

'Queer Natures': Feminist Ecocriticism, Performativities, and Ellen van Neerven's "Water"

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Abstract

This paper brings together queer ecological thought, ecofeminism, and feminist ecocriticism to explore forms of embodied resistance against intersectional, complex oppressions of women, races, and lands. It looks at the award-winning Indigenous Australian writer Ellen van Neerven's short story, "Water" (from the 2014 collection, *Heat and Light*) to canvas an anti-essentialised queer feminist politics and ethics of care through which to shape utopian futures after sovereignty, after the West, after patriarchy, after whiteness.

Keywords: *ecocriticism, performativity, queer, van Neerven, "Water"*

It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories. (Haraway 2016, 35)

We should all have deep concerns about the present, and the future, and the traumas of the past. (van Neerven, in Sydney Writers' Festival 2017)

1. Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, scholarship in queer studies has shifted its focus towards ecology applying its deconstructive tools to the category of the "human" and its relation to the "nonhuman", the "inhuman", the "other-than-human", or "beyond-the-human/posthuman". Taking an oppositional stance to (hetero- and homo-) normativity to develop theories and to shape practices of resistance

to neoliberalism and Western supremacy, the emerging field of queer ecology rethinks sexualities discourses alongside the heterosexualization of urban and suburban places, the exploitation of natural resources, and the nature/culture dualism. This paper takes further a set of reflections presented at a one-day meeting on ecotheology organised by Liberospirito¹ at Casa Cares, a meeting space and Waldensians centre for responsible, sustainable tourism immersed in the Tuscan countryside, which took place in 2016. The seminar gathered together a small group of scholars and practitioners whose interests stem biodiversity and intellectual property, animal liberation, ecocriticism, and feminism². The analysis here is concerned with the connections of sexual freedom and environmental justice, and with the political import of feminist knowledges for contemporary queer theories and the struggle against patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, anthropocentrism, and colonialism. Specifically, it will be informed by ecofeminism and its attribution of value to the interrelatedness of all these aspects, which have been crucial to gain “the understanding that the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing” (Gaard 1997, 114). In her Introduction to a special issue on ecofeminism of the journal *DEP-Deportate, esuli, profughe* (Zambonati 2012), Bruna Bianchi sees ecofeminism as the only ethically viable position to apprehend the sedimented logic that binds oppression on the grounds of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and their interconnections, the exploitation of nonhuman, and of natural resources. The critique of the nature/culture dualism carried out in this essay is located within the work developed by the Italian women’s journal; it is stimulated by a distinct field of ecological critique that is still under-theorised in Italy – ecofeminism – yet whose history in Australia is at least as long as the publication of Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993)³.

Taking their lead from this theoretical and activist field, the next two sections explore the workings of a queer ecology crossing practices of radical feminism(s) to nurture strategies for (un)learning, for thinking, and for acting *otherwise*. These are two fundamental concepts to rethink the notions of “utopia” and “performativity” that emphasise the contingent and uncanny nature of practices of resistance in theory as in praxis, with which I engage in

¹ For more information on the Italian Liberospirito laboratory and blog see their website: <<http://www.liberospirito.org>> (11/2017).

² The “Distruzione o cambiamento? Ecoteologia per il XXI secolo” seminar took place in Reggello (Firenze) on July 9 2016. My gratitude to co-organisers Federico Battistutta and Valerio Pignatta for their interest in my research. An earlier version of this paper in Italian can be accessed on the Liberospirito website, <<http://liberospirito.altervista.org>> (11/2017).

³ As noted by Bianchi, the period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s marked a watershed for the development of this field. In particular, Karen Warren and Val Plumwood employed the term “ecofeminism” to refer to thought and action against the reticence of dominant dualistic conceptions of life and the world (Bianchi 2012, VI-VIII).

this paper. “[W]hat we imagine queer ecology to be emerges in tandem with what we hope it contributes to the world” (Azzarello, in Anderson *et al.* 2012, 84) – as such, queer ecology has profound implications in the theoretical and activist research field of ecofeminism in particular, and in ecological criticism in general. In the fourth and final section of the paper, I look at how this queer ecology can be seen at work in Ellen van Neerven’s short story, “Water” (2014a), from her award-winning collection, *Heat and Light*, which was published after she was awarded the David Unaipon Award as Unpublished Indigenous Writer at the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards.

Van Neerven is a Brisbane-based Indigenous Australian writer and editor with Mununjali and Dutch heritage⁴; she is currently commissioning editor for *The Lifted Brow* literary magazine, and has curated a series of events about sacrifice at the 2017 Sydney Writers’ Festival. She is also the author of a collection of poetry (*Comfort Food*, 2016) and editor of a digital anthology on Indigenous literature, titled *Writing Black* (van Nerveen 2014b). “Water” is set in a dystopian near-future, when Australia is a republic whose president, Tanya Sparkle is “determined to leave her legacy on native title” (van Neerven 2014a, 73): a new nation called “Australia2” is being built, entitling Aboriginal people to receive a piece of land provided they meet specific requirements (74). The protagonist, Kaden, is offered a job as Cultural Liaison Officer due to her mixed Indigenous background, and as the story unfolds she is confronted with key facts about the project, about her artist father and his family who grew up on the fictional Ki island – a place originally inhabited by Kaden’s ancestors, whose “spirits of thousands of years” (118) are embodied in the plantpeople she is supposed to liaise with to carry out the government’s “horribly misguided attempt at making reparations” (Dovey 2014). Kaden will have to facilitate the job for her company in letting the plantpeople flee a group of islands through administering a formula that makes them “more docile” (van Neerven 2014a, 93) – and that is ultimately going to be lethal (109). Raising questions about indigeneity and indigenous sovereignty, lesbianism and sexual (dis)identities, and recalcitrant nature/culture dualisms, “Water” will be the empirical case to canvas an anti-essentialised queer feminist politics and ethics of care that is telling of and timely for utopian futures after sovereignty, after the West, after patriarchy, after whiteness. This study is situated within a wider cross-disciplinary inquiry into theories, practices, and pedagogies of antinormativity aimed at new mappings of freedom, equality, social and ecological justice under neoliberalism, and the attendant legacies of colonialism and imperialism.

⁴See also Ceridwen Dovey (2014)’s interview with the author for van Nerveen’s biography; and Menzies-Pike (2015), for a discussion of van Neerven’s career as editor, also in relationship to her Indigenous background and her writing career.

2. *Queer “environments”*

Queer theories have brought about a change of paradigm in our understanding of subject formation, moving from their insistence on discursive, cultural, and social constructions of sexuality and gender through the handling of sexuality as lens through which to address intersectional forms of oppressions. Of specific interest here are two seemingly interrelated positions concerning the import of this change, one for a coalitional embodied politics of resistance arising from a collective sense of precarity and vulnerability, the other for an anti-authoritarian pedagogy and politics “beyond gender”. The first is taken from Judith Butler’s updated conceptualisation of the performativity of gender within the context of her current work on a theory of assembly. The notion of gender performativity has been influential to mobilise non-hegemonic practices within the context of normative regimes, which are produced as systems of power/knowledge and enforced through the operations of institutions (the family, the Church, the school, the State). As theorised by Judith Butler in the early 1990s, it has also provided the awareness that sites of domination are where alternative possibilities for re-signification and agency can potentially be opened:

The political aspiration of this analysis, perhaps its normative aim, is to let the lives of gender and sexual minorities become more possible and more liveable, for bodies that are gender nonconforming as well as those that conform too well (and at a high cost) to be able to breathe and move more freely in private and public spaces, as well as those zones that cross and confound those two. (2015, 32-33)

The second reflection informs Lucy Nicholas’ recent elaboration of a “queer post-gender ethics” premised on the belief that it is possible, indeed desirable to envision a gender-neutral existence. This implies a kind of anarchistic refusal of the ruse of the normative in all spheres of life, where queer becomes the name we give to “a position or an impulse for critique [...] rather than an identity or positive theory *of* something” (2014, 7). These observations about performativity and gender stress a common radical impulse to critique dualistic frameworks like those that have sanctioned the oppressions of women, races, and lands which are the focus of this paper. Read through the lens of the primordial separation between nature and culture, queerness as impulse to critique makes what is (thought as) natural, or given the product of a (dominant) culture dictating material and discursive realizations of nature.

Although queer ecology started to appear more recently as a term used in the literature, Greta Gaard’s essay, “Towards a Queer Ecofeminism” seems to have anticipated many of its concerns about sexual freedom and the shaping of visions of social alongside ecological justice while questioning interrelated forms of oppression. The institutionalisation of Christianity in Europe has legitimated the typically Western fear of the erotic, and a white masculine

heterosexual rationality has been mobilised to provide, in Gaard's words, "the rhetorical justification for genocide and colonialism" (1997, 128). The history of Eurocentric imperialism can thus be (re)narrated as the story "of compulsory heterosexuality whereby the queer erotic of non-westernized peoples, their culture, and their land, is subdued into the missionary position – with the conqueror 'on top'" (131). Gaard's claims to free eroticism/the erotic from the constraints of patriarchy and the Church consider all human beings "as equal participants *in culture and in nature*" (127, emphasis added). Indeed, queer ecology reveals that the nature/culture dichotomy is an artificial technology put to work historically to justify the required labour needed to sustain complex oppressions of class, race, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness through which the codes of the "natural" circulate.

It is crucial to recall here Donna Haraway's work since the late 1980s, where we have learned about the necessary task of acquiring the ability to see that all knowledge is generated through technologically and scientifically produced theories, bodies, institutions, and worlds according to specific materialisations of gender, class, and race. Haraway's feminist situated perspective, or strategic positioning has much to share with Gaard's and other ecofeminists' works; her "modest witness" provides a location for resistance enacted through being able to see *differently*, to make connections with others while producing knowledges that can only be partial, non-foundational⁵. Through its denial of anthropocentrism, this non-objective awareness is profoundly non-hegemonic, making space for embodiment – how we live, think, and feel in space and time – as the site of transformation and change⁶. This is aligned with the educational project envisaged by queer pedagogies, referring to teaching and learning practices where dissent and disagreement are mobilised strategically to refuse the injunction to erase differences from view. In its portrayal of encounters crossing dualistic notions of sexuality, gender, race, and human-ness, van Neerven's short-story lends itself as a powerful call to engage with, as opposed to merely acknowledging difference, thus shaping unforeseen pedagogies for living with and loving others. Deborah Britzman's conceptualisation of difference seems apt here; accordingly, normativity is reduced to a structuring order of thought effacing otherness because its very existence is premised on this production, which always entails a denial of what the normative sets itself against (1995, 157). An implicit assumption in this paper is that this awareness should enliven our desire to refuse the barriers

⁵ See also Braidotti (2017, 65) for a recent reading of Haraway's powerful figuration.

⁶ This understanding of embodiment is taken from Kay Inckle's challenging reflections on developing transformative pedagogies through embodying diversity (in her case, a disability). As she writes: "Embodiment exceeds dualism; it incorporates the material (body), intangible (soul/psyche/intuition) and non-rational (emotional) and enables diversity beyond oppositional, identity-based dualisms" (2012, 165).

that are strengthened in our name, as environments are destroyed and the dualisms that have subjugated nature to culture, the other to the same are still taken for granted, immobile, unquestionable. A related assumption is that ecological justice also involves nurturing autonomy (Heckert 2010, 32) as we explore possibilities to think, to teach, to love, and to live differently; to engage differences in order to be able to see the difference this makes.

Recent scholarship in queer studies has been concerned with environmental justice in the attempt to reveal the correlations between normative heterosexuality and the organisation of public space; among others, through contrasting dominant efforts to safeguard forms of sociality premised on nature/the natural, as well as its production and reproduction. This body of work has contributed to the debate about the matrix of the White, affluent, nuclear (heterosexual or homosexual) family as space of policing and docility reaching into public life, for instance, by shedding light on “environments [that] have become overdetermined as the *province* of heterosexual masculinity” (Evans 2005, 27). A first theoretical effort to address these convergences is found in Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson’s edited collection, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* where the authors shift the focus of ecological thought towards “the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world” (2010, 5). How we understand materiality is cogent for the kind of social and ecological justice proposed by queer ecology, ecofeminism, and feminist studies more broadly; this is the subject of the next section.

The above discussion of the nature/culture dichotomy has referred to queerness and ecology as the referents of knowledge(s), bodies, and ways of life exceeding the dictates of natural(ized) heterosexuality and (hetero)sexism (Morris, in Anderson *et al.* 2012, 90) ultimately aiming to dismantle hierarchies of power and to elaborate strategies of dissent. Seen as constellation of practices that resist and invalidate the order of “what is”, or as “acts that cast care as an overt gesture of refusal” (Stephens, in Anderson *et al.* 2012, 101) this understanding of queerness bears several affinities with the kind of ethics advanced within contemporary anti-authoritarian thought (see, among others, Heckert, Cleminson, eds 2011; Daring *et al.*, eds 2013). It works in support of the belief that a path to freedom and autonomy involves distancing oneself from the discourses, practices, and subjectivities of institutions, including the State. It also works as method by offering a tactical perspective that is not exclusive to sexuality and through which to build powerful alliances that short-circuits normativity and its allies; it becomes an everyday act of exposing the links between (bodily) experience and capitalist (white, hetero-patriarchal) accumulation. These same concerns have been employed to look at how reproduction takes place outside the realm of human beings. This move has gained the important awareness that the category of sexual orientation does not exhaust the sexualities spectrum found in organic living matter. A case in

point is Myra Hird's prefigurative "naturally queer" existence (2004, 85-89) to try to account for the seemingly endless variety in sexual behaviour as she concentrated her analysis on bacteria and other organisms; or, Bruce Bagemihl (1999)'s definition of the "exuberant" anti-normative sexual behaviour that can be observed with regard to several animal species⁷.

So far, this paper has charted a situated map of the convergences between queer/gender studies and ecocriticism prompted by a yearning for practices of reading, seeing, and thinking *differently*. The work developed in the field of intercultural feminisms is especially instructive to hint at a broader pedagogical project addressing, among others, recalcitrant colonialist and neo-imperial practices that are distinctive of neoliberal rationality, which van Neerven's short story at the end of the paper typifies. It is apt to ask the same question as Giovanna Covi does on the desire for social, and implicitly, ecological justice in the context of a cross-national feminist pedagogy of difference: "What happens when we try to think about a healthy world?" This question is inspired by Haraway's concept of "natureculture", in which constructivist and essentialist views about gender and being co-exist and resist as we participate in critical teaching practices requiring awareness that biological constructs are made through hegemonic cultural ones (Covi 2008, 61-62). Covi's question cogently opens a discourse in support of our belief that another world is possible; for women, this belief has animated peaceful protest movements of women's peace camps, which in turn have influenced the alter-globalization⁸ mobilisation from Seattle (1999) and onwards (Bianchi 2012)⁹. A critical feminist pedagogy of interculturality helps us understand this utopian longing for another liveable world as we strive to negotiate the conditions enabling, as Liana Borghi puts it, "discourses *otherwise*, that do not aspire to overthrow directly the regime of repression and prohibition which constitutes social norms, but to seek alternative speaking positions" (2008, 100). Perhaps, this is how we would be able to improve our ability to be and to remain accountable towards a shared vulnerability that sanctions our constitutive being together with what is "not-us", other-from-us.

3. *Performativity/Performativities*

Recently, a significant ontological shift has occurred within contemporary feminist studies under the rubric of "new materialism", where the notion

⁷ Further developments in this field can be found in the militant queer antispecist perspectives of Rasmus Rahbek Simonsen's *Queer Vegan Manifesto* (2012).

⁸ I am following Jamie Heckert here, who chooses "*alterglobalisation*" as opposed to the more conventional "anti-globalisation" as a way to insist that "another world is possible" (2010, 30).

⁹ See Bianchi's "Introduzione. Ecofemminismo: il pensiero, i dibattiti, le prospettive" in *DEP* (2012, I-XXVI) for a transnational genealogy of women's activism against environmental destruction.

of “worlding” – namely, being in and of the world – is appropriate for the philosophical and literary terrain charted here¹⁰. Succinctly put, the turn to matter as active/dynamic materiality contradicts established assumptions about matter as inert, or passive which new feminist materialist theorists disallow. The corollary of this shift is that difference is viewed as the unavoidable inter-relationality of discursive (or, cultural) and material practices, with significant implications for gender and sexuality discourses; for, in their refusal of nature/culture dualisms, new materialist approaches “tend to eschew the choice between essentialism (i.e. appealing to innate characteristics as in notions of biological sex) or social constructionism (which can play or bracket off biology as with notions of gender), choosing instead to consider the reality of how bodies develop” (Nicholas 2014, 9)¹¹. In what follows, the connections of queer theories and the discourse on nature in two works by Karen Barad and by Timothy Morton are discussed as attempts towards a radical understanding of ecological justice.

For Barad, the vitality of matter is trenchantly described by the notion of “entanglement” to replace the distinctions that separate human and non-human beings, subjects-as-agents and objects, entities and concepts. The consistency of the nature/culture dualism is particularly undermined by her use of “nature’s queer performativity” (from her essay that bears its title) to describe the constitutive *intra-action(s)* between animate and inanimate worlds and beings. At the same time, the idea of nature as inherently performative allows to transcend conventional understandings of relationality, whereby autonomous entities are formed before they enter into relations: “intra-actions” thus teach us about the origin of the material-discursive practices that have brought about the splits of subject and object, self and other, culture and nature in every domain of life. New trajectories of (environmental and social) justice would then have to take into consideration “the materializing effects of boundary-making practices by which the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ are differentially constituted” (2011, 124)¹². In van Neerven’s short story, Kaden finds herself attracted to a part human, part plant non-gendered being; she is struggling to come to terms with the practices of separation she has internalised, while Larapinta and the plantpeople are facing extinction at the hands of the company that has employed Kaden. Seeing her and her

¹⁰ See Barad 2007; Alaimo, Hekman (eds) 2008; Coole Diana, Frost (eds) 2010; and van der Tuin, Dolphijn (eds) 2012 for a comprehensive introduction to new materialism(s) and its concerns.

¹¹ New materialist approaches are usually seen in opposition to the importance attributed to discursive and cultural practices, as is the case for queer theories. This opposition can aptly be summarised as the belief in “the vivacity denied by social constructivist theories that posit all social processes and, indeed reality itself, as socially and ideologically constituted” (Barrett 2012, 3).

¹² Braidotti (2017) advances a specific “radical materialist” position that enriches and complements the version of new materialism that is being referred to here.

people she is “struck both by how startlingly human-like they are, and how alarmingly unhuman they are. Green, like something you would see in a comic strip, but they are real” (2014a, 78). Later on into their relationship, Kaden is ready to stand with her own people to stop a government-sanctioned plan of conquest; but it is now Larapinta that catalyses Kaden’s self-questioning: “‘I’m not human,’ Larapinta reminds me. ‘You never used to let me forget it’” (119). Kaden’s hesitancy is a powerful and provocative reminder of the work required to (un)learn the dualisms we have incorporated within ourselves, perhaps inadvertently as in this case; their underlying logic returns as a reminder of the enduring workings of normativity.

That the impulse for justice should rely on our relinquishing of the idea that nature is “out there” instead of being integral to our very being is also at the core of Morton’s ecological thought, and his essay on “Queer Ecology” supports the belief in being as togetherness. For Morton, the key tenet of queer theories that gender is inscribed on bodies through repetition-sedimentation of norms in a constricting discursive/cultural field proves that it can no longer be seen as quality, or something that one can have; for gender can only exist by instantiating a prior dichotomy, where the very existence of one term implies the other’s abjection. The same occurs in nature, where all life forms are living and reproducing themselves in excess of dichotomies, so that “[n]othing exists independently, and nothing comes from nothing” (2012, 275)¹³. Morton contends that we face an ontological problem with regard to the boundary-making practices we deploy, and it is only by acknowledging the principle of ecological interdependence that we would be able to grasp fully the reality of difference, which is that of unlimited proliferation of differences (277). As can be inferred from Barad’s and Morton’s positions on nature/culture, the multiplication of discursive positionings from where to theorise differences and their different materialisations undermines the inside/outside dualisms, including those at stake in theory, resistance, and politics. What are the implications of this discussion for those of us moved by a desire for a sustainable world that prompts our capacity for accountability, and our investment in a pedagogical project aimed both at critiquing the normativity of power and the power of normativity?

At present, the idea of the performativity of nature also manifested in/as one’s love of a free world is obstructed by the undoing of freedom and of democracy under neoliberalism, which increasingly needs “technically skilled human capital, not educated participants in public life and common rule” (Brown 2015, 177). Here the concern is with mortgaging a perpetually deferred reward in the future in return for self-inflicted precariousness

¹³In her recent book, Haraway borrows Lynn Margulis’ term “sympoiesis” to articulate a politics of being that closely resembles Morton’s quote. “*Sympoiesis* is a simple word: it means ‘making-with.’ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (2016, 58).

and suffering that neoliberalism imposes¹⁴. Wendy Brown cogently sees this logic of sacrifice at work in the replacement of democracy with governance, “the consensus model of conduct integrating everyone and everything into a given project with given ends” (211). As a regime of power that thrives on the belief of government “in the name of our own freedom (we are expected to be free, self-reliant rational choosers)” (Newman 2016, 23) neoliberalism naturalizes the presumption that freedom is being free from the constraint of being-with-others, and that it is entirely legitimate to crave for more of this freedom. Conversely, and as we take a stand towards the conditions of our shared vulnerability and the unavoidable relationships with others, what role are we willing to take while confronting the unequal distribution of privilege and of risks across the world, across species? Ultimately, the questions posed in these paragraphs speak to the necessary task of building critical pedagogies that address our implication within the processes of separation dividing us from others/otherness outlined previously. It is with the intent of leaving these questions open that I turn to van Neerven’s speculative fictional landscapes.

4. *Utopia/Dystopia*

As a kind of “militant literature” focusing on the relationship between textuality and the environment (Salvadori 2015, 11) ecocriticism has proved a valuable tool for feminist interventions aiming both to interrogate its masculinist bias and to relocate its roots outside the realm of the *man*-made (see in particular, Gaard, Opperman and Estok 2013). A feminist ecocritical standpoint assumes that the given understandings of text, biology, matter, discourse, femininity and masculinity are untenable to articulate contemporary experience (3). Ecofeminist literary criticism lies at the intersection of the desire for a healthy world (expressed as rejection of the human/non-human dualism), the idea of a collective vulnerability that is constitutive of humans’ location in the world and of their relationships with others (and with other beings), and non-violence. From this point of view, it is a form of consciousness-raising amidst the enduring exploitation of nature being put at the service of a self-justifying culture of individualised and corporate accumulation – of capital, bodies, resources, lands. In Australia, which provides the setting for the empirical case examined here, Salleh Ariel’s *Ecofeminism as Politics: nature, Marx and the postmodern* (1997) is still considered a key text in ecofeminist literary criticism (Alloun 2015)¹⁵, and the leading “Australian Feminist Studies”

¹⁴The present conditions of precarity and vulnerability, addressed within the context of the shaping of collective forms of resistance are described in Butler (2015).

¹⁵Alloun Esther’s essay, provides an excellent, though brief historical overview of ecofeminist criticism in Australia.

journal often features interdisciplinary contributions in this field. Of particular interest for a perspective that frames the nature/culture dualism within the reality of women's bodies seen as exploitable "resources" to meet the economic demands of (a culture of) progress is the work of Australian researchers on transnational feminisms Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby (2014)¹⁶.

Van Neerven's *Heat and Light* expands on the meaning of Australian-ness and Indigeneity, also through exploring what queer and lesbian experiences may bring to these very categories, as explained later on. Part of this process involves a strategic use of language and the ensuing (mis)recognitions. This is shown, for instance, by one of the conversations Larapinta and Kaden have, during which they discuss sexual orientation(s):

'And your sexual identity?' She is really in the mood for grilling me.
'Queer, I guess.' I say. 'I know it's an old-fashioned word...'
'That is fine. I do not know the common usage of words. They are bricks, aren't they?'
'Some words are loaded,' I continue. 'Will *always be loaded*.'
'I must return to my reading,' she says. (2014a, 95; my emphasis)

In what follows, I look at Kaden's own journey within the short story, "Water" – touching on her desire for social and environmental justice, her lesbianism, and her own family, especially on her Aboriginal father's side –, across which she acquires a "militant consciousness" whose seeds are to be traced in her singular relationship with these aspects. My reading of some key elements in van Neerven's work will then be weaved through ongoing concerns with equality, freedom, social and environmental justice, and the defence of indigenous rights to sovereignty alongside our positioning in relation to them.

Ethical responsibility and accountability may involve adjusting laboriously the practises used to name difference(s) while eschewing the burdens of fetishisation entailed in the process. In this case, Kaden's encounter with the plantpeople at first creates tension and uneasiness (75); their marked body (they have "green human-like heads", and are "a very intelligent species", 76) and habits (like, "walk[ing] through water", 89) at times unsettle her, in spite of herself. The ensuing tensions are more evident in the intimacy of her relationship with Larapinta – she has "wild frondlike hair across her face,

¹⁶Witnessing the contemporary collapse of the confines between production and reproduction, in their book, *Clinical Labor* Cooper and Waldby discuss "bio-economy" as structuring form of consumption for global transnational markets. The capitalisation of women's bodies at work in the trade of oocytes, surrogate motherhood, assisted reproduction, and regenerative medicine are the case studies the authors employ to illustrate the emergence of "clinical labour". Cooper and Waldby document the ways neoliberalism thrives on reproduction and the reproductive labour of women turning it into yet another source of production/consumption, while at the same time confirming the persistence of classed inequalities and imperial and colonial narratives.

bleached pale pink in parts”, “a face that’s like me and you. With space for two small eyes and a hint of a mouth”, “the body [...] shaped like a post, covered in prickles except for the hands” (78), “an awkward tangle of roots and limbs and when she walks she cracks like an old stair railing” (87). Kaden’s lesbianism and Aboriginal background have taught her that words can be powerful instruments of violence and subjugation, as in the previous exchange, and that the dominant gaze functions within a binary framework that provides legitimation to its colonising practices. This is what happens, for instance, during a conversation she has with her boss Milligan: unable to conceive of sexuality and gender in terms other than dichotomous ones, he sees Kaden’s sexual attraction for Larapinta as an infringement of the boundaries of the “natural” and as naive fascination for the “unnatural” (97). This is in tension with Kaden’s progressive self-questioning about the meaning of the “human”, about the place of its other, and about the relation of the human and the other-than-human: through reiterated questions – “Am I blind not to notice much difference?” (78); “To understand, I give myself the first question. What is a plant? A plant is a living organism”; “The second question is harder. It is. What is a human?” (96-97) – addressed as much to herself as to us, Kaden’s interpellation seems to work on two interrelated levels. Firstly, it functions to remind us that the possibility of existence of an outside to dualistic binary thinking/living is inherently threatening for the rationality of power of white, male, heteronormative sexuality; non-hegemonic knowledges are thus erased, the more so with regard to their complexities and different locations. Secondly, Kaden’s interpellation works to insist on science fiction literatures as practices of world-making, of positing practices of knowing *otherwise*. Haraway’s insight is apt here, so as to remember that at stake in science fiction narratives is both “storytelling and fact telling; it [Science Fiction] is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come” (2016, 31). In “Water”, this patterning, or map-making involves Kaden’s realisation that “intimacy with strangers” (in this case, with other beings) can act as disseminator of personal and collective change, so that alternative stories can be (re)told and *equal* futures be lived: “In the dark of the room, her shadow enclosed into mine, she could be anything” (van Neerven 2014a, 103) – where “anything” challenges us into a more loving freedom/more freedom to love.

A feminist ecocritical perspective is useful to look at the disruption of gendered norms as it is performed in the short story. Through Kaden’s eyes, we learn that for the plantpeople gender is a fiction belonging specifically to humans: she finds out that “the females and the males are identical. She has no breasts. I understand they are ungendered; see, their gender is not predetermined and is only communicated” (78). This deviation from the norms sanctioning bodily appearance and codification is replaced with the

perception that a sense of collectivity and togetherness is embodied in the very social fabric of the plantpeople: "They are a community with no hierarchy of age or gender. They stand in a row, long and thin figures. They make the sky seem pale and *the individual seem insignificant*" (88; emphasis added). In this passage and elsewhere in van Neerven's collection, representations of non-normative sexual and gender identities are meant to "expand perhaps a perception of what it means to be Aboriginal Australian", as she has admitted in interview, then to contribute to make the "young, female, urban, queer" integral part of today's understanding of indigeneity (in Menzies-Pike 2015, n.p.). Taking its lead from van Neerven's point(s) here, my concluding remarks address the issue of our positioning towards a pedagogy of difference that takes into consideration issues of responsibility, indigenous sovereignty, and the category of indigeneity as it has been dealt with by recent literature in this and other related fields.

Van Neerven is not alone in attributing reluctantly the status of a category to Indigenous writing (in Menzies-Pike 2015), and in particular, the discussion here brings us close to the rapport between Native American and Indigenous Studies and Settler Colonial Studies as it has been addressed in a recent essay by Josette Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016). Expanding on Patrick Wolfe's understanding of settler colonialism as "structure, not an event", namely, that one of the greatest threats for the survival of our awareness of colonialism is that we give way to the "myth that indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended" (n.p.), Kauanui contends that settler colonialism actually holds on to indigeneity in order to be able to accomplish its mandate, while existing in radical opposition to it:

In terms of both cultural and political struggles, one of the tenets of any claim to indigeneity is that indigenous sovereignty – framed as a responsibility more often than a right – is derived from original occupancy, or at least prior occupancy. Like race, indigeneity is a socially constructed category rather than one based on the notion of immutable biological characteristics. (*Ibidem*)

Kauanui's questioning of the foundations of indigeneity as category to address recalcitrant practices of imperialism in the present is illuminating for our purposes. Used as method, it can lead us to see in van Neerven's strategic use of the term "Indigenous" to describe the subjective and political content of a literary work a warning against potentially closed-off opportunities, and opening "only [to] a certain amount of space or number of positions for Indigenous writers" (in Menzies-Pike 2015, n.p.).

As shown in the first part of the paper, the Western logic of a white heteropatriarchal system and its materialisations has worked historically to foreclose making space for women to liberate the erotic. In "Water", Kaden's mobilisation of the erotic is articulated from the situated perspective of an

aboriginal coalitional politics of alliance, breaking through with the power of the planned attack at the very end of the story, whose outcome can only be imagined, as in felt. This time, Kaden is working for the plantpeople, and through them, for her own family, for her ancestors – we are led to believe – for the cross-generational and trans-national collectivities constituted by traditional owners of lands, alive or ghosts/spirits (Haraway 2016, 138):

They move in formations, in shapes similar to the last letter of the alphabet. Larapinta is one of them. There must be thousands. I step onto the ferry and stand next to my uncle. The water is rising around us and I can feel the force in the leaping waves and what we're about to do. (van Neerven 2014a, 122-123)

This suspended revolutionary act can be read as incitement to relinquish a neoliberal conception of responsibility as individual self-sufficiency, and instead to embrace a form of “response-ability”, or “capacity to respond” (Haraway 2016, 28, 78)¹⁷.

The opening of “Water” introduces us to a vivid image of economic exploitation of natural resources that also speaks to colonial and imperial histories; as Kaden stares at the landscape from on board the ferry taking her to the company’s headquarters on Russell Island, off the actual Brisbane coast, “the buildings, the smoke from the industry tankers” (van Neerven 2014a, 70) weaken her expectations about uncontaminated nature. Our desire for ecological justice should take into account first and foremost what the late Val Plumwood (2008) defined as the “shadow places” living and being exploited so that other places become part of an ecologically-minded attachment to “dwelling”. The existence of this dualism is telling of the impossibility to heal the damages of the past unless we consciously built this repair as ongoing process of questioning and imagining of unforeseen survival strategies; and that, as we do so, we never let go of the one question, namely, “what are we willing to do to survive and help others to survive?” (van Neerven, in Sydney Writers’ Festival).

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¹⁷ “Response-ability is about both absence and presence, killing and nurturing, living and dying – and remembering who lives and who dies and how in the string figures of natural-cultural history” (Haraway 2016, 28).

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