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'Coexisting in the Outside Space in the Shade for the Afternoon': Poetics of Loss and Connection in Ellen van Neerven's *Heat and Light*

Anne le Guellec-Minel

- 1 In his 1976 study entitled *Place and Placelessness*, the Canadian geographer Edward Relph defined "implacement" as what most fundamentally determines human experience. Building on Martin Heidegger's notions of *Dasein* and dwelling, Relph insisted that the "essence of place" "does not come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial or mundane experiences" (1976, 43). Instead, according to a phenomenological definition, it "lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existence" (43). For Relph, consciousness cannot *take* place except *in* place, and to understand how space can become meaningful, it is necessary to identify the "persistent sameness and unity which allows [a place] to be differentiated from others" (45). Conversely, the sense of placelessness "is a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience" (90). Even though Relph's illustrations of authentic places are less quaintly rural than Heidegger's farmhouse in the Black Forest, his notion of the primacy of place has been criticized for being too essentialist and fixed to be compatible with a (post)modern, fluid, globalized world.¹ Social-constructivist geographers like Doreen Massey have argued instead that place should be thought of as "an event" rather than "a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic" (Cresswell 2015, 71). Setting out a theory that combines Heraclitean impermanence² with Habermas' trust in the possibility of a democratic working out of differences, Massey insists that places are not "points or areas on the maps" but "*spatio-temporal* events" (2005, 130) or "constellations of processes" (141). "What is special about place," she contends, "is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or of the eternity of the hills" but "that thrown-togetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a

here and now" (140). This theoretical debate about place – opposing, on the one hand, the existential necessity for a specific grounding of individual and collective consciousness, a degree of permanence and continuity between person and place, and on the other, the definition of place as being an event, the chance convergence of trajectories requiring negotiation – offers useful tools when dealing with the way place and placelessness are imagined in contemporary Aboriginal literature, almost three decades after the Mabo and Wik decisions recognized the principle of native title. The focus of this analysis will be *Heat and Light*, Ellen van Neerven's 2014 debut short story collection, which is set in Queensland and deals with mainly young, queer, female characters of Aboriginal descent in socially, economically and culturally degraded environments. Paying due consideration to the great variety in genre, length and outlook that characterize the sixteen short stories in the book, I will attempt to show how the young Yugambah³ writer negotiates between what mainstream Australians and Aboriginal people themselves identify as a "typically Aboriginal" way of relating to place and, on the other hand a sense of moral obligation to truthfully represent her own generation's worldview in order to widen the scope of Aboriginal literature in the Australian literary landscape.

- 2 *Heat and Light* falls into three parts, entitled "Heat," "Water" and "Light." These terse, thematic titles evidence an elemental trope that could be a nod to Queensland's "Sunshine state" image. However, the titles of the tripartite collection also highlight the problematic absence of any reference to land. There is, moreover, metatextual irony in the title of the collection inspired by Tracy Chapman's "Smoke and Ashes," a song which laments the end of a love story: "Your light and your heat have all been spent / Leaving only smoke and ashes." In spite of the fiery energy intimated by the title, the Bundjalung⁴ protagonists of these stories suffer from a sense of disconnection and tend to see themselves as the "unfixed remainders" of what is "no longer there" (van Neerven 2014, 26). These teenagers' and young adults' experiences are very different from their elderly relatives' traditional sense of grounded identity, but also from their parents' generation's involvement in land rights campaigning during the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era.⁵
- 3 This generational difference is made particularly clear in "Heat" which is made up of five linked stories composing the Kresinger family history. The short story form, which requires of each piece to be able to stand on its own⁶ allows for a greater narrative freedom than is usually possible in a novel.⁷ Not only is the chronological order of events disregarded, but the alternation of point of view and narrative voice, as well as the possibility of leaving out the accounts of particular family members, enable van Neerven to weave a disturbingly lacunary narrative the loose strands of which the reader must attempt to tie up. This readerly activity in fact mirrors the efforts Amy, one of the fourth-generation protagonists since colonisation, deploys in the opening story "Pearl" to piece together her family history. Amy struggles against her father's refusal to reveal painful family secrets in order to recover a sense of her own identity. According to her "[t]he stories we construct about our place in our families are essential to our lives" (2014, 19). This "implaced" vision of family relations is largely metaphorical in Amy's experience, as she lives in the city and only drives down to her "ancestral country" to go surfing, "not to meet family or do any of the practices you'd expect me to do" (6). Her somewhat defiant disaffection towards the "typical" or expected Aboriginal relation of care and respect to place and family does not really

seem to be a positive choice of lifestyle, however. In spite of the fact she has a regular job running a Youth Development Centre for Aborigines and Torres Straights Islanders in Brisbane and both has a “place” of her own and can afford to be physically and socially mobile, 26-year-old Amy feels “pushed into the ground like some sedated potplant”(6).

- 4 Although most of the younger characters are like Amy deprived of any real sense of place and belonging, the family history form allows van Neerven to compare what Relp identified as the several levels of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” (2016, 51–55) experienced by different family members. Amy could be described as suffering from existential outsiderness associated with feelings of uninvolvedness and alienation from place. Although she has comforting childhood memories of visits to the family property (“She remembered [...] how healing the air felt against her skin when she went there,” [2014, 23]), her localisation of “Hune Hill” is vague and careless: “near Casino, halfway between somewhere” (14). Ironically, the way she identifies the family home as authentic when she goes back to visit her aunt, is estranged, implicitly judgmental, and rather typical of a non-indigenous, or at any rate, urban gaze: “At the front of the property was an assortment of wild dogs tied to trees, and old raggy goats” (14). On the other hand, her cousin Colin – whom Amy envies for having been raised “on country” in the Kresinger family home, listening to his grandmother’s stories – experiences objective outsiderness. As a boy, Colin, being fair-skinned, was not himself subjected to racist abuse from the predominantly white rural community, but his best friend Mia, a darker Aboriginal girl, suffered discrimination and serious physical abuse. The event of his friend’s rape itself, the white community’s lack of concern after the event, as well as the local Aborigines’ (including his family’s) lack of agency filled Colin with such anger and frustration that he “left the mountain and the stories behind” (35) and chose to go and live in Sydney, 700 km away. By contrast, Amy’s grandmother Marie’s deep sense of belonging, which is introduced in the fourth story “Skin,” is typically what Relp identified as “existential insiderness.” Marie is a strong, warm, nurturing figure who represents a centrifugal, materially and psychologically grounding force within the family and the family saga. She, in turn, draws her strength from her relationship with the Kresinger land. The way she returns to it for spiritual and material advice is a particularly apt example of what Yi-Fu Tuan referred to as “topophilia,” the affective bond between people and place that defines place as a field of care (Tuan 1974):

Marie and Irma went for a visit to the cemetery. [...] They walked through the scrub up the hill. They said this place was a lightning point because of the history here. She made out the small white sticks in the ground. The Kresinger circle. Here was where her unborn and stillborn babies also lay, with their ancestors’ bones. There was a bench under an ironbark tree. She sat Irma on her lap [...]. She could see the whole valley from here. She spoke low, the words that she knew rumbling through, the wind making a part. Irma was serious in concentration with her, in connection. (van Neerven 2014, 45)

- 5 It should be noted that the passage avoids transforming “this place” into a landscape. Although we are told that Marie can see the whole valley, no description follows that might turn this moment into a visual experience, evaluated in aesthetic terms as is the case when Amy remembers Hune Hill for its “magnificent view” (van Neerven 2014, 23). Instead, the passage depicts Marie’s relationship with her ancestral place as a “visit” to the Kresinger family place and to the people in it. What is described here is indeed a relationship of dwelling, a “residing in the nearness of things” (Casey 1998, 273). The hilltop, for Marie, crystallises her recent and more distant family history, and beyond

that, a history, probably of colonial violence, that is merely alluded to, yet is believed to impact the elements since it attracts lightning. Contrary to a landscape viewed from a dominant spot, this location is very much “a thing to be inside of,” a “lived and felt ‘place,’” as Tim Cresswell also puts it (2015, 17). The interconnectedness between the human and inanimate elements in this particular place is made explicit by the description of the event of Charlie’s birth a few pages later:

No cars went by and no one saw them, but at the same time the valley saw them.
The open sky fingering their skin.
This was where the sisters had been born, in the shadows of the ironbarks, the spot
where their women had given birth for a continuum of years. (50)

- 6 Pearl conceived Charlie after being gang raped and she had to give birth outside as Marie wouldn’t allow her back inside her house because Pearl, having come to them for help, had then seduced her sister’s husband. Yet, whatever the circumstances that led up to it, the repetition of the process of giving birth in this exact spot defines a particular group (“their women”), ritualizes the event and gives it a legitimate place within the family history. According to the ontology of the story, observing family traditions – by accident or fate – is a way of paying respect to the ancestral place. This is rewarded by recognition from the non-human entities that make up that particular location. While the circumstances of the characters’ lives may have changed with settlement and modernity, the Kresingers’ land is perceived by the initiated women as having retained what Relph described as the “persistent sameness and unity” of meaningful place. The title of the short story, “Skin,” furthermore refers to the Aboriginal kinship system which traditionally defines group members’ responsibilities and obligations in relation to one another, to ceremonial business and land. This piece of the family saga therefore firmly anchors the Kresingers in the traditional Aboriginal worldview.
- 7 But Marie is already dead in three out of the five Kresinger stories, and in “Hot Stones,” we are told “the Hill End Road house of generations” has been sold (2014, 36). For practical and psychological reasons, therefore, Marie’s descendants clearly find it very difficult to connect meaningfully to their environment, their family or their culture as she used to do. Van Neerven was in her early twenties when she wrote these short stories and this is reflected in her choice of characters. Most are teenagers or young adults who struggle to find their place in society: “We were the casual breed. Serial underperformers and undertalkers, jeered at by teachers who thought of us as no-hopers, destined to be dole bludgers and, if we were lucky, tradies or kitchenhands” (175–76). In “The Wheel,” the ten-year-old narrator describes the breakdown of her family’s cohesion in terms of kilometric distances: “I began to notice the distances between us: 200 ks between Grace and Mum, 100 between me and Mum, 3000 between Dad and Mum” (177). The family home for her is an empty container: “Hours later it was dark and our place still held the same number of occupants, no one had come home” (178). This form of social placelessness is prevalent in the ten stories that make up “Light,” the third part of the collection. As well as the dereliction of family cohesion, it is the artificialisation of natural spaces that makes the young protagonists of these stories “lose touch” (204) with their environment. In the final, particularly pessimistic story “Sound,”⁸ Jodie lives alone on the seventh floor of an apartment block in Brisbane. Such is her sense of affective and physical insecurity that she feels her room “could topple backwards off the building and no one would notice”: “The sea beneath my window is an intangible space. They keep building up from the ground, soon there

will be no green space to see, on a campus that used to be known for its gardens. I look into the face of the city and feel homeless" (197). The repetition of the more abstract word "space" in this passage is symptomatic of Jodie's feeling of disconnection brought about by the disintegration of her physical and social environment.

- 8 Purely functional or artificial non-places abound in this last part of the book. In "Lungs," the narrator is unable to leave the supermarket she works in because of a flood. But she wades down into the flooded car park to help a trapped lungfish escape. The miraculous survival of prehistoric air-breathing lungfish species into the Anthropocene and this particular lungfish's rescue by the narrator could be read as a form of redemption, but the story ends on a pessimistic note: "The water is receding and soon they will find us. I'm not sure if the lungfish will matter then: other people's and community's battle stories, the contagion of trauma, will outdo it. I feel it in my chest" (2014, 151). The wonders of the endemic living world have become irrelevant to the modern narrative, a fact van Neerven also laments in her poem "Love and Tradition" which associates climate change and rising waters with the destruction of indigenous culture: "Island / of love and tradition / let them see / what has gone under" (van Neerven 2016, 5). In "Sound," Jodie's brother David is committed to the mental health ward of a hospital that has palm trees in the courtyard, and turtles to keep the patients happy. Jodie thinks it might also do her good to go to visit the local animal park and "watch them swim and also lie on the rocks," but adds sadly: "I hope they have real rocks there" (2014, 222). The shocking mismatch between the siblings and their environment is also brought across in an earlier description of David "darting down the hallway like a fish, a great white tuna tunnelling under" (207). David's sense of existential dislocation is such that he takes out his frustration on his relatives, possibly killing his pregnant girlfriend at the end. An added source of frustration for the book's young Aboriginal protagonists is that although their material, social and cultural surroundings have been severely disrupted, mainstream definitions of Aboriginality have remained the same:

[Jaye] was darker than me and all the other Murris I knew, like a walking projection of what a blackfella was supposed to be like. She knew language, knew them old stories. Had to say 'deadly' every second sentence. Postcard blackfella. [...] Mum used to tell me and my sisters when we were younger that being Murri wasn't a skin thing. But next to Jaye that was all anyone noticed.⁹ (158, 160)

The atavistic capacity to survive on the land, in particular, so common to colonial constructions of Aboriginality, is a quality young urban Aborigines are ashamed not to find in themselves. In "Water," when Kaden gets stung by a jellyfish she berates herself: "What kind of Aboriginal person are you? Can't survive taking your shoes off" (87).

- 9 Being required to survive as an authentic Aborigine in a degraded environment is a contradiction that can only find a more optimistic resolution in stories that move away from realism, like the post-apocalyptic story "Currency" or the speculative "Water." In "Currency," a young Aboriginal couple drive away from the city that is giving children cancer. Beyond the "petrol stations, car yards, rubbish tips" of the city's outskirts, they reach the desert where they think they can escape urban toxicity: "Here, there's no longer the city's taste, the city's influence, the disease." Even here the young mother notices "cut-open earth often, unmanned machinery" (2014, 187) and the signs of drilling. Yet the family are able to find refuge, not in a preserved environment, but in a small community where stories are valued as everyday currency and where the small boy's post-apocalyptic visions of mutant, horned camels reconnect with traditional

Dreaming: “[The camels] are honey coloured with two long horns, oldtime patterns on the backs of their necks and skinny tails. For this visualisation, he is one of them, sitting on the back of an old girl, and they will never harm him” (195).

- 10 As for “Water,” the single novella that constitutes the second part of the collection, it is a satirical futuristic story about a young Aboriginal woman’s increasingly conscious involvement in her relatives’ struggle to resist “project Australia2.” This is a government plan to join up islands off the Brisbane coast in order to create a super island. Reversing the political onus placed on Aborigines to prove enduring links to ancestral land in order to be able to claim it, the story presents Australia2 as a second Australia, a place where Aboriginal people who can show they had been removed or disconnected from their country can apply to live (2014, 74). To achieve this large-scale project, the government are evacuating the indigenous islander population and killing off the local mangrove. This strange plant people is later revealed to be the form the “old people” have taken to help the traditional owners fight to preserve the islands. Van Neerven revisits the alien invader story genre in order to parody the colonial naturalization of indigenous peoples as elements of the local flora or fauna. The “jangigir” (the Bundjalung word for mangrove) are described as “a community with no hierarchy of age or gender. They stand in a row, long and thin figures. They make [...] the individual seem insignificant” (88). The rooted plant people force Kaden to reconsider what it means to be human: having been drawn into a romantic relationship with Larapinta, one of the jangigir, she abandons her job as “Cultural Liaison Officer” for the Science Centre. In spite of its positive label, the job is so routine and mindless that she “can’t remember which bank is which, and all the edges, the coastal shrubbery, look the same” (89). Furthermore, as she discovers later, it actually involves feeding chlorine to the mangrove people to weaken and eventually kill them. Even when Kaden realises that she has been used as a pawn by her family to infiltrate the Science Centre staff, and that the anti-government plan involves allowing Larapinta and the other jangigirs to sacrifice themselves to destroy the planners’ installations, she bows to a greater necessity than her own pride and romantic love, that of a rediscovered life-enhancing duty to ancestral place: “I know the ocean now. I know Ki. [...] From the beginning I’d known there was something more, and now I know the truth” (115).
- 11 Considering the objective conditions of social, economic and cultural marginalisation most of the characters in the collection have to deal with, such resolutions as the ones these two stories offer could be seen as rather escapist. To hold out the possibility, however tentative, of rediscovering a grounded continuity may seem quite illusory considering the extensive impact of European-style modernity on the Aboriginal mode of “being in the world.” Yet lamenting loss of place and only bearing witness to cultural and social dereliction would just confirm the “Dying Race” trope which comforted settler Australia in the idea that it was always already too late for Aboriginal survival.
- 12 If, however, the traditional “rooted authenticity” way of imagining meaningful place is no longer available for modern day Aborigines, does it follow that the mobile “throwntogetherness” model of place put forward by Doreen Massey is a valid alternative?

In sharp contrast to the view of place as settled and pre-given, with a coherence only to be disturbed by ‘external’ forces, places as presented here in a sense necessitate invention; they pose a challenge. They implicate us, perforce, in the lives of human others, and in our relations with nonhumans they ask how we shall

respond to our temporary meeting-up with these particular rocks and stones and trees. They require that, in one way or another, we confront the challenge of the negotiation of multiplicity. (2005, 141)

- 13 The quotation on which the title of this essay is based surely suggests a certain affinity between Massey's definition of place and van Neerven's focus on tentative moments of perceived convergence. It comes from the opening paragraph of the programmatic story "Skin," and here Marie's perception of place involves chance rather than continuity:

Outside, a rosella perched shyly on the edge of the birdbath. Marie watched her daughter, Irma, light up when she saw the bird, and she stumbled towards it. Marie soon noticed there was another rosella there, a smaller one. Irma's hair shone a bronze colour. She and the pair of birds coexisted in the outside space in the shade for the afternoon. [...] The sun interchanged. (2014, 37)

- 14 This encounter between the little girl and the two birds is mediated by the loving gaze of the mother and is turned into a numinous moment, all the more precious for being tentative and fleeting as is highlighted by the paratactic syntax. The pretty "child with birds" image may appear as a rather unimaginative form of "invention" of place as a miraculous moment of harmony. The use of the rather unpoetic word "coexist" and the three place and time phrases that follow, however, call the reader's attention to the way the event is materially put together, as well as to its contingency. Proximity and distance are fused in the intensity of the event. Place, here, is not determined by a specific history or rooted experience, but as the temporary site of perceived connections between human and non-human protagonists. By making Marie perceive place *both* as a form of continuity with the past and culture *and* as a chance site of unexpected significance, van Neerven allows a wider scope for representations of Aboriginal emplacement than mainstream readers might expect.
- 15 "Crash," the last short story in the Kresinger saga, also exemplifies the way van Neerven plays with the reader's expectations. Indeed, the story literally throws together two women who should never have met. When the story begins, Charlie Kresinger's wife Lena and his lover Janet, neither of whom have been mentioned in any of the other stories, are both racing up a mountain, having heard that Charlie has crashed his motorbike at the top. The unnamed mountain, overlooking Brisbane, is different from the one near the Kresinger property and is not associated with any particular ancestral story. Yet, it works in the same mysterious way,¹⁰ being the place to which the two women are drawn and where they meet. Converging towards the same point from different directions, the women literally pile up their cars one on top of the other. The event is both ludicrously improbable and shockingly realistic. Bleeding from the crash but still fighting, the women then rush to Charlie's side. Although one is an immigrant from Crete and the other is from a well-off European Australian family, they are similar in their fierce rivalry, and are compared with the warring female spirits of traditional Aboriginal stories: "One of the paramedics on duty that night, a Murri one, would say he had never been more frightened at the sight of them appearing like spirits" (2014, 61). Later, both women are taken to hospital in the same ambulance: "Confined, Lena and Janet faced one another, rocking, both with their backs to a wall, Charlie between them. In that moment, even though they didn't yet know it, the women aligned themselves to a movement separate from Charlie" (62). Although they only meet again in a research trial for whiplash patients, a few years

later (63), they become friends, unbeknown to Charlie. When Lena is dying in hospital after being hit by two cars, he finds Janet at her bedside.

- 16 By unexpectedly choosing to end her family history with a story centred on Charlie's non-Aboriginal partners, van Neerven in fact reintroduces Marie's sister Pearl as one of the structuring forces of the family saga. While Marie is a reassuring centrifugal force, Pearl, who seems wedded with the wind, is a disruptive character, both irresistible and deadly. "But," says Amy at the end of the opening short story, "I think she was a fighter. I think there was a lot of struggle in our family and she has passed on that strength. [S]he deserves to be a part of our family's history" (19). Pearl represents a cultural impacement that allows for conflict as well as deterritorialization. Amy learns from a complete stranger, a nameless old woman in an unremarkable shop "off the highway" (3) that her real grandmother was Pearl, not Marie as the family had led her to believe. The old woman also gives Amy the wooden call that Pearl used to attract wild ducks. On it Amy discovers a tiny grey spore, and understands that she has been bequeathed a curse, for the spore is very similar to the stone-grey seeds Marie and Pearl were warned not to pick up when they were children, although their exact significance is never revealed: "Those who could not understand would say that they were dispersed by the wind" (13). If one associates Marie with the type of territory Aborigines define as "estate," that is to say "the traditionally recognized home or dreaming place of a patrilineal descent group," Pearl could stand for "range," defined as "the tract or orbit over which the group ordinarily hunts and forages" (Tuan 1974, 157). While the dreaming place is associated with fixed, unchanging landmarks (hills, waterholes or even trees), a range is where the members of a group forage for food, in times of scarcity trespassing into other groups' ranges. While Marie "sits" at home and holds the family and place together, Pearl ranges far and wide, dispersing, occasionally wreaking destruction, but also revitalizing the family core. Since Pearl is described as a mesmerizing snake-woman ("[H]er ears weren't really there, her eyes hissed and some of her teeth were missing. But the men followed the dance of her hair from back to mouth," 4) it is possible to suppose that it is her doing if a snake glides into Amy's path, reminding her of her childhood near Hune Hill, just when her father Charlie is on the phone trying to convince her to give Colin a chance to return to the community: "Just because they've gone away. It's our job to bring them back" (22). As Deborah Bird Rose has indicated, in Indigenous Australian philosophies, everything and everyone only acquires meaning and significance locally, within a specific "country." However, while each country is "unique and inviolable," "the relationships between the countries ensure that no country is isolated, that together they make up some larger whole, clusters of alliance networks" (1996, 12). The fact that both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics are at work in Ellen van Neerven's definition of place constitutes a form of resilience in the face of dislocation.
- 17 To account for the stories' strange combination of deep pessimism and enduring optimism, Tim Ingold's notion of "wayfaring" as a mode of being in the world in Indigenous stories seems particularly appropriate. Instead of being locations with intrinsic, recognizable attributes, the places in the book (the mountains, the sea, the islands) are "topics," or knots that gather or "entangle" things, people, and animals in ways that must be explored through the narrative. As Ingold writes, "[c]omplexity is the product of local entanglements and cannot be accessed and learned independently from its respective context. This is a world of engagement and interaction" (2011, 160). Far from exploiting the picturesque potential of all the places that are mentioned in the

stories (and they are very place specific, most of the numerous place names in the short stories referring to existing locations), van Neerven focuses on the meaning these places hold as sites of reiterated or unexpected interaction:

[Griffin] saw a light in a park. There was an Aboriginal family grouped together, food cooking over a fire, and he was hungry. They saw him standing there. Marie, fifteen, was the one prodding the fish with a stick. [...] That image marked his life. Marie, a dust-coloured girl, fed him fish in a park. (2014, 42)

- 18 In relational ontology, entanglement and interaction are not just metaphors, as Martin Porr's study of relational narratives shows:

Within a relational framework, images, language and stories do not contain information about places and things that can easily be removed from bodily engagement; they are there to direct attention. To learn about anything, you need to do it yourself, you need to establish your own interaction and dynamic relationship. The Indigenous view accepts that knowledge can only be acquired through these entanglements. (2018, 404)

- 19 In "The Wheel," the young, nameless narrator, despairing of ever connecting with the other members of her family, goes into the desert with her young Melbourne friend Stephanie to try to reach an old abandoned Ferris wheel, because that is where "every kid wants to get to" (2014, 180), but also because the girl believes that the journey was part of a women's Ceremony. After two days and a night spent in the desert Stephanie becomes too weak to walk and the ten-year-old narrator starts carrying her on her back: "To feel the life force of someone else so close to me made me think of these women and all the years they'd lived that way" (183). The pilgrimage to the wheel and the ordeal it entails acquires meaning through physical contact and the support the young girl is able to give her friend. When they finally reach the Ferris wheel, "spread out like a giant spiderweb," the girl feels connected, not only to her friend, but to the world around her: "It was the feeling of *togetherness*. A sort of vitality. The feeling of a new part that felt like home, a hill, or tree, a nut opening in your hand after breaking the casing" (183). Although it is ultimately unclear whether the narrator's assumptions concerning the cultural significance of that particular part of the desert are correct, and although it is ironically Stephanie, who has only learnt to "survive" in Melbourne "catching trams and wearing four layers in August" (182), who manages to get help when the narrator falls into a diabetic coma, the pilgrimage to the wheel seems to have given the Aboriginal girl the cultural tools to achieve an integrated vision of her place in the world. Recovering in hospital, the girl discovers her older sister Grace has run away, leaving her to cope with their parents' depression alone. Yet the girl's experience in the desert, sitting in one of the Ferris wheel carts, "rocking forward and back a little, as if phantomly operated, as if ghosts were here, old people opened up by the lines of the giant circle cut across sky and land" (184), has given her an implaced world picture which maintains caring connections in spite of her sister's betrayal:

One of the first nights back home there was a real ripper of a storm. [...] The small community, already in strings, was blown almost apart. [...] I thought of Grace, dreamed shelter for her, pathways where the storm couldn't fit, hidden patches of earth where even a season's rain couldn't touch her. She was one distance that never left me. (185-86)

- 20 In Melissa Lucashenko's novel *Mullumbimby* (2013), Bundjalung native title claimants discover that the whorls on the hands of a teenager in their group mirror the topographic lines of their contested country. But rather than submitting to a harrowing scrutiny in court, the girl puts her hands on an oven burner and destroys

the miraculous evidence. This shocking act of self-mutilation symbolizes how the politics of belonging have further complicated the emotional and spiritual connections to place that still prove so necessary for many young Australians of Aboriginal heritage in the face of social and economic marginalisation. The emphasis laid on continuity by native title legislation has created tremendous problems of infighting among Aboriginal communities already severely affected by the impact of colonialism. Queensland writers Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucaschenko and Ellen van Neerven, in particular, have produced work that unflinchingly reflects the difficulties of imagining place from a contemporary Aboriginal perspective. Specific to van Neerven's informal, unadorned short story writing however, is what a reviewer describes as the "generous use of space to give meaning the room to build" (Sakr 2016). In "Whole Lot," the opening poem of her debut collection *Comfort Food*, she writes "we are not here until we sit here / we sit in silence and we are open / there are different kinds of time / I hope you'll understand" (2016, 3). Van Neerven's short form writing, both in print and on line, creates an unassuming "here," a shared experience of how her generation's claustrophobic sense of isolation can tentatively be overcome by a heightened awareness of placeness: "the day shows / country spread open / a map of all that was and will be / don't forget it / I'm tracing it to remember / don't be scared" (2016, 3).

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NOTES

1. Relph acknowledged in his preface to the 2008 reprint of the book that the neat binary interpretation of place and placelessness he set out in the seventies is too straightforward to account for place experience in the twenty-first century. Environments today reveal "manifestations of *both* distinctiveness *and* standardisation" in a state of "dynamic balance." He insists, however, that the phenomenological approach remains valid as a way to clarify the complexity of the experience of place "without reducing it to some model or an average" (Preface to Reprint, unnumbered pages).
2. Massey acknowledges Arif Dirlik's contention in *Places and Politics in an Age of Capitalism* (2001) that social-constructivists tend to focus exclusively on human social constructions, but disagrees with his conclusion that they should not disassociate place from fixed location. Referring to geological impermanence, Massey argues that even if there can be vast differences in the temporalities of trajectories, fixity is indeed an illusion: "in the end there is no ground, in the sense of a stable position" (22).
3. Ellen van Neerven is a poet and short story writer of Dutch and Mununjali heritage. The Mununjali are one of the clan estate groups of the Yugambeh people whose traditional land is located in south-eastern Queensland, including the coastal area just over the border into New South Wales.
4. The Bundjalung people's traditional land lies along the coast of north New South Wales and into southern Queensland. They belong to the Bundjalung-Yugambeh language group.
5. Joh Bjelke-Petersen served as Queensland Premier from 1968 to 1987. Nicknamed "the Hillbilly Dictator" for the restrictions he imposed to civil liberties, he opposed the sale of large areas of land to Aboriginal groups. In "Crash," there are allusions to this period with the land-rights campaigner Charlie Kresinger having to fight charges of assault on police in a demonstration and later choosing to live in Byron Bay after his "expulsion" from Brisbane (56).
6. "S&J," one of the stories featuring in "Light," was first published in the American literary quarterly *McSweeney's* in 2012. Having had this "big break," van Neerven began producing more stories for literary events. Her account of her writing process for the collection ("It was a process of scavenging, foraging and scrapbooking, as I tossed my ideas into a growing hot heap") highlights the absence of an overarching plan (van Neerven 2015).
7. Some readers, for instance, complained about the structural complexity of Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart*, which demanded a much more drawn-out effort from the reader considering the length and breadth of the novel form. Van Neerven uses the generic elusiveness and concision of the short story in combination with the linked short-story device to produce a kind of narrative in which cultural and ideological codes are left for the reader to uncover.
8. "Sound" here is the geographical term, several passages in the short story pointing to the former links between Jodie and her brother and the sea.

9. "Murri" is a demonym for Indigenous Australians of modern-day Queensland and north-west New South Wales. The Bundjalung are one of the ethno-linguistic groups identifying as Murri.

10. "Call it Goorie grapevine or women's intuition, but [Lena and Janet] both knew fast" (53).

ABSTRACTS

The theoretical debate about place opposing, on the one hand, the existential necessity for a degree of permanence and continuity between person and place, and on the other, the definition of place as the chance convergence of trajectories proves useful when dealing with the way place and placelessness are imagined in contemporary Aboriginal literature. The article examines how, in *Heat and Light*, Ellen van Neerven negotiates between a "typically Aboriginal" way of relating to place and her own generation's worldview.

INDEX

Keywords: Aboriginal Australian literature, humanist geography, dislocation, emplacement, negotiation

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