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Reclaiming One's Place: Resurgence and Empowerment

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OUTLINE

Not “Footnotes on a timeline” (33): denouncing the invisibilisation of Indigenous presences
A poetic subversion of the sailing ship as a vessel of colonial positivity
Performing artistic resurgence

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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AUTHOR

Anne Le Guellec-Minel
anne.leguellec[at]univ-brest.fr

Anne Le Guellec-Minel is a senior lecturer in Commonwealth Studies at the University of Western Brittany (Brest), and a member of the HCTI research unit (UR 4249). She has authored a PhD thesis on epic writing in the 1950s novels of Patrick White. She is particularly interested in the production of the national imagination in Australian postcolonial literature and culture, with a particular focus on the legacy of national mythologies and their contestation in fiction and film. She is currently working on a study of the fire trope in Australian culture. In 2019 she edited *La mémoire face à l’Histoire : traces, effacement, réinscription*. In 2022 she edited a collection of articles entitled *Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria: An Autonomous Literature that Belongs to Place* (*Motifs*). Her latest article entitled “Ambivalent Theatricals, Troubled Memories and Heuristic Uncertainty in Tracey Moffatt’s Nice Coloured Girls” appeared in *Miranda* in 2024.