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**Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment**

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*Se faire une place : résurgence et pouvoir*

**Christine Vandamme et André Dodeman**

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## TEXTE

***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 Ward'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).
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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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