, Dickens, Zola, Hawthorne, Dostoevsky or any number of other examples. The family as the center of social, economic and cultural relations also developed as the essential organizing frame of

fiction, and *Wuthering Heights* is no exception. Phillips reminds us of this essential dimension of the novel by giving titles to the chapters that suggest, in the words of Tanya Agathocleous, "a bildungsroman gone wrong" (2015). This comment is interesting because it underlines the intimate connection between the bildungsroman as a form of family romance, to the extent that it explores an individual's relation to the family, and our expectations as readers about the relation between family and narrative. Brontë gives even greater emphasis to the family in its structuring role by telling the story of an outsider who is adopted into a family and manages to get revenge for his outsider status. Phillips's attribution to Heathcliff of a specific parentage related to slavery roots the fictional status of the child in historical reality. However, it also suggests how the notion of family connections can be extended metaphorically to evoke a tension between relations that are organic and imposed and those that are freely chosen. While the novel encourages the reader to perceive parallels and connections between disparate periods, events, and people, it does this against the background of the intractable reality of family relations. Even more, by constructing its narrative of families and lost children on an intertextual relation, it places the free choice of literary ancestors at the center of its examination of family links, thus extending the notion of family metaphorically to cover the idea of literary heritage. In other words, the idea of the family and the accompanying notions of orphanhood, adoption and belonging are not present in *The Lost Child* only as themes; they can be seen as related to the very structure and functioning of the novel as a form.

9 This thematic orchestration of family connections as the underlying motif linking past and present can be seen as producing a "resonance", to use the term proposed by Clingman, that is not purely thematic, but that finds echoes in Phillips's use of narrative voice. As in other novels by Phillips situated in the past, the author imitates the style of writing which characterizes the period from which his intertexts are borrowed, creating a pastiche that reinforces the feeling of historical estrangement, but that also highlights the linguistic conventions of the period and what they may both hide and reveal. Thus, in the opening pages of *The Lost Child*, in which Heathcliff and his mother are presented (without being named), the

narrator expresses himself in a language reminiscent of Brontë's, with its seeming formality and liberal use of metaphor:

> She could see that he was nervous, and some crumbs clung stubbornly to his chin, but he had forsaken drinking while he still remained in full custody of his sensibilities. She looked favorably upon him, convinced that integrity and kindness were lodged in his bosom. He removed his satin vest and lace ruffles with impeccable dexterity, which helped to soothe her own nervous condition. (10)

This deliberate adoption of a language and a narrative stance consistent with the context being described suggests the relevance of paying greater attention to the language used by the contemporary characters and to what it reveals about their relation to society. What clues can be detected in their voices as to their relation to the world in which they live and to the way in which the lasting effects of slavery and racism may have affected their capacity for self-expression? As Bénédicte Ledent and Evelyn O'Callaghan explain in their study of the novel, "*The Lost Child* is deeply invested in literary parenthood: the narrative reclamation/adoption of absent stories, the unvoiced account of orphans and stolen or denied children of Empire who are missing from, or only shadowy figures within, official records" (Ledent and O'Callaghan 2017, 231). In spite of the "denied" children's absence from official records, their existence can be expected to have left some kind of trace in people's relationships with one another and with society in general. In this perspective Phillips's use of narrative voice can be seen as an attempt to capture in discourse the constraints imposed by the social uses of language, inherited from a past marked by slavery and its aftermath and to explore the possibility of a freely-chosen language which would allow the "absent stories" to which Ledent and O'Callaghan refer to be heard. From this point of view, language plays an important role in producing a resurgence of painful memories through the traces of the past that it carries into the present. It can also be seen as a potential terrain on which to combat a negative resurgence of the past.

Narrative discourse as a "quotational form"

10 If one looks closely at the narrative voices used in *The Lost Child*, it is possible to see a connection between Phillips's use of an intertextual connection to a novel about families and the voices through which he constructs the broken twentieth-century family around which the main narrative revolves. This can be done by looking at narrative discourse as what Richard Aczel calls a "quotational form", a term that suggests a bridge between narrative voice and intertextuality as a broader form of cultural quotation. Aczel draws on Bakhtin's view of the polyphony of the novel, emphasizing Bakhtin's "treatment of narrative discourse as an essentially quotational form where the quoting instance is not unitary and monological, but a configuration of different voices or expressive styles organized into an "artistic" whole by means of a set of identifiable rhetorical principles" (1998, 483). Although Aczel is here referring to the author's tendency to allow a variety of discourses to be heard in his own, the same polyphony can be identified in the voices reproduced by that of the narrator.

11 *The Lost Child* uses two types of narrative voice—third-person narration by an extradiegetic narrator and first-person narration, or interior monologue, which is used in two sections narrated by Ben, one of Monica's sons, and by Monica herself. If we examine these two types of voice in a quotational perspective, we can see, or rather hear the voice of Monica's father Ronald, presented through the discourse of an extradiegetic narrator, as marked by a form of quotation that reflects the pressure exerted by society, a form of haunting or negative resurgence. On the other hand, the monologue pronounced by Monica's son Ben provides the reader with a glimpse of ways in which narrative discourse can free itself from these constraints, producing a voice that is capable of managing and shaping the multiple echoes of the past without falling victim to them. It is through the intertwining of these two narrative modes that Phillips explores the limits and possibilities of any resurgence of a silenced past.

12 When one reads the chapter that opens the narrative about Monica, ironically entitled “First Love”, it is not difficult to understand why Ledent and O’Callaghan perceive it as a “flattened realist record” (2017, 242), or why Rebecca Walkowitz in discussing other novels by Phillips, laments the absence of “unmediated voices” (134). There is little dialogue or direct speech, and the narrator describes the thoughts of the characters in a way that indeed tends to make it difficult to distinguish between his/her words and the thoughts of the characters. The effect is a feeling of distance, as if the voices of the characters were being muffled or coming from a great distance. This is the effect of what Dorrit Cohn calls “psycho-narration”. [6] The preponderance of verbs introducing the characters’ thoughts helps to explain the effect produced. A paragraph from the beginning of the section, in which Monica, a student at Oxford, is waiting for her father to arrive makes this very clear:

> She [Monica] *had thought long and hard* about what to wear and *had assumed* that her father, *who had fixed ideas* about how women should present themselves, *might even be expecting her* to be decked out in her tutorial garb […] Although she *knew full well* that she wasn’t much to look at, this year men had begun to notice her […] But she certainly didn’t want scrutiny from this warped man, who had already bullied his wife into near-mute submission. By the time Monica was a teenager *she was fairly sure* what type of person she was dealing with, and *it was she who had decided* to generate a distance between them […]. (16, my emphasis)

The verbs describing Monica’s thoughts and expectations, which seem to echo what she imagines to be her father’s thoughts, preclude any spontaneity in the encounter between the two characters. The distancing effect is compounded by the repeated use of modals like “might” or verbs that imply hesitation, puzzlement and doubt. This becomes particularly obvious in scenes involving Monica’s father Ronald, a man who seems to be out of touch with his own feelings and the feelings of others:

> The mantelpiece and sideboard in the new living room supported a sequence of expensively framed photographs of his daughter flowering into a beautiful girl, and late at night, after everyone had gone to bed, he liked to sit alone and marvel at the images that

> showed off her poise and self-belief to best advantage, although occasionally he did find himself irritated by the *seemingly* nonchalant path that his daughter *seemed* to be steering between his own indulgence and his wife's silent pride. (29, my emphasis)

In this passage, the effect of the "expensively framed photographs", which like "the new living room" constitute a material expression of the family's achievements, is undercut by Ronald's solitude and his inability to believe in the "poise and self-belief" radiating from the photographs. Furthermore, the narrator's voice appears to have replaced that of the characters in an intrusive way that amplifies the dismal aspects of a story involving people with few or no communication skills. However, the seeming monotony of reported speech and thought is disrupted by the resurgence of words that betray the thoughts and emotions which have been suppressed in the characters' desire for control. This is evident in the passages devoted to Monica's father, a man who has attempted to work himself up from a modest background. When he learns that his daughter has been accepted at Oxford, he can't help "blurt[ing] it out" to his colleagues at the school where he teaches:

> "Our Monica's going to Oxford." He immediately felt his face colouring up, for after all, he spent most of his working day trying to exhort boys to speak grammatically correct English and now listen to him. "Our Monica." (21)

In using the expression "our Monica", he unexpectedly slips back into an orality that betrays his origins. The way in which Ronald quotes himself to himself makes this slip from his usual middle-class verbal performance all the more noticeable.

13 It is in the narrator's use of free indirect discourse [7] that the struggle over language becomes most obvious, revealing gaps and inconsistencies in his "flattened, realist record". Free indirect discourse blurs the borderline between the words of the narrator and those that belong to the character. To the extent that a character's language may be the reflection of the pressure exerted on him or her by society, free indirect discourse reveals the polyphony, in the Bakhtinian sense, that lies beneath the seemingly smooth surface of individual speech. In the case of Phillips's characters, it undercuts

and undermines their attempts to speak a language consistent with their aspirations. The narrator's description of Ronald's reaction to his daughter's birth is a clear example:

> Soon after Monica's birth, his wife had dropped a few broad hints that she wouldn't mind having a second child, but Ronald Johnson had determined that one would suffice. After all, there was a war on, and it was incumbent on all English families to make sacrifices of some kind. (19)

In this case, the clue to the presence of Ronald's voice is the "after all", betraying his impatience with his wife's impracticality. While what follows are most likely also Ronald's words, the rather stilted expression "it was incumbent" and the reference to "sacrifices" suggest that Ronald is reiterating what he felt to be necessary patriotic sentiments in words that he had heard elsewhere. Another passage in which Ronald is reflecting on his daughter's obstinacy in marrying a man from the West Indies exposes the racist and colonialist discourse he has appropriated without realizing it: "Given all her advantages and ability, *it made absolutely no sense* to him that Monica should be *throwing everything away* by getting involved with a graduate student in history nearly ten years her senior who originated in a part of the world where decent standards of behavior and respect for people's families were *obviously* alien concepts" (22, my emphasis). In this passage, the traces of Ronald's impatience, expressed in terms marking his emotional presence in the narrator's discourse, betray the way he has absorbed a racist discourse and allowed it to affect his relations with his own daughter. In terms of what is happening in *The Lost Child*, Ronald's linguistic susceptibility to the language and opinions of others helps to explain why he is unable to establish positive connections to his West Indian son-in-law or with anyone who is different from himself. This handicap lies at the heart of Phillips's concerns in illustrating how children have become lost through a long history of people's inability to understand others.

14 If we examine Ben's first-person monologue in the chapter entitled "Childhood", we can see it as reversing, on a stylistic and narrative level, the negative pattern generated by the use of an extradiegetic narrator in the section devoted to Monica. This is not

simply a question of using interior monologue to express a character's inner life in a way that shows how he overcomes the social and historical constraints to which he has been subjected. Ben's monologue gives emotional form to the abstract questions posed by Phillips's "multi-stranded novel". Ben, unlike his grandfather, displays a growing capacity to place the words of others in a perspective which makes them manageable. As he recounts his past life, the disappearance of his brother Tommy and his mother's decline and death, he develops a capacity not only to quote other people without allowing their words to drown out his own. He also learns to draw on culture, particularly music and cinema, in ways that constitute a form of intertextuality, a type of free-wheeling quotation which is the source and mainspring of his resilience and ability to survive.

15 In order to understand how Phillips is using Ben's monologue to make the impact of intertextuality relevant at the emotional level of narrative discourse, it can be helpful to refer to some of the theoretical studies devoted to interior monologue, a form of narrative discourse that Phillips often uses. Ben's monologue is not what Dorrit Cohn calls "autonomous monologue", a form typified by Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses* in which "the use of the present tense pinpoints the simultaneity of language and happening" in contrast with other forms of first-person narration where "language always follows happening" (1978, 173). It is rather, in Cohn's terms, an "autobiographical monologue" as Ben is narrating the past. [8] Over sixteen sections, or chapters, Ben tells the story of his life with his mother and brother, first of all in London, then in Leeds. His narrative is shaped by memory as an active process; he is trying both to remember and to understand what happened to his brother, who disappeared and was probably murdered by one of his mother's boyfriends, Derek Evans. It displays the quest for objectivity often found in autobiography; as narrator of his own experience, Ben clearly distinguishes between his narrated and his narrating self. In evoking the brothers' separation when Ben is sent to a different school he admits "A part of me liked the idea of us both going to the grammar school in town, but another part of me was ready for a bit of separation" (146). If one considers Ben's monologue from the perspective of its capacity to express the emotional impact of a social, cultural and historical context, one notices the details that Ben

uses as signposts of time past and passing. He begins his story with a reference to the "telly":

> It's years since I've seen one of those tellys. They look like a brown ice cube, and all the edges are rounded, and the screen's a bit like a goldfish bowl. […] The old-fashioned tellys are so strange that most people coming across one might well be inclined to think, bloody hell, what's that? That said, were I ever to clap my eyes on one of them, I'd be fascinated because of the memories it would bring up. (137)

The "telly" here fulfills three functions in terms of time. It situates the moment in historical time (technology is a particularly useful signpost for historical moments), it allows Ben to measure the distance between the past and the present of narration ("It's been years since…) and it serves as a mnemonic marker, focalizing his memories of his relationship with his mother, since they often watched television together. In terms of cultural history, or cultural objects as signposts in time, the most interesting aspect of his monologue is the presence of the titles of popular songs as chapter headings for each section. In each section Ben comments on the song and suggests its relation to his narrative, but he never makes any metatextual remark suggesting that the titles are chapter headings in a written text, diary or journal. Dorrit Cohn reminds us that it makes sense, in interpreting interior monologue, to consider the origins of this narrative technique, as a way of understanding its functioning in specific contexts:

> Its sources have been variously identified as confessional literature; narratives based on memory; diary and epistolary novels; digressive narration; the essay; the prose poem; the dramatic monologue; and the stage monologue. (1978, 175)

The song titles suggest a written form that is not actually present, the kind of retrospective objectivity, of taking stock, that we associate with autobiography. It suggests a historical, social and cultural frame for a narrative in which Ben is seeking to achieve some semblance of objectivity in order to understand his own responsibility and that of other people in the death of his brother. [9] This takes us to the heart of Phillips's preoccupation with the aftermath of slavery and its social

and cultural progeny. As free-floating monologue, Ben's narrative seems to be chasing an impossible vanishing point at which Tommy's disappearance would find an explanation in individual and collective terms. It exposes the emotion involved in attempting to reach the point of intersection of the novel's many threads. At the same time, it serves as a counterpoint to the narratives of loss that characterize the other sections. While Ben is grieving his brother's loss, he is also describing his own initiation and ultimately successful attempt to come to terms with the difficult conditions in which he has been brought up:

> At school I decided to try harder because that's all there was now. There was no Tommy, and I didn't feel like talking to anybody, and so inevitably I soon discovered that I had no mates. I'd always been a bit of a clever clogs when it came to schoolwork, and the teachers often said if I continued to make an effort, I could do very well. (178)

The term "clever clogs" is clearly a term he has picked up from other people and uses somewhat ironically on himself. But unlike his grandfather, he does not feel belittled or threatened by other people's language. Throughout the monologue, Ben proves to be capable of placing the language of other people, like Mrs. Swinson, in perspective. When Mrs. Swinson gets angry with Ben and begins attacking his mother—"fobbing you off on me so she can carry on like a minx"—Ben simply says, "I watched her face change shape as she began to laugh. There was some spit at the edge of her mouth" (152). He also shows that he can adjust his language to other people in order to obtain what he wants, as when he says, in explaining how he got a job in a garage, "It wasn't a summer job, so I had to tell the bloke who interviewed me that I had ambitions in the auto trade and one day I hope to own a petrol station; otherwise he'd never have given me the time of day" (187). Confronted with clients who were "corporate accounts types, ill-mannered buggers who just signed for their petrol and wanted to be treated as if the sun shone out of their arses", Ben finds ways to shortchange them, a way of both making money and getting revenge. At the same time, he has noticed that "[h]alf his [his boss's] clients were Pakistanis and Indians dressed up in all the gear, but he tried too hard when they came in, and he was always putting it on" (188). The fact that Ben is planning to go to

university and become a film director links his growing ability to deal with others to an artistic capacity that will provide him with a way of surviving, both emotionally and financially.

17 If one looks at Ben's artistic potential from the point of view of the novel's overall strategy, it points to the importance of an ability to choose one's family, intellectually and artistically, thus linking Ben's narrative to the intertextual echoes by which it is framed.[10] In reimagining the effects of slavery through a rewriting of *Wuthering Heights*, Phillips is choosing his own literary family, his own heritage. Close attention to his use of narrative voice reveals how the tension between imposed and chosen relations plays out not only on the thematic level of mismatched couples, broken families and foster care, but also at the level of voice and language. This relation between language, voice and family is expressed by Monica in the narrator's description of her reaction to the use of the expression "Are you partial?" by Derek Evans in her first encounter with him:

> What kind of an antiquated phrase was that? It was like this Derek Evans was talking to somebody twenty years older. She guessed that he probably spent a lot of time with his father, or grandfather, down the allotments or going to dog races, or engaged in some other manly pursuit where the vocabulary of one generation could be casually absorbed by the next without any regard for its relevance to the present time. (86)

There is a deep irony in Monica's inability to detect the gap between Derek's language and his real intentions. But her imagining of a world in which "the vocabulary of one generation could be casually absorbed by the next" reveals the depth of the fissures that traverse language in a world defined by differences in social class and ethnic and racial origins. *The Lost Child* reveals the unhealed wounds of the past precisely by exposing the social and racial fractures that lie just beneath the surface of what appears to be a shared and common language. That these fissures should sometimes go unnoticed is just one sign of the cultural amnesia surrounding the long-term effects of slavery.

18 A close analysis of Caryl Phillips's narrative strategies in the writing of *The Lost Child* enables one to better understand how the author uses his own emotional response to events he has experienced or read about as triggers for an exploration of the ways in which England's past as a slave-trading country may have impacted subsequent periods. Phillips does not simply adopt a seemingly distant narrative voice to explore historical connections that his characters are incapable of perceiving. He carefully modulates the distance between the narrator and the characters. Sometimes he uses psycho-narration to explore a character's inability to connect with his own thoughts. At other times, through the use of narrated monologue, he suggests the possibility of using language as a way of forging one's own identity, as is the case with Ben. For the reader, through Phillips's subtle modulation of narrative voice, the resurgence of the past suggested by *Wuthering Heights* acquires greater emotional force and brings the traumas of the past closer to the present.

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NOTES

1 Bénédicte Ledent and Evelyn O'Callaghan speak of the "reclamation/adoption" of absent stories in *The Lost Child* (Ledent and O'Callaghan 2017, 231). Peter Widdowson looks at the idea of revising former texts as a form of re-vision: "Whether sad or seminal, then, this essay seeks to define and promote a relatively recent sub-genre of contemporary fiction whose nominal adjective deploys a tactical slippage between the verb to revise (from the Latin "revisere": "to look at again")—"to examine and correct; to make a new, improved version of; to study anew"; and the verb to re-vision—to see in another light; to re-envision or perceive differently; and thus potentially to recast and re-evaluate ("the original") (2006, 496).

2 Phillips is referring to what came to be known as the "moors murders" involving the murdering of at least five children by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. The murders were carried out in the 1960s and the children were found buried on Saddlewood Moor.

3 Carolina Sanchez-Palencia has suggested looking at the novel from the perspective of the "woman-as-zombie coming back from the dead to disrupt sediments of male civilization". In this perspective, "Emily Brontë could be the spectre that haunts Phillips's narrative seeking to illuminate modern Britain's patriarchal and colonial legacy […]" (2020, 349). Yes, but the phrase "gipsy brat" does not sound romantic but dismissive of the child.

4 Nelly Dean's use of the word "gipsy" in referring to Heathcliff reflects the prevalence of the figure of the gypsy in nineteenth-century literature. While Nelly Dean's use of the term is dismissive, the gypsy also inspired the "imagination of the romantic writers who sought to distance themselves from industrialization, burgeoning capitalism, established religion, the rigid morals and customs of English society […]" (Jamin 2021, 676, my translation).

5 It is interesting to note that Phillips himself in an interview with Stephen Clingman uses the term "orchestrator" to describe his way of assembling narratives, of creating "the overall structure". Clingman picks up on the word "orchestration" and refers to the "the resonance that carries over from section to section, from part to part" (2017, 592). The choice of the metaphor, which is auditory in contrast with Wondrich's use of the visual image "prismatic", suggests the complexity of the reading experience itself, which is interpreted by the reader in terms of experiences that are sensory rather than intellectual. Phillips himself in another interview emphasized the importance of voice as the foundation of fiction and explained that he tells his students at Yale that "[y]ou don't have anything until you have the voice" (Agathocleous 2015).

6 This is the term used by Cohn in *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* to describe "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" (Cohn 1978, 14) as opposed to the other two modes she identifies: quoted monologue, "a character's mental discourse", and "narrated monologue", "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (14). Cohn justifies her choice of the term "psycho-narration" as opposed to "omniscient description" on her objection to the term "omniscient" as being too general. She sees the term "psycho-narration" as "identif[ying] both the subject matter and the activity it denotes (on the analogy to psychology, psychoanalysis)" (11).

7 This is the term more commonly used for what Dorrit Cohn designates as "narrated monologue": "By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light

on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation" (1978, 103).

8 Dorrit Cohn speaks of works in which "a lone speaker recalls his own past, and tells it to himself—in chronological order. *Autobiographical monologues*, as will call texts of this type, create a highly stylized rhetorical effect, since reciting one's own biography to oneself does not appear psychologically plausible. Or rather it appears plausible only if the speaker pursues a definite aim with this recitation, an aim of public confession, of self-justification. Despite the absence of listeners, the autobiographical monologue thus retains the meaning of communication, or at least of rehearsal for communication" (1978, 181–182, original emphasis).

9 Sara Brophy describes Ben's use of the records as an example of "autotopography", a term she borrows from Jennifer A. Gonzalez: "A material manifestation of the work of 'reorientation' (Ahmed 6), autotopography involves, as Gonzalez defines it, a set of semiotic, material, and spatial cultural practices, the arranging of 'personal objects' in order to remember the painful past and possibly invent a new future" (2018, 169).

10 Phillips himself has drawn attention to this aspect of the novel and the importance of art as a way of making sense of life: "So art is a way of organizing that excessive subjectivity that, if left unchecked, can get out of control. In that 'Childhood' chapter, the pop songs that structure it and anchor Ben's memory become the only kind of stepping stones by which he can understand his growth or his development. Without those songs, it's utter chaos" (Agathocleous 2015).

ABSTRACTS

English

This article examines Caryl Phillips's novel *The Lost Child* (2015) as an example of rewriting that generates a form of resurgence, evoking the impact of Britain's past on the present social context. By inserting scenes imagining Heathcliff as the child of a former slave, Phillips creates an intertextual relation to *Wuthering Heights* (1847) that suggests a possible connection between the main story line and Brontë's novel. Critics tend to highlight Phillips's use of multiple storylines as a way of connecting past and present; this approach emphasizes the intellectual aspect of the author's narrative strategy while failing to take fully into account the emotional dimension of his stories. A closer look at the author's use of narrative voice enables one to measure the emotional dimension of resurgence. Dorrit

Cohn's approach to the expression of subjectivity in narrative provides theoretical tools for measuring the ways in which Phillips uses free indirect discourse and interior monologue to explore his characters' ability (or inability) to cope with the pressures of society, thus either overcoming or succumbing to the lasting effects of slavery.

Français
Cet article étudie le roman *The Lost Child* (2015) de Caryl Phillips comme exemple de réécriture qui suscite une forme de résurgence et vient rappeler l'impact du passé de la Grande-Bretagne sur la société d'aujourd'hui. En insérant dans son texte des scènes du personnage de Heathcliff comme enfant d'esclave affranchi, Phillips construit un lien intertextuel avec *Wuthering Heights* (1847) sur le plan de l'intrigue. De nombreux critiques ont tendance à souligner l'emploi qu'il fait d'intrigues multiples comme manière de lier le passé et le présent. Cette approche met l'accent sur la stratégie narrative de l'auteur au détriment de la portée émotionnelle de ses récits. Une étude plus approfondie de la manière dont l'auteur utilise la voix narrative permettra d'évaluer la portée émotionnelle de la résurgence. L'analyse de Dorrit Cohn de l'expression de la subjectivité dans le récit nous propose des outils théoriques pour évaluer les manières dont Phillips utilise le discours indirect libre et le monologue intérieur pour mieux explorer la capacité (ou bien l'incapacité) à faire face aux pressions sociales et ainsi surmonter ou bien succomber à l'impact toujours présent de l'histoire de l'esclavage.

INDEX

Mots-clés
Phillips (Caryl), The Lost Child, résurgence, esclavage, ré-écriture, psycho-narration

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