

Tide Turning

Literary Imaginations of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary

Inaugural-Dissertation

zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie

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vorgelegt von

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aus

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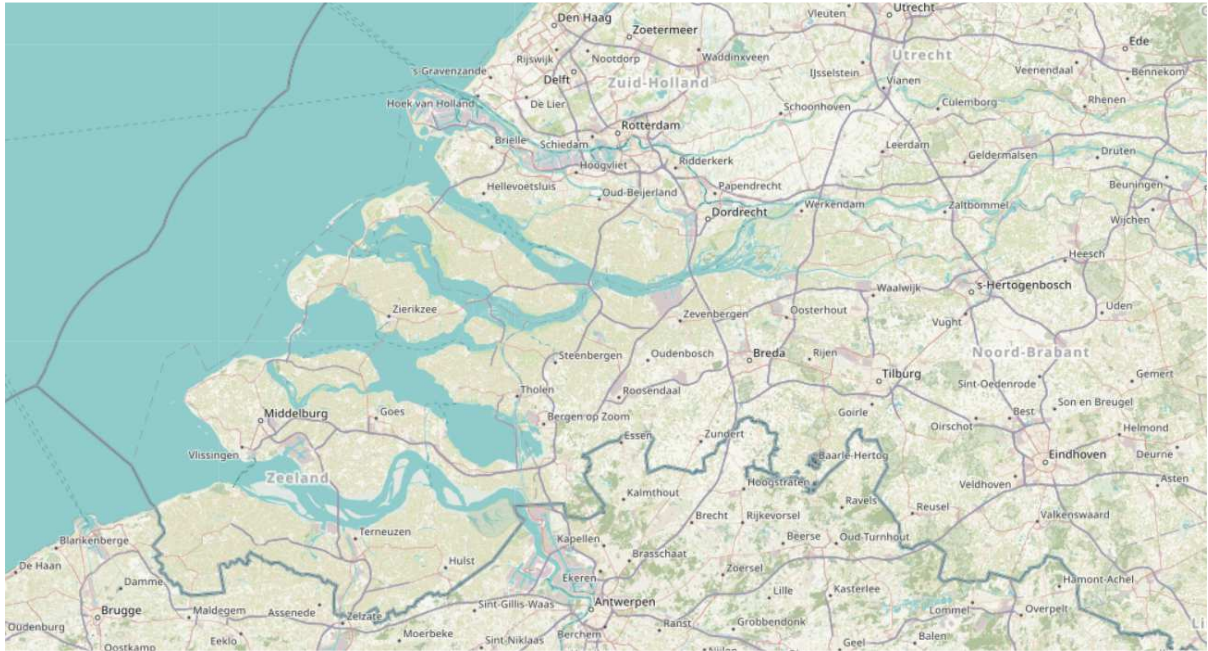
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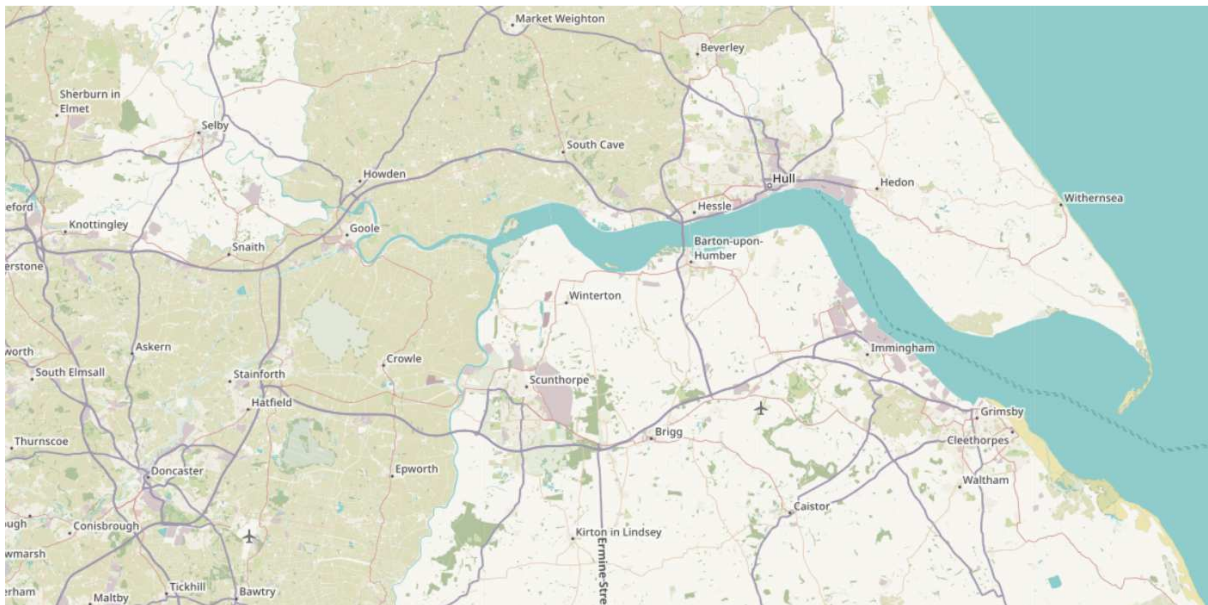
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Contents

Acknowledgements	8
Introduction	10
Dutch Nature	13
English Nature	19
Nature in the Anthropocene.....	26
River Mouths Speaking.....	38
“The Tide Had Turned”: Remembering and Reimagining the River	47
A Theatre in the Port.....	51
A Vibrant Nature	60
Paradise Lost.....	66
Paradise Regained?.....	72
“This Kingdom of Metaphor”: Imagination and Materiality in the Construction of Place.....	80
Empty Lands and Open Skies.....	84
Poetry and Politics	92
Poem and Place.....	100
Materiality and Degradation	107
Spectres of Landscape	120
Estuarial Poetry.....	125
Places of Empathy	133
“And What Is Real?": Landscaping in the Anthropocene.....	143
Creating a Garden	147
Hortus Conclusus.....	155
The Urban Sublime.....	162
Dreams and Reality.....	168
“The Wind that Shapes Spurn, Shapes All of Us”: The Perennial Transformations of Spurn.....	179
Shifting Lands.....	183
Tide and Time	189
Landscape and Memory	197
Boundaries and Transformations	204
“The Things that are to Come”: Ways to a New Nature.....	211
The Park on the Motorway	215
Landscape and Text.....	223
Tradition and Modernity	236

Frames and Layers	246
Conclusion.....	257
Summary in English	268
Summary in German	274
Maps.....	281
Works Cited.....	284

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Introduction

“It’s just like the real thing, this nature. They really did a beautiful job,”¹ my father said, one day as we took a walk in a polder close to my parents’ home. We were walking on a path amongst trees, shrubs and herbs, enjoying being outside in the mild Dutch winter. Until the end of the second half of the 20th century, the area we traversed had been agricultural land. In the late 1950s, the port of Rotterdam was expanding, while the nearby city of Vlaardingen hoped to construct a new residential area to accommodate its increasing number of inhabitants who found new jobs in the port. As the port was dredged, Vlaardingen accepted the sludge and deposited it in the area designated for construction, called *Broekpolder*. The sludge was supposed to provide a solid basis for the new residential area. It raised the terrain about five to seven metres above its surrounding areas, to keep it high and dry in case of floods. However, it was soon discovered that the sludge contained chlorinated cyclic hydrocarbons that made the soil unfit for construction (“Toen” n.pag.). What was supposed to have been a landmark of urbanisation and post-war progress became a wasteland.

Considered unusable, the land was abandoned, and before long, plants and trees started to grow. In some places, they were actively planted, in others, they appeared naturally. As vegetation returned, the *Broekpolder* quickly developed into a green space that the citizens of Vlaardingen regarded with ever increasing enthusiasm. After a years-long community organised effort, the city finally abandoned construction plans for the *Broekpolder*. The exaltation of citizens about their *Broekpolder* was unstoppable. Soon, new plans were devised to rewild the *Broekpolder*. Many of the poplar trees that dominated the landscape were cut down to allow for more biodiversity and large herbivores such as the Scottish Highlander were introduced. The most densely forested area was renamed *De Ruigte* (the Roughness or Wilderness).

¹ Het is net echt, he, die natuur. Dat hebben ze wel mooi gedaan.

The history of the *Broekpolder*, as well as citizens' perceptions of their environment there, reveal ideas about nature in the Netherlands and about nature in urban and industrial regions more generally. I use the *Broekpolder* as a starting point to explore imaginations of nature in the context of two industrialised river mouths: the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta in which the *Broekpolder* is located, and the Humber Estuary in England. Both river mouths empty into the North Sea, and they have strong geographical, historical and social links, as I will explain later in this introduction. Both suffered socially and economically from the developments that radically changed their appearances in the 20th century. As a result, they are traditionally regarded as dilapidated and undesirable places.

In this thesis, I explore ideas about nature, environment, landscape and place in both literary and non-literary texts. I use these texts to understand how the drastic changes inflicted on the environment by humans have shaped their ideas of the world they inhabit, what they think about its past and how they imagine its future. I read literary and non-literary texts in conjunction to discuss similarities and differences in their messages and implications. Contrasting the two types of texts allows me to explore the political nature of the literary imagination as well as the imaginations that lie behind more seemingly straightforward and practically oriented communications about physical landscapes.

In the context of the changing environment, I will discuss how people imagine the appearance of their specific natural landscapes and how they establish connections with the places they inhabit in a more abstract sense. Although both the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary have seen far-reaching changes in their landscapes, which have become increasingly urbanised and industrialised over the past decades, I show that ideas about nature are important especially in these types of areas, and that the connection between people and their landscapes is very strong there. These ideas about and connections with landscape in environments that have been radically altered by humans are informative for

understanding landscape in the contemporary era. As our environment continues to change and the earth's appearance, processes and living conditions are influenced by humans to ever greater extents, we have to increasingly make decisions that influence the ways in which it will change. These decisions affect ever more aspects of our lives, ranging from the products we buy, the modes of transportation we choose, the way we construct and remodel our homes and gardens to the political parties we vote for. Therefore, it is important that we take into account both the political implications of these connections and their related imaginations. At the same time, we need to be aware of the different imaginations that lie at the basis of political interventions.

Dutch Nature

In the *Broekpolder*, visitors can experience nature as an entity that is both organic and artificial. Although it is recognised as nature by many citizens, including my father, because of its vegetation and animal life, the fact that it owes its existence to humans is not just a historical detail. It is in fact very much part of the imagination of the place. Citizens are aware of the recent deposition of the soil and its toxicity and of the fact that the landscape is still new; the final end to the construction plans in 2009 is a fairly recent memory. The awareness of the long history of culture and human activity in the area is designed to go deeper than this, as it is directly referenced in the *Broekpolder's* present appearance. Today, the area hosts an archaeological education facility where buildings and landscapes are recreated that existed in the region in different time periods, from the Neolithic to the early modern era. The paths that traverse the area, many of which are asphalted, have names that refer to the archaeological cultures that existed in this place during the prehistoric era, such as *Klokbekerp pad* (Bell-Beaker Path), *Bronstijdpad* (Bronze Age Path), *Bijlpad* (Axe Path) and even *Vlaardingen-Cultuurpad* (Vlaardingen Culture Path).

The Vlaardingen Culture was a Neolithic culture that existed in the area that later became Vlaardingen between 3,500 BC and 2,500 BC. Objects from this culture were first found in Vlaardingen in 1958, coincidentally the same year that sludge from the port of Rotterdam was first deposited in the *Broekpolder*. Later, Vlaardingen Culture artefacts were also found in other parts of the Netherlands and in Belgium. The culture existed near the coast and it was distinct from other cultures in north-western Europe because of its comparatively larger dependence on hunting and gathering rather than agriculture.

The *Broekpolder*'s references to and representations of the past societies that existed in the region remind visitors that the influence of humans on the landscape of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta has been profound for millennia: agriculture has been practised here since 5,000 BC, and the oldest “‘water management works’ ... such as drainage systems, thrown up living mounds and protective dykes” (Nienhuis 17) date from pre-Roman times. Environmental scientist Piet H. Nienhuis concludes that the appearance of the Delta landscape is very much indebted to human activity:

The rough outline of the basins of Rhine and Meuse is the work of nature, the deposition of the ice-pushed ridges and the cover-sand layers during the Saalien ice age, 250,000 to 140,000 years ago, and the steady sea-level rise after the last Weichselien ice age, from roughly 15,000 years ago onwards. The shaping and re-shaping, gain and loss of land, exploiting or counteracting the forces of nature is the work of man. Eventually, the Delta is a man-made country. (17)

The strong awareness that humans have long influenced the appearance of the Dutch landscape has both shaped the cultural imagination and impacted practical decision-making in this country. The history of nature conservation in the Netherlands has involved a high degree of human interference from its very beginnings. Henny van der Windt argues that before the Second World War, salt marshes and dunes were recognised as “original nature” (176,

translations from the Dutch are my own unless otherwise stated)² but primæval forests constituted an ideal nature that environmentalists ardently pursued. The organisation *Natuurmonumenten* (Nature Monuments), the most prominent conservation society in the Netherlands since its founding in 1905, planted different species of trees in forested areas it acquired both “to beautify the forest” (176)³ and “as a step towards the natural forest as it had once been” (176)⁴. Jac. P. Thijssse, a prominent conservationist and co-founder of *Natuurmonumenten*, argued for the construction of “real natural forest landscapes” (qtd in Van der Windt 179)⁵ like ones that had previously been constructed in the east of the Netherlands, which he imagined would be “so beautiful and rich, as they have never been witnessed before, more beautiful perhaps than the famed German woods” (qtd in Van der Windt 179)⁶.

The high degree of human interference in Dutch nature has also strongly influenced the cultural and literary imaginations of nature in the Netherlands. Because much of the country has seen human alterations for millennia, which are pervasive even in places that are now nature reserves, ideas of nature as a wilderness are largely absent from the cultural imagination in the Netherlands, and they do not play an important role in most Dutch literature. Literary critic Isabel Hoving, citing Dutch author Maarten ‘t Hart, states that Dutch literature is primarily a “literature of city dwellers” (167). The Dutch literary imagination held that nature was foreign, removed from society and non-existent in the Netherlands. Hoving explains: “Natural environment and human society were seen as at odds with each other, and Dutch literature lingered on the ugliness of its destroyed landscapes. ... nature was generally seen as an organic, timeless realm outside society – a realm that in the Netherlands was virtually destroyed” (Hoving 169).

² oorspronkelijke natuur.

³ teneinde het bos te verfraaien

⁴ als een stap naar het natuurlijke bos zoals dat er ooit geweest was.

⁵ echt natuurlijke boschlandschappen

⁶ zoo mooi en rijk, als ze nog nooit zijn aanschouwd, mooier wellicht dan de befaamde Germaansche wouden

Indeed, one of the most famous poems in the Dutch canon, J.C. Bloem's sonnet "De Dapperstraat," which Hoving also refers to, asserts: "Leave nature to those empty or contented" (1)⁷ because after all, "what's left of nature in this land? / A little wood, the size of a postage stamp, / A hill, residences stuck onto it" (2-4)⁸. The speaker presents himself as one of the city dwellers that typify Dutch culture:

Give me the grey urban streets
 The water firmly held between brick moorings,
 The clouds, so beautiful when framed
 In attic windows, they drift along the sky. (5-8)⁹

Not only does he declare himself to be unconcerned with nature, he forcefully asserts his preference for urban landscapes and being inside rather than outdoors.

Hoving argues that Dutch authors have reacted to this dominant narrative in various ways, one of which manifests itself in a recognition and appreciation of the materiality of the landscape, and human entanglements with their environments: "Men consist of their memory, ... and memory is spatial; therefore, landscape and the human beings who inhabit the landscape are one" (170). She sees this reaction as part of a wider movement towards a comprehensive understanding of the "aesthetic, cultural, social, phenomenological, and ecological significations of nature" (170). The Dutch texts that are discussed in this work – 't Hart's *De Jacobs ladder*, Alex Boogers' *Alleen met de goden* and songs by broeder Dieleman from the albums *Alles is ijdelheid*, *Gloria* and *Uut de bron* – can all be read as instances of this reaction.

By reading these texts to tease out ideas about nature in the Netherlands, I aim to provide insights into the limits of the imagination of nature, but also of its scope and

⁷ Natuur is voor tevreden en of legen.

⁸ wat is natuur nog in dit land? Een stukje bos, ter grootte van een krant, / Een heuvel met wat villaatjes ertegen.

⁹ Geef mij de grauwe, stedelijke wegen, / De' in kaden vastgeklonken waterkant, / De wolken, nooit zo schoon dan als ze, omrand / Door zolderramen, langs de lucht bewegen.

inventiveness. Each of these texts, in different ways, display a tension between appreciating the different meanings of nature in their environments and realising that the green spaces they enjoy are declining, have been declining and will continue declining in the future. While they respond to this tension in different ways, they all suggest that even as the environment changes, new ways of experiencing and appreciating nature may be realised in the future, although this nature will look quite different than the one we may expect. In a time when our environment is under pressure and ideas about nature are questioned and contested across the globe, ideas of different, future natures are important, if not necessary ones to consider.

H. Marsman's famous poem "Memory of Holland," which was voted "Poem of the Century" in a public vote in 1999, demonstrates the deep connections between people and their environment, and the imagination of landscape in the Netherlands. This poem presents an image of a rural landscape and, through its title and first line, equates the very idea of Holland with that of human influence on the landscape; all of the features the speaker mentions in the first 16 lines have either been altered or constructed by humans, but no people are depicted. Rather, their presence is implied by the landscape, suggesting that humans and the environment are an inseparable entity:

Thinking of Holland

I see wide-flowing rivers

slowly traversing

infinite plains,

inconceivable

rarefied poplars

like lofty plumes

on the skyline in lanes;

and submerged in the vastness

of unbounded spaces
 the farmhouses
 strewn over the land,
 tree clumps, villages,
 truncated towers,
 churches and elm trees –
 all wondrously planned. (1-16; translation by Paul Vincent)¹⁰

The poem's typography of a tall, slim text reflects the shape of the river as well as the poplars and church towers that dominate the Dutch landscape.

At the end of the poem, the water of both the river and the sea emerges as the dominant force in the landscape:

The sky hangs low
 and slowly the sun by
 mists of all colours
 is stifled and greyed
 and in all the regions
 the voice of the water
 with its endless disasters
 is feared and obeyed. (17-24)¹¹

The passive voice that is employed here prevents the reader from directly encountering the people in question; their worries and actions are presented as distant and abstract. Rather than obscuring them, however, this stylistic choice again makes it clear that humans are

¹⁰ Denkend aan Holland / zie ik brede rivieren / traag door oneindig / laagland gaan, / rijen ondenkbaar / ijle populieren / als hoge pluimen / aan den einder staan; / en in de geweldige / ruimte verzonken / de boerderijen / verspreid door het land, / boomgroepen, dorpen, / geknotte torens, / kerken en olmen / in een groots verband.

¹¹ de lucht hangt er laag / en de zon wordt er langzaam / in grijze veelkleurige / dampen gesmoord, / en in alle gewesten / wordt de stem van het water / met zijn eeuwige rampen / gevreesd en gehoord.

everywhere in this landscape; their presence permeates the prospect to its very core.

Landscape and people are completely intertwined; they are entirely inseparable, and because of this, not only the people, but the entire country, including its rivers, poplars and churches, “fear[s] and obey[s]” the water (24). The people *are* the country and the country *is* its people.

In this way, the poem provides a commentary on Tim Ingold’s notion of the *dwelling perspective*. Ingold describes this as “a perspective that treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence. From this perspective, the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity” (153). In Marsman’s poem, this perspective clearly arises, but alongside it we also see its inverse: the landscape is fundamentally dwelled-in and cannot be seen separately from its human inhabitation. The poem thus reflects on the Dutch environmental history of a landscape defined to a large extent by human activity. On the other side of the North Sea, in England, we find landscapes that have similarly been radically altered by humans, but the role of nature in the literary imagination is quite different here. Far from being absent in English literary works, nature has an important position in the works of many writers and is admired as well as considered critically.

English Nature

In England, like in the Netherlands, the landscape is defined by humans who have inscribed their presence on it. During a research fellowship at the University of Leeds, I walked the Stanza Stones Trail, a west Yorkshire hiking trail dotted with large rocks bearing poems about water in a number of its different appearances, including snow, dew, mist and rain. The poems were written by Simon Armitage and carved into the stones by Pip Hall. While the verses inscribed on the stones are uniquely elaborate and poetic markers in the landscape, they are far from the only ones present along the trail carrying messages for hikers and

influencing the way they see the landscape. A multitude of cairns, piles of stones collected by travellers over the centuries to guide the way of those who follow in their footsteps, bear witness to those who have come before, reminding travellers of both past and future hikers. Stones with road names, topographical data (“The most easterly point in the County of Lancashire”), the massive Stoodley Pike Monument and benches carrying dedications to people who walked the Moors before (and, according to one particularly disturbing one, still do!) all inscribe meanings on the landscape, inviting the walker to read the landscape and to remember its past inhabitants.

Structures of larger scale also guided and punctuated my walks and they are also an impressive testament to the shaping force of humans on the landscape. During my walks, I followed the Leeds and Liverpool Canal for some kilometres and crossed a multitude of roads, including the M62 that connects Liverpool with Hull, walked on asphalt roads, paths marked by slabs of old industrial stones or simply trampling by predecessors’ feet. Each of my walks was preceded and followed by a train ride from and to my home in Leeds. The significance of the lines created by these different structures is more than the sum of its parts: while they all function individually as indicators of human activity, as a collective they shape a great part of the English landscape, in which linear features of one kind or another are practically inescapable. In fact, ecologist and author Hugh Warwick suggests in his book about the influence of linear features on English wildlife that “It is rare to discover a view of the landscape untouched by our lines. So dominant a feature have they become that they have transformed our landscape into something new” (2).

Less obviously human-made features in the landscape are also deeply indebted to human intervention. As local historian W.G. Hoskins notes, “Not much of England, even in its more withdrawn, inhuman places, has escaped being altered by man in some subtle way or other, however untouched we may fancy it is at first sight” (19). Indeed, if we consider a

scale even larger than the grand structures of roads, railways and canals, we see that the Yorkshire landscape at large, including large parts that the Stanza Stones Trail crosses, has, to a great extent, been shaped by agriculture. Even its distinctive heather moors largely owe their existence to humans. Although these moors may “offer the uninitiated little evidence of human activity” (Richards 11), they are in fact regularly burned to encourage growth of new heather and to prevent tree growth so conditions stay optimal for grouse shooting. The moors are therefore “a human creation, resulting from the efforts of moorland managers to provide ideal conditions for the shoot” (Richards 14). Without these interventions, the moors would grow into pinewoods. Rather than wild nature, “Such moors today are thus a totally artificial landscape, created by tree felling and maintained by regular burning” (Stott qtd in Richards 14).

Both Warwick and Hoskins emphasise the long history of human influence on the landscape, and note that many of the English landscape features visible today are ones that humans constructed centuries or millennia ago. The ancient histories of human-made structures of all the above discussed scales reflect this. On the smallest, very local scale, we may consider south-west England, where farmsteads have been rebuilt in the same location over long periods of time, so that structures that exist today “represent original Celtic farms which have been continuously occupied ever since their beginning in pre-Roman or Romano-British times” (Hoskins 24). On the larger scale of linear features, it is significant that in south-east England, the boundaries of plots of land used for agriculture in the early Iron Age can still be identified in the landscape (Hoskins 24). Indeed, Hoskins states that “The immense continuity of English boundaries is fascinating” (237). Hoskins and Warwick both note that some English roads date back to the Bronze or Iron Age (234; 103). Even when their appearance has changed dramatically, modern roads are often located in the same place as ancient roads were; indeed, Francis Pryor suggests that “The layout of our modern trunk

road and motor-way network would not have seemed at all unfamiliar to a Roman Britain [sic]" (qtd in Warwick 176-177). Finally, on the scale of the broader landscape, it should be noted that draining of land in Britain started as early as the Roman period (Warwick 59). Heathlands and moorlands, both of which are important landscape features on the island of Great Britain, are the result of woodland clearances that began in the Neolithic period and by the end of the Bronze Age, "About half of England had been stripped of its trees and all present British moorlands had been instigated" (Evans 14).

Nature in contemporary Britain not only exists as part of a landscape that has seen human interference, in fact, it owes its shape and existence to humans. David Evans notes that many plants and animals that thrive in Britain depend on human activity for their existence (263-264) and that across the country entirely new nature reserves are being constructed (264-265). Indeed, F. Moriarty suggests: "There is probably nowhere in Great Britain where the flora is truly wild, in the sense that there is no part of the flora that has been unaffected by man's activities. A lot of our flora is semi-natural, in the sense that it has come of its own accord, but that is not quite the same thing" (qtd in Evans 264). Similarly, N.M. Moore, speaking of the designation of sites as protected areas, characterises his work as a conservationist not so much in terms of protection as in terms of creation:

I know few pleasures greater than standing in a newly established nature reserve which one has helped to set up. You feel that you have made a special link with the plants and animals around you and with the people who will come to look at their descendants in the future. It is difficult to analyse why this is so satisfying. It is not just because a conservation battle has been won. I suspect that the underlying pleasure – relief is almost a better word – is connected with a desire to produce something permanent in today's world, in which so much else is subject to unpredictable change. Setting up a nature reserve has similarities with painting a picture or writing a

scientific paper: a great deal of hard work has been done, obstacles have been overcome and, at the end, something new has been created. One has impinged on the future as well as the present. (67-68)

Although both the Dutch and English landscapes are marked by a long and profound history of human intervention, the way they are reflected in the literary imagination clearly differs. In the Netherlands, the sustained and profound influence of humans on their landscape and the resulting lack of a wilderness led to an absence of nature in the literary imagination and a preoccupation with city life. Conversely, in English literature, as Raymond Williams argues, stories of country life dominated the English literary landscape into the 20th century, long after its society had become mostly urban and industrial (3), and nature remained central to some of English literature's most famous voices, from William Wordsworth and John Clare, John Ruskin and William Morris¹² to W.H. Auden and Ted Hughes. In fact, the past decades have seen a flourishing of literary non-fiction that is commonly grouped together as *the New Nature Writing*, a genre that is preoccupied with “new ways of thinking about landscape, nature, place, culture and the range of interconnections that these share” (Smith 1).

Far from being a celebration of wilderness, the genre of New Nature Writing is firmly rooted in Hoskins' idea of the British landscape as “a palimpsest of intricate historical narratives in which human life and culture, geology, forests, climate and wildlife were deeply intertwined” (Smith 20), and the increased understanding of the interrelations between humans and their environment in the 21st century:

many of the writers ... revisit familiar geographies with an open mind, to bear witness, reconnect, rethink and rewrite. However, the post-natural view of landscape

¹² For more on nature in the work of these four authors, see Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Imagination*.

is not reconfigured by mapping a change in ‘Nature-as-object’ alone. It is not about changing the definition of ‘Nature’ but rather about changing our understanding of the whole relationship between ‘Nature’ and ‘Human’ that constitutes ‘Nature-as-object’ in the first place. (Smith 15)

Despite the different roles of nature in Dutch and English literary history, this contemporary preoccupation, then, is similar to the one Hoving describes as being present in Dutch literature in which the relations between nature and humans are emphasised.

The English texts discussed in this thesis – poetry by Sean O’Brien from the collections *The Drowned Book*, *The Indoor Park* and *November* and by Peter Didsbury from *The Classical Farm* and *That Old-Time Religion*, as well as Ian McMillan’s long poem “East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation” – all engage with the renegotiation of the relationship between humans and their environment, although they express their concerns in very different ways. In discussing them, I will explore the different ways people establish relations with their environment and the various aspects of their lives that are influenced by these connections. They are complex, meaningful but also precarious: as the environment changes, these connections do too in ways that can be inspiring but also upsetting. In this way, the poems show that the changing environment does not only influence the landscapes people inhabit, but their own place in the world and their very identities.

One of English literature’s most famous poems on nature, indeed one of the most famous poems in its literary history, has the complex relations between humans and nature at its heart. Wordsworth’s poem about daffodils presents an image of peaceful natural beauty, in which the speaker is entirely at home in his environment:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills
When all at once I saw a crowd,

A host, of golden daffodils;
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (6)

The reader is provided with much information regarding the landscape; there are trees, a lake and a great many bright yellow flowers, and the speaker firmly establishes his position as a human as an inextricable part of the landscape: he likens himself to the landscape feature of the clouds in the sky while he anthropomorphises the flowers by having them dance. Literary critic J.R. Watson notes that not only the relations between speaker and landscape come to the fore here, but the reader's position is tangled up with them. In the continuous renegotiation of the scene's characterisation, in which the daffodils are first figured as a crowd and then as a host, and the scenery marked by a lake, and then by trees, "We are continually invited to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct a portrayal of the daffodils" (8).

The poem both exemplifies the web of relations between human and non-human and shows how important the environment and its features are to the individual. The speaker is struck by the sight of the daffodils and invites the reader to be similarly enthralled by it. He asserts that the landscape's affect is a lasting one, as the daffodils continue to impress him long after he has left the scene. The poem is told in the past tense and the speaker is no longer observing the daffodils. Instead, he remarks that

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,
 And dances with the daffodils. (19-24)

It is the memory of the scene rather than the scene itself that is presented with an attentive eye for detail and emotive connections. In fact, while the speaker appreciated the moment of witnessing the daffodils and suggests that “A poet could not but be gay / In such a jocund company” (15-16), he admits that he did not expect himself to be so lastingly moved by the experience: although he “gazed – and gazed” (17), he “little thought / What wealth the show to me had brought” (17-18). It is only when he looks back on the scene afterwards that his “heart with pleasure fills / And dances with the daffodils” (23-24). The mostly regular iambic metre reinforces the “sprightly dance” (12) of the daffodils, and connects the reader to it, inviting her to sway along with the speaker and the flowers. Although Wordsworth’s short poem is much more spirited and cheerful than Marsman’s “Memory of Holland,” both poems are indicative of the deep relations between humans and nonhumans, and the profound meanings that can be identified in the landscape and affect the human observer.

Nature in the Anthropocene

Acknowledging the long histories of human influence on the environs of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary provides an insight into the many different and highly creative ways humans work in and with their environment, and how they imagine their landscape and negotiate the concept of nature. We now live in an era in which the boundaries of nature are continuously questioned and the influence of humans on both the local and global environment becomes more evident every day. The imaginations of landscape in places like the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary suggest ways in which we might think of landscape and nature in general at a time when the impact of humans on the environment continually increases. The framework of the discussions of nature, landscape and environment in this thesis requires some degree of scrutiny here, and to this purpose I will elaborate on two concepts that have been vital in my thinking and the writing of this thesis: *naturecultures* and *the Anthropocene*.

In the past decades, natural scientists have increasingly come to understand co-dependencies in the existence of different creatures, and the influence of human action on the global environment. Their discoveries have had a great influence on the work of researchers in the humanities and social sciences, who have critically examined these issues and productively questioned their implications for society at large. In Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*, she introduces the concept of *naturecultures* to assert that the coevolution of different species, including humans and nonhuman animals as well as bacteria, means that we cannot easily differentiate between different species. Instead, Haraway argues that we should see "the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture" (4) as inseparable. We increasingly understand, she continues, that in our world "There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. ... A bestiary of agencies, kinds of relating, and scores of time trump the imaginings of even the most baroque cosmologists" (6).

Although I do not refer to the concept of *naturecultures* after this paragraph, the term's implications for nature as an entity that has no clear boundaries and is influenced by both human and non-human agents, proves fundamental to this thesis. Indeed, any discussion of nature in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta or the Humber Estuary requires a definition of nature that allows for its entanglements with culture, since landscapes in both regions have long been influenced by humans and the appearance of nature is to a large extent dependent on human activity. The notion of *naturecultures* offers exactly this critical and bilateral way of thinking about the environment. Throughout this thesis, when I speak of nature, I use this word to refer to green spaces that are perceived as separate from centres of urban and industrial activity; however, this nature is always contingent on culture.

A similarly foundational concept for this thesis is the Anthropocene. This term was coined in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, who argue that humankind has become and “will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come” (18). This concept pushes Haraway’s notion of naturecultures even further: not only emphasising the entanglements of subjects and objects, but also collapsing the distinction between them. At the time of this writing, geologists have not made a formal decision on whether to accept the term “Anthropocene” to indicate a new geological epoch, but in 2016, a first step towards this decision was taken when the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy recommended to the International Geological Congress that this new epoch should be recognised.

Despite its lack of formal recognition in geology, the term *Anthropocene* has caught on in fields beyond the natural sciences, as evidenced by the titles of publications such as literary critic Adam Trexler’s *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, geographer Jamie Lorimer’s *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature* (both from 2015), and historians J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke’s *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* from 2014. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, literary critic Timothy Clark neatly summarises how the concept is generally used in the humanities:

The term has rapidly become adopted in the humanities in a sense beyond the strictly geological. Its force is mainly as a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale, notably climate change, ocean acidification, effects of overpopulation, deforestation, soil-erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems. (2)

In spite of the many problematic aspects of the term, some of which are discussed in this introduction, I use it throughout this thesis because it is the most powerful way of evoking both the many and diverse environmental problems the world faces today while also referring to the blurring of boundaries between categories previously thought of as separate, such as “culture and nature, fact and value, and ... the human and the geological or meteorological” (Clark 9). While the term is used in different ways by different scholars, I use it as a concise, readable and evocative way of referring to the current environmental predicament and the collapsing of distinctions between categories.

As with any widely used concept, the Anthropocene has been critiqued many times and in many ways, often very productively. The first major critique of the Anthropocene relates to its proposed temporalities. If the Anthropocene is to be accepted as a geologic epoch (or indeed even period or era, depending on how large its influence will turn out to be¹³), it needs an appropriate starting point. Suggestions for such a point range from “the first evidence of human modification of local environments” (Malhi 90) to sometime in the future, “when and if the Earth system passes a critical transition such as the climate system being tipped into an alternative state, and/or the biosphere being degraded sufficiently to mark a mass extinction” (Malhi 92). Although Crutzen first suggested the Industrial Revolution as the beginning of the Anthropocene (Malhi 83), today, the most widely accepted starting point is the Great Acceleration, the period of rapid technological and industrial expansion that followed the Second World War (Malhi 100).

The imaginations of landscape that are presented in the texts discussed in this thesis touch on several of the proposed beginnings of the Anthropocene. The rapid industrialisation of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary was symptomatic of the Great

¹³ Epoch, period and era are geologic units of time, each one is larger than the one before. Yadvinder Malhi suggests that “the magnitude and legacy of changes” (87) might be so far-reaching that they extend beyond the classification of epoch, and be so disruptive as to herald a new period or even era (87).

Acceleration, and this process reverberates through almost every text discussed in this thesis. However, the landscapes in which they are set also reflect the notion that human influence had profoundly shaped the environment for hundreds or even thousands of years before the Great Acceleration started. By recognizing both the long-term influence of humans on the environment and the effects of industrialisation, the texts from both the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary respond to different aspects of human history that are pertinent to the Anthropocene debate: both the long and enduring impact of human activity on the landscape, and the unique disruption caused by mid-20th century industrialisation.

I will use the term *Anthropocene* to refer to a time that began only recently, and picked up speed over the 20th century. In this way, the word *Anthropocene* emphasises the fairly recent disruption of climatological, geological and socio-economical standards that are relevant to this thesis and indeed characterise the current global crisis. Yet, in engaging with landscape transformations in both recent and much earlier history, I show how the awareness of each heritage can inform the understanding of the other. The knowledge that, in these regions, the landscape has been profoundly shaped by humans for much longer than written history may show that, while interventions in the environment are very important in making it safer and more habitable, and sometimes even more beautiful, they can also be extremely damaging. This understanding teaches us that even when landscapes have been profoundly altered by human intervention, this does not necessarily inhibit thinking about and imagining nature, green spaces and connections with landscapes.

The second main problem regarding the term *Anthropocene*, according to some critics, is that the term's focus on humanity as the marker for this epoch not only belies the complexity of the relations between humans and their environment, but it also neglects the distribution of power amongst humans. In the first case, it is falsely dualistic, and in the second, it is falsely monistic. Some critics suggest that the term implies a separation between

humans and their environment, an environment which humans have, seemingly independently, transformed and now have the responsibility to manage in an appropriate way – whatever this may mean. In this way, it obscures the long history of the ways humans and the earth have interacted with, influenced and shaped each other over many thousands of years in a relationship that is marked by co-dependency rather than unilateralism. It ignores the fact that that the Earth, rather than a passive victim of human actions is, and always has been “an active, local, limited, sensitive, fragile, quaking, and easily tickled envelope” (Latour 4).

While the term *Anthropocene* may be said to create a wrongful divide between humans and their planet, it is also critiqued for falsely implying that all humans belong to the same category of agents, share equal responsibility in the current crisis and will suffer equally from its effects. In this way, the term ignores the fact that while the causes of environmental degradation and climate change lie predominantly in the developed world, its effects will be and already are overwhelmingly felt by the least privileged members of society. The term thus

neglects humanity’s division into a multitude of unequal social groups, and the ways in which wealth, nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and so on mediate the relationships between those groups. In its simplifying view, the human species – the *anthropos* in general – becomes instead an abstract, homogeneous mass, collectively damaging the planet through vaguely defined habits of industrialization, resource exploitation, and overconsumption. Those habits are supposed to put at risk the well-being of the whole human race ... The Anthropocene wrongly implies that humanity is united in culpability, in vulnerability, and in the need for self-protection. (Davies 52-53)

Even in developed countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the Anthropocene clearly exposes class differences. Research and consultancy organisation CE Delft reports that the Dutch government's climate policy has a much larger impact on the disposable income of lower income households than on that of higher income households (7)¹⁴. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the climate change levy proportionally costs lower income households much more than higher income ones (Barrett and Owen n.pag.)¹⁵. In France, widespread discontent with this type of inequality has recently led to extended and violent protests. The *mouvement des Gilets jaunes* (yellow vests movement), which started in late 2018 and continues up to the time of writing, have taken to the streets of Paris in response to a proposed fuel tax that hits low-income households, especially in rural areas, disproportionately hard.

Considering that environmental degradation, climate change as well as environmental and climate policy are far too often unequal, it is vital that we do not see the Anthropocene as a monolith. While literary critic Rob Nixon does not denounce the term *Anthropocene*, he cautions that when employing this term we must remain aware of this fact and pay attention to the social, economic and political circumstances that divide different sections of humanity:

We need to acknowledge that the grand species narrative of the Anthropocene – this geomorphic “age of the human” – is gaining credence at a time when, in society after society, the idea of the human is breaking apart economically, as the distance between

¹⁴ According to CE Delft, in 2017, the highest 10% of incomes in the Netherlands spent 1.5% of their disposable income on climate policy, on which the lowest 10% spent 5.1% of their disposable income. This divide is expected to grow so that by 2050, the highest 10% of incomes will spend 5.7% of their disposable income on climate policy, while this will cost the lowest 10% of incomes 17.1% of their disposable income. CE Delft comments that “a burden like this seems hardly bearable for households with a low income” (7)

¹⁵ The climate change levy is raised on home heat and energy. John Barrett and Anne Owen argue that the lowest 10% of incomes spend 10% of their income on energy, while energy costs only cost 3% of the income of the highest 10% of incomes, so the levy proportionally impacts lower incomes more than higher incomes (n.pag.).

affluence and abandonment is increasing. It is time to remold the Anthropocene as a shared story about unshared resources. (Nixon “Great Acceleration” n.pag.)

Nixon implies that, if the concept is used in a nuanced way that is sensitive to the different circumstances of different groups of people, it may be productive. Indeed, Jeremy Davies argues that many different versions of the term *Anthropocene* exists, and while some may indeed dismiss the many intricacies of the power relations between humans amongst themselves and between humans and their environment, others use the term as an invitation to investigate exactly these. He asserts: “Any worthwhile version of the Anthropocene has to be underpinned by a historically nuanced account of how power relations operate, both across the earth system as a whole and between human beings” (56).

The environs of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary, both home to large ports and a number of cities that grew exponentially in the 20th century to house and provide for the workers in these ports, owe much of their appearance to modernisation and globalisation. In these regions, we can see not only the long relations between humans and their environment at play, but also the class issues that divide society here as they do across the globe, issues that remain of great importance in matters of climate and environment.

When I use the term *Anthropocene*, I therefore use it with the conviction that

The Anthropocene does not ... require a turn away from the critique of socio-political power relations (globalization, capitalism, imperialism, and so on) toward a universal history of the human species. Instead, to understand the Anthropocene means widening the focus of socio-political critique and working toward an *analysis of the power relations between geophysical actors, both human and nonhuman.*

(Davies 62)

The consideration in this thesis of the landscapes of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary, and their 20th century transformations, is thus not only an aesthetic

question, but an ethical one, too, both with regard to the landscape and to its human inhabitants.

The expansion of the ports, increasing industrialisation and urbanisation resulted from the modernisation and globalisation of the post-war economy, and they transformed the landscapes of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary into the ones we see today. These transformations that changed the landscape beyond recognition represent the global threat our planet faces today. As low-lying, fragile areas, the two river mouths find themselves facing the consequences of climate change, and as sea-level rise increases the chances of flooding, they require further intervention into their hydrologies and sea defences to protect human lives. Far from separating the human and nonhuman realms, the concept of the Anthropocene allows me to focus on the ways inhabitants connect with this landscape and imagine its appearance in past, present and future. I emphasise the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman agencies, and analyse how these operate in times when they are upended. By invoking the large timescale of the Anthropocene, this thesis is able to “stay with the crisis. To inhabit it and seek to mold it” (Davies 200). None of the texts I discuss show a way out of the current predicament, but reading them offers different perspectives with which we may face this long-term crisis and imagine meaningful relations with the environment even in times of profound change.

The role of class in the imagination of place is also highly relevant to this thesis. Not only are people in lower classes economically disadvantaged by climate policy, their imaginations, too, are disadvantaged. Writing literature is traditionally – though not exclusively – a pastime of the upper and middle classes. Furthermore, the relations between lower class people and their environment have traditionally often been neglected, as Williams writes:

Remember the argument was that the proletariat had no country, the factor which differentiated it from the property owning classes. But place has been shown to be a crucial element in the bonding process – more so perhaps for the working class than the capital-owning-classes – by the explosion of the international economy and the destructive effects of deindustrialization upon old communities. When capital has moved on, the importance of place is more clearly revealed. (qtd in D. Harvey 29)

Although social issues are not explicit in all texts discussed in this thesis, they are fundamental to the issues that the regions of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary face, and several characters portrayed in the literature, as well as their authors, have a working-class background. By showing in great detail the clear, strong and important attachments of people of working-class backgrounds to the places they inhabit and the creative ways in which they think through them, the literary texts discussed in this thesis show the vital importance of considering these relations to environmental politics.

The third and final problem regarding the concept of the Anthropocene relates to its political potency. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg suggest that Anthropocene scholarship that ignores social inequalities is not only simplistic and unjust in its recognition of the drivers of environmental degradation and climate change, but it also inhibits the possibility of change with its focus on the long history of human-made interventions in the environment. They argue that in this way: “species-thinking on climate change is conducive to mystification and political paralysis. It cannot serve as a basis for challenging the vested interests of business-as-usual” (67). Similarly, in a recently published paper, Erik Swyngedouw and Henrik Ernstson suggest that the concept of the Anthropocene and its emphasis on the entanglements between different beings is depoliticising and inhibits productive action. Essentially, the term’s endless interrelations do not allow for a creative outside opinion: “To put it simply, the effort to contain and transcend the nature-society split

or dualism through ontologies of internal relationality disavows the separation upon which relationality is necessarily constituted” (19). Instead, they argue for a more politically radical approach in which we acknowledge the inequalities that lead to repression and the reality that our actions and decisions matter and have the power to make a better future: “The political practice we are searching for, then, needs to make ‘a wager’ on natures, to articulate and force political choices between this rather than that nature. In doing so, dissensual axes are clarified, lines are drawn and possible future trajectories are charted” (22).

Considering the magnitude of the environmental problems the planet faces today, this is an important criticism, and if the disciplines of environmental humanities and ecocriticism aim to contribute to a solution to these problems, they have to take it seriously. My primary concern in this thesis has been literature, but I have tried to refer to the political space Swyngedouw and Ernstson demand. To achieve this, I read the literary texts about the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary together with non-literary texts that are equally imaginative, but have a more pronounced political dimension. I thereby show the political importance of the imagination and draw attention to the values and ideals that inform practical decisions in the past, present and future. In this way, I hope to make you aware of the political force and potential that your imagination, and that of your neighbours, also holds to be disruptive and to make a difference, for better or for worse.

In each of the five chapters that make up this thesis, I discuss the works of one or two authors in relation to non-literary descriptions of specific sites that are relevant to their work. These texts include, amongst others, government publications, tourist information, letters from conservationists and newspaper articles. The inclusion of non-literary texts into this work of literary criticism is inspired by New Historicism, a movement in literary criticism that was popular in the 1980s, at about the same time that ecocriticism started to come into its own. One prominent advocate of this movement was Stephen Greenblatt, who reads historical

non-literary texts together with literary ones to better understand “the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history” (14).

Although both Greenblatt and I remain focused on literature, my aim in including historical texts is different to his. Unlike Greenblatt, who searches for historical contingencies, I read the non-literary texts not so much out of interest in history as to show literature’s political dimension. Rather than teasing out direct relations between literary texts, historical texts and artefacts and the ways they have influenced each other, I aim to show more broadly how both are part of a shared imagination and political sphere. Rather than a web of connections, I present a constellation where texts may not be directly related, but can, together, show more comprehensively their individual cultural significance. Where Greenblatt aims to “grasp simultaneously the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20), I hope to show both the imagination of politics and the politics of the literary imagination.

The arts, and literature in particular, have the power to present values and ideas in an eloquent and stylistically appealing manner, and allow for great complexity of thought, different points of view and greater attention to nuances that other forms of communication are less suited to. As David Harvey argues, literary texts do not need to present a coherent argument because they can reveal tensions without needing to resolve them. They are “not subject to closure in the same way that more analytic forms of thinking are. There are always choices and possibilities, perpetually unresolved tensions and differences, subtle shifts in structures of feeling all of which stand to alter the terms of debate and political action, even under the most difficult and dire of conditions” (28). In this way, they can be especially powerful in voicing their imaginations of place, and they thus occupy a position that can serve as a starting point from which we can further explore the connections between imaginations and politics of place. I hope they may inform us in the choices we make and

inspire us as we visualise futures and make decisions that will shape our world in the ages to come.

River Mouths Speaking

This study focuses on five distinct places in two different regions. I aim to show local concerns in great detail while also presenting them in a regional and transnational context.

This is not so much a comparison between two regional networks of imaginations as they are figured in literary and other texts as it is a mosaic, one in which insights from one context inform and reflect on the other. Reading texts from the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary together reveals patterns that only appear by virtue of the transnational context: the English texts speak of the ways that people establish relations to place in a more abstract sense, and the Dutch texts focus rather on the specific values and emotions that people attach to their landscapes. The English texts thus help us understand the foundations of the Dutch imaginations, while the Dutch texts allow us to grasp the potential of the imaginations expressed in the English texts.

While each body of texts and imaginations helps us understand the other, studying two regions also shows the global connections that are relevant to very local issues. The Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary today are linked by a daily ferry service that connects Rotterdam to Kingston upon Hull. The two river mouths are also geologically linked. Not only do both rivers flow into the North Sea, but during the last Ice Age, until around 5,800 to 3,800 BCE (Coles 67), they both occupied the same land mass when Doggerland connected the island of Great Britain and continental Europe (although then, they emptied into different bodies of water. The Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt Rivers joined the Thames to flow south into what we call the English Channel, which was then separated from the North Sea, into which the Humber flowed as it still does today).

Historically, the regions are also rather intimately linked. Throughout the 17th century, Dutch engineers and labourers¹⁶ drained vast swathes of land across England, including regions around the Humber Estuary. In 1629, King Charles I of England even knighted Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden for his services¹⁷. Today, the societies of the Dutch and English lowlands share cultural features that can be traced back to their similar geographies. Greg Bankoff describes how the risk of flooding that is part of life in these areas has shaped their social structures so that they, too, have many features in common:

[T]he Netherlands, the northwest coast of Germany and the western coast of Denmark form together with eastern England one vast North Sea Basin system continually shaped and reshaped by the processes of storm, flood and erosion. Over time, the people living along its shores have had to find ways of accommodating to this dynamic world by adapting to its rhythms, learning to live with its risks, taming the worst of its excesses and exploiting its resources for their own wellbeing and prosperity. In the process, they, too, have become equal partners in the construction of a very particular type of landscape – in many ways, more a waterscape composed of sea dykes, river embankments, drained marshes and reclaimed fields. In turn, the ceaseless activities required to maintain, repair and extend such works have given rise to their own variations of social cohesion, economic cooperation and political governance. (4)

¹⁶ Greg Bankoff elaborates on the wide variety of Dutch nationals involved in the draining of the English Lowlands, writing that their “role ... cannot be overstated: Dutch expertise in the form of engineers was instrumental in draining the fenlands; Dutch investors provided some of the capital required to effect these changes; Dutch prisoners-of-war carried out some of the excavation work; and Dutch religious refugees were settled on parts of the newly reclaimed lands” (29).

¹⁷ Hull poet and Member of Parliament Andrew Marvell distinguished a similar, but slightly different link between the material construction of his home island and the low countries: “Holland, that scarce deserves the name of Land, / As but th’Off-scouring of the Brittain Sand; / And so much Earth as was contributed / By English Pilots when they heav’d the Lead; / Or what by th’Oceans slow alluvion fell, / Of shipwrackt Cockle and the Muscle-shell; / This indigested vomit of the Sea / Fell to the Dutch by just Propriety” (qtd in Jardine 232).

In his article, Bankoff aims to establish a connection of the English “enviro-cultural history” (36) to that of the other countries on the North Sea, since they have much to learn from each other’s efforts at mitigating flood risks (37).

In this thesis, I argue for a similar connection in the area of the imagination of landscape in the face of environmental degradation. The different imaginations of landscape, nature and environment in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary respond to similar environmental and socio-economical concerns but are markedly different in a number of ways. As I will show, an understanding of the imagination of landscape in one river mouth can inform the understanding of that of the other.

This thesis contributes to a variety of fields. The texts discussed in it have received little attention from literary scholars for different reasons – some are very recent works, and others simply seem to have failed to gain widespread critical attention. However, they are all complex, nuanced and engaging works of art that deserve careful critical attention. This thesis aims to provide this and in analysing these works, I add to the body of critical work in Dutch and English literature in areas that are still underexplored.

The project also contributes to the corpus of ecocriticism, a relatively new field that examines “all possible relations between literature and the physical world” (Glotfelty xx). Although English literature has been well represented in ecocriticism, Dutch literature has often been neglected, probably due to the small number of Dutch speakers, and this thesis is a step towards filling this gap. By discussing the two closely connected regions of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary, I show the global context in which regional problems and imaginations exist.

The broader field of environmental humanities, which I define as any scholarship within the humanities that is concerned with topics related to the environment¹⁸, as well as that of ecocriticism, may benefit from the political dimension of the imagination of landscape that I emphasise throughout this thesis, and which I have introduced by using an interdisciplinary methodology and introducing non-literary texts into a literary research project, thereby relating the literary imagination to political decision-making. Hannes Bergthaller et al. emphasise that it is vital that environmental humanities scholarship “relates to other scholarship and to the larger society” (273). The methodology of this thesis shows one way of achieving this, although of course there is a vast multitude of others.

The works discussed in this thesis were selected for their relevance to the chosen geographical areas and their attention to landscape. A number of the texts meet Lawrence Buell’s criteria for environmental texts:

1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. ...*
2. *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. ...*
3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. ...*
4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)*

However, while Buell’s criteria are informative in reading texts with a mind for the environment, and they have been for me, I have chosen not to limit my choice of texts by them. Instead, I have worked very much with the conviction that “*any* writing, whether or not that writing might involve a conscious and explicit engagement with nature” (Bennett and Royle 145) is a valid object of study in ecocriticism because all texts provide insights into the

¹⁸ For a good introduction to the environmental humanities, see Bergthaller, Hannes et al. “Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities.” *Environmental Humanities*, 5, 2014, pp. 261-276.

ways their authors perceive the physical universe and their relations to it. I have done this because my interest lies primarily with the human, and my thesis follows Clark as it examines notions of culture, identity and humanity (20). This thesis does not show the importance of nature to people who are invested in its cause, but rather to people whose main concerns lie elsewhere, with the struggles of everyday life and timeless issues such as fear, guilt, belonging and love. Still, they are very much affected by their environment, natural or otherwise. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argue, “It is not a matter of choosing to be or not to be an ecocritic” (141) or indeed, the speaker or protagonist of an environmentally-minded work of art: “We are all eco-critters” (141). If the environment is of secondary concern to the subjects in the works I discuss, I argue that it is in such texts that we can see its real importance on a larger scale: the environment is not only of interest to environmentalists, but to everyone.

The texts discussed in this thesis provide insights into the relations between people and place and the imagination of landscape from the post-war era until today. The oldest texts were first published in 1983, and the newest in 2016; the earliest landscape that is described in these texts is one set in the 1950s, and the latest are set in the distant future. This timespan, both in terms of publication date and temporal setting, allows me to trace a trajectory of change in landscape transformations from the beginning of the Great Acceleration until the contemporary period, and to analyse the development of the recognition and cultural awareness of these transformations’ implications for the environment at large, and of the Earth’s entering a new geological epoch.

Lastly, I have chosen texts that engage with specific sites in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta or the Humber Estuary to enable a comparison of the literary and historical imaginations of these sites. Often, but not always, the authors of the literary texts have a personal connection with the sites they describe and are highly familiar with the complex

issues surrounding them. The texts addressed in chapters two and five, however, are not exclusively ones that engage with specific sites. While both chapters include one text that focuses on a specific site, these chapters also discuss texts that only engage with unnamed or even immaterial landscapes. These chapters focus on shorter texts, and the poems and songs that do not describe specific landscapes are included because they elucidate the role of place or landscape in the site-specific text.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses the novel *De Jacobs ladder* by behavioural biologist and novelist 't Hart, and it explores the imaginations of Rozenburg, a former island in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta that was destroyed as part of the port of Rotterdam's construction, and *De Beer*, a nature reserve that was connected to Rozenburg (see maps at the end of this thesis). 't Hart was born in Maassluis, the city in which the novel is set, which lies across the water from Rozenburg and *De Beer*. The novel's protagonist witnesses the destruction and transformation of these landscapes as he himself experiences feelings of guilt over the death of an acquaintance. By examining *De Jacobs ladder* and texts about Rozenburg and *De Beer*, this chapter considers stories of loss and mourning of nature in the industrialising world of the mid-20th century Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta. Yet, while recognizing grief regarding landscape and environment, these texts also provide hope for a greener future.

Chapter two analyses texts about Sunk Island, a region on the north bank of the Humber Estuary east of Hull, and examines poetry by O'Brien and Didsbury, both of whom have lived significant parts of their respective lives in Hull. By first focusing on several texts about Sunk Island in local histories, tourist information and other texts, this chapter shows how Sunk Island has been constructed as an imagined place as much as a physical site. After discussing these texts, the chapter provides an analysis of poet and critic O'Brien's poem "Sunk Island" and several other poems by this author, as well as poems by poet and

archaeologist Didsbury to investigate the different ways poetry can engage with, or distance itself from, the particulars of places. These poems demonstrate the political implications of the engagement or disengagement with place in the context of environmental and social decline, and the connection, disconnection, alienation and companionship with and from both landscapes and other beings that can result from this.

The third chapter focuses on novelist and former kickboxing coach Boogers' *Alleen met de goden* and several texts about the forest and park that are relevant to the novel. Boogers was born, and still lives, in Vlaardingen, a city some 10 kilometres east of Maassluis and 10 kilometres west of Rotterdam, and his hometown provides the setting for the novel. The chapter discusses the value of nature in an environment that is mostly urban and devoid of green spaces by examining new interpretations of the concepts of nature and the natural in the context of the environment, but also of family relations and gender. It describes how, after landscape transformations are no longer mourned because the inhabitants of the region have no memory of them, urban nature, although contained and somewhat limited in its power, is still able to inspire feelings of comfort, awe and creative imagination in the people who encounter it.

Chapter four analyses texts about Spurn, the tidal island that lies at the end of the Humber Estuary's north bank, and explores poet, comedian and broadcaster McMillan's poem "East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation." The chapter opens by discussing the long history of conflict over Spurn and its most recent incarnation in the dispute between the local community and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, a conservation organisation which owns the site but, according to local citizens, is too much motivated by profit and too little by wildlife. It then uses McMillan's poem to reflect on the emotions and memories that lie at the basis of this dispute by analysing the ways in which individuals establish connections between themselves and the places they inhabit and how their relations with and memories of these

landscapes change and evolve over time, like the landscape itself also does. Understanding these relationships, as the poem helps us to do, might also help us understand the stakes involved for both parties in the conflict about Spurn.

The fifth and final chapter discusses the works of broeder Dieleman, a Dutch singer and poet from Zeelandic Flanders in the south of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta, and explores ideas of landscape in his corpus. This chapter begins with an examination of *Kleinpolderplein*, an interchange on the north side of the Rotterdam ring road which is expected to be partially redundant several years from now. *Kleinpolderplein* used to be a symbol of modernist progress in mobility, but in the future, it may be turned into a city park. The site thus exemplifies creative thinking that invites green spaces into unexpected parts of the urban and industrial world. Much of Broeder Dieleman's work features conflicts of old and new worlds meeting, as well as broader discussions of landscape, but it is typically grounded in his home of rural Zeelandic Flanders. By examining his music and its representations of meetings between old and new ways of life and the landscape, this chapter aims to understand the ways in which landscape is connected to religious ideas, and how this relates to changes in the environment and traditional livelihoods. An investigation into these themes also suggests ways in which the arts can encourage creative ways of thinking about the environment in uncertain times, much like *Kleinpolderplein* also does.

By showing the ways in which different people have imagined these places in their present and future states in different media, such as presentations and management documents, as well as the ways they have been imagined in literature, I hope to show the power of the imagination and its political potential in shaping the future of our environment. With Evans, I think valuations, feelings and emotions are vital as we face the environmental problems of the contemporary world:

Nature and landscape of course exist in reality, but our feelings for them, upon which the conservationist ethic is based, are extremely personal and very varied. The scientist can break them down into basic elements but, for most of us, what we value in nature and landscape is a cultural thing: an overall impression built up through life from first-hand experience and – more prominently these days, I suspect – from the influence of others, received through various media. And so it is that the conservationist mood is as much a moral or social phenomenon as it is a scientific one. In fact, while the scientific approach has recently come to win converts to the cause, through talk of global threats and the like, it is the aesthetic argument that continues to power the movement as it has always done. (22)

As we find ourselves in the age of the Anthropocene, we are in great need of an aesthetic that may guide us in imagining the landscapes of our future. In this thesis, I hope to discover what such an aesthetic may look like, how it may be imagined and established, and what it might come to mean for the people who will inhabit it.

“The Tide Had Turned”:
Remembering and Reimagining the River



Road to the tip of present-day Rozenburg



Exploring the wildlife on Rozenburg



View across the river

A Theatre in the Port

The *Landtong Rozenburg* is a peninsula that stretches out like a long, slim serpent's tongue in the middle of the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, one of the artificial mouths of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta. Visiting the peninsula is an estranging experience. Across the river, on the north bank, is the metro line that connects Rotterdam with the coast at *Hoek van Holland*, and beyond it lie several small villages. On the other side, over the water on the south bank, is the heavy industry of Europoort, a part of the port of Rotterdam. The *Landtong* itself, however, is green. In 1994, the Rijnmond region, which encompasses the conurbation of Rotterdam, decided in their *Groenakkoord* (Green Agreement) that 1750 ha of land in the Rotterdam port should be dedicated to nature. Of these 1750 ha, 50 ha were to be located on the *Landtong*. Since then, efforts have been made to improve nature and increase biodiversity, and not without success.

Today's visitor to the peninsula finds herself in patches of woods, encounters grazing cattle and a partly shovelled out hill designed to attract nesting swallows, while beyond the treetops, the petroleum refineries loom. Tourism is encouraged here. There is a viewpoint and a playground and there are facilities for cycling, walking and roller skating. Interpretation signs tell the history of the peninsula and draw attention to the contrast between the peninsula and its nature and the port on the other side of the water. A "*Landtongroute*" is signposted for visitors to follow and depicts an arrow, and under the arrow the outlines of a Scottish Highlander, a duck, a refinery and a ship. The tourism section of the *Port of Rotterdam* website encourages visitors to "spot endangered animals and plants" ("Wandelen" n.pag.)¹⁹.

In this chapter, I will assess the ways people construct relations between themselves and their environment, and nature and industry, in the context of a landscape that is undergoing fast-paced transformation due to industrialisation. To understand the significance of the appearance of the *Landtong* today, we need to delve into the cultural implications of

¹⁹ Spot beschermde dieren en planten.

the large-scale landscape transformations that the *Nieuwe Waterweg* underwent in the mid-20th century, from the demise of its natural and agricultural landscape in favour of the construction of a large port to the creation of nature on the *Landtong* that now sits right in its middle. I will do this by considering a variety of non-literary texts as well as Maarten 't Hart's 1986 novel *De Jacobs ladder* (Jacob's Ladder), all of which engage with the appearance of the *Nieuwe Waterweg*'s landscape, and express their own particular ideas about the ways it should be managed.

I start by considering texts about the imagination of nature and its maintenance, destruction and development in the *Nieuwe Waterweg* in the past, present and future to show the ideas that lie behind different interventions in landscape management in this region. Next, I will consider how the landscape in this region has been imagined in literature through an analysis of *De Jacobs ladder*, showing the importance of landscape – and therefore ideas about its management – to the people who inhabit it, and also indicating ways in which its narrative may inspire new ideas about nature as well as reflect on old ones. In doing so, the novel offers a commentary on the management of the *Nieuwe Waterweg*'s landscape throughout the 20th century that is still relevant many years after its original publication. In this chapter, I will discuss how nature in this novel is imagined as a vital force with a particular agency, how its subsequent loss is mourned, and how both the beauty and loss of nature are intimately connected with the protagonist's own personhood and his religious experiences. Finally, I will connect the novel's hopeful ending and its emphasis on materiality to the ways we can imagine nature in the Anthropocene.

The conjunction of nature and industry is a very familiar one in the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, as is the idea of nature as an artificial and artful presence. When the *Nieuwe Waterweg* was constructed in 1872 to improve the accessibility of Rotterdam's port, nutrient-rich clay that was dug out of the channel was dumped in parts of *De Beer*, altering the course

of the river and decreasing the flow rate and water level along the south side of *De Beer*. A new dam significantly decreased erosion from the sea, meaning the area steadily increased in size. As a result of the construction work, *De Beer* was cut off from the mainland and connected to the island Rozenburg, and its newfound remoteness facilitated the relatively undisturbed development of a diverse natural area with a prosperous bird population (Buijsman n.pag.). *De Beer* became a nature reserve, but it owed much of its appearance to human activity. Jac. P. Thijsse, one of the first Dutch conservationists, called *De Beer* “a first rate landscape” (qtd in Buijsman n.pag.)²⁰.

When, decades later after the Second World War, the port of Rotterdam was greatly expanded, Rozenburg and *De Beer* gradually diminished until they were almost completely gone. Rozenburg was connected to the mainland and nature reserve *De Beer* disappeared entirely. The slim *Landtong* that visitors see today is all that remains of the land after the construction of the ports and digging of canals. In a 1959 letter written for a hearing on a local development plan, the president and secretary of the *Contact-Commissie voor Natuur- en Landschapsbescherming* (Contact Commission for Nature and Landscape Protection), M. Van der Goes van Naters and R.J. de Wit, expressed grave apprehension of these developments. They wrote that they were “deeply concerned about the consequences of the stormy development of the port and industrial area along the *Nieuwe Waterweg* for the preservation of natural areas located in this part of [the] province [of South Holland]” (1.5n 1)²¹. Later in the same letter they wrote: “we see this alternative land use possibility as a gun to the heart of nature reserve De Beer” (1.5n 4-5)²². Similarly, the mayor and secretary of Heenvliet, a small town on the other side of the *Brielse Maas*, the branch of the Meuse river

²⁰ een eerste klas landschap.

²¹ ernstig verontrust ... over de consequenties van de stormachtige ontwikkeling van het haven- en industriegebied langs de Nieuwe Waterweg voor het behoud van de in dat deel van uw provincie gelegen natuurterreinen.

²² Daarenboven zien wij deze alternatieve bestemmingsmogelijkheid als een pistool op het hart van het natuureservaat De Beer.

flowing by the south of Rozenburg, J.H. Vijgeboom and J. van Herpen described the revised plan in another petition as a “fatal intervention” (1.5t 3)²³ to the existence of nature reserve *De Beer*.

Today, over twenty years after the plan to enhance the peninsula’s biodiversity was initiated, an interpretation sign tells visitors that they find themselves on “a green stage in the port”²⁴. The theatre stage as metaphor for this particular area of natural interest is not new. In 1950, the *Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst in Zuid-Holland* (Provincial Urban Development Service in South Holland) wrote a report on the development of part of the Meuse on which, amongst others, *De Beer* was located. In this *Rapport over de toekomstige landschappelijke ontwikkeling van de oeverlanden langs de Brielsche Maas* (Report on the Future Landscape Development of the Banklands along the Den Briel Meuse), repeated mention was made of a “wings-effect” (13)²⁵ that should be created in the landscape, referring to the wings of a theatre stage. This effect would be employed so that “plantation that is located farther away will also be given enough visual closure, retaining a large sense of visual depth” (13)²⁶. The main concern with regard to the landscape, then, was its aesthetic value; it had to be arranged in a way that would be most pleasing to the human eye.

This preoccupation with beauty is apparent throughout the report, which is primarily concerned with industrial and recreational developments, and with related infrastructure. Nature is mostly discussed in terms of aesthetics rather than inherent value; specifically, the *Stedenbouwkundige dienst* repeatedly mentions the area’s lack of picturesque qualities. It appeals to emotions to argue that little would be lost in the transformation of this landscape, after all, it has a “stiff, somewhat inhospitable character” (3)²⁷. The word *inhospitable* is used

²³ fatale ingreep

²⁴ groen podium in de haven

²⁵ coulisseëffect

²⁶ zullen ook verder afgelegen beplantingen een voldoende visuele afsluiting kunnen geven, met behoud van een grote dieptewerking.

²⁷ stug, wat onherbergzaam karakter

again on the next page, to emphasise that what is aspired to is a more picturesque landscape that is pretty, charming and quaint. They argue that rougher landscapes, on the other hand, are undesirable: “salt marshes, mud flats and reed lands do not only appear inhospitable, they indeed are” (4)²⁸. This anthropomorphism indicates that the planners involved in the project recognised that humans have a very close relation to the landscapes they inhabit. The landscape is described in emotive terms, and its lack of charm is suggested to be a failing of kindness on nature’s part. Even when the *Stedebouwkundige dienst* recognises a certain singularity in the area, a reference is made to this perceived failure in the landscape: “despite its hardly hospitable character [it] still has a special charm, all its own” (4)²⁹. All things considered, they argue that the character of the landscape made it unsuitable for recreation, and therefore, it needed to be improved to meet the expectations of contemporary urban development.

Although, presumably, *De Beer* was hardly inhospitable to the abundance of life that flourished there, the *Stedebouwkundige dienst*’s stance was typical for its time. In the post-war years, many conservationists, including some within the *Contact-Commissie*, emphasised the value of “recreation, aesthetics and newly developed knowledge of landscape types. To the new practices of landscape care and landscaping plans, too, the nature and shape of the area, the so-called cultural-historical value, and the attractiveness of the surroundings for citizens and visitors were central” (Van der Windt 129)³⁰. Thus, at the time, conservation efforts depended to a large extent on the aesthetic appeal of a certain area, and the approach of the *Stedebouwkundige dienst* is unsurprising.

²⁸ schorren, slikken en rietvelden maken niet alleen een onherbergzame indruk, zij zijn het ook inderdaad.

²⁹ ondanks zijn weinig herbergzaam karakter [heeft het landschap] toch een bijzondere, geheel eigen charme.

³⁰ recreatie, esthetiek en nieuw ontwikkelde kennis van landschapstypen. Ook in de nieuwe praktijken van landschapsverzorging en landschapsplannen stonden de aard en de vorm van het gebied, de zogenaamde cultuurhistorische waarde en de aantrekkelijkheid van de omgeving voor bewoners en bezoekers centraal.

In the face of this aesthetic objective, existing nature sometimes had to suffer. Although the *Stedebouwkundige dienst* expressed a desire to keep the influences of industry and tourism far from the most prosperous areas, it drily remarked that in other parts of the region “the bird population shall have to try to find its nourishment elsewhere” (5)³¹. It also applauded the damming of the *Brielse Maas*, which would turn its salt water into fresh and provide for new species of plant life:

Fortunately the closure also provides quite new possibilities. The turning fresh of the *Brielse Maas* basin of course enables tree plantations as a new element to the river. Assuming the existing, valuable givens, such as amongst others, the surprising run of the Meuse, it is now possible to build a whole new landscape, that is appropriate for the development of an intensive recreation area. (4)³²

At the end of the report, the *Stedebouwkundige dienst* did not go into ecological loss in the area, instead, as far as nature is concerned, they were very optimistic about the future of *De Beer* as a newly beautified place: “The landscape to be created will be counted amongst the most beautiful ones in this region” (16)³³.

The *Stedebouwkundige dienst* was thus not opposed to nature, but it had specific ideas about it that the contemporary landscape failed to meet. In its view, nature was a matter of aesthetics as well as ecology: it ought to be visually pleasing to the human visitor. This meant that the landscape needed to be one that was ordered so as to direct the viewer’s eye across the scene and present a unified whole, as in a painting. This conviction is in fact closely related to the word *landscape*. The Dutch word *landschap* refers to “a unit of human

³¹ de vogelbevolking [zal] elders ... moeten trachten haar voedsel te vinden.

³² Gelukkig brengt de afsluiting ook geheel nieuwe mogelijkheden. De verzoeting van de Brielsche Maasboezem maakt het immers mogelijk boombeplantingen als een nieuw element aan de rivier toe te voegen. Uitgaande van de bestaande, waardevolle gegevens, zoals o.a. het verrassende beloop van de Maas, wordt het nu mogelijk een geheel nieuw landschap op te bouwen, dat geschikt is voor de ontwikkeling van een intensief recreatiegebied.

³³ Het te scheppen landschap zal tot de schoonste van dit gewest kunnen worden gerekend.

occupation ... as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction” (Schama *Landscape* 10), and the word *landscape* entered the English language with an emerging fashion of Dutch landscape paintings (Schama *Landscape* 10). Indeed, the insistence on the use of emotive language, expressed in the *Stedebouwkundige dienst*'s report in their descriptions of the supposed inhospitability of the landscape, and used in the communication of the *Contact-commissie* to convey danger, is inescapable in our thoughts about the environment we inhabit. In whatever way we value nature, and whatever it is in nature that we value, our ideas are filtered through our human experience:

All versions of revealed values in nature rely heavily upon particular human capacities and particular anthropocentric *mediations* Through deployment of highly emotive terms such as love, caring, nurturing, responsibility, integrity, beauty, and the like, they inevitably represent such “natural” values in distinctively humanized terms, thus producing distinctively human *discourses* about intrinsic values. (D. Harvey 158)

Nature conservation in the *Stedebouwkundige dienst*'s report echoed contemporary Dutch ideas of conservation, which to a large extent were concerned with the management and development of beautiful landscapes. It should be noted that, in addition to the fact that our ideas about landscape are always mediated by anthropocentric valuations, conservation in the Netherlands is necessarily a practice that involves a high degree of human influence. Humans have always had a large impact on the landscape in this region. Since prehistory, they have actively altered the appearance of the low-lying, fragile delta region, constructing dykes and drainage systems to keep themselves dry even before Roman times (Nienhuis 17). These practices have impacted the landscape to a very large extent, so that over time, the intensive cultivation of the land contributed to the establishment of a rich biodiversity. In

absence of interference, ecological succession will allow forests to develop³⁴, but in the Netherlands, human intervention has enabled earlier stages to continue to exist (Schaminée, Dirx & Janssen 11). This has led to an ecological diversity that is unique in Europe today: landscapes such as grass peatlands, peat colonies and polders are extremely rare outside of the Netherlands (131). In this light, Joop Schaminée et al. argue that “For the conservation of biodiversity in the Netherlands, continued intervention is necessary” (131)³⁵. They state: “Nature in our country is ... not *ur-nature* or *nature-nature*, but *human-nature*” (11)³⁶. Even in 1945, biologist V. Westhoff argued that “In principle, ... nature must live according to its own laws, but in the Netherlands this is impossible” (Van der Windt 84)³⁷.

In the 2014 article *Van steenoever tot leefoever in Rotterdam* (From Stone Bank to Living Bank in Rotterdam), *Rijkswaterstaat*³⁸, Port of Rotterdam Authority, the municipality of Rotterdam and the WWF present a plan to improve the banks of the *Landtong* to make them more sustainable and suitable as habitat for wildlife. Representatives of all four parties involved in the project wrote that the project is a way for companies to “show the world their green business card” (Hiddema, Van Leeuwen, Van Zonneveld, Zwakhals 14)³⁹. This statement sounds suspiciously close to greenwashing; a large part of the Rotterdam port is taken up by petro-industry, which today is regarded as the antithesis of anything green. The reader attentive to the theatrical metaphor we have heard about might wonder if, perhaps, some parties are mostly staging an ecological consciousness.

³⁴ David Harvey argues that the idea of ecological succession and its concept of the climax forest is heavily reliant on anthropocentric metaphors in communication about the concept: “Ecologists concerned ... to articulate conceptions of equilibrium, plant succession, and climax vegetation as properties of the natural world, have reflected as much about the human search for permanence and security as the quest for an accurate and neutral description of theorization of ecological processes” (163).

³⁵ Voor het behoud van de biologische verscheidenheid in Nederland zal een blijvende inspanning nodig zijn.

³⁶ De natuur in ons land is ... geen oernatuur of *natuur-natuur*, maar *mensen-natuur*.

³⁷ In principe ... moet de natuur volgens haar eigen wetten leven, maar in Nederland is dat onmogelijk.

³⁸ Rijkswaterstaat is the executive arm of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment that is concerned with water management.

³⁹ de wereld hun groene visitekaartje [te] laten zien.

Even so, the language that authorities and businesses use has an impact on the way we think, and if their narratives become greener, then so might our thoughts. Scott Knickerbocker argues that metaphors play a vital role in our conception of the environment: “Instead of being merely a ‘device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language,’ metaphor shapes our ‘ordinary conceptual system,’ and thus ‘the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor’” (4-5). Even if the narrative of the green stage on the *Landtong* is more performative than it is performed, and more imagined than it is realised, it does show that the imaginative use of language shapes the way we think of the world around us. It opens up the possibility to imagine nature in an area where we had not been used to considering it before: the industrialised port. Author Emma Marris argues that it is exactly the places close to people’s homes, even if they are not particularly large or traditionally wild, that have the greatest potential to forge a bond between humans and their green environment. For reasons of popular awareness of nature conservation, places like the *Landtong* are crucial because

If we fight to preserve only things that look like pristine wilderness, such as those places currently enclosed in national parks and similar refuges, our best efforts can only retard their destruction and delay the day we lose. If we fight to preserve and enhance nature as we have newly defined it, as the living background to human lives, we may be able to win. We may be able to grow nature larger than it currently is. This will not only require a change in our values but a change in our very aesthetics, as we learn to accept both nature that looks a little more lived-in than we are used to and working spaces that look a little more wild than we are used to. (151)

In what follows, I will discuss both how the protagonist of *De Jacobs ladder* mourns the loss of the nature he has always known, and how the narrative encourages the forging of new

connections in spite of fundamental differences. Thus, it may also inspire ideas about nature in new places. In this way, the novel reflects on landscapes that change in both ways Marris proposes: becoming simultaneously more and less inhabited, and less and more wild.

A Vibrant Nature

The importance of language and the imagination in appreciating nature and landscapes is at the heart of *De Jacobs ladder*. The novel depicts a Reformed Christian community, and religious themes and frameworks are central to the cultural conception of landscape in the novel. *De Jacobs ladder* is set in the mid-20th century and traces the youth and adolescence of Adriaan Vroklage, the son of a sexton, who lives in Maassluis, a predominantly Reformed Christian town on the *Nieuwe Waterweg* about 15 kilometres west of Rotterdam. When Adriaan is young, a case of mistaken identity that takes place on the *Nieuwe Waterweg* instils in him a sense of guilt that will haunt him for years afterwards, and that binds him to the very orthodox Reformed family Ruygveen. By establishing a relationship with them, Adriaan attempts to relieve his guilt, only to be increasingly fraught in his attempts and continuously implicated in the misfortunes of others. It is only when he is a young adult that a conversation with the Ruygveen patriarch releases him from his feelings of guilt and he can move on with his life and the bright future that is suggested to await him. Meanwhile, the construction of the port of Rotterdam proceeds and leads Adriaan and his grandfather, whom he is close to, to mourn the loss of the landscape they love. While the appreciation of existing nature and the grief over its loss are important themes in the novel, it also shows the deep connections that bind the landscape to cultural, including religious, conceptions of the world at large.

Like the *Stedebouwkundige dienst*, the *Contact-Commissie* and the authors of “*Van steenoever tot leefoever in Rotterdam*,” all of whom appealed to the imagination and emotions in their writing about their hopes and fears for the region’s future, this novel abounds in dreams of and for the landscape. The novel is set against the transformation of the

Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta into what would be the world's busiest international port for several decades, and the island Rozenburg is an important place for Adriaan. His life is bound up with the river's presence and the development of Rozenburg and *De Beer*. The riverscape is where fate connects the existence of different characters in life-changing ways, and it is where the cultural frameworks that people use to understand the landscapes they inhabit become apparent. It is a place that can be a source of worry and a cause for mourning, and it is a place that, in the face of all this, can also offer redemption. It is, however, first and foremost, a place of dreams.

At the beginning of the novel, Adriaan sets out on a journey from Maassluis, on the north bank of the *Nieuwe Waterweg* to the island Rozenburg, to buy milk, cheese and eggs from an estranged aunt. His narration pays particular attention to the specifics of the landscape, about which he is exceedingly excited. As the scene progresses, its dreamlike qualities are enhanced: Adriaan's sensory perceptions intensify to the point that they become surreal. This shows both how deeply Adriaan feels for the landscape and how appreciative he is of its agency and all its complexity and vibrancy, while also demonstrating the breadth and depth of the imagination in comprehending and appreciating nature. Relating this capacity to the wider cultural framework from which the landscape is understood and appreciated, and which people use to narrate their place in it, allows us to unpack how dreams and imaginations shape our view of landscape, and our actions on it, and what hope they might provide for the future of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta.

The novel opens with the word "*Weertij*" (11), an archaic Dutch word for ebb, and continues: "the ferryboat lay moored at the lowest landing stage" (11)⁴⁰. Adriaan is about to cross the *Nieuwe Waterweg* on that very ferryboat, but is delaying his boarding, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells produced by the river and the activity taking place. The largely

⁴⁰ de veerboot lag afgemeerd aan de laagste steiger

agricultural landscape surrounding his native town of Maassluis is home to a wide range of species, many of whom Adriaan notes and appreciates. He equally enjoys the signs of human industry on the river, and he is excited about his trip as it allows him to observe both.

Standing near the rear of a frigate that lies moored in the harbour, he muses “It smelled so wonderful there, it was a smell like no other, a smell of decay and lubricating oil and ropes and, strangely enough, also of manure” (11)⁴¹. When he boards the ferry, he narrates: “On that broad gangway I ascended to heaven” (12)⁴². As much as he is intrigued by the frigate, the moment his ferry leaves for Rozenburg he walks to the front of the ship to observe the river, already anticipating fresh joys:

It was always so lovely to look at approaching Rozenburg, to smell the briny water, and to feel the sea wind. Moreover, the ferry almost invariably had to give way to some coaster or tanker, so that you could see these ships from very close up as well. Common sandpipers or black terns or oystercatchers flew over the water in closed ranks. (12)⁴³

Adriaan’s narration of his surroundings is very intense, engaging three of the five senses directly; his experience is described in visual, olfactory and tactile terms, which makes the scene as alive to the reader as it is to Adriaan, and makes her feel as if she is there with him.

When Adriaan arrives on the opposite side of the river, he says: “Rozenburg. The tide had turned” (13)⁴⁴, which is true in more ways than he can yet fathom. When he looks back at the Maassluis bank, he sees the confusion surrounding an event that will mark the rest of his childhood and adolescence, although he does not realise this yet. He is slightly upset that he

⁴¹ Het rook daar zo heerlijk, het was een geur die nergens anders op leek, een geur van bederf en smeerolie en touw en, vreemd genoeg, ook mest.

⁴² Met die brede loopplank steeg ik ten hemel.

⁴³ Het was altijd zo verrukkelijk om naar het naderbij komende Rozenburg te kijken, om het zilte water te ruiken, en om de zeewind te voelen. Bovendien moest de veerboot onderweg haast altijd uitwijken voor een coaster of een tanker, zodat je die schepen ook van heel dichtbij kon zien. Over het water vlogen altijd oeverlopers of zwarte sterns of scholeksters in gesloten formatie voorbij.

⁴⁴ Rozenburg. Het tij was gekeerd.

misses the spectacle, but as soon as the scene vanishes from view, his mind wanders again.

Below the dyke

I suddenly smelled the imperious, peaceful, deep smell of rapeseed, of a whole field full of rapeseed. I almost forgot what lay behind me. Also, poppies and snapdragons grew on the sloping dyke. In between them, rare blues and coppers and yellow small whites. They chased each other, crossed the road, disappeared in the rapeseed, reappeared in larger numbers. Yet it was more quiet than in an empty church. And it was warm, very warm. It was as if the silence and the warmth intensified each other. 'It is warm-silent,' I whispered, 'it is silent-warm.' (13)⁴⁵

In this passage, four senses are involved. Adriaan is very perceptive to the life that grows, flutters and blossoms all around him. To him, the whole world is active and alive: "It was as if that whole field was in conversation, with the wind and the sky and the dunnocks sauntering about and sometimes flying over it" (15)⁴⁶; he shows an acute awareness that "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives, stories." (Iovino & Opperman 1).

The landscape becomes increasingly dreamlike and surreal: as Adriaan walks on, "It seemed as if the path went down and as if that buzzing, loud hawthorn hedge protected all that lay behind. It was as if it was on fire. ... I came to a gravel path that circled around a lawn. Two gigantic plane trees rose in the middle of the circle. A clothesline, on which sheets hung to dry, stretched between these two trees. The lawn was blue from bird's eye" (16)⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Daar rook ik opeens de heerszuchtige, vredige, diepe geur van koolzaad, van een heel veld vol koolzaad. Bijna vergat ik wat achter mij lag. Bovendien groeiden op de schuine dijkelling klaprozen en leeuwebekken. Daartussen buitelden ijle blauwtjes en oranje vuurvindertjes en gele koolwitjes. Ze achtervolgden elkaar, staken de weg over, verdwenen in het koolzaad, kwamen in grotere aantallen terug. Toch was het stiller dan in een lege kerk. En het was warm, heel warm. Het leek of de stilte en de warmte elkaar versterkten. 'Het is warm-stil,' fluisterde ik, 'het is stilwarm.'

⁴⁶ Het was of dat hele veld in gesprek was, met de wind en de lucht en de heggemussen die erin rondscharrelden en er soms overheen vlogen.

⁴⁷ Het leek of het pad omlaagvoerde en of die gonzende, luidruchtige meidoornhaag al wat daarachter lag beschermde. Het was of hij in brand stond. ... Ik kwam uit op een grindpad dat om een grasveld heen cirkelde.

and then, from this mysterious place, shielded from the busy world he knows by bushes, dykes and the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, a girl appears: “Motionless I stood watching the blue lawn. It seemed even warmer there than elsewhere. It was incredibly summery, incredibly peaceful. Then, from the house beyond, a dark girl my age emerged. She was not startled when she saw me. She walked over the blue field. It seemed a coincidence that, as she did so, she came my way” (16)⁴⁸. The entire journey is marked by a sense of mystery and wonder that arises from the natural world and becomes progressively more intense as Adriaan approaches the house.

Adriaan’s narration in all its celebratory dreaminess can be read as sensuous poesis, which Scott Knickerbocker describes as “[performing] the complexity, mystery, and beauty of nature rather than merely represent[ing] it” (159). In showing how alive the world around him is, how everything buzzes and flutters and grows, his perception also displays a “sense of strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side” that Jane Bennett advocates “to treat nonhumans – animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities – more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically” (17-18). Unlike both the *Stedebouwkundige dienst* and the parties involved in the *Groenakkoord*, Adriaan does not experience the distance that is inherent as seeing nature as a theatrical affair. Adriaan’s relation to the natural world is immediate and physical, rather than mediated by distance to the stage. This direct engagement is apparent throughout Adriaan’s narrative as he pays particular attention to all the different creatures, their behaviours and surroundings and all their wondrous particulars. Every detail of the material world merits specific attention, whereby Adriaan recognises its singularity and shows how important it is. In his view of the world around him is a promise of interconnected, caring relations between humans and non-humans.

Midden in de cirkel verhieven zich twee reusachtige platanen. Tussen die twee bomen spande een waslijn, waaraan lakens droogden. Het grasveld zelf was blauw van ereprijs.

⁴⁸ Bewegingloos stond ik naar het blauwe grasveld te kijken. Het leek daar nog warmer dan elders. Het was er ongelofelijk zomers, ongelofelijk vredig. Toen kwam, uit het huis verderop, een donker meisje van mijn leeftijd aanlopen. Ze schrok niet toen ze mij zag. Ze liep over het blauwe grasveld. Het leek toeval dat ze daarbij mijn richting uit kwam.

Adriaan spends the rest of the afternoon on Rozenburg with the girl Klaske, whom he decides that day to marry when they both grow up. Adriaan, however, expressly states the precondition that he will only marry her if her house will still be there by that time, and if it will not have been swallowed by the Rotterdam port, the expansion of which threatens the island. He is very much impressed by the house and its surroundings. Again, in his description, the impressions of the senses are made highly vivid, so much as to be personified: “it was just as if there, yes, it sounds so silly, but still it was true, it was just as if summer lives there. I mean: somewhere else it is also summer, but he lives with you, there is his house and his garden, you understand, yes, I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else more than there” (23)⁴⁹.

Summer is hardly an obvious object for anthropomorphism. It is a concept that shines through in various materialities – the plants that are approaching the peak of their abundance; the animals that show behaviour particular to the season – but it is not itself a tangible entity that agency can easily be ascribed to. Adriaan, however, sees a network of different material manifestations of the season that all connect and culminate in a symphony of summer. The fact that Adriaan ascribes agency to this assembly of ecological particulars and brings them together in an extensive network of creatures shows how far his understanding of and respect for the natural world goes.

In ecocriticism, anthropomorphism is a much contested literary device, since some believe it shows a harmful anthropocentrism, as Knickerbocker points out (5), but Adriaan uses it to represent summer as a co-inhabitant, and to show how he and his surroundings exist entirely on equal footing. This sentiment resonates with Adriaan’s earlier descriptions of the river and the ecology of the opposite bank, in which his attention for the vibrancy of the

⁴⁹ het was net of daar, ja, ’t klinkt zo gek, maar toch was het zo, het was net of daar de zomer woont. Ik bedoel: ergens anders is het ook wel zomer, maar bij jullie woont hij, daar is z’n huis en z’n tuin, begrijp je, ja, ik zou nergens anders liever wonen dan daar.

material world indicates great respect for local riverine ecology. Whereas the anthropomorphic descriptions of nature in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta in texts by the *Contact-Commissie* and the *Stedelijke dienst* showed it to be an area that was exposed to threat, or was itself threatening to visitors, respectively, Adriaan employs personification to show that he and the place he finds himself in exist as equals. Rather than an entity that requires pity or submissive force, in *De Jacobs ladder*, nature is a companion. In Knickerbocker's view, this is where the power of anthropomorphism lies: not only can it stimulate affinity of the human with the non-human world, but it can also, at least partly, give the latter the agency to, in a way, speak back to the former (6).

Paradise Lost

Adriaan's feeling, smelling, observing and dreaming of the landscape exists in a framework that goes far beyond his own direct experiences. The novel shows that not only his sensory experience, but also his biographical narrative is bound up with the river. Since religious ideas are prevalent in the society he is part of and play a vital role in understanding life in all its complexities for many of *De Jacobs ladder*'s characters, they are also a dominant force in the imagination of place in this community. Different characters interpret the transformations in the landscape that they witness by comparing them with Bible texts. The main plot of the novel, that of Adriaan's guilt and his ensuing pursuit of a relationship with the Ruygveen family, is also heavily dependent on the relationship between landscape and religion. As soon as Adriaan comes back to Maassluis from Rozenburg, his life, through his perceived guilt, becomes entangled with the river as well as the life of the Ruygveen family.

Returning from his waking dream on Rozenburg, Adriaan is confronted with the aftermath of the events he glimpsed after disembarking from the ferry earlier that day: a boy fell in the water, was caught by the frigate's propeller and died, his clothes torn and smeared with oil, his body maimed beyond recognition. Since passersby saw Adriaan on the quay near

the ship and the boy's knee showed a scar similar to one on Adriaan's knee, he has been reported dead. When he returns home, he finds his parents grieving. This case of mistaken identity gravely impacts Adriaan. It results in a feeling of guilt that will haunt him for years and constitutes the main theme of the novel: he feels that the boy, Jan Ruygveen, died in his place and he himself should not be alive. No longer able to live a carefree life, he befriends Anton Ruygveen, Jan's younger brother, in an attempt to atone for the event, but the rest of his childhood and adolescence will be marked by further tragedies, often but not always deaths, for which Adriaan feels a sense of responsibility even if he is not to blame.

Adriaan loses his innocence in the river which, having taken Jan's life, has become the site of Adriaan's guilt and shame, so much so that he will later contemplate taking his own life by jumping into it. The fates of the boy and the landscape he grows up in are bound up together. The tide also turns for his dream-island Rozenburg, which is increasingly transformed until it is completely swallowed up, sacrificed to the Rotterdam port and physically connected to the mainland, a change so profound that the island is no longer even an island. Although Adriaan never returns there, distant echoes of the island's transformation can be heard throughout the novel, and he keeps revisiting the day he spent there in his mind.

One of these scenes occurs when Adriaan attends the founding meeting of a new church, out of curiosity. The church is established by the Ruygveen patriarch, the father of Jan and Anton. Since he arrives early, Adriaan decides to take a detour and his thoughts turn to Rozenburg:

Quickly I left the Fenacoliuslaan, crossed the railway, walked along the harbour. A ship went by on the *Waterweg* with green and red lights. People were still working hard on Rozenburg by the light of giant floodlights. Across the water rang the distant sound of river hammers. All the time I heard the dull, almost doleful bang of a rammer. Even the following hiss of escaping steam was carried across the river by the

south wind. The *Hoofdingenieur van Elzelingen* moored at the highest landing stage. It was high tide. If I just sailed across now? Would walk to Klaske's garden? No, that had become impossible, I could not do that. Again I saw that garden in front of me in the summer sunlight. It seemed as if, from top to toe, I was made of desire for it. To brave this pain, I walked, close to the water, back to the square. I kept trying to smell that smell of spring again, but it escaped me, I only smelled the tarred anchor chains.

(72)⁵⁰

Listening to the destruction of the rural island's idyllic landscape, Adriaan's musings indicate that he mourns the loss of nature deeply. The bangs and hisses of industrialisation signal to him that something is irretrievably lost; not only the beauty of nature, but also its surprises and excitement. He mourns the loss of his dream. This loss is deeply connected to the one Adriaan feels in his own life. As a result of his trauma after Jan's death, he has become so preoccupied with the impossible atonement for a crime he did not commit, that his life has become as bleak as the landscape has. In the moments leading up to his encounter with Jan's father, Adriaan recalls the untarnished environment and transports himself back to the last moments before he discovered Jan's death and the case of their mistaken identities. This recollection shows the deep ties that link Adriaan's existence to the landscape.

The framework of religious ideas also plays a vital role in the imagination of the environment. Both Adriaan's grandfather and his uncle use Biblical stories to make sense of the destruction of the landscape as they have always known it. As Adriaan returns to the

⁵⁰ Snel ging ik de Fenacolijslaan uit, stak de spoorweg over, liep langs de haven. Op de Waterweg voer een donker schip voorbij met groene en rode lampen. Op Rozenburg werd, bij het licht van reusachtige schijnwerpers, nog hard gewerkt. Over het water klonk het verwaaide geluid van klinkhamers. Telkens hoorde ik de doffe, haast smartelijke klap van een heiblok. Zelfs het daaropvolgende gesis van ontwijkende stoom werd door de zuidenwind over de rivier gedragen. De Hoofdingenieur van Elzelingen legde aan bij de hoogste steiger. Het was vloed. Als ik nu zou overvaren? Nu naar de tuin van Klaske zou lopen? Nee, dat was onmogelijk geworden, dat kon niet meer. Weer zag ik die tuin voor me in het zomerzonlicht. Het leek of ik van top tot teen was opgetrokken uit verlangen ernaar. Om die pijn de baas te worden liep ik, vlak langs het water, terug naar het plein. Steeds probeerde ik die geur van het voorjaar weer op te snuiven, maar hij ontweek me, ik rook alleen geteerde ankerkettingen.

square where the meeting about the new church is about to start, he sees his grandfather, who, earlier, described Ruygveen as “a truly magnificent bloke ... he is still one of those real old-fashioned followers of Ledeboer⁵¹, one who ferrets through the bible to dig out the very blackest” (32)⁵². Indeed, Ruygveen starts the meeting by proposing to read the complete, not particularly cheerful Book of Zephaniah, in which the eponymous prophet speaks of the Last Judgement and the wilderness that will conquer the corruptions of civilisation.

As Ruygveen holds his speech, he does not have ecology on his mind: he is mostly preoccupied with the spiritual failings he identifies in society. However, Adriaan’s grandfather connects Ruygveen’s Bible reading directly to the loss of nature that Adriaan has just drawn the reader’s attention to. Adriaan’s grandfather is particularly captivated by Zephaniah 2:14: “And flocks shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the [bittern and the night owl] shall lodge in the upper lintels of it; *their* voice shall sing in the windows; desolation *shall be* in the thresholds: for he shall uncover the cedar work” (*King James*)⁵³. Adriaan’s grandfather, who, like many citizens of Maassluis at this time, has enjoyed a deeply religious upbringing and has a detailed knowledge of the Bible, applies this narrative to his own situation and the way he thinks of the transformation of Rozenburg: “How wonderful, this Book of Zephaniah. What language! I almost died when he read: ‘Woe unto the inhabitants of the sea coast, I will even destroy thee, that there shall be no

⁵¹ Lambertus Gerardus Cornelis Ledeboer (1808-1863) was a preacher whose career was marked by many conflicts in different Protestant Churches. His ideas were highly conservative; he opposed singing in church and any kind of governmental influence on church affairs.

⁵² Hij is ook een doodgoeie kerel ... het is nog een echte, ouderwetse Ledeboeriaan, zo een die de bijbel uitvlooit om 't allerzwartste eruit op te diepen.

⁵³ In my translations of Bible verses, I have referred to the King James Bible. This version gives the names of the birds as “the cormorant and the bittern” which is in discord with the Statenvertaling, the Dutch translation used by protestant congregations in the Netherlands and ‘t Hart in this novel. I have changed the species in the my citation to reflect the Dutch translation, as this is relevant to the reflections of Adriaan’s grandfather.

inhabitant.’ As if he was reading about Rozenburg” (78, original omission in Bible quotation)⁵⁴.

Adriaan’s grandfather takes this comparison of the state of the land in Zephaniah and in his own region quite serious; he uses the reference to the Bible to make the current situation gain in significance. Using rivers to establish a connection between the contemporary world and the ancient world of stories and mythologies is an old tradition. Simon Schama suggests that the process of mythologising rivers and imagining connections between Biblical and local rivers creates a basis for a religious and cultural connectivity (*Landscape* 266, 301). It allows people to see themselves as part of an ancient tradition and add a dimension of meaning to their lives. Barbara R. Rossing also mentions the adaptability of river mythology in this respect (205). Schama argues that this practice was particularly popular amongst Reformed people in the low countries in the 17th century. He writes: “The Bible became a source book of analogies for their own contemporary history, as well as an inspirational talisman on the field of battle. Its swarming detail ... allowed for a high degree of specificity to suit all sorts of contingency” (*Embarrassment* 95). The Dutch in particular “regard[ed] themselves as ordained and blessed survivors of the deluge” (*Embarrassment* 34).

Even in the 20th century society that *De Jacobs ladder* portrays, this way of reading the Bible is still in practice. Klaske’s father develops an obsession with finding Bible passages that he can link to the traumatising eviction from his farm as it was demolished to make room for the port: “Every time he found something that, to him, seemed related to Rozenburg, he would read it aloud, ten, fifteen times. ‘Arise ye, and depart; for this *is* not *your* rest: because

⁵⁴ Wat geweldig, dat bijbelboek Zefanja. Wat een taal! Ik ging bijna door de grond toen hij las: “Wee den inwoners van de landstreek der zee, Ik zal u verdoen, dat er geen inwoner zal zijn.’ Alsof hij over Rozenburg las.

it is polluted, it shall destroy *you*, even with a sore destruction” (183)⁵⁵. In this passage, Klaske’s father quotes from the Book of Micah; he compares his removal from his home to the “appropriat[ion of] the lands and houses of others” (Rogerson 704) that the prophet condemns a few verses before this passage, and he renounces his enemies with the prophet’s words. By relating Biblical narratives to everyday situations, the characters show how acutely relevant the Bible is to them, and how important it is to their conception of the world they inhabit. The Bible allows them to make sense of and give meaning to events that happen to them.

The initial point of connection that Adriaan’s grandfather identifies in his Biblical comparison is the coast, but his focus soon shifts back inland to his native riverscape as he muses on the presence – or rather absence – of bitterns there: “If now you know there to be one somewhere, you’d lie in the reed bed in a rowing boat for three weeks just to see it, if you had to, and if you see it, you won’t forget it as long as you live. ... Could it be true? Could the bittern and the night owl live on Rozenburg?” (78)⁵⁶. Although the landscapes Zephaniah and Adriaan’s grandfather confront are both infected by human degradation, they are also moral opposites. Zephaniah predicts a civilisation destroyed, its inhabitants exterminated and its ruins taken back by nature. The resulting image is exactly that which Adriaan’s grandfather sees when he looks admiringly at the Rozenburg of old. In his view, this landscape is Edenic and civilisation, with its concrete and asphalt, is its ruin.

Adriaan’s grandfather sees the construction of the port as an instance of both ecological and moral degradation, and finds the idea of God punishing civilisation through destruction unabashedly appealing. He would very much like to see the Earth share in God’s

⁵⁵ Elke keer als hij iets vond dat naar zijn idee op Rozenburg betrekking had, las het tien, vijftien keer hardop voor [sic]. “Maak u dan op en gaat heen, want in dit land zal de rust niet zijn, omdat het verontreinigd is, zal het u verderven, en dat met een geweldige verderving.”

⁵⁶ Als je er nu ergens één weet te zitten, ga je desnoods drie weken in een roeiboortje in het rietland liggen om hem te zien, en als je hem ziet, vergeet je dat je hele leven niet meer. ... Zou het waar zijn? Zouden de roerdomp en de nachtuil op Rozenburg gaan wonen?

judgement as it did in Biblical times. Elizabeth A. Johnson suggests that landscape is portrayed as singularly important to God in both the Old and New Testament, which “teach that the creating and redeeming God loves and takes delight in the natural world, which correspondingly enjoys an integrity that is not dependent on human decision” (6). This is supported by Adriaan’s grandfather’s conviction that Rozenburg and its birds have an intrinsic value. God’s appreciation of nature, however, also means that nature is subject to the same relations with God as humans are, be they positive or negative: “in the scriptures of the Jewish tradition, from which Christianity took its early orientation, the natural world is pervasively and comfortably present. Not only is it depicted as God’s good creation and covenant partner, but it shares in the blessings of the human covenant as well as in judgment when that covenant is broken” (5). It is this idea that the landscape partakes in the judgement of God and shows the moral qualities of civilisation that leads Adriaan’s grandfather to entertain and indeed enjoy the thought of the destruction of Rozenburg: not only would it be beautiful to him, it would also be just. In establishing the connection between Biblical texts and the contemporary landscape, then, the novel makes the argument that the loss of nature is not merely an emotional affair for the citizens affected by it, but one that has deep cultural connections and implications.

Paradise Regained?

The relation between landscape and religion works two ways in *De Jacobs ladder*. Not only is religion used to make sense of the environment, the landscape is also used as a standard to assess religion. Adriaan’s grandfather finds comfort in the environment as well as in religion, and applies motifs from the world around him to his thoughts about religion. Eventually, this conjunction is able to provide a source to imagine a hopeful future for the environment of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta, and for Adriaan.

To Adriaan's grandfather, the earth and its ecology are the main source for meaningful comfort. When Adriaan expresses his concerns regarding his future as they are fishing, a fish falls off his grandfather's hook, and he comments:

Look ... that's what I mean, you're always being tricked, but it doesn't matter, because now it's summer and the sun is shining, and if you smell very carefully you can feel the autumn coming. Soon, the migratory birds will come over, and it will be winter and you will have the most beautiful sunsets of the year, and maybe you can go skating. And then spring will come again. (108)⁵⁷

It is in this scene, perhaps, that his feelings for the landscape turn most directly and explicitly to ecological concern, as he mentions the impending destruction of nature reserve *De Beer*.

He continues:

"You shall see: the older you get, the more you'll realise that that's the only thing that matters: that spring will come and that the hawthorn will blossom, first the white one, then the red one – oh, have you seen the hawthorn on Rozenburg?"

"Yes," I said.

"Would it be gone already?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Me neither," he said, "and I don't dare to go look. Just imagine they'd have taken it down."

"Yes, and the two plane trees," I said.

⁵⁷ "Kijk," zei hij, "dat bedoel ik nou, je wordt altijd genept, maar 't geeft niet, want het is nu zomer en de zon schijnt, en als je goed ruikt kun je de herfst al voelen aankomen. Straks gaan de trekvogels weer over, en wordt het winter en heb je de mooiste zonsondergangen van het jaar, en kun je misschien schaatsen. En dan komt 't voorjaar weer."

“I wish I were invisible,” my grandfather said, “then I went to stab those guys, who made that up, to death, one by one. If only they keep their hands off *De Beer*. Please pray every night that they keep their hands off *De Beer*.” (108)⁵⁸

There is a tension between Adriaan and his grandfather’s concern for ecology and the traditional view of Reformed churches on the material world. During the reformation, to a large extent, these churches were characterised by a turn towards anthropocentrism, which resulted in the non-human world being left behind in appreciation. Johnson describes the theology behind this turn as follows: “Human nature in its fallenness is depraved; nature as a whole can only refer to fallen creation, which is empty of God’s presence and in need of God’s sovereign act of salvation given only in Christ. Theology’s vision thus stays focused on humanity where the all-important saving action of God takes place” (9). Manuel A. Vásquez puts it even more strongly, arguing that the depravation of the material world not only renders it irrelevant to theological thought, it makes it threatening:

Protestantism, particularly in Reformed churches, meant “word without sacrament.”

As historian Colleen McDannell notes, in stressing God’s absolute sovereignty and humanity’s utter brokenness, theologians like John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli exacerbated Christianity’s ambivalence toward the body and the material world.

“Divinity, the wholly other and sacred, should not be brought into the profane world of bodies and art.” (31-32)

However, for Adriaan, his grandfather, and other characters as well, the landscape they inhabit is central to their religion. The latter is always seen through the lens of the former, and judged by it, too. In a complaint about secularisation, the vicar’s figurative

⁵⁸ Je zult zien: hoe ouder je wordt, des te meer zul je beseffen dat dat ’t enige is waar het op aankomt: dat het lente wordt en dat de meidoorn weer in bloei staat, eerst de witte, dan de rode – och, heb je die meidoorn gezien op Rozenburg?” “Ja,” zei ik. “Zou die al weg zijn?” “Ik weet het niet,” zei ik. “Ik ook niet,” zei hij, “en ik durf ook niet te gaan kijken. Stel je toch voor dat ze die omgehaald hebben.” “Ja, en die twee platanen,” zei ik. “Ik wou dat ik onzichtbaar was,” zei mijn grootvader, “dan ging ik al die lui, die dat bedacht hebben, één voor één doodsteken. Maar als ze maar van de Beer afblijven. Bid alsjeblieft elke avond dat ze van de Beer afblijven.”

language is borrowed from the local landscape: “We do live in times of falling spiritual tides” (102)⁵⁹. Adriaan’s grandfather particularly likes to adapt Biblical motifs to his own world: “If Moses should have had to leave the Netherlands with the people of Israel, God would have sent black-headed gulls instead of locusts” (92)⁶⁰. When Adriaan’s grandfather hears members of the Pentecostal church singing in a city square before Ruygveen’s speech, his main concern with their preaching is that their religious narrative does not respect the reality of the material world. He says of the song, which includes the lines “I walk in the light with Jesus / the dark dale lies behind me” (74)⁶¹: “How darned little respect those folks have for Jesus ... they seem to think he’s some kind of everybody’s friend. And they don’t have a clue about geography, either. A dark dale! In South Holland” (74-75)⁶². It is of great concern to him that when Biblical motives are applied to the real world, as he himself did in comparing Zephaniah’s prophecy to Rozenburg, they do not conflict. Although he is deeply sceptical of religious institutions, he finds that religion itself must be treated with utmost attention and respect.

The insistence of the characters in *De Jacobs ladder* to not only view their lives and their landscapes through the lens of religion, but also the other way around, shows that this process of meaning-making is not only relevant to the imagination, but to politics as well. It shows that they are keenly aware that landscape and imagination are bound up together and influence each other deeply. Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins suggest that the political relevance of religion lies in the incarnation of God in the body of Jesus of Nazareth (26). In Christ’s being in the world, his existence becomes part of earthly politics. Rather than

⁵⁹ We leven wel in een tijd van afnemend geestelijk getij

⁶⁰ Als Mozes met het volk Israël uit Nederland had moeten wegtrekken, zou God vast kokmeeuwen gestuurd hebben in plaats van sprinkhanen.

⁶¹ Ik wandel in ‘t licht met Jezus / het donk’re dal ligt achter mij.

⁶² Wat hebben die lui toch verrekt weinig respect voor Jezus ... dat ze maar denken dat ’t een soort allemansvriend is. En van aardrijkskunde hebben ze ook geen snars verstand. Een donker dal! In Zuid-Holland.

restricted to the domain of the divine, he becomes and part of the earth and its landscape, which in turn are entwined with the lives and stories of its human inhabitants.

The human experience of the environment, then, is only in part about material features and non-human life. To a large extent, it is just as much about the cultural and religious frameworks that play a vital role in people's assertion of their place in the world, the ideas they have about it and the ways they act in it. While on a surface level, the novel shows appreciation for local ecology and explicitly mourns its loss, its larger contribution is that it shows how deeply landscapes are entwined with memory, with people's emotions and their social and religious identities which do not seem directly related to the natural world itself. By the end of the novel, when the destruction of *De Beer* and Rozenburg is complete, it is this framework that provides a glimpse of hope for the future of both Adriaan and his environment.

In the hospital where Adriaan finds a job towards the end of the novel, he runs into the old Ruygveen again, and he provides Adriaan's deliverance from his perceived guilt. Ruygveen has lost all his children either to suicide, emigration, or marriage to a Catholic, or, as he puts it, a "whoremaster of Babylon" (200)⁶³, and finally has also lost his sanity. During this meeting, Ruygveen reveals that Jan's death was not an accident, but a suicide. This insight changes the way Adriaan has made sense of his life, and the way he will be able to make sense of it in the future: "Yes, it did matter very much, it changed everything, I was not guilty in that case, or maybe I was, but there was no question about any mistake. This could not have happened to me just as well. I could have lived differently the last ten years, I could have been happy, I could have made other friends, could have put my arm around Klaske on the *Zegwaartse weg*" (202)⁶⁴. It is Ruygveen, too, who encourages him to look towards the

⁶³ Hoereerder Babylons

⁶⁴ Jawel, het deed er alles toe, het veranderde alles, ik was dan niet schuldig, of misschien ook wel, maar van een vergissing was geen sprake. Dan had het mij evengoed niet kunnen overkomen. Dan had ik de afgelopen

future and embrace it, as he, surprisingly for such a strict Reformed man, orders Adriaan to “Come on, put your arm around [Klaske]” (204)⁶⁵. As he is finally released from his guilt, Adriaan again notes the blooming plants around him. Just like his grandfather had predicted, spring has come again: “[Ruygveen] stood still on the gravel path. It was spring. Close to his feet, the yellow celandine blossomed” (206)⁶⁶. What finally unites Ruygveen and Adriaan, is a verse from Isaiah that Ruygveen cites at the very end of the novel: “The sun came through again, shone on his face. And he said, with the same voice as with which he had said ‘I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD,’ that weak, yet far-reaching voice of the Fenacoliusplein: ‘He hath lovingly embraced my soul⁶⁷’” (206)⁶⁸.

Although Adriaan and his family, since his father’s dismissal as a sexton, have become increasingly removed from their religion, the strong influence his religion has had on him all through his youth becomes most apparent in the matter of his perceived guilt over Jan’s death. Unlike Catholicism, which Ruygveen so despises, the Reformed church of Adriaan’s background informs him that for his guilt, there is no absolution. John Carroll argues that “dispositional guilt” (146) is so pervasive in protestant culture as to preclude the possibility of faith, because God “has lost his central function – the forgiveness of sins, or the granting of immortality, or the preservation from evil and therefore mortal spirits” (146). He explains that instead: “Guilt working in this mode produces the highest of all sublimations, that is reverential questioning and praise. Where there can be no faith the best man lives with

tien jaar anders kunnen leven, dan had ik vrolijk kunnen zijn, dan had ik andere vrienden kunnen maken, dan had ik, op de Zegwaartse weg, een arm om Klaske heen kunnen slaan.

⁶⁵ Kom, leg een arm om [Klaske] heen.

⁶⁶ [Ruygveen] stond stil op het grindpad. Het was voorjaar. Vlak bij zijn voeten bloeide het gele speenkruid.

⁶⁷ For all quotations from the Bible in *De Jacobs ladder*, I have referred to the King James Bible for my translations. This last verse, however, I have translated myself from the Dutch. The King James translation of this verse, “thou hast in love to my soul *delivered it* from the pit of corruption” (Isaiah 38:17), is very different from the Dutch translation and does not fit the context of the novel well.

⁶⁸ De zon kwam weer door, scheen op zijn gezicht. En hij zei, met diezelfde stem waarmee hij had gezegd: “Maar Ik zal in het midden van u doen overblijven een ellendig en arm volk: die zullen op de naam des Heeren betrouwen,” die zwakke, toch verdragende stem van het Fenacoliusplein: “Hij heeft mijn ziel liefelijk omhelsd.”

the great questions in his mind, puzzled, curious, afraid, hopeful. Here is piety” (149).

Adriaan’s sense of guilt, which is impossible to absolve because it exists in absence of a crime, and his continued efforts to dedicate his life to being exceedingly morally upright and deprive himself of joy because of his perceived guilt, provides a commentary on this conundrum.

The fact that the impossibility of absolution is so constitutional to the Protestant religion makes Adriaan’s remission through Ruygveen’s words all the more poignant; this is the only way in which he can regain or repossess the direction over his own life and be freed from his guilt over Jan’s death. The fact that the novel concludes with Ruygveen’s citing of Isaiah is equally important. The book of Isaiah tells of judgement but also of salvation. In chapter 38, which Ruygveen’s quotation is taken from, Hezekiah, the king of Judah, is about to die, but God’s mercy “add[s] unto [his] days fifteen years” (Isaiah 38:5). Ruygveen cites Hezekiah’s response to this, which continues: “thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back” (Isaiah 38:17). It is in this quotation, then, that Adriaan is not only forgiven by the father whom he felt he had implicated in deep suffering, but also that the possibility of God’s redemption becomes apparent.

De Jacobs ladder, then, ends on a conciliatory note. Hezekiah finds mercy with God, Ruygveen reconciles with Adriaan, and Adriaan is free to unite with Klaske. Under these newly established connections, the flowers bloom once more. We might, perhaps, read in the blossoming of this little flower an encouragement for deep, entangled relationships that are willing and able to reconcile their differences, between humans amongst themselves, but also between humans and non-humans, and the natural and industrial worlds. We have seen that, both for Adriaan and the fictional characters around him, and the historical people who shaped the appearance of the *Nieuwe Waterweg* in the real world, landscape issues are closely connected with ideas and emotions. A reading of the novel might thus make us reflect on and

better understand the emotive language that the *Contact-Commissie* and the *Stedebouwkundige dienst* used in their documents. We might read the novel as a reflection on and a memory of a lost landscape, but in its conciliatory and hopeful ending, it may at the same time point towards new natural landscapes that coexist with industrial ones, like the *Landtong Rozenburg* is meant to do. Humans can cause terrible destruction in their environment, but their perceptions, as well as their cultural frameworks, narrations and imaginations can lend grace to it as well, which should give us hope for the future. We can only hope that the Rotterdam port and the *Landtong Rozenburg* will, in the long term, live up to this idea.

“This Kingdom of Metaphor”:
Imagination and Materiality in the Construction of Place



Road to Sunk Island



Directions



A featureless landscape?

Empty Lands and Open Skies

Sunk Island is a fascinatingly boring place, a small hamlet consisting of a redundant church that now houses the local Heritage Centre, a vicarage, an old school building and a scattering of houses amidst wide expanses of fields. The area's flatness and emptiness offers a view that seems to stretch forever, but its few inhabitants are friendly and show a dedication to local culture and history. Sunk Island lies at the end of Sunk Island Road, which branches off the A1033 from Hull to Withernsea at Ottringham. Ottringham is a remote enough place, lying 20 kilometres away from Hull and having less than 600 inhabitants. Sunk Island is even more isolated. The closest bus stop is in Ottringham, and the visitor unfortunate enough not to possess a driver's licence has to make her way on foot from there, another 5.5 kilometres along a straight road that stretches south through agricultural fields. After three kilometres, she encounters a sign welcoming the traveller to Sunk Island and encouraging lucky car owners to "please drive carefully". After the second half of the walk, the visitor finds herself on a crossroads with a few buildings. This is Sunk Island.

In this chapter, I will discuss how Sunk Island has been imagined by different people and how they have presented it to the public in different media, including newspapers, interpretation signs and works of local history. The texts show the extent of the imagination in creating a sense of place, as many different authors use both Sunk Island's evocative name and its physical attributes to both construct and deconstruct the place, both describing and denying its material existence. After showing the imaginative force of these non-literary texts, I will analyse the poem "Sunk Island" by Sean O'Brien, and assess how this text, like non-literary texts about Sunk Island, engages with the materiality of place and constructs, as well as deconstructs it. This discussion is the starting point for examining the conception of place in O'Brien's poetry, and its contribution to the ways we are able to think about and imagine our world in the past, present and future, showing that the concept of place, in the age of the Anthropocene, is one that has significant political implications. Representing a site

that exists in the real world means taking seriously, and taking into account the different social, cultural, economic and ecological features that shape it. In O'Brien's poetry, the materiality of place, when it is engaged with, offers a space where the possibility of connection appears, and where the surprise and unpredictability of everyday life is an inspiring force, whereas in poems in which materiality is denied, the foundations of society shift, and dread and chaos ensue. Next, I will explore the poetry of Peter Didsbury, in which placelessness is evoked to a slightly different effect. It often invokes a sense of alienation that is carried through in his speaker's ability to communicate through language and connect with his fellow human beings. However, Didsbury's highly immaterial world of poetry also shows the power of the imagination in its ability to inspire creativity and foster connections on a shared mental or cultural plane. In times of environmental degradation and climate change, when the stability of the physical world is ever more at risk, the power of ideas as expressed in his poetry may appear as a significant and inspiring force.

In this consideration of place as material or imagined, Sunk Island occupies a curious double position. Those who decide to make the journey to Sunk Island will have no doubt that it is very much a real place, but it is also, to a large extent, an imagined place. This notion is apparent even in Sunk Island's name, which implies simultaneously a place and an absence of place, including as it does both a word for a geographic body and a verb in the past perfect tense that indicates it is no longer in existence. However, not only is Sunk Island a place that is very much physically real, but also it has been ever since it acquired its present name (Whitehead 2). To complicate the matter further; Sunk Island is not sunk, and it is also not an island. Still, in the preface to his *Sunk Island: The Land that Rose from the Humber*, John Whitehead intimates that on some level, it does not really exist at all: he writes: "Sunk Island is on the way to nowhere" (v).

To understand Sunk Island's misleading name, we have to go back to its earliest origins. These can be traced back to the 9th century AD, when, because of silt depositions on the north bank of the Humber "large tracts of land had appeared, sufficient to support nine towns and hamlets; the grange of Tharlethorpe and the township of Frismersk were well established where once there was only the river, and where Sunk Island now prospers" (Whitehead 4). By the 15th century, this land had disappeared; floods had returned the shoreline to its state in Roman times. A new sandbank appeared in the Humber 200 years after this land disappeared, one that gradually grew by accretion and embankment. Its predecessor was apparently not forgotten, and this new piece of land was initially referred to as "The Great Sunke" (Whitehead 6) or "Sunke Sande" (Whitehead 6). It was first referred to as "Sunk Island" in a chart made in 1683-1684, when it totalled about 12 ha. in size. Gradually, Sunk Island grew so much in size, to almost 4575 ha. today, that it became attached to the mainland, but it always kept its name.

With this history, as geographer George de Boer remarks (20), Sunk Island has the name of a memory of a place that had disappeared two centuries before the appearance of the land we can visit today. This evocative and paradoxical name is remarked on without fail by people writing about the area. In the foreword to John Whitehead's book about Sunk Island, Howard Frost writes: "Sunk Island. The very name conjures up cartoon pictures and begs questions. Is it really an island? Was it ever an island? How did it sink?" (iii). Whitehead himself comments in the preface: "Being neither sunken nor an island, its name is a paradox, and strangers have visions of an island, complete with churches and houses, sitting beneath the waves" (v).

The fact that Sunk Island's name is so elaborately pondered on by these authors has just as much to do with its name as it does with the area's geographical constitution. Sunk Island's name serves as a continuous reminder of the precarious nature of this low-lying area.

In this era of climate change and sea level rise, this precarity is as relevant as ever. It signals that, as Sunk Island's name comes from the realm of memory and the imagination, the sea might, at any time, send the physical place back there, a fear that many authors writing about Sunk Island elaborate on.

Conservationist Trevor Londesborough emphasises the continuous threat of destruction that looms over Sunk Island by personifying the water, showing its horrendous effects on the land: "Here the river Humber eats unceasingly the rich farmland taken from it by reclamation" (16). Whitehead, for his part, elaborates on the many villages of Holderness, the region in Yorkshire that includes Sunk Island, that have already disappeared beneath the waves before foreshadowing the same for Sunk Island. Early in his book, he writes:

Holderness has two unusual features. It is geologically very young, under 10,000 years old, and it is also of a temporary nature. Ever since it was formed, the soft unresisting clay has been steadily eroded by the North Sea, and a strip of about seven miles is estimated to have already disappeared, numerous towns and villages, some almost in living memory, having been engulfed: Old Kilnsea, Old Withernsea, Owthorne, Out Newton, Dimlington, Monkwise, Monkwell, Great Colden, Hyde and many others, all lost to the ravenous seas. (4)

At the end of his book, Whitehead makes explicit the suggestion that Sunk Island's past destruction is a fear looming in the present as well: "Our island story has now turned full circle and we are back to the present. Despite the attention of historians, Sunk Island remains a place of mystery, its origins still a matter of debate, with its future in doubt. Is it a permanent phenomenon, or is it merely the latest chapter in a cycle of accretion and erosion?" (76).

Although it is impossible to say if or when Sunk Island will disappear beneath the water once more, it is highly likely that one day, it will. In fact, the Heritage Centre in Sunk

Island's former church indicates that, while the area is often described as being "reclaimed from the Estuary," this characterisation may be "over-confiden[t]," and it suggests instead that "'Borrowed temporarily' might be a more apt description in the long term." In this way, the author of these texts shows another way in which Sunk Island is an unreal, immaterial place: having disappeared into the Humber, it once really was a place that was nothing more than a memory, and it may be so again in the future. Not only is the past of Sunk Island a product of myth, its future might lie in the realm of stories as well, as another place in a long list of drowned villages, lost in time, that punctuate the coast of the North Sea.

Sunk Island's evocative name and precarious existence, fascinating as they are, relate strangely to the way the contemporary physical appearance of the area is described. Later in this chapter, I will discuss Sunk Island's appearance in a poem, but even in non-fictional texts, Sunk Island remains in a way an imagined place, one conjured up in mental images that are often discordant with reality. Many people who write about Sunk Island are hesitant in their descriptions of the physical appearance of the place. If its name is appealing, that seems to be its only redeeming feature. Whitehead writes: "Featureless, with few trees, its scattered farms and cottages stand out like lonely sentinels across a flat monotonous landscape, and it would appear to have little to offer the visitor except solitude and a sense of timelessness" (1). Londesborough characterises Sunk Island as "flat and apparently featureless save for the isolated farmhouses standing unexplained amongst the enormous fields dissected by the arrow-straight drains or 'dykes'" (16), and T.H. Etherington writes: "Sunk – we never called it Sunk Island – was and still is unusual not only for its remarkable crops of wheat, but also for the featureless monotony of its landscape" (386). Finally, the blurb for a Dutch translation of Hubert Nicholson's 1956 novel *Sunk Island* says the land is "too flat, too damp, too monotonous" (n.pag.).

The number of times that the words *featureless* and *monotonous* reappear in descriptions of Sunk Island is remarkable and it shows how widely shared this conception of the landscape is. Even an interpretation sign in the Heritage Centre reads: “How would YOU describe Sunk Island’s landscape?...flat...lonely...bleak...featureless?” [sic] and continues with a confirming “it’s all of these things, yet it still retains a peculiar beauty of its own.” What this beauty entails, however, seems hard to define and even the sign itself seems unable to provide a satisfying answer:

Great open ‘prairie wheatlands under huge skies...now and then relieved by the odd scattered farmhouse or cottage, each in itself an island, surrounded by its protective overcoat of trees – guard against prying eyes and winter storms. The Island is low-lying..in places less than 10ft above the muddy waters of the Humber It’s roads and open field-drains stretch ‘straight as a die’ horizon-wards. There are few hedges here,fields having always been divided more by the man-made drains. High salt content in the soil meant that thorn hedges could not be grown until well into the 19th. century...today’s farmers have little use for them. In autumn and winter months the Island is more often than not,wreathed in mists... the throb of great ships’s engines and the mournful call of their fog-horns boom across the rain-sodden cornfields. [sic]

The sign does not elaborate on the particulars of Sunk Island’s singular beauty, and in the last two sentences, which contain the most poetic language, the landscape is presented not as beautiful but as inhospitable and cold, not in an awe-inspiring, but a saddening way. Sunk Island’s presentation as featureless is yet another way the place is rendered placeless: it is denied a description of the physical attributes that characterise and constitute the area, in fact, in calling it *featureless*, the texts deny that Sunk Island even has these.

In contrast to Sunk Island's supposed featurelessness, its unique appeal is often described as its wildness, even by authors who also characterise it as featureless. The choice of these two particular words may call to mind the connotations of the word *wilderness* a few centuries ago, when "To be a wilderness ... was to be 'deserted,' 'savage,' 'desolate,' 'barren' – in short, a 'waste,' the word's nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was 'bewilderment' or terror" (Cronon 8). This, however, could not be further from the truth, as the authors are excited about the beauty of wild nature they identify in Sunk Island.

Frost, for example, uses the concept of wildness to approximate the notion of beauty that the sign in the Sunk Island Heritage Centre failed to pinpoint: "Sunk Island may seem wide, open and even bleak, yet its special atmosphere satisfies that deep yearning for wildness which many of us feel" (23). Whitehead writes that, in the 1980s, a new attraction to life in the countryside emerged in England, which led to societies that advocated the recording, appreciation and conservation of countryside ecology (75-76). The concept of wildness or wilderness recurs in different texts. Even Londesborough and Whitehead, who characterised the landscape as "featureless" (16; 1), also praise its wild nature. Londesborough contends that Sunk Island is a prime place for shooting duck, and in this context affirms that "The 'fowler must also have full knowledge and lasting appreciation of the special surroundings because these flats and strays are some of the last truly [sic] wild places remaining in this country" (16). Whitehead, on the other hand, emphasises not so much the joy of the hunter as that of the observer:

Sunk Island is a paradise for botanists, naturalists and ornithologists who frequent its fields and marshlands in all seasons in order to find and examine its rare plants and bird life. Flat and featureless it may be, but with its own peculiar beauty. Because of its isolation it attracts few visitors, but those who do come are captivated and many

return to experience again the Island's uniquely wild atmosphere. It is, perhaps, one of the few far-flung areas of England where one can be alone with nature. (1)

Sunk Island's supposed wildness is oxymoronic: the concept of wildness indicates an absence of human intervention, whereas Sunk Island's existence is dependent upon land reclamation, and it is an agricultural area, where the land is worked by humans for human benefit. This contrast is made most explicit when Frost describes Sunk Island as: "A domesticated wilderness of rape, grain and potatoes, punctuated by pyramidal dots" (iii). Both the qualifying word *domesticated* and the mention of different crops contradict and complicate the use of the categorisation of *wilderness*, since a wilderness is a place that is supposedly not influenced by human activity. The concept of wilderness, however, is one that is largely the product of human imagination, because there are no places untouched by humans, only places where we have denied or forgotten this history. Environmental historian William Cronon argues that "there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny" (16).

Much like the concept of wilderness, Sunk Island is to a large extent produced by human imaginaries, to the point that they often and in many different ways deny the material reality of the place. Firstly, Sunk Island's name belies its reality, as it is neither sunk, nor an island. Its name also refers to a time in the past when Sunk Island did not exist, as well as to a time in the future when it will once more, in all likelihood, have disappeared. Furthermore, descriptions of the area deny its characteristics in insisting it is featureless, something any place by definition cannot be. Finally, when authors, sometimes in spite of their earlier use of the word featureless, do attribute particular qualities to Sunk Island, they use words that hardly reflect reality and fall back on concepts that are firmly rooted in the imagination rather than any objective reality.

On many levels, Sunk Island thus proves the power of the imagination of in the conception of place: it is defined, quite literally in this case, by the ideas that exist around it as much as it is by its physical features. In this way, it shows that, to understand a place, it is vital that we understand the cultural imaginations of that place. In the following, I will discuss the imagination of place in poetry in the context of Sunk Island, and the landscape of the Humber Estuary more generally. Because of its uniquely imaginative nature and its ability to engage with, comment on and interpret the material world, but also to depart from it in favour of the realm of ideas, poetry can provide powerful insights into the ways we imagine places. It can invite us to question our conceptions of the material world, and imagine our relations with it anew, something that is especially poignant in these times of environmental change.

Poetry and Politics

In several of O'Brien's and Didsbury's poems, the concept of place is questioned and denied, and people's relation to it is thereby reconsidered. While Sunk Island's name and non-literary descriptions misleadingly indicate an absence of place, these poems show the process and consequences of making place absent in more detail and with more complexity, allowing us to consider its implications. In this era in which the places we inhabit and our existence in them are particularly and increasingly precarious, this disengagement with place is highly pertinent and has political implications. Reading poetry in the age of the Anthropocene, literary critic Tom Bristow argues, can help us assess the ways in which "the human figure is placed in view and measured by degrees of solidarity, communal and bioregional [a]ttunement to – and confinement by – place. Memory (personal and cultural) and linguistic and artistic developments over time embody these external factors: they produce places that act as indicators of our creative evolution, the capacity to exercise critical consciousness alongside our desire to name and navigate the depleted world before us" (14). In short, we

can assess the state of our relations with the world we inhabit by studying the role of place in poetry.

In O'Brien's and Didsbury's poetry, this notion is turned on its head: both poets evaluate the human in an emphatic and conspicuous absence of place. In this way, their poetry, like the lyrics Bristow discusses, can also be read as a commentary on the relations between humans and environment in a way that adds to Bristow's analysis. However, O'Brien's and Didsbury's poetry is also a commentary on the role of the imagination in times when the physical appearance of the world we inhabit has become unstable and insecure. This chapter discusses the implications not so much of the relationship between people and the world they live in, but more fundamentally of questioning the foundations of the imagination of place by reading texts that disengage with it. In this way, I aim to show how imaginations both of place and of departure from place can help us establish new relations with the world around us in the age of the Anthropocene.

The concept of place, in geography, is opposed to that of space. While space refers to a distinct area as it exists, place includes the social and cultural meanings that inhabitants inscribe on it. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan states: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6). Space might be a river as it flows by a dyke, a long straight road amidst fields or a group of houses, a church and a school building by a crossroads. Place, on the other hand, is the fact that the place name of these same buildings provokes wonder in the visitor, who might be interested in the architecture of the church and school, and struck by the remoteness of the hamlet. Place is the road cutting through a landscape she might or might not think of as featureless, or wild, or the river that might remind a visitor from another coast of home. The cultural associations of an area are vital to the ways we understand and shape our existence in the places we inhabit;

indeed, the understanding of a space as place is essential to being human, as geographer E. Relph argues:

To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place. The philosopher Martin Heidegger declared that “‘place’ places man in such a way that it reveals the external bonds of his existence and at the same time the depths of his freedom and reality”. It is a profound and complex aspect of man’s experience of the world (1).

The fact that sites inspire in their visitors emotions and considerations of many kinds, from assessments of architecture to feelings of wonder and memories is what makes our relation with the world we live in meaningful, and what constitutes, indeed, our place in this world.

Both Sunk Island and the poetry discussed in this chapter occupy a complex position in this debate. Sunk Island’s existence is – at least partly – the result of human interference with the landscape, and its portrayals in written texts are as imaginative as they are descriptive. In this way, they make a space into a place. However, in the many ways in which these descriptions deny Sunk Island’s materiality, it is robbed, at least in part, of its being a place; it becomes placeless.

Placelessness is the condition in which a connection of people with place is inhibited by the lack of particular experiences, meaning that the process of attaching values to a site is obstructed. In the many ways in which Sunk Island’s physical reality is denied, this same inhibition arises. In his explanation of the concept of placelessness, Relph suggests it is a result of modernity and mechanisation:

There is a widespread and familiar sentiment that the localism and variety of the places and landscapes that characterised preindustrial societies and unselfconscious, handicraft cultures are being diminished and perhaps eradicated. In their stead we are creating, in Norger-Schulz’s terse phrase, “a flatscape”, lacking intentional depth and

providing possibilities only for commonplace and mediocre experiences. ... [This view of modernity indicates] the possibility of a placeless geography, lacking both diverse landscapes and significant places, and also impl[ies] that we are at present subjecting ourselves to the forces of placelessness and are losing our sense of place. (79)

Although the condition of modernity is perhaps less relevant in the case of Sunk Island, the notion of placelessness does show that the process of making space into place is not self-evident and it may be obstructed.

Relph is not entirely negative about the concept of placelessness, but suggests that “superficial expressions of placelessness are far from being an infallible guide to deeper attitudes; being lived-in confers some authenticity on even the most trivial and unrelentingly uniform landscapes” (80). All spaces that are directly engaged with in some way become places, and the same goes for Sunk Island. If it is placeless in one sense, it is certainly a place in another. For every instance in which its materiality is denied, this is done in contradiction with the fact that Sunk Island exists, and there is plenty of space for values to be attached to. Indeed, many different texts do this, including O’Brien’s poem “Sunk Island.” The two conditions of place and placelessness can coexist and shed light on the different ways in which we can understand and imagine landscapes and our connections with them.

This negotiation of place and placelessness becomes apparent in O’Brien’s poem “Sunk Island” from the 2011 collection *November*. A large part of the poem veers away from the site’s materiality in a manner that implies a denial of its existence as a place. In this way, the poem mirrors some of the texts discussed above. However, an interaction that takes place between the speaker and a woman creates an opportunity for a connection and the empathy that emerges in this moment creates a possibility for the kinds of emotions and values that lie at the heart of the creation of place, to appear.

In “Sunk Island,” the eponymous site thus occupies a similar position as it does in the non-fictional texts, between place and placelessness. In describing it and imbuing it with meaning, O’Brien contributes to a sense of place, but throughout the poem, the materiality of the actual space is avoided in favour of an elaborate framework of immaterial cultural references, creating a sense of placelessness. O’Brien describes Sunk Island as a site that is pervaded by death. The speaker of the poem finds himself by the churchyard in Sunk Island and encounters a woman riding a horse:

She stares down the dead straight mile, at a walk,

While I stand by the lych-gate to let her

Arrive at this slow-motion replay of England (1-3)

Although no physical death occurs, its presence is alluded to in the first line, with the qualifying adjective to *straight* and the second line with its mention of the entrance to the churchyard, the *lych-gate*, a word derived from *lich*, meaning “[a] dead body; a corpse” (“Lich” 1b). Even the third line hints at death, for a “replay” (3) is only an image of something that no longer is.

The woman sitting on a horse is herself also reminiscent of death, as horsemen in European literature are generally bad omens. They may be headless demons in folklore, announcing and executing the deaths of those who cross their paths, or indeed the initiators of the Apocalypse in the Christian tradition. The fact that she wears a “bladed helmet” (14) contributes to her otherworldly appearance. The poem carries a hint of the last lines of W.B. Yeats’s “Under Ben Bulbin” and the epitaph that appears on his grave:

Cast a cold eye

On life, on death,

Horseman, pass by! (92-94)

This poem, however, is a much friendlier iteration of this motif. Although death is omnipresent, the woman is not at all unkind: “*Can I help you?*” asks the lady on the horse” (4). What follows is an encounter that is deeply empathetic but frustrated by the speaker’s sense of paralysis, emphasised by what he perceives to be the stagnant nature of the place. He remarks that the landscape is marked by “graves” (7) and “water taking back the frozen fields” (8), both of which refer to times long past.

When the woman asks what he is waiting for, the speaker’s answer foresees disaster in the guise of a flood, but it is a metaphorical flood as much as a physical one:

... For the flood to accelerate over this ground,
 For your helmet to circle and sink like a moral,
 For a rag-and-bone man with his cargo of trash
 To come rowing past slowly (17-20)

The speaker’s prediction of the physical helmet’s movement is abandoned mid-line in favour of an idiom referring to the loss of ethical values. The rag-and-bone man is, again, reminiscent of Yeats, who ends his poem “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” in “the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (44). This poem, a reflection on Yeats’s career from the volume *Last Poems* that was published in the year of his death, is, much like “Sunk Island,” very much preoccupied with the notion of mind over matter: “Players and painted stage took all my love / And not those things that they were emblems of” (31-32). The reference to this poet who is famous for not taking the material reality of life all too seriously (Ricks 51) distances the poem again from the physical world.

When the speaker muses that the woman will not be exempted from disaster and a watery fate, he again reverts to literary history when he mentions “the pearls of [her] eyes” (21). This is a reference to William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which Ariel sings that

while Ferdinand's father is at rest at the bottom of the sea, his body transforms into the treasures found on the ocean floor:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
 Of his bones are coral made;
 Those are pearls that were his eyes;
 Nothing of him doth fade (1.2.560-563)

The dramatic qualities of this highly estranging image are further intensified as the horsewoman in "Sunk Island" is much worse off in the speaker's vision: her pearly eyes are "Unforgiven and sold at Thieves' Market / For sixpence and never thought of again" (22-23). The intertextuality also includes a reference to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which the phrase *Those are pearls that were his eyes* occurs twice to convey a sense of mystery or bewilderment.

Still, the conclusion of the poem is deeply empathetic; it displays a kindness and consideration that stems from the woman's recognition of the material reality of the situation and indeed the dread of finding oneself alone in a place like Sunk Island. She feels for the speaker, saying "*You must be cold out here*" (24), and her recognition makes her the opposite of Yeats's horseman. In the face of death, her utterance of the word *cold* shows her eye is not so. Because she understands the despair as well as the reality of the situation she is capable of establishing a connection with the speaker, who concedes, perhaps with relief: "I think I must" (24).

The engagement with materiality, then, is a deeply affective choice. It is also a political one. O'Brien comments on his preoccupation with materiality and its political implications in the preface to *HMS Glasshouse*:

There are occasional rumblings these days to the effect that English poetry should escape its attachment to the concrete and particular. It's a course some may care to

take; I couldn't agree less. The dense variety at our disposal seems to me a compelling basis for the imagination, however sceptical it may be, to work its revealing changes, given the chance. (202)

Literary critic Peter Barry argues that this engagement with the concrete world “is the *real* challenge of the imagination” (Barry 120, original emphasis). This challenge lies in part in the fact that by engaging with material reality, poetry departs from the abstract plane of ideas and has to take into account, do justice to and communicate something meaningful about the complexity of the real world. Thus, poetry gains a political dimension that comes with a certain responsibility. Reading descriptions of Sunk Island in conjunction with O'Brien's poem “Sunk Island” reveals the extent of this responsibility. The non-literary texts communicate a sense of placelessness about Sunk Island that reverberates across different texts, including the poem. These texts shape how we as readers experience the physical Sunk Island itself.

O'Brien recognises this responsibility in the preface to his 2002 collection of poems, *Cousin Coat*. He links his poetry directly to politics, making a claim for its political significance:

Writing about England and its condition means writing about history, not as an escape but a source of the possible. Fact and dream are neighbours there. When I was young it was a truism that poetry and politics didn't mix: the one was too refined and other too befouled to permit their marriage. One served and the other denied the musicality of language. To me as to the poets who most inspired me, this was a lie. Poetry and politics are wedded unto death, and frequent English unease at this fact is another signpost into history, the realm of necessity from which we are always half hoping to get an afternoon off. Poetry too has a history – to be neither abandoned nor denied – and modernity is part of it, not its sole professor. (203)

Because the world of poetry is directly related to the material realm we inhabit and informs our thinking about it, it gains a sense of responsibility, but also one of opportunity, in relation to the world of politics. The images it construes are all filed into the collective memory of the people reading it, informing them and inspiring them, and allowing them to reconsider the way they act on and in it.

Poem and Place

The tension between materiality and immateriality is a common theme in O'Brien's poetry, and it shows quite clearly the political relevance of poetry of landscape. It is at the heart of his poem "The Mere" from 2007's *The Drowned Book* and "Fireweed" from *November*, both of which show similar dreams for the landscape, but differ in their engagement with place, and come to very different conclusions. "The Mere" shows that the way a text engages with the materiality of the landscape and the extent to which it recognises it as a place has a grave impact on the way we can understand people's activity there.

The landscape of "The Mere," like that of "Sunk Island," is unloved, wet and dirty. In this poem, however, the name of the location is never mentioned and instead, the noun for a generic body of water is used. The fact that the name of the geographical feature, mere, is homonymous with the word meaning "Having no greater extent, range, value, power, or importance than the designation implies; that is barely or only what it is said to be" ("Mere, adj.2" 5), makes for a sense of unimpressed detachment that marks the poem. Although the poem sets out to describe the physical features of the mere, soon, it becomes abstract: a temporality, without purpose or place:

Its poplars and willows and sludge. Its gnat-clouds.

Smell of cooling animal at dusk. Grey-greenness.

Soup-suspension. Its having been

Here all along. It is nowhere, serves nothing, lives

On your behalf when you are absent. (1-5)

The speaker's descriptions show an utter absence of enthusiasm: his listing of the features of the mere seem to drag because of the word *and*, the periods after each phrase and the alliteration in *grey-greenness* and *soup-suspension*. This strengthens our belief that the mere, for all intents and purposes, does not deserve "any great claims" (11) and that indeed, it does not seem to have any purpose at all.

The poem centres on a conflict between the speaker and a group of people who, apparently against the addressee's judgement, want to drain the mere but are only referred to as "they" (6) and "crims from the deadlands" (12). The addressee is similarly unidentifiable. Not only are the parties involved described in obscuring terms, so are the actions taken in the landscape and the intentions behind them. Although this is a poem of nature conservation, it is very much detached from the landscape. The opposing party is said to want "To drain [the mere] and extract the name / It never had" (14-15). Although the verb *extract* carries a sense of threat, suggesting that the land will be exploited, it only refers to a name, an abstract entity, and one, moreover, that the mere does not have. The mere is merely a mere, and was never cared enough for to be named, even, apparently, by the addressee who now concerns himself with its conservation.

His motivation for this activity is equally unclear:

... It's just

That you have to save something –

A fence-post, the shape of a firebreast

Nailed high on a wall by your ignorant gaze:

They will add up to love in a hand of decades. (15-19)

There are many arguments in favour of nature conservation, but when the materiality of a place is not recognised, they can hardly be engaged with. In this poem, for example, the fact

that people value nature is referenced, but hardly seems to apply. The intrinsic worth of nature is also not at issue: while nature writing and conservation practices often address how landscapes and the species that occupy them are vibrant and alive, like Adriaan did in *De Jacobs ladder*, here there are no such connections to be found: “Life is a word you can sometimes remember / And might never use, but that’s / Nobody’s business” (21-23). In fact, the mere becomes nothing more than a concept on paper, an entry in a dictionary, and one that is mostly out of use, too, except in specific cases: “*Standing pool, body of water, formerly / Arm of the sea, now chiefly poet. and dial.*” (25-26). The reduction of geography to something abstract and obsolete destabilises what the act of conservation means. It is hard to protect something that is not really there:

Anonymous, here with us now

In the order of things – this is what

You will find you have chosen,

If choice is the word, to defend. (27-30)

Because the speaker consistently rejects a recognition of the materiality of the place, it is not surprising that his description of the actions that take place there do not carry any sense of conviction. In this way, like “Sunk Island,” “The Mere,” too, shows that the poetic is political. Without a sense of place, there can be no meaningful action.

The poem “Fireweed” from *November* presents a desire that is very similar to that of “The Mere,” but in a setting and with a result that is diametrically opposite. Instead of an area of fraught conservationist efforts, it shows a place that thrives in neglect. At the heart of this poem is a deep appreciation of place, and a recognition of its creative force. Like “The Mere,” “Fireweed” is about a neglected site, one that might, in other circumstances, be described as placeless and forgotten. However, the poem’s strong sense of affection for and appreciation of the site and its vegetation makes it a celebration of place. The poem presents

a vision of the strong regenerative force of nature and its speaker expresses the sentiment that, whatever people do, non-human nature will always find a way to flourish, even amongst ruins. The poem in its entirety reads:

Look away just for a moment.

Then look back and see

How the fireweed's taking the strain.

This song's in praise of strong neglect

In the railway towns, in the silence

After the age of the train. (1-6)

The speaker of this poem insists that his addressee *looks* at the place he describes in a certain way, and not only looks, but *sees* the life unfolding there. This shows a recognition and appreciation of the site that was absent in "The Mere," and it is an appreciation that turns out to facilitate surprising and exciting insights. The site is "neglect[ed]" (4) and may appear derelict, as the last two lines indicate, but this poem departs from the associations and descriptions commonly used for places like this. Making an effort to truly see, the addressee will notice that, against all odds, the fireweed grows, which to the speaker is a joyful sight. The recognition of the place and its materiality thus enables a sense of hope for the site in question.

This sense of hope, furthermore, goes beyond hope for only the place. It also sheds light on the relations between humans and their environment, for the appearance of the fireweed also testifies to the deep connections between humans and soil. Fireweed, or *Chamerion angustifolium*, is a weed that thrives in disturbed soil ("Chamerion" n.pag.) and in this poem, it is the brave life form that takes action after human structures have fallen apart. It

is a source of hope in a landscape seemingly marked by despair, and leads the speaker to contemplate an aesthetics of abandonment. The fact that this weed is one that thrives particularly in disturbed soil indicates that it does not exist in spite of human presence, but because of it. Weeds are often conflated with wildness (Pollan 110) but in reality, they are entirely dependent on human cultivation of the soil. Michael Pollan writes: “Weeds, as the field guides indicate, are plants entirely well adapted to man-made places. They don’t grow in forests or prairies – in ‘the wild.’ Weeds thrive in gardens, meadows, lawns, vacant lots, railroad sidings, hard by dumpsters and in the cracks of sidewalks. They grow where we live, in other words, and hardly anywhere else” (118). This knowledge indicates that what is being praised is not the force of nature per se, but the force of nature in a cultivated environment. It is not so much the plant in itself, but the plant in its human-made surroundings, that is inspiring.

Richard Mabey argues that, even if in other aspects they might be problematic, in their choice of habitat, weeds show a creative force: “as we survey our long love-hate relationship with them, it may be revealing to ponder where weeds belong in the ecological scheme of things. They seem, even from the most cursory of looks, to have evolved to grow in unsettled earth and damaged landscapes, and that may be a less malign role than we give them credit for” (14). He suggests that, in their ability to grow in disturbed environments and often against the wishes of the people who make their existence possible, weeds intimate a new conception of wildness:

Weeds – even many intrusive aliens – give something back. They green over the dereliction we have created. They move in to replace more sensitive plants that we have endangered. Their willingness to grow in the most hostile environments – a bombed city, a crack in a wall – means that they insinuate the idea of wild nature into places otherwise quite shorn of it. They are, in this sense, paradoxical. Although they

follow and are dependent on human activities, their cussedness and refusal to play by our rules makes them subversive, and the very essence of wildness. (19-20)

It is precisely this sentiment that “Fireweed” demonstrates. The fireweed’s “taking the strain” (3) indicates its boldness and audacity to go where no other species any longer want to go. In its being there, the plant cushions and covers the landscape’s scars. It fills the emptiness that has emerged “In the railway towns, in the silence / After the age of the train” (5-6) with new life, new hope and a new wildness, and the promise of excitement that that word contains. Attention for and appreciation of this seemingly unremarkable site, and an understanding of its agency, are necessary to recognise this excitement, which has the power to alter completely our conception of this derelict place, as well as others, and to grant them their own aesthetics.

The poem “The Park by the Railway,” from O’Brien’s first collection, *The Indoor Park* from 1983, presents a touching scene in which the hope that lies in the reciprocal relation of emotive engagement and materiality of place becomes apparent. It is a cheerful poem that shows the speaker and his girlfriend attending a fair in a dilapidated industrial town, but while the setting is grim, their joy and love are very real. The site was transformed by industrialisation and thereafter in large part abandoned, but because of the speaker and his lover’s insistence on creating happy memories and attachments to place, it retains a sense of importance, connection and therefore beauty.

The poem’s particular location is not identified, but nowhere does the poem consciously distance itself from a physical and earthly landscape. The landscape is bleak, but it is nowhere unreal, nor is the speaker who describes it unable to see beauty in its very bleakness. It is a place that is somewhat alienating and whose description is rife with oxymorons: we see “unimportant sunsets flaring up” (5), in which the verb unsettles the adjective. It is also a place where historicity works in curious ways: “abandoned viaducts”

(7), artefacts of civilisation, are in ruin, worn out and useless, while plants become the symbol of new, exciting times that gain their very own specific historical periodisation in the phrase “modern flowers” (8). The speaker sees a certain appeal in this setting where “dock and willowherb” (8) exist together: he describes the scene as an “Industrial pastoral” (3), referring to Arcadian narratives of the easy and content lives of primitive shepherds, here transplanted to the degenerating port city.

Although the way the ruinous remnants of industry and the eternal youth of plant life are juxtaposed in this poem is somewhat alienating, the speaker and his lover and their romantic engagements herald the possibility of creativity and hope. Despite its dilapidation, the park is perfectly suitable for a romance in their eyes: “Where should we meet but in this shabby park / Where the railings are missing and the branches black?” (1-2). They are very much aware of the lack of picturesqueness of this place, and there is a sense of defiance in this utterance. Still, if this romance is not a conventional one, this makes it in no way less sweet. The speaker endearingly calls his companion “my industrial girl” (11) and their outing, similarly, is perhaps not a standard romance, but it accepts the reality of the situation and embraces it:

I win you a ring at the rifle range
 For the twentieth time, but you've chosen
 A yellow, implausible fish in a bag
 That you hold to one side when I kiss you (13-17).

The speaker is very aware of the reality of the situation and all it entails: fish won at fairs are typically goldfish, and he recognises that its yellow colour is odd: goldfish are orange. Similarly, his pointing out that the girl moves the fish when they touch, taking care that it is not harmed, shows an awareness of the practicalities of existence in the material world. Their emotional engagement in this site lends it a certain dignity, making a place out of a location

that might, if it were not for their love story, well be described as placeless. The setting may be abandoned by many, but it is inhabited by two specific people, and there is beauty and meaning in their activities. Their recognition of the reality of the place, but also their conviction to go beyond it, make for a romance that is a symbol of hope, and regardless of its setting, every bit as charming as any romance can be. It is this imaginative engagement with the site that makes it a place that is valuable and an object of concern, and that enables other people, like the reader, to establish a connection with it, too.

Materiality and Degradation

In the Anthropocene, the material world may offer beauty in all manner of places, but it can often be a complex, difficult and indeed saddening place to encounter and reckon with.

Reading poetry can help us to not only see beauty in unexpected places, but also to understand the cultural implications of environmental degradation and its impact on humans' relations with their environment. In the poem "The River in Prose" from *The Drowned Book*, the sense of place that is established at the beginning of the poem becomes increasingly tentative until it is obliterated by the end of the poem as the observed degradation works through in the speaker's imagination.

The poem's landscape is a particularly bleak one; it is marked by a stasis and indeed paralysis that eventually make the endeavour to engage with its materiality an unsustainable one, so that, while it starts out squarely in the material world, as the poem progresses, it slides away via history into the realm of stories and the world of the imagination, to a mythical place of danger that seems impossible to escape. It fits nicely in a collection that Michael Symmons Roberts describes as "a sustained elegy for lost friends, landscapes and a decaying culture" (qtd in Crown n.pag.). The collection's title is a reference to Prospero, who, at the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, declares "And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book" (qtd in Dunmore vii). His words are tinged with irony, since, as Helen

Dunmore notes, “[Prospero] says these words within the frame of a play which will make his magic immortal, and to an audience which knew that witchcraft was incapable of drowning. The drowned book cannot be destroyed, but will continue to speak” (vii). This ability to speak and re-emerge from the deep, however, is strongly contested in “The River in Prose.”

“The River in Prose” is a poem in four parts that shows the Humber Estuary in both a physical and metaphysical form. O’Brien paints a bleak image of the place; he shows a city at a complete standstill, where whatever may have happened there before has been stopped in its tracks, leaving the landscape stagnant and paralysed. The Humber is explicitly mentioned, and the town is clearly reminiscent of places like Grimsby or Hull, where O’Brien grew up. The poem contains several historical references to the latter town. In Hull, the demise of the fishing and shipping industry over the later decades of the 20th century led to sharp social and economic decline, a decline that is at the heart of the poem. Historian Jo Byrne discusses this large societal shift, marked by “unemployment, urban disadvantage, physical change and disruption” (820) and argues that the narratives of this history of the people of Hull are closely related to their conception of place: “Fishing in Hull was strongly place-centred. Tunstall observed that ‘fishermen see themselves in a curious way as working in Hull.’ Although fishing 2000 miles from the city, vessels and processing facilities were Hull-owned and Hull-based. Trawlers sailed from and returned to the city” (818). The crisis of the fishing industry, apart from being a social and economic crisis, was then also a crisis of place as fishermen had to grapple with the fact that their industry “was becoming political, territorial and global” (819).

“The River in Prose” presents a similar crisis and a scene in which connections to place slowly dissolve over the course of the poem. The speaker describes the river as “that area of retired water” (1), the static connotations of the word *area* contradicting the dynamic ones we associate with the flowing of rivers. In the estuary, the movement comes not so

much from the descent of the water from the inland to the river's mouth, but from the tides that make the water level rise and fall with the sea's movement. In this moment, it is ebb, but the word that tells us this, "retired" (1), also carries the denotation of "The action or an act of retreating into seclusion, quiet, or privacy" ("Retire" 3). The river, then, is portrayed as an ancient force that is now used up, a place that was productive in the past, but now no longer is. Its banks are in even worse condition; immobile and unused, they are slowly eaten up by the forces of nature. The docks are "gridlocked" (1) and are "fed by the tides / through broken lock-gates which the mud is digesting" (2-3).

The fact that the poem is written in prose rather than verse contributes to the sense of bleakness and dereliction. Verse is the more artful form of language, and the fact that this river, in a collection of verse poetry, is narrated in prose instead, makes it stand out. In Shakespeare's plays, which were often written predominantly or exclusively in verse, prose speeches stand out, and are often used to distinguish their "inferior capacity" (Vickers 17). Utterances that are rendered in prose are often "coarse" (Vickers 10) and show their speakers as "limited" (Vickers 10) and "contemptible" (Vickers 10). Generally, "prose will inevitably be connected with a lower level of existence" (Vickers 17). The prose in this poem has a similar effect of degrading the region it speaks of even more, stripping it of its expected artful metre and leaving it bare. However, the language, if not the form of the language, shows that this suggestion is accurate only to a certain extent. The choice of words often suggests multiple layers of meaning, like the word *retired*, and its turns of phrase, too, indicate that while this is a poem in prose, it is still very much a poem. It is, therefore, a very artful text, and this fact lends the Humber a certain dignity.

The second paragraph builds on the previous one; while the first paragraph presented a scene of complete standstill, the second one elaborates on the slow process of erosion that has transformed the area. It does this by posing a number of questions about the way the area

came to be in the state it is in when the speaker encounters it, showing how the disaster that befell the Humber Estuary cannot be traced back to a single decisive moment:

Identify, please, the point, not officially recorded, at which a barge ceases to be simply unvisited and at rest and becomes derelict; becomes an interior the water goes over at leisure, something condemned by the fact it can never be water. (9-12)

The truth is that in the Humber Estuary, there is no such point. Its ruin and paralysis are the result of a process similar to what Nixon calls “slow violence” (*Slow Violence 2*), namely “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (*Slow Violence 2*). This violence here is the set of social and economic factors that together brought Hull to the state it finds itself in today. Nixon explains that this is a kind of violence that is increasingly gaining relevance in the age of the Anthropocene:

Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage in a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.” (*Slow Violence 2*)

“The River in Prose” engages with this problem by confronting the addressee, and thereby the reader, with the product of a slow process of decay. By pointing out its particular material details and actively questioning the process, its speaker encourages the reader to contemplate a subject that often stays unnoticed in today’s world, and yet has a large impact on it. Doing this, the addressee is confronted with the incremental degradation that befalls areas in

decline, and will find it is impossible to say when the object crossed the line from forgotten to irreparable to debris, or to draw the boundary between an object of utility and one of waste, merely marked by its unwanted nature and its disruption of its surroundings. The poem's depiction of the same kind of violence that is typical for the Anthropocene, and the sustained inquiry into how this relates to conceptions of place that follows, can help us think through the implications of our actions for the environment.

The second part of the poem sees its attention shifting from the processes unfolding in, and transforming, the material world towards history as a speculative narrative of the ship's history begins. The speaker says "Say" (17) and continues with a stream of consciousness narration of the history of Hull and the Humber as he imagines they might have been, which he presents from the start as "*a dream of extinction*" (17), suggesting its fate has always been inevitable, if not foreseeable. This part sees Hull in the past as a place of great historical significance, a notion that is invoked through a number of historical references that occur throughout this section of the poem. The first of these is applied to the ship, that may have carried coal from Selby, once the leading coal mining area in the United Kingdom. It is said to be "*bashing through the swell like a Merrimack boat*" (18). This metaphor is ambiguous and might refer to any of a number of different ships.

Firstly, the *Merrimack boat* invokes the Merrimack River in New England. Henry David Thoreau writes about a trip he undertook on this river and its tributary, the Concord River, in his travel narrative *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In this account, he writes about themes like nature, fishing and industry that are highly relevant to the landscape and society of the Humber even today. When Thoreau addresses a fish that, because of a dam, is prevented from travelling upriver, his account resonates with the state of affairs on the Humber:

Still patiently, almost pathetically, with instinct not to be discouraged, not to be *reasoned* with, revisiting their old haunts, as if their stern fates would relent, and still met by the Corporation with its dam. Poor shad! where is thy redress? When Nature gave thee instinct, gave she thee the heart to bear thy fate? Still wandering the sea in thy scaly armor to inquire humbly at the mouths of rivers if man has perchance left them free for thee to enter. By countless shoals loitering uncertain meanwhile, merely stemming the tide there, in danger from sea foes in spite of thy bright armor, awaiting new instructions, until the sands, until the water itself, tell thee if it be so or not. Thus by whole migrating nations, full of instinct, which is thy faith, in this backward spring, turned adrift, and perchance knowest not where men do *not* dwell, where there are *not* factories, in these days. (36-37)

Although the Humber is not dammed, and its geologic features as well as fish populations, are wholly different to the scene Thoreau describes, there are certainly places where one might wonder about the presence and influence of humans in the landscape.

The future prospects that the speaker of “The River in Prose” describes, in which the tide turns on the progress of civilisation, also appears in this text, but with a positive twist. The nightmare reality of “The River in Prose” here means justice and opportunity for the shad, and indeed for humans, too. Thoreau asserts:

I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against that Billerica dam? – ... Thou shalt ere long have thy way up the rivers, up all the rivers of the globe, if I am not mistaken. Yea, even thy dull watery dream shall be more than realized. ... At length it would seem that the interests, not of the fishes only, but of the men of Wayland, of Sudbury, of Concord, demand the levelling of that dam. (37-38)

In bringing the contemporary plight, as well as the future prospects of these two rivers of Old and New England together, the speaker indicates that there is a broader significance that stretches beyond the story of the Humber alone.

With the phrase *Merrimack boat*, “The River in Prose” also invites a comparison with the frigate *Merrimack*, which was later rebuilt as the *CSS Virginia*, and took part in the Battle of Hampton Roads, the first battle between ironclad warships, and one of the most important naval battles in the American Civil War. This reference lends an air of grandeur and historical significance to the coal ship. However, the comparison is a somewhat tainted one, since the ex-*Merrimack*, which was never launched by its original Union builders, went into battle for the Confederacy, and Hull prides itself on being the home of the prominent abolitionist William Wilberforce. The Battle of Hampton Roads was the Confederacy’s attempt to break the blockade on Confederate ports that was imposed by the Union and cut off a vital source of income for the Southern States, as it limited trade and made cotton, the Confederacy’s main crop, very hard to export. To another famous Hull inhabitant, Zachariah Pearson,⁶⁹ whose name is also referred to in the poem, however, the *CSS Virginia*’s role in world history was perhaps less problematic than tragic. The mayor of Hull in 1859 and 1861 who tried his hand at a blockade-running enterprise would have certainly rejoiced if the *CSS Virginia* had been more successful in her attempt at lifting the blockade.

All these references are presented in one continuous stream of consciousness, a sentence that runs on and on, with subordinate clause followed by subordinate clause, offering little time to pause and reflect. Although the ship may have a claim to a place in one of the most important conflicts in modern world history, the drama of politics, merchandise, warfare and the freedom of the individual, is just as easily, or perhaps even more so,

⁶⁹ Zachariah Pearson, incidentally, has made an indirect contribution to Hull’s environment in his gift of a piece of land to the city of Hull which is now Pearson Park. The park includes the Pearson Park Wildlife Garden, a community garden that, according to the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, which owns it, boasts 240 different species.

forgotten as it is called to mind. Now the ship lies rotting in its dock, and all the significance it might once have had is rotting with it; its name is forgotten, its story has disappeared and signifies nothing to the casual passer-by:

... *The tide comes in through
the broken lock-gate, investing every rotten inch of a vessel so 'much
decayed' as no longer to merit a name.* You come here in 1959, in
perfect ignorance (29-30).

This historical narrative thus contextualises the picture of the harbour of Hull, and also relativises it. The *Merrimack*, Pearson, Wilberforce and the ships they saw sailing out the Humber, have all disappeared and lost importance to contemporary people's day-to-day lives. All that is left of their attempts, for better or worse, to have an influence on the course of world history, is a ship performing an eternal, useless feat, in a smelly incarnation of Sisyphus: "Water lies between the plank floor of the cabin and the hull, sieving the stinking ballast twice daily" (26-27).

In the third part of "The River in Prose," the reader is brusquely brought back to contemporary Hull, but following this disenchanted history, the speaker starts to lose his grip on the material world. The section describes "rivermen" (31), finding themselves in "Rivermen's pubs, where the river is penned in the cellars" (31-32). The presentation of the river not as a body of water, but as a text, not a physical reality but an idea, marks the poem's departure from materiality. The fact that this change of perspective applies to all levels of society becomes apparent when, in the fourth part of the poem, the scene shifts from the pub to a disturbing perversion of a traditional English gentlemen's club, showing that the disintegration of the world is perceptible across social strata.

What follows is a scene of increasing alienation, in which the connection with the landscape is, by the end, entirely lost. The first paragraph of the fourth section is a dialogue

between two people; one whose voice is rendered in upright roman type and one whose speech is shown in italic type. The conversation shows a disillusionment so pervasive it has become institutionalised. The first voice enquires if he has arrived at the Russian consulate, only to find that he has instead come to “*the Club Lithuania, / Dogger Street Branch*” (33-34). His reasons for going to the Russian consulate remain unclear, and his decision to remain at the club is also not explained. The reference to Lithuania serves to connect the scene to Hull in a somewhat roundabout way. Hull has long had commercial relations with the Baltic countries; Wilberforce’s family had made a fortune through trade with them, and in recent times, many people have emigrated from the Baltic to Hull to work in the port. By mentioning Lithuania in conjunction with Russia, a country that occupied it multiple times over the centuries, a tension arises that is emphasised by the reference to the now-submerged Doggerland in the club’s name.

During the last glacial period, Great Britain (which was itself then connected to Ireland) was connected to continental Europe by an area named Doggerland, which is now at the bottom of the North Sea. Today, the name is, unsurprisingly, rarely used in daily conversation, although Dogger does appear four times a day in BBC Radio 4’s shipping forecast, which is read out in “hymnal cadences” (F. Harvey par. 1) that, to the uninitiated, sound like a distant, almost esoteric lullaby. The reference to Doggerland is an eerie foreshadowing of the fate that may befall Hull. During the Mesolithic period, Doggerland was a place of great social, economic and cultural importance (Gaffney et al. 140-141) that was more diverse and possibly preferable as a habitat to the hills of England (138). Over time, as the glaciers in the north melted, it became entirely inundated, submerging all signs of culture in the North Sea, so that its existence was forgotten completely until the early 20th century, when it was first written about by paleobiologist Clement Reid.

Doggerland's history contains a grave warning for Hull, the possible future inundation of which is hinted at by means of the sunken barge from the first part of "The River in Prose." It is a warning that is particularly topical in this age of climate change which is marked, much like the Mesolithic period was, by global warming. V. Gaffney, S. Fitch and D. Smith write:

When considering the evidence from the North Sea one point should be appreciated – Doggerland was always doomed. The heartland of the Mesolithic in north-west Europe would have been constantly shrinking and this would have been obvious to its inhabitants. Sometimes slow then terrifyingly fast, the sea inevitably reclaimed ancestral hunting grounds, campsites and landmarks. (141)

The club's name thus shows a real, if ancient, precedent to complete obliteration through inundation, subtly pointing out that this prospect is not at all unlikely or even surprising. Doom and disaster are nothing but the way of the world, and entirely likely to happen in a place like Hull, which after all lies on Doggerland's border.

Like a traditional gentlemen's club, membership in the Club Lithuania is required for entry into the building, but here, this is not dependent upon financial and social status; rather, it seems to be based on experience with the hardships of life at sea. The evidence the first voice presents of this is both startling and mystifying. It is a far cry from the realism of the first part and the historical genealogy of the second. Rather, it is reminiscent of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Edgar Allan Poe's "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket" or indeed Richard Wagner's "Der fliegende Holländer", all of which present characters who have committed greater or lesser crimes and, after terrifying voyages and encountering, or indeed, becoming, ghost ships, are condemned to death or to wandering the seas forever:

... I've sailed

through pancake ice on a Baltic ferry while Wagnerian bridge-pillars loomed past in the fog and been very afraid. (34-36)

Although Wagner, before commencing work on “Der fliegende Holländer,” indeed found himself in a terrible storm on a ship from Estonia, in a situation very similar to that which the speaker finds himself in, the trope of a ghost ship emerging from the fog is an entirely immaterial one; ghost ships are by definition not physical.

This story of disaster, however, fails to register with its addressee, who shows himself to be unimpressed: “*You have to get signed in*” (37), and his reaction seems marked for this particular establishment: “*Here at the Club Lithuania we specialize in continuous disappointment. We never close*” (38-39). Neither the material world, nor historical narratives or the human imagination seems to have any significance. The club and its porter contribute to the image presented in the first part of the poem, of a place in an irreversible state of decay, where the water of the sea washes over everything, making it damp and useless. Even the guest is of no importance.

The final section of “The River in Prose” shows that the departure from the material world has far-reaching implications for the poem, when the estuary, this place of decomposition where all meaningful activity has become impossible and all that is left is an eternal state of paralysis, is denied a status as a physical place. The connection with materiality is now irretrievably lost. The city is condemned to being “an annexe of Belgian Symbolism” (41-42); Bruges-la-Morte has become Hull-la-Morte, a place of “infinite silence and an existence that was so monotonous it almost failed to give ... the sense of being alive” (Rodenbach 30). The estuary, meanwhile, is characterised as “formerly a place but in fact an end to places, formally a flood-plain but in fact somewhere geography has finished dealing with” (42-44).

The mention of geography and its irrelevance in the estuary is important; the study of geography is “concerned with the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere, and with human activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities” (“Geography” 2). Although the region’s physical characteristics can be identified and categorised, this categorisation has become entirely void of meaning as the result of the paralysis that has struck the area. If “the modern science of geography derives its substance from man’s sense of place and his curiosity about the spatial attributes of the surface and atmospheric envelope of the earth” (Committee of American Geographers qtd in Relph 2), this study is futile when no men (or indeed women) are left with any feelings about or interest in the land. The poem’s speaker thus intimates that the process of appraisal and memory making that is constitutional to the sense of place, has stopped entirely in the region he describes.

The closing image of “The River in Prose” shows that the departure from the material world has far-reaching implications for the poem. As it progressively loses its grounding, the poem, which is very much concerned with processes that play out over time as well as the course of history, sees time folding back on itself. In the absence of a meaningful societal structure on land, the setting may, as well as post-modern, be prehistoric:

... Cannibals in skiffs come
 rowing smoothly down at dusk, with barely a drip in the grey
 waters of the right-angled network – (45-47)

The many references to water that occur throughout the poem, and return at its end, are reminiscent of the place where life once began, hinting that it will come back to reclaim what it once gave to the land. Similarly, the cannibals are creatures from a distant past. As William Arens argues, the discussion of cannibalism as a custom is normally restricted to faraway lands just prior to or during their “pacification” by the various agents of western civilization.

... Correspondingly, if the time is lengthened sufficiently back to the pre-Christian era, we permit ourselves a glimpse of this sort of savagery among our own forebears. Cannibalism becomes a feature of the faraway or foregone, which is much the same thing. In the way that the dimensions of time and space are interpreted, “they,” in the form of distant cannibals, are reflections of us as we once were. (18-19)

The primitive Heart of Darkness creeping up on the Humber Estuary represents its final collapse, cutting off the poem with a “-” (47) as it will cut off all hope for the river and its surroundings, and everyone who has the misfortune of residing there. A sign bearing the command “*No fishing*” (44), meanwhile, serves as an ironic commentary on both the morality and the history of the poem’s setting. In one sense, it is a flippant detail in light of the mention of a practice that has often, in different times and cultures, been regarded as a custom that serves as a “boundary between civilized and savage” (Arens 40); surely the arriving people will not heed prohibitions such as these. It also refers to the demise of the Hull fishing industry: *No fishing* might, besides a prohibition, also be a description of the state of affairs in Hull: no fishing takes place there anymore.

“The River in Prose” thus shows a dramatization of what the implications are when the forces of history and cultural imagination are, one by one, undermined and denied. It makes for a sense of placelessness that turns into a horror story where the forces of time wipe out everything of meaning for the site’s inhabitants. Nixon suggests that the process of place-making is never-ending as meaning has to be continuously reinforced: “Place is a temporal attainment that must be constantly renegotiated in the face of changes that arrive from without and within, some benign, others potentially ruinous” (*Slow Violence* 18). This notion is hauntingly reversed here. Once the estuary is separated from its historical and cultural framework, it is shown to be utterly lost. The recurring references to water that creeps up on the town, its ships and pubs and everything in it, reinforces this. Water has great power to

degrade and destruct. Rather than static, the sea is fluid, and it denies to the people on shore all sense of stability, reliance and dependence they may once have had.

Even if the town is never in direct danger of being inundated, the sense of decay is indicative of a fear that is felt across the modern industrialised world. Historical and cultural narratives are obliterated, traded for a lingering sense of decline. In this way, the poem very much echoes the history of Hull in the 20th century, in which the sense of community that existed amongst workers in the fishing industry was traded for the larger structures and constructions of capitalism, industrialisation and globalisation, which led to alienation amongst the people of Hull, and indeed across the western world. The notion of precarity and the denial of a sense of place that follows from it, are also reminiscent of the different descriptions of Sunk Island, and a reading of this poem in conjunction with the texts on Sunk Island provides a dramatic commentary on the political implications of the imagination of real places.

Spectres of Landscape

The bleak imagination of landscapes and pervasive placelessness that appears in O'Brien's writing is an important theme in Didsbury's poetry as well. In the following, I will discuss how the sense of placelessness can contribute to a perception of the world as a scary place, but also one that may help us reconsider our place as humans in the world, and provide an invitation for empathy. Regarding the role of place in Didsbury's poetry, Barry writes that, like many other Hull-based poets, including O'Brien, Didsbury shows a "preference for 'setting' over 'geography'" (107). He describes the distinction as follows: "'Setting,' in this sense, is *generic*, evoking a generalised impression of the urban or the metropolitan, while 'geography' is *loco-specific*, giving a rendition of specific cities, and often signalled by using the names of actual streets, buildings or districts" (49). In the previous sections, we have seen that in the poems I have discussed, it is often the points of reference in the material world that

inspire in the poems flashes of hope and connection. Barry explicitly laments Didsbury's "always very rapid exit from 'here' to 'elsewhere', even (or perhaps especially) in the case of a poet as highly gifted as Didsbury" (108). In the following sections, I will tease out the implications of Didsbury's engagement with the landscapes he describes as they evolve or dissolve over time, and how, in different settings and contexts, the turn away from place can also become a point of connection, and provide an alternative way of imagining our place in a changing world. In this way, we can see in Didsbury's poetry not only a questioning or a dramatisation of the role of the imagination in the construction of place as we have seen it at work in the texts about Sunk Island, but also an inspiration for an alternative way of engaging with the world.

The poem "Home Town," from Didsbury's 1987 collection *The Classical Farm* depicts a scene that is marked by both placelessness and a sense of horror in a way that is reminiscent of the last part of O'Brien's "The River in Prose." The poem opens to a vision of "Children and dead sailors loung[ing] in salty parks" (1) and continues to mention "oilskins" (2), "boarded-up shops" (2) and a "grey and angry sea" (4). All these features contribute to an image of a seaside town, once perhaps prosperous but now no longer the home for fishermen it once was; a town like Hull, although Didsbury never mentions Hull in the poem. We may see a tempestuous, grey sea when we walk along the quay in Hull, and we may see boarded-up shops too, but it is unlikely we will see corpses in them, much less encounter the protagonist of the poem, who "strolls among them with a sword" (3). When the protagonist enters a building, "the floor is no floor" (10), it is "an idle bed" (10) but even that phrase is qualified to make it more obscure – it is "an idle bed of dangerous machinery" (10). The world outside is equally troubling; the park the speaker visits is an extension of the nightmare: "Dark children offer him their hands in parks / that bob against the street like barges against a wharf" (16-17). "What is beginning to frighten him most is the rescue, / not

the predicament” (23-24), Didsbury writes, but what the predicament is remains unclear, much less what the rescue entails, or even the fear itself. There is only a haunting line-up of bodies, dead or alive, standing or dynamic, in unreal places, with unclear origins and destinations.

The poem “The Northlands,” from the same collection as “Home Town,” presents a landscape that is less frightening, but where the reality of the scene was questionable in the latter, here it is denied outright, and the distance between the speaker and his environment leaves him ambivalent regarding his ability to act under these circumstances. “The Northlands” is a self-reflexive poem about the poet, who, upon learning that

... some tune
 I hadn't been listening to
 and which didn't impress me
 was a Chopin nocturne (12-15)

begins to see metaphors all around him. After he is impressed by the name of the creator rather than the music, he decides that living life “with fountain pen in hand” (24) is “much better than history” (25); he prefers the artful and artificial life of poetry over that of reality. Soon, he starts to deny the locality of the poem’s eponymous place. He says that he “began to imagine / *the hills with all their electrics stilled / and cattle pinned out like photofits in the glare*” (28-30). The landscape to begin with is not real, and the cattle are not only images, but productions of the mind, themselves placed in a light that impedes clear sight. His death is an exit from an immaterial world. What he leaves is a “*kingdom of metaphor*” (35), a place where the rule is that things refer not to what they are, but have some other meaning assigned to them. Upon his death, he will continue to exist in the new guise of “some new kind of god for the northlands” (37) but the lack of capitalisation in both the words “god” and “northlands” shows that here, too, his referents are far from concrete – they do not merit the

orthographic courtesy that other proper nouns in the poem – “Chopin” (15), “Ophelia” (21), “Susan” (23), and even “Summer” (22) and a passing “cunning Butterfly” (23) receive. He writes that “the *northlands* / ... actually frighten me” (38-39); his fear is real, but the place, ultimately, is not: the northlands are “far from being a place” (40), but are rather “a set of sounds” (41), a phrase that is in itself a metaphor. The northlands are made not of soil, but of air.

The poet-speaker indicates that his relation to the landscape is problematic. He calls his imaginings “lies” (28) and says he is “confessing” (27) to having made them up. He describes his world as “*this kingdom of metaphor*” (35) and imagines that on his death, he will become “some new kind of god for the northlands” (37). Added to this fanciful imagination is the conviction that

the *northlands*,
 which actually frighten me,
 which far from being a place
 are a set of sounds whose transcription I think
 it would be unwise to leave unrepented for very long
 whose transcription thank God
 I think I am *unable*
 to leave unrepented very long. (38-41)

The speaker thus sees his attempt to put his imagination into words, or transcribe it, as a sin, and his giving permanence and importance to these words, the imagination rather than the real place, needs to be acknowledged, confessed and properly repented. However, his repeated use of negative form in *unwise*, *unrepented* and *unable* indicates that there is a lack of immediacy to these feelings. By foregoing the more affirmative *wise*, *repented* and *able*, he creates distance from his conviction. Even his conscience, then, exists on a level that is

once removed from reality. Much like O'Brien's more immaterial poems, the departure from place in "The Northlands" thus inhibits the speaker's ability to act.

Didsbury's poetry often negates the materiality of the encountered world, and yet the concept of place is an important theme in spite of or perhaps because of this negation. The landscapes that he portrays are often alike, yet their physical attributes are hard to pin down. They resonate with Hull and the environs of the Humber, but they appear dematerialised. Still, they keep haunting the poems as an absent presence, simultaneously real and not real. In this sense, they are reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's concept of the spectre:

one does not know what it is, what it is presently. It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead.

(5)

The landscape in Didsbury works in much the same way as the mysterious *it* that Derrida describes. The landscape is there and not there, present and absent, it cannot be ignored, but however much the reader tries, it also cannot be known, and this challenges the speaker's ability to engage with it. The landscape is continuously and conspicuously implied and referred to, and thus it attracts the reader's attention, but because its materiality is simultaneously denied, the reader cannot fully engage with it, or learn much about it. While the poems invite interest in the landscape, they never satisfy this curiosity. In this way, they imply that while there is an environment that is relevant to the poems, this is an environment that the reader, as well as the poems' speakers and characters, cannot connect with.

Estuarial Poetry

The mysterious and unknowable, non-material nature of the landscape is enhanced by the complex web of intertextual references that is present in many of Didsbury's poems, and grants them the same hermetic qualities that the turn away from the physical world does. Not only is the engagement with the material world inhibited, but so is communication and understanding between different parties. This theme becomes apparent in Didsbury's poem "The Guitar." This poem, again from *The Classical Farm*, starts by destabilising the physical landscape, and soon moves towards a complex web of historical and literary references that cloud the poem's content in mystery, much like the imaginary landscape does. "The Guitar" portrays a train ride along the Humber, and it names this environment directly (2). The physical landscape is again approximated to a sonic one, as it was in "The Northlands," as the tracks are transformed into the frets on a guitar, and the landscape becomes not sound but an instrument of sound. The poem makes this connection seem fairly obvious: "Aerial songs, estuarial poetry" (1).

Although it is set on the Humber, the poem looks upward towards the sky. The soils of the Humber are described as thin (5), referencing the practice of warping that made the Humberhead Levels fertile. This process involves flooding land and allowing sediment to settle, "leaving a thin layer of material overlying the previous ground surface" (Metcalf et al. 114), after which the water is drained. The process of desiccation as a result of artificial drainage has also had an effect on the appearance of the landscape, making it more compact and indeed thin. The adjective *thin* makes the ground sound unsolid and fragile, and indeed the processes that have made the soil thin have made the future of the Humber Estuary much more precarious and difficult to predict in the face of climate change (Metcalf et al. 114). As an archæologist, Didsbury is well versed in the changeability of nature and people's adaptation to these changes, having published on this topic himself (Metcalf et al. 114).

The character who next enters the scene in “The Guitar” is even less solid than the fragile and shifting land: it is Æolus, the Ancient Greek god of the winds. He descends onto the land but never loses his aerial qualities: on the land he “begins to bounce” (6), and soon he takes off again as “His pinions take him / half a mile high in a lift” (11-12). However, this mention of Æolus also has a very material resonance, as æolian processes, in which the wind shapes the landscape, had a great influence on the Humber Estuary (Metcalf et al. 98). Upon descending, Æolus starts playing the guitar that is the railway along the Humber, producing the “Aerial songs” (1) mentioned at the beginning of the poem. Again, there is a hesitation: Æolus plays with “Nebuchadnezzar toenails” (9). This is a reference to the Biblical Book of Daniel, in which King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of an enormous image of a man whose body parts, interpreted from the top to the toes, represent consecutive kingdoms. The toes are made of clay and iron, materials that were dug up and worked in the region of the Humber and which, Daniel says, mean that “the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken” (Dan. 2:42). This leaves us to wonder for how long Æolus will be able to play, especially since he does not play with his most dexterous body parts.

In its epigraph, the poem contains another intertextual reference, which contributes to the pattern of allusion that emerges in Didsbury’s poetry. The epigraph is taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp,” and with its inclusion, the poem makes reference to another instrument beside the guitar: to the eponymous contraption that is played by the wind. Named after Æolus, it was a popular poetic motif in Romantic poetry. Coleridge uses the æolian harp as a “metaphor of the internal breeze or breath responding to the inspiration of a natural wind” (Ferber 8). The instrument shows nature as a creative force – it is capable of producing music without human interference. However, as Charles Rzepka notes, the music of the æolian harp is hardly a spontaneous manifestation of nature’s art alone. He writes: “As otherworldly as such music must have sounded to its listeners, the wind harp could not

‘perform its task untouched alone,’ to paraphrase Bloomfield, without a good deal of ‘touching’ by its owner both beforehand and afterwards” (n.pag.). The sounding of an æolian harp was indeed a “notoriously fickle” (Rzepka n.pag.) hobby, since

Changes in temperature or humidity could easily sour it, requiring laborious and delicate attention to the tuning pegs. Tighten the strings too much or too little, or place the harp at the wrong angle, and it could refuse to perform altogether. Nor could it be used in wet or cold weather, unless its owner was indifferent to frigid drafts and drizzle blowing in, not to mention the long-term effects of bad weather on the harp’s wooden sound-box. In England, at any rate, your Aeolian harp could be sitting quietly on a shelf or in a drawer for weeks or months at a time. (Rzepka n.pag.)

The æolian harp’s sounds are thus rather the product of an intricate collaboration of human and nonhuman forces. Much like Didsbury’s poetry, the idea of the æolian harp in Coleridge’s imagination is one that diverges from materiality to the point where it sometimes obscures its practical implications.

Coleridge and Didsbury significantly differ in their aims for their reflections on ideas and materiality. Whereas Coleridge used his art to gain insight into the physical world, Didsbury moves away from it. M.H. Abrams argues that Coleridge’s conversation poems, of which “The Eolian Harp” is the first: “Typically ... [begin] with a description of the landscape, moves into a sustained meditation which involves the speaker’s past, present, and future, and ends in a return to the outer scene, but on a higher level of insight” (275). In fact, Coleridge saw the arts as a means of connecting the human to her environment:

For Coleridge a cardinal value of the arts was that they humanized nature and so helped to repossess it for the mind from which it had been alienated. Art, he says, “is the mediatrix between, and reconciler of, nature and man. It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into every thing

which is the object of his contemplation.” “To make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature, – this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts.” (Abrams 269)

The picture we are presented with in “The Guitar,” on the other hand, is a much more jarring one than the ones that emerge from Coleridge’s lyrics. Here there is no harmony and reconciliation; rather, the move away from materiality inspires confusion and fear.

This becomes clear when Coleridge himself appears as a character in the poem. After Æolus takes his leave into the air, the scene shifts back to the land, and there we see him, asleep, mumbling the words “Dutch River” (21), a reference to the lower reaches of the River Don, which flows into the Humber and the course of which was altered by Dutch engineers in the 17th century. He is not impressed by this scene. Neither the madman, nor the engine-driver who cross the reader’s path next have much to say either: “‘Nice bit of road,’ one says. ‘Aye, nice road,’ says the other” (36), disregarding the fact they find themselves at a railway.

The speaker shows more interest in the sky, which he describes as being “like an entry in The Oxford English Dictionary” (37). This simile is curious; it makes the sky, already distant and intangible, even more immaterial by likening it to an abstract entity, a word that is not even mentioned explicitly. The obscure reference surely indicates the speaker must be very erudite, and perhaps knows parts of the dictionary by heart, as he casually notes that “The earliest reference for it is 1764, / in Randall’s *Semi-Virgilian Husbandry*” (38-39). This, however, appears to be hot air. No word of which the first recorded use is in the mentioned text is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary. One word is listed that has a reference in it, but this is the second reference for the word, and it seems hardly applicable to any kind of sky: it is the word *spiky*. Rather than the sky, this word is reminiscent of the railway, and in this way, it creates a link between the two different entities. Spikes are the objects with which rails are fastened to railway sleepers. The speaker likens the train itself to a caterpillar (32),

an animal that can have a spiky appearance. The view shifts back to the train with its three human passengers, but now it is not the speaker but Æolus himself who “is getting tired of attending” (43). As he descends to the earth, it becomes clear that this is a dangerous place that is to be feared and ignored if at all possible for here, the god becomes a fearsome apparition who “puts his face right up to the window / and shakes his horrid locks at them” (50).

Here, the poem is reminiscent of another poem by Coleridge, namely “Kubla Khan,” in which the poet appears as a dreadful figure who leaves the people who see him to “cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” (49-50). In the preface to “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge explains that the poem came to him in a dream when he was feeling ill. In “The Guitar,” we see Coleridge sleeping, and as he sleeps in his train carriage, Æolus appears to the other characters and the reader as a character not unlike the poet from “Kubla Khan.” The difference, however, lies in the fact that “Kubla Khan’s” poet-speaker is regarded with awe as well as fright, admiration as well as terror, whereas Æolus in “The Guitar,” is merely disturbing and scary: “the herbaceous stubble / ... makes frightful his visage of mud” (52-53). The humans present on the scene are not incited to react to Æolus’s appearance at all, in fact, they wish they were not there, were absent or rather present in another world, the immaterial world of dreams: “They wish they were asleep” (48), but nothing suggests that this sleep should be creative like Coleridge’s supposedly was. The move away from the material world and the distance that the intertextual references create between speaker and reader again result in a scene in which the characters find themselves in a state of stasis in terms of their relations with the world and creatures other than themselves.

“Red Nights,” like “The Guitar,” is a poem that is highly preoccupied with the aerial domain, and this poem showcases the move away from the material world as a reaction to modern life in a world marked by environmental change. The connection between the aerial

and immaterial qualities of the poem and post-industrial English society is hinted at in “The Guitar” in the references to environmental degradation and a changing world whose advance was marked by the railway, and which Coleridge responded to in his poetry, but it becomes more explicit in “Red Nights.” Like in “The Guitar,” the environment of “Red Nights” is a threatening one: “The red industrial nights of summer / are typed on the back of a frightening letter, / one that will cause you an ongoing pain” (1-3). The red night sky is reminiscent of the proverb *red sky at night, shepherd’s delight*, which predicts fair weather on the following day, but here the shepherds are gone and the scene is not pastoral but industrial. The colour red rather implies fear and danger and the heat of machines, intensified by the heat of the season. The colour of the light may itself be the result of the lamps and flames of factories. This scene, too, is immaterial; it only exists represented in language and explicitly draws the reader’s attention to this fact. Like its space, its time is also not real. Bakhtin writes that “any and every literary image is chronotopic” (251), but this poem denies both the reality of its place and time: “this hour / ... itself is only a fiction” (13-14). Indeed, its speaker is reluctant in his actions, his appearance, and in his entire ability to engage with the world around him: “There are ways of deportment under skies that mimic fire / which I hesitate to commend to you at this hour” (12-13).

The turn towards the immaterial world from the industrial one is reminiscent of Marshall Berman’s critique of Karl Marx’s concept of modernity. Berman contrasts the potentials and the risks of the state of modernity, and the famous quotation from Marx: “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. ... To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air’” (15). Didsbury’s poetry is symptomatic of this modernist change. The people inhabiting his landscapes have

experienced both the opportunities and the losses that a modernising world brings with it, and his poetry responds to Marx' prophecy in a very literal way: by turning solidity into air, and the material world into a metaphysical one.

The confusion that results from Didsbury's use of allusion and intertextual references, which occurred throughout "The Guitar," can also be linked to the sense of alienation that results from life in the modern world. Berman explains that, in today's society, the public has become so diverse that there is no single audience with a single frame of reference anymore, and this is detrimental to communication: "as the modern public expands, it shatters into a multitude of fragments, speaking incommensurable private languages; the idea of modernity, conceived in numerous fragmentary ways, loses much of its vividness, resonance and depth, and loses its capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives" (17). The language of Didsbury's poetry alienates in a similar way since, for the reader, the many references are almost impossible to keep track of. Whereas in the texts about Sunk Island, a shared imagination was essential to the conception of place, here, the possibility of such sharing is cut off as communication is impossible.

Many of Didsbury's poems show these complex networks of allusions to different texts of varying degrees of obscurity, that result in a private language of allusion that is inaccessible to the reader in the same way that the landscape is. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin suggests a similar connection between landscape and language: "Language, as a treasure-house of images, is fundamentally chronotopic. Also chronotopic is the internal form of a word, that is, the mediating marker with whose help the root meanings of spatial categories are carried over into temporal relationships (in the broadest sense)" (251). If Didsbury's chronotope fails to become concrete, it is no surprise that his language fails, time and again, to establish stable connections.

In “Next,” a poem from the 1994 collection *That Old-Time Religion*, many different difficulties surrounding the complexity of language and communication emerge, and they indicate that a failure of connection also implies a failure of progress. At the heart of the poem are two forms of language: spoken and written. The written language appears as a text on “a porcelain plaque, / fixed by a nail / to the trunk of a churchyard yew” (1-3). The spoken language comes from the mouth of “a supercilious pillock in a trenchcoat” (4). His language is being recorded on a camera, immortalised like that on the plaque, if in a less concrete medium. However, even if the language is fixed, it fails to communicate. The man’s words are lost to our speaker, his listener, who muses that perhaps “he’s talking about that plaque, / but then again / his subject might be anything” (9-11). Lost, too, are the words on the plaque, and while the words of the filmed man may be heard by the person holding the camera and the people who will watch the film later, the written text is lost forever. From its position and material it may be inferred that the plaque carries information about the city’s heritage that would be important for an understanding of the place, but “nowadays [it] is eloquent only / of the sad effects of two hundred years of weather” (23-24). The lost language thus carries with it a loss of the understanding of place. The speaker, however, does not mind this at all: “I love that kind of thing” (25).

He goes on to note that part of the plaque is still visible; he makes out the name of the Bible book that was the source of the words once present on it; the book *Judges*. However, he sighs, “chapter and verse have completely eroded away” (27), punning on the idiom referring to specific details. *Judges* is a book that presents communication as a complicated process. P. Deryn Guest notes that it has a cyclical narrative in which, time and again, “Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh; is subsequently given over to the hands of the enemies; cries to Yahweh; Yahweh raises up a leader to resolve the crisis; the spirit of Yahweh comes upon the leader; the enemy is defeated; peace is regained” (190), after which the cycle starts anew.

Sustainable progress is not made, never do the people learn from what they are repeatedly being told. Guest suggests that in this book, a process similar to the one that Berman identifies in the modern age takes place: “By the time we reach the final judge, Samson, the cyclic pattern will have broken down considerably, the fabric of the text thus mirroring the social and religious breakdown of the story world” (190). The downfall of Israel mirrors the decline of the society that the speaker and the man he observes are part of, one in which connections with either environment or fellow human are out of reach. Both the people of Israel and the speaker of “Next” are provided with communications that they are unable to understand and follow. Like the sense of place, which, in Didsbury’s poetry, often is an absent presence that is implied, but cannot be meaningfully engaged with, communication is attempted, but because it is obscured in different ways, its message remains elusive.

Places of Empathy

The complications involving landscape and language that we have seen are present throughout Didsbury’s work come together in “Eikon Basilike” from *The Classical Farm*. The poem opens with a bleak image of “the empty heart of the city” (2) which suffers from “long continuing cold” (1). It is frosty and closed to such an extent that the homely becomes foreign and the familiar obscure: the speaker “... noted the resemblance that my home now suddenly bore / to a level Baltic town, its frozen gardens, and its / bright green civic domes” (5-7). Even the most common of plants, the grass, appears mysterious

... The new white lawns
 had frosted to such a depth that they’d lost
 the visual texture of grass and begun to make pastiche
 of a pavement, a complement to some old and
 disgruntled buildings. (7-11)

The materiality of this image is complex: the atmosphere is alienating and bleak, which is reinforced by the speaker's statement that, on commencing his journey, he "stuffed the sun and moon in a deep string bag" (3). This line is reminiscent of those that are repeated at the end of each stanza of Yeats's "Those Dancing Days Are Gone," a rather unforbearing lamentation on old age and death: "I carry the sun in a golden cup. / The moon in a silver bag" (7-8). However, part of this alienation results from the fact that the world's material presence is extremely insistent: the cold makes the speaker aware of the circumstances of the material world, and the frost makes it physically more resistant: the otherwise pliable grass becomes hard matter that the speaker compares to stone.

Attempts at communication are similarly conflicted; the speaker's characterisation implies that they both fail and succeed. Much like the landscape, they have a level on which connection seems possible, and one where it is frustrated. The speaker muses:

If this was what linguistic exercise meant
 then I didn't think much of it. The deep structures
 I could cope with, but the surface ones
 were coming at me in Esperanto, and fragments of horrible Volapük. (23-26)

In this section, the speaker refers to Noam Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar, in which he distinguishes between *deep* and *surface structures* in language, that are mediated by a *transformation marker*. The deep structure is the intended message the person uttering a sentence means to communicate, while the surface structure is the sentence as it is presented to the listener. The transformation is the linguistic process that puts meanings into words in a syntactic structure. Chomsky writes: "The deep structure of an utterance is given completely by its Transformation-marker, which contains its basis. The surface structure of the sentence is the derived Phrase-marker given as the output of the operations represented in the Transformation-marker" (131). The speaker seems to indicate he has faith in the meaning

behind words, but the words themselves he cannot comprehend, something that, bearing Chomsky in mind, seems impossible. If the transformation marker is a bridge that delivers the message from one side to the other in a surface structure, we may wonder how Didsbury's speaker can know what is on the other side of the bridge, if he cannot access the bridge of verbal communication itself.

The languages the speaker mentions and the systems that are employed to carry the intended meaning to its audience also refer to the difficulties and complexities of communication. Both are languages that were constructed to facilitate communication between people from different backgrounds, in contexts where communication was difficult, if not impossible before, but both ultimately failed to achieve this goal. Esperanto is still widely known today, and Volapük was an earlier iteration of the same ideal; its name is Volapük for *world language*. Its qualification as horrible refers to the fact that it was heavily criticised for its strange sounds⁷⁰. These criticisms led to internal conflicts which divided supporters into smaller factions that in turn disappeared altogether. Neither Esperanto nor Volapük succeeded in their attempts to substantially improve means of communication between people with different native languages. Therefore, it is unsurprising that they confuse and upset the speaker: firstly, he does not understand the languages he hears, and secondly, they also tragically refer to the wider issue of idealistic, but ultimately failed attempts at communication.

⁷⁰ While Johann Schleyer, who developed Volapük after having been inspired to do so by God, tried hard to make the language accessible to speakers of all manner of mother tongues by excluding diphthongs and consonants that were difficult for some people, as well as restricting root words to a single syllable, his extraordinary love for *umlauts* led to much confusion, discussion, and ridicule amongst those acquainted with the language. Schleyer was of the opinion that “a language without umlauts ... sounds monotonous, harsh, and boring” (qtd in Okrent n.pag.), indeed, it would seem “like a coloured picture without violet, brown, grey or rose” (qtd in Lafarge n.pag.), and “when you think about the hand-painted photographs of the 1880s, which had scarcely any colors but brown, gray, and a lurid dark red, you realize that, for Schleyer, the umlaut was life itself, or at least as close as you could come to it in the late 19th century” (Lafarge n.pag.). However, many enthusiasts of Volapük were more sceptical about the use of the diacritical mark and feared it would become the language's undoing as it was too foreign to non-German speakers. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* published a poem that poked fun at the language thus: “A charming young student of Grük / Once tried to acquire Volapük / But it sounded so bad / That her friends called her mad, / And she quit it in less than a wük” (qtd in Okrent n.pag.).

According to Arika Okrent, the reason constructed languages fail in their aims results from the fact that their philosophical basis obstructs the essentially “cultural nature of natural language” (Jones E116). To be really alive, a language needs to be used by groups of people who will adapt it to suit their own needs and let it change and grow naturally. This permits speakers to express the wide variety of experiences of different people: “The best hope a language inventor has for the survival of his or her project is to find a group of people who will use it, and then hand it over and let them ruin its perfection” (qtd in Jones E116). If a language is not concretely applied to the struggles of daily life in all its forms, it is doomed to die out. Languages can only flourish if they are allowed to evolve in the convoluted and messy way that languages, and indeed all things that grow, do. Like our environment and its inhabitants, they are organic. Didsbury’s world, however, is very much not so. Here, the metaphysical world routinely takes precedence over the physical one and as a result, the landscape and the language are transformed into a ghostly presence.

When we speak of growth, we usually think of the organisms that inhabit the world around us – including ourselves. So far, in Didsbury’s work, we have seen few instances of organic growth. Didsbury’s speakers have often distanced themselves from the material world, but in “Eikon Basilike,” the speaker decides to follow it. As he sets out on his journey across the town and has to decide which way to go, he “chose to follow three hares in winter coats / who hopped across my path” (12-13), as Alice follows the white rabbit to Wonderland. These, it turns out, are not just any hares. They have names and are called Tiney, Puss and Bess – they are the hares of the 18th century poet William Cowper, to whose soul the poem is dedicated. The physical presence of the hares is problematic – they are all dead, and two of them have even been elegised by their caretaker. The hares lead the speaker through a landscape that seems confused about its own materiality. He says they lead him

... away

from that novel plaza the ice revealed
 and I found myself on a track beside a canal,
 or rather a drain, which is different
 for it empties into the turbulent German Ocean (13-16)

The speaker's concern with the specifics of hydrological engineering show an attentiveness to the concrete landscape, but his reference to the place where the water he walks alongside is being transported to confuses it: the German Ocean, an old name for the North Sea, is not to be found on any map anymore. This name was in use until the first half of the 19th century and is contemporary to Cowper, rather than Didsbury and the world of "Eikon Basilike." The name *German Ocean* thus creates a distance between the time and place in the text and the corresponding place in the real world today.

Later on, the speaker walks through an industrial landscape and pays particular attention to his surroundings, which he compares to all manner of historical and fictional structures: "I was walking through the urban fields that surrounded / the Stalag or temple or star-ship of the Power Station" (27-28). Here, he encounters real people as well as "most of the leading Romantic poets" (32), who are busy with the very physical act of eating, in fact their meals are "substantial" (33), meaning large, but also emphasising materiality. Again, the physical and metaphysical world intermingle.

For Cowper, however, the hares were very much physical beings that he doted on throughout their lives. He wrote in a letter that was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1784:

Puss grew presently familiar, would leap into my lap, raise himself upon his hinder feet, and bite the hair from my temples. He would suffer me to take him up and carry him about in my arms, and has more than once fallen asleep upon my knee. He was ill three days, during which time I nursed him, ... and, by constant care and trying him

with a variety of herbs, restored him to perfect health. No creature could be more grateful than my patient after his recovery; a sentiment which he most significantly expressed, by licking my hand, first the back of it, then the palm, then every finger separately, then between all the fingers, as if anxious to leave no part of it unsaluted.
(qtd in Durbridge 6-7)

The natural world plays an important role in Cowper's poetry. His engagement with the hares is very much in line with his ideas about landscapes and nature that he expressed in his writing. Vincent Newey argues: "His landscape pulsates with life. Effects and meanings collide and fuse, forming, under their own pressure, a concentrated whole – an image of nature's organic profusion and God's plenty (there is no distinction) and an active embodiment of organic personality" (159-160). There is a stark contrast between Cowper's and Didsbury's landscapes, but the latter's relate to the former's in a meaningful way. Newey argues that Cowper's turn to nature resulted from a sense of alienation from his contemporary society: "Many had gone to nature for their inspiration before, of course ... but never, I think, with the accompanying sense of other possibilities being closed, or fast closing, and of the need to keep creatively, spiritually, and morally alive in an age hostile to creativity, spirituality, and moral sensibility" (111-112). As we have seen, the sense of alienation from society is one that is very much recognisable in Didsbury's work as well.

In the end, Cowper's hares lead the speaker to a very concrete, in fact loco-specific place, "outside the gate / on the bridge that carried the road across the stream / and in to the precincts of the Generating Board" (50-52), and it is here that he is finally able to establish a connection to another being, albeit in a complicated way. The presence of the hares is one mystifying aspect to the scene, and so is the way he reads "an old white notice bearing the four bold letters" (55). The letters would be CEGB for Central Electricity Generating Board, the state-owned body responsible for energy generation in England and Wales in the mid- to

late 20th century, but the speaker, who is unable to read the first two letters of the power-generating body's name, turns instead to a higher power. He says the sign is one "that denoted which mesmeric authority / we laboured under the caring aegis of" (56-57), a characterisation that is more fitting for God than an organisation. From the production of electricity, which is our main source of artificial light, he turns to the creator of light. Trying to work out the illegible letters, he muses: "Something – Something – G – B. / Like a name of God. But the letters were all wrong" (58-59). Much like the name of the organisation, God, too, is out of reach. Already once-removed from the physical world because of his metaphysical nature, Yahweh, the self-referential *I am that I am*, is here turned inside out; the name of God instead refers to nothing at all.

When the speaker looks at the sign again, he notices a different text, and this text enables him to finally make a meaningful connection to another human, albeit one far removed in space and even more so in time. He notes that

The enamel plate was now announcing that this was *Eikon Basilike*,
 a place whose sub-title I had no problem supplying
 from my sad and emotional erudition, justified at last
 by a portraiture of his sacred majestie, in his solitude and sufferings. (63-66)

This is an estranging discovery. Far from a loco-specific, physical place, *Eikon Basilike* is a text; it is the supposed religious autobiography of King Charles I, which was published days after his beheading. Whereas in the poems discussed above, the speaker's knowledge of and reference to obscure texts could alienate the reader, here the intertextuality serves to make a connection: his erudition is not just academic, he describes it as "emotional" (65) and even "sad" (65). When he spells out the subtitle, he acknowledges the King's "solitude and sufferings" (66), and because he lets the reader partake of his knowledge, he invites her to empathise with the King, too. In this way, he is able to establish an emotional connection,

albeit a tentative one as the subject with whom he intends to connect was beheaded in 1649, and this text is an artefact intricately connected to this fact.

This achievement of the imagination, the establishment of a meaningful connection to another being, is an important one in the age of the Anthropocene. In these times when the landscapes, environments and climates we know are changing beyond our control, Didsbury's poetry shows that we can still rely on the imagination to provide meaningful insights. In the introduction to *That Old-Time Religion*, Didsbury writes: "The poet can give the same answer to the question Why? as the mountaineer: Because it's there. But also, and unlike the climber, and far more importantly indeed: So that it should continue to be there" ("Introduction" 51). Poetry exists only because and when we produce it. In an era in which our ability to preserve the physical world is highly doubtful, it is a very comforting thought that, in writing poetry, we can at least perpetuate the world of the imagination.

In Didsbury's work, the reader is presented with a world of words, of references, of a religion that cannot be approached and a landscape that cannot be entered. It is, however, a world that is vibrant with creativity and humanity. Even if the world is a desolate place, destroyed by industrialisation, we have the imaginative power to create a new one, and the many intertextual references Didsbury uses show that that is something we, as a species, have always done, and will always continue to do. His work testifies that over the course of history, many things have been lost, but also that their ghosts, or spectres if you will, are not only memories to be mourned, but new sources of creativity. O'Brien argues: "For the anti-Romantic ... what is remembered seems by definition *lost*, a sign of mortality sweeping up at our heels. In Didsbury's case, memory is a gift, the granary of the imagination" (*Deregulated* 145). While his dematerialised worlds, made of memories and imaginations, can in some cases be alienating, in other cases, they can be an invitation to connect and find a common ground.

O'Brien's poem "Sunk Island," as well as the prose texts about this site, contain hints of floods and of a world that is changing beyond recognition. These changes are not explicitly connected to, but nevertheless similar to the ones that our planet in the age of the Anthropocene increasingly faces because of climate change. Furthermore, over the past decades, many places along the Humber, including Hull, where both O'Brien and Didsbury have lived for long periods of time, have witnessed major changes on the economic and social plane. However, one thing that is continuous through all the shifts and changes that mark the contemporary world is the power of the imagination. In various descriptions of Sunk Island, we noticed its force in the construction of a sense of place.

The political relevance of the imagination in times of drastic change became apparent in the Humber Estuary in June 2016, when the United Kingdom held a referendum on its EU membership. Journalist David Segal argues that the population of Grimsby voted in favour of Brexit because the town's narrative of former fishing glory that could potentially be restored after Brexit was more powerful than the economic reality of a large fish processing industry that relies on the European Union. He writes: "what happened here was more about hearts than minds ... economic facts are no competition for sentiment and history" (n.pag.). The nostalgia that lies at the heart of this phenomenon has similarities with the imagined worlds of O'Brien and Didsbury: the Grimsby of the past is very much an imagined world as well, albeit a more positive one. Nostalgia is a "Sentimental longing *for* or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past" ("Nostalgia" 2). It is a longing for a world that is unreal in two ways: not only does it not exist today as it lies in the past, but it has never existed: it is a version of history constructed of memories and imaginaries. Nevertheless, its political implications, as we have seen in June 2016 and as we are still seeing even today, are very real indeed.

The poetry of both Didsbury and O'Brien demonstrates the power of the imagination, its political force and its ability to create worlds and ideas, in different ways and with different outcomes. In O'Brien's work, it demonstrates that attention to the particulars of place can show the power of connection between people, and of the organic forces of nature in places where we might least expect them. It also, conversely, shows the impoverished world that may emerge if the connection with the world around us is lost. In Didsbury's poetry, similarly, we see that a disconnection with the material world results in scenes that are filled with dread because the foundations on which we build our understanding of life are missing. The connection between people in this environment is similarly fraught. Still, his poetry demonstrates that a shared understanding of culture and ideas, even if they are immaterial, can establish a framework in which people can connect. In the Anthropocene, this time in which our physical world is increasingly at risk, this is a message that is perhaps more important than ever.

“And What Is Real?”:
Landscaping in the Anthropocene



Trees in 't Hof



A path along the water



Flowers in autumn

Creating a Garden

In the centre of Vlaardingen, a city in the Rotterdam agglomeration about 10 kilometres east of Maassluis, the setting of *De Jacobsladder*, sits a small park connected to a larger one. The two parks lie across the street from Vlaardingen's old harbour, which ends in the *Nieuwe Waterweg*. 't Hof, the smaller park, is located on the grounds of a former estate whereas the larger *Oranjepark* was added later to benefit the community. Although neither park is particularly beautiful or impressive, they provide the visitor a more than welcome green retreat from the city. She can walk around on the paths, visit the petting zoo, have a picnic if the weather is fine or, if it is less so, enjoy a pancake in 't Hof's pancake restaurant. There is also a nature education facility that hosts primary school classes and provides interactive programmes on different environmental topics. While enjoyable places to visit, neither park will ever win any prizes. Much like the parks, Vlaardingen too, for all intents and purposes, remains a mediocre city. For a Dutch city, it is not small, but, located in the shadow of Rotterdam, Vlaardingen never achieved any notoriety. It grew exponentially in the post-war years when the port was booming, but never reached the expected number of 100,000 inhabitants. It remains devoid of important cultural, historical or natural landmarks. An initiative to adorn public bins in the city with poetry produced the following couplet: "we breathe on *merrily* / under Europoort's smoke" (original italics).⁷¹

In a policy summary, the municipality of Vlaardingen suggests that Vlaardingen's proximity to the larger city of Rotterdam and its port, which is visible across the *Nieuwe Waterweg* that forms the south city limit, makes it highly appreciative of the green spaces that exist in the city. It argues:

Vlaardingen is a city of contrast. Nature and industry, pleasure yachts and professional navigation, ecology and residences. On the other side of the *Nieuwe*

⁷¹ Wij ademen *blijmoedig* voort / onder de rook van Europoort

Maas is the petrochemistry of Pernis. Large ships dock in the Vlaardingen harbours. For relaxation and recreation, Vlaardingen turns its face towards the unique, open peat lands of *Midden-Delfland*. (1)⁷²

This suggests that of all places, heavily industrialised areas can be exceptionally inspiring ones in thinking about nature, a notion that is dependent on the idea that the contrast between nature and industry makes green spaces stand out more, like a complementary colour. In this chapter, I will explore the value of nature in an environment that is seemingly devoid of it, and the implications of the imagination of nature as particularly powerful in industrialised regions. I will do this by analysing Alex Boogers' 2015 novel *Alleen met de goden* and texts about the forest *Lickebaertse Bos* and *'t Hof*, two green spaces in Vlaardingen that are relevant to the novel. I will describe how, even when memories of earlier, now-lost natural spaces have been forgotten and environmental changes are no longer mourned, people can still be inspired, comforted and awed by urban nature after earlier natural spaces have disappeared. I will also show that the powerful and creative force of nature in urban and industrial areas is relevant and poignant not only for attitudes towards the environment, but also towards social issues.

Vlaardingen possesses a fairly distinct topographical shape: a square that can be divided into four smaller squares of about equal size. Two lines run through the middle of the city, one from north to south, and one from east to west, separating the four quarters from each other. A draining canal that runs from the town of Schipluiden eight kilometres down to Vlaardingen's old harbour makes up the north-south division, while the A20 motorway from the coast to Rotterdam runs through the city from east to west. The north-eastern, south-eastern and south-western squares are all urban areas, while the north-western square is

⁷² Vlaardingen is een stad van contrasten. Natuur en industrie, plezierjachten en beroepsscheepvaart, ecologie en wonen. Aan de overkant van de Nieuwe Maas ligt de petrochemie van Pernis. Grote schepen meren aan in de Vlaardingse havens. Voor ontspanning en recreatie heeft Vlaardingen echter het gezicht gericht naar het unieke open veenweidelandschap van Midden-Delfland.

entirely green. This area, called the *Broekpolder* is used intensively for recreation, including for cycling, walking, horse riding and obstacle racing, and in recent years, the area's biodiversity has been improved. While it is a green and increasingly biologically diverse space, the *Broekpolder* owes its existence to decades of civilian resistance that strongly opposed, and eventually blocked, real estate development in this part of the city.

In spite of Vlaardingen's proximity to the heavy industry of the port of Rotterdam, the city remains very much preoccupied with nature. In 2009, the city participated in the *Entente Florale*, an annual European horticultural competition organised by the European Association for Flowers and Landscape that exists "to promote a greener and more pleasant environment in European towns and villages and to facilitate international contacts among the participants" ("Entente"). In a policy summary the city published on the occasion of its participation in the competition, the municipality insists that not only does the city contain much green, but its very structure is green, as its shape is described as that of a four-leaf clover⁷³ (Gemeente Vlaardingen 1). Advocates for a more nature-friendly Vlaardingen explain this imaginative metaphor as follows: "Whoever looks at the map of Vlaardingen discovers ... a four-leaf clover. The old harbour and the *Vaart* make up the stem. Nature enters the city of Vlaardingen from outside and green veins spread through the residential areas. In the three urban areas, green oases can be found The *Broekpolder* is the fourth, rare and entirely green clover leaf" (n.pag.)⁷⁴. The language used in this passage is flowery in different ways, thus reinforcing the notion of Vlaardingen as a profoundly green city: the topography of the city is described in highly imaginative terms, and the explanation of the metaphor is executed in a linguistic style that is lush and poetic.

⁷³ In celebration of the gold medal the city received and in recognition of its leading metaphor, the municipality of Vlaardingen sent four-leaf clover bulbs to all its residents, and planted a tree in each of the city's "leaves".

⁷⁴ Wie naar de plattgrond van Vlaardingen kijkt, ontdekt ... een klavertje vier. De Oude Haven en de Vlaardingse Vaart vormen het steeltje. Natuur komt van buiten de stad Vlaardingen binnen en groene nerven dooraderen de woonwijken. In de drie bebouwde stadsdelen zijn groene oases te vinden De Broekpolder is het vierde, zeldzame en geheel groene klaverblad.

The writers of the policy summary state that the people of Vlaardingen are intensely invested in local ecology because they are surrounded by heavy industry, and this insight was recognised by the jury of the *Entente Florale*. The municipality writes: “In the sixties we see a massive growth of the petrochemical industry and transloading in the ports. Vlaardingen takes on a leading role in the fight against the heavy burden the expansion of the port puts on the environment. The industrial surroundings stimulate the citizens of Vlaardingen to work extra hard for a green city” (2)⁷⁵. In their report, the *Entente Florale* jury acknowledges not only the city’s green spaces, but also notes that “The commitment of civilians to their green spaces is big and nature and environmental education are of a high level. This green pearl in the midst of an industrial environment really provides the municipality and its citizens with *The quality of life!*” (n.pag., italics indicate original English)⁷⁶. Vlaardingen was awarded a gold medal, a prize the city still very much celebrates today on signs announcing the city limits.

Landscape architect Michael van Gessel, who developed plans for restoration works that were carried out in ‘t Hof and the Oranjepark in 2012, invokes the contrast between nature and urban and industrial landscapes when he writes about the entrances to both parks. He suggests that the parks owe their singularity to the contrast between their green appearance and the rest of the city outside. In his plans for the park, he expresses a desire to emphasise this difference: “City parks are exceptional elements in the city. You shouldn’t walk in and out of them unnoticed. This calls for a clear marking of the city park in relation to its surroundings” (32)⁷⁷. In fact, the boundary between park and city is vital to the park’s

⁷⁵ In de jaren zestig zien we een enorme groei van de petrochemische industrie en de overslag in de havens. Vlaardingen neemt een voortrekkersrol in de bestrijding van de zware milieubelasting die het gevolg is van de havenexpansie. De industriële omgeving prikkelt Vlaardingers om extra hard te werken aan een groene stad. Een beleid dat zijn vruchten heeft afgeworpen.

⁷⁶ De betrokkenheid van de bewoners met hun groen is groot en de natuur- en milieueducatie is van hoogstaand niveau. Deze groene parel temidden van een industriële omgeving verschaft de gemeente en haar inwoners werkelijk ‘The quality of life’!

⁷⁷ Stadsparken zijn bijzonder [sic] elementen in de stad. Je dient er niet ongemerkt in en uit te lopen. Dat vergt een duidelijke markering van het stadspark ten opzichte van zijn omgeving. Dat kan op velerlei manieren.

existence as a garden, as Robert Pogue Harrison explains. He also argues that gardens owe their importance entirely to the contrast with the world outside the garden: “one could say that the stillness *draws its energy* from the whirl around its edges” (57). It is, then, especially when our eye is drawn to the contrast between green and grey, nature and concrete, that we appreciate the particulars of both aspects of the city. When we are forced to see what not-green is, we can start to imagine what green may be.

Apart from the *Broekpolder*, *'t Hof* and the *Oranjepark*, Vlaardingen is home to another surprising patch of green that provides an insight into citizens' green dreams for the city. Alongside the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, the visitor finds the *Lickebaertse Bos*, a strip of land that, like the two parks, seems to have very few remarkable qualities. It is, however, indicative of the power of the imagination in shaping the landscape and making it more green. Like the *Broekpolder*, the *Lickebaertse Bos* owes its existence to citizen engagement. The forest was first imagined in 1968, and plans for its construction were officially presented in 1971. When a member of the local council wanted to speed up the process, they collected 20,000 signatures in two weeks. A year and a half later, construction officially began when State Secretary Meyer puts the first shovel into the ground (Davidse 35). The first trees were planted in the following spring, and citizen participation played a big role in the physical construction of the forest. The *Boomplantdag* (Tree Planting Day), a national holiday on which school children go out to plant trees, made a significant contribution and two days after *Boomplantdag*, “thousands of citizens from Vlaardingen and Maassluis contributed to the establishment of the forest” (Davidse 36)⁷⁸. It is now a popular place for walking and cycling, as well as sunbathing and picnicking on the river bank in the summer, where large ships on the water and trees on land present a view that captures the full extent of both Vlaardingen's natural and industrial expansiveness.

⁷⁸ duizenden burgers uit Vlaardingen en Maassluis [werkten] mee aan de totstandkoming van het bos.

Almost two decades after the construction of the forest, a site for disposal of industrial waste was planned to be constructed in a bordering area. However, 8,000 citizens under the name of *Groeiend Verzet* (Growing Resistance) put a halt to this plan by going out on a Saturday in December, when the conditions for planting would have hardly been ideal, to plant over 17,000 trees on the 20 ha. site, which is now called the *Volksbos* (People's Forest). Today, it is the largest protest forest in the Netherlands (Gemeente Vlaardingen 4). In 2003, the future of the area as a forest was ensured when an area of 30 ha. was added to the forest, turning the silt deposition site that lay there into wetland. Today, this area is still maintained as a part of the *Lickebaertse Bos* and “ha[s] become a sustainable area with high ecological value” (Gemeente Vlaardingen 4)⁷⁹. Adriaan's grandfather from *De Jacobs ladder* would be happy to know that the place is now a habitat for bitterns: “During monitoring, lovers of nature have found a great variety of plants, such as the unique adder's tongue ferns and snake's head. Bitterns, bearded reedlings and several other bird species have settled in the *Lickebaert*” (Gemeente Vlaardingen 4)⁸⁰.

The city thus owes much of its green appearance to the dreams and imaginations of its inhabitants. The imagination of landscape has also been foundational to the design of the parks *'t Hof* and *Oranjepark*. In his plans for the reconstruction of these two parks, Van Gessel shows that he is very much aware of the importance of cultural imaginations of landscape to the architecture of parks, and strives to incorporate them in his landscape design, developing what Harrison calls a “lyriclike crystallization of form” (53). Van Gessel writes:

There are a number of bodies of water that fan out in three directions from the heart of the park, and end in a large bowl. Water stands for movement, water has to flow if it is to speak to the imagination, remain clean and not to give the impression of standing

⁷⁹ het [is een duurzaam gebied] met hoge natuurwaard[e] geworden.

⁸⁰ Natuurlijefhebbers troffen bij inventarisaties een grote variatie planten aan, zoals de unieke addertong en de wilde kievitsbloem. Roerdompen, baardmannetjes en diverse andere vogelsoorten hebben zich in de Lickebaert gevestigd.

and becoming something negative, a pathogen. Standing water is not pleasant. To achieve this flowing, transitive effect, the preliminary design proposes to connect the ends of the existing bodies of water so as to create flow and an apparent increase of movement, so the park becomes more spacious and attractive. (8)⁸¹

The park's layout is thus the result of one person's engagement with a long tradition of imaginations of landscape elements.

The lyric-like qualities of the park have been recognised by many citizens over time, from over a century before Van Gessel's plans were written down until the present, as the park has inspired many poems that were published in private, by newspapers or online, and some of these actively engage with the motif of dreams and use the landscape as an opportunity to imagine a better world. In 1949, for example, *'t Hof* was the venue for a lights festival called *Droomland* (Dreamland). A citizen writing a poem for the local newspaper uses this event to explore the park as a scene that holds within itself a promise of utopia:

With light steps I walk the paths.
 Is it a fairytale of a beautiful poem?
 I see a mixture of warm colours,
 So richly shone by fantastic lights
 ...
 If we keep banning hate and discord,
 And always strive for good,
 The light will shine at all times,

⁸¹ In het Oranjepark liggen een aantal grote waterpartijen die vanuit het hart van het park in drie richtingen uitwaaiëren en in een grote kom te eindigen [sic]. Water staat voor beweging, water moet stromen wil het tot de verbeelding spreken, schoon blijven en niet de indruk wekken stil te staan en daarmee om te slaan tot iets negatiefs, een ziekteverwekker. Stilstaand water is niet prettig. Om dit stromende, doorgaande effect te bereiken wordt in het voorlopig ontwerp voorgesteld om de uiteinden van de bestaande waterpartijen met elkaar te verbinden zodat doorstroming en ogenschijnlijk meer beweging ontstaat en het park aan ruimtelijkheid en attractie waarde wint. [sic]

Then “Dreamland” will come true. (W.H. Dalman-v.d. Zalm qtd in Davidse 19)⁸²

The *Volksbos*, too, has been immortalised in poetry. Aat Rolaff, Vlaardingen’s poet laureate, wrote the poem “The *Volksbos*,” in which the speaker describes the vibrant qualities of nature:

I feel it quaking softly about me,
 With weasel, fox and stoat.
 Because what should have been a refuse dump,
 Is now sweltering with animal life. (1-4)⁸³

This stanza, much like Adriaan’s descriptions of nature on Rozenburg, resonates with Bennett as all around, nature throbs with life. The whole earth moves with the presence of the animals. The rest of the poem tells the story of civilian resistance to land-degrading plans and the actions the people took to eventually become victorious. The speaker declares that really, the forest is a materialised dream: “And see, the dream came true!” (12)⁸⁴, and the poem finishes with the urge to continue dreaming: “That is why the great tit sings / So lovely and loud – Sleep in! Sleep in!” (13-14)⁸⁵. In sleep begin dreams, and in dreams, forests. While the literary qualities of these poems may not be very impressive, they do show that even small-scale green spaces can prove very inspirational to city-dwellers. Regardless of its size or history, urban nature is vibrant with agency, energy and surprise. This idea is pertinent both to the many texts about *’t Hof* and the *Lickebaertse Bos*, and to *Alleen met de goden*. In this book, as in the poem about *Droomland*, the idea of vibrancy and activity, while relevant to

⁸² Met zachte tred bewandel ik de paden / Is ’t een sprookje of een mooi gedicht? / Ik zie een mengeling van warme kleuren, / zo rijk beschenen door fantastisch licht. ... Als wij de haat en tweedracht steeds verbannen, / En tot het goede altijd zijn bereid, / Dan zal het licht ten alle tijden stralen, / Dan wordt het “Droomland” eenmaal werkelijkheid!

⁸³ Ik voel het rondom zachtjes beven / Van wezel, vos en hermelijn. / Want wat eerst afvalhoop zou zijn, / Dat zindert nu van dierenleven.

⁸⁴ En kijk, die droom is uitgekomen

⁸⁵ De koolmees ook: Sliep uit! Sliep uit!

nature, extends far beyond it, and shows people's potential to not only imagine a beautiful landscape, but to create a better life and world.

Hortus Conclusus

Alleen met de goden (Alone with the Gods) exemplifies the power of green spaces for people in urban environments, and the comfort and inspiration they draw from it, even when they are not primarily preoccupied with nature or concern for the environment. The novel's protagonist, Aaron Bachman, grows up in Vlaardingen in the 1970s and 1980s, about two decades after Adriaan did. Much has changed in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta since Adriaan embraced his *Klaske* and took his first steps in a world that had been changing – and would continue to change – almost beyond recognition. The impression we get from *Alleen met de goden* is that the expansion of the Rotterdam port has provided jobs, but has overall been a mixed blessing to the region. Vlaardingen, or at least that part of the city that Aaron inhabits, is a working class city made up of much concrete and social housing, where life seems to be ever dreary.

However, in some rare moments, he encounters small patches of green in the grey city that, in their unique apartness from the city, lead him to experience hope and joy and enable him to connect with his environment on a deeper level. Like the citizens and municipality of Vlaardingen, who collectively dream of their city as a more nature friendly place, and work to make this happen, Aaron also dreams of better life against all odds, and after many struggles, he shows that even for him, this might be possible. In this way, the novel reinforces the creative ideas about nature that are present in the non-fictional texts about the forest and the park, and broadens their scope, showing how they can apply to many different aspects of life. In this way, the novel also shows the extent of the close connection between the human imagination and the landscape, which is intimated, but never fully explored, in the non-fictional texts.

Aaron's description of life in Vlaardingen is extremely bleak. When he, like Adriaan, describes a scene of summer, there are no traces of a lively environment. In his narration, Aaron echoes the couplet on Vlaardingen's public bins that insists on the joys of breathing air pollution, but he rids those lines of their irony: "It was summer, the sun shone, and yet I saw few happy faces. Maybe it had to do with this city. Everybody here lived under the smoke of Rotterdam. I didn't know what that meant, but that was what everybody always said. We lived under the smoke of Rotterdam and in the shadow of the chimneys of Pernis" (15)⁸⁶. Aaron's experience of summer is much different from Adriaan's. Gone is the vibrant appeal of nature's wonder, Vlaardingen's summers are more reminiscent of Charles Dickens's Coketown. Nature is no longer readily available, as most of it has been paved over to make room for the port.

Unlike Adriaan in *De Jacobs ladder*, who is concerned about the changes in the landscape, Aaron has no landscapes and green spaces to grieve, since he has never known the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta's former natural glory. He shows himself entirely resigned to the fact that the place where he lives is devoid of beauty or any redemptive qualities. Although the city he inhabits is easily recognisable as Vlaardingen through the many local markers that are mentioned in the novel, its proper name never appears. Instead, Aaron consistently refers to it as the "nameless hole" (9)⁸⁷, and he describes himself and his friends with the not much more cheerful denomination of "Nameless people in a nameless hole" (312)⁸⁸. The conviction that Vlaardingen is a city without any redemptive qualities seems to distance Aaron from any concerns for the environment. In fact, he vehemently insists that he is not an environmentalist. He is defined by his working-class background, has an abusive mother and

⁸⁶ Het was zomer, de zon scheen, en toch zag ik weinig vrolijke gezichten. Misschien had het met deze stad te maken. Iedereen hier leefde onder de rook van Rotterdam. Ik wist niet wat dat betekende, maar dat was wat iedereen altijd zei. We leefden onder de rook van Rotterdam en in de schaduw van de schoorsteenpijpen uit Pernis.

⁸⁷ naamloze gat

⁸⁸ Naamlozen in een naamloos gat.

a father who ignores this abuse and is imprisoned for manslaughter when Aaron is 11 years old, leaving Aaron's mother in debt. Aaron is disdainful towards people who can afford the time to worry about the environment: "It seemed to me a luxury to get enraged at all kinds of things that had nothing to do with your own situation. If you didn't have anything to worry about, seals became important all of a sudden, or the assault on a ship of an environmental organisation⁸⁹" (193)⁹⁰.

In spite of his hostility towards environmentalists, nature is of vital importance to Aaron, and his attitude towards it provides an insight into one of the many meanings of nature in the age of the Anthropocene, in which the concept of nature necessarily evolves. In the era in which human activities leave such marks on the earth that they might constitute a new geological epoch, the boundaries between the natural and human realm become obsolete. Urban and industrial spaces increasingly invade and mingle with green spaces, and vice versa, and as a result, ideas of nature change. The question of what nature is and can be in a world in which the environment changes rapidly is one that *Alleen met de goden* engages with on different levels.

One place that shows how important the environment is for Aaron is *'t Hof*. Scenes that are set there show that the park has a healing effect on both the boy's spirits and those of a rescue dog he befriends there. The reader first sees Aaron going to *'t Hof* when he is in his last year of primary school and takes on a job at the animal shelter located next to the park. It is here that, ignoring the warnings of his boss Nelis, he befriends a fighting dog whom he names Otis, after Otis Redding, his favourite singer: "His head looked like the voice of Otis: covered in scars, tormented, anguished, and yet he had not given up. That was what the voice

⁸⁹ This is one of the events that can be used to date the text. Aaron, who is a teenager when he says this, refers to the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*, the flagship of the Greenpeace fleet, by the action division of the French intelligence service in the port of Auckland, New Zealand in 1985, which resulted in the death of photographer Fernando Pereira.

⁹⁰ Als je niks had om je zorgen over te maken, dan werden zeehondjes ineens belangrijk, of de aanslag op een schip van een milieubeweging.

of Otis sounded like too. Otis who is dead⁹¹” (97)⁹². The first time Aaron takes Otis out of his cage for a walk in ‘*t Hof* shows the good personality of the dog as well as the healing effects nature can have in a city. Although Aaron’s description of summer in Vlaardingen was entirely at odds with Adriaan’s narration of this season on Rozenburg in *De Jacobsladder*, in this scene, ‘*t Hof* is shown to possess a vibrancy that is similar to Rozenburg’s nature as Adriaan saw it. Perception is heightened, as it was in *De Jacobsladder*, so the dog can take in all the sights, sounds and smells that the park has to offer:

I encouraged Otis to walk with me. I kept the tension on the line, and then he slowly moved my way. We crossed the path and walked along the field, the weeping willows, the pond, the reeds, the ducks and coots, which walked along the side of the pond with hasty, gawky steps. In the background you heard the frogs croak, and now and then a car passed by. Time and again Otis looked up, scared, with his tail between his legs. But his nose forced him to pick up the smells. You saw his eyes shine more and more. He smelled the fresh grass, a warm summer day, the sunlight that shone on the fields and the dandelions, and other dogs who left their piss. (117)⁹³

The level of detail that is paid to the landscape is so high that it goes beyond what perception can justify: Otis’s sense of smell is so active that he smells things that have no odour, such as the summer day and the sunlight.

Much like the content of this section, its linguistic style also departs from the overall tone of the book and has similarities to that of *De Jacobsladder*. Whereas the language of *De*

⁹¹ In Dutch, Otis Redding is often jokingly referred to by the rhyming phrase “Otis die dood is,” or Otis who is dead.

⁹² Zijn kop zag eruit als de stem van Otis: onder de littekens, gepijnigd, gekweld, en toch had hij niet opgegeven. Zo klonk de stem van Otis ook. Otis die dood is.

⁹³ Ik moedigde Otis aan mee te lopen. Ik hield de spanning op de looplijn, en toen bewoog hij heel langzaam mijn kant op. We staken het pad over en liepen langs het veld, de treurwilgen, de vijver, het riet, de eenden en meerkoeten, die met haastige, klungelige stappen naar de rand van de vijver liepen. Op de achtergrond hoorde je de kikkers kwaken, en zo nu en dan reed er een auto voorbij. Steeds keek Otis op, verschrikt, met zijn staart tussen zijn poten. Maar zijn neus dwong hem om de geuren op te pikken die hij rook. Je zag zijn ogen steeds meer glinsteren. Hij rook het verse gras, een warme zomerdag, het zonlicht dat de velden en de paardenbloemen bescheen, en andere honden die hun pis hadden achtergelaten.

Jacobs ladder is often archaic and quite flowery, with long sentences that flow like the *Nieuwe Waterweg* does, *Alleen met de goden* is written in a very fast-paced rhythm and colloquial to the point of slang. Its articulation is staccato; sentences are short and further the plot; there is little time for scenery or even scene setting. Passages often begin *in medias res*, and no effort is made to embed them in or connect them to the overarching narrative. The novel in that sense echoes the punches of the martial artist Aaron is to become, and the machines pounding in the factories that loom over his city. In a review, Jeroen Vullings writes that the style of the novel is “charged, enchanting, rhythmical, caught in itself” (par. 5) and that its story feels like “*It has to be told, goddammit, now, all at once, everything, round after round, with a breathing pause of a second after each chapter until the next one starts*” (par. 8). The change of rhythm that occurs as Aaron describes the walk in the park, when the echoes of factory machinery make way for longer, flowing sentences, provides space for sensory detail and a new temporality.

As the narration is finally allowed some space to breathe, time seems to slow down in the environment of the park. Harrison recognises this same change in a park he writes about, and argues that it is exactly this different temporality that enables the heightening of perception: “It is as if the aesthetically determined relations between things in the garden’s precinct had the effect of slowing time down and, in so doing, intensifying or throwing into relief the sheer gift of things to perception” (54). In the excitement and joy that the boy and his dog, both of whom have not had easy lives, experience in the park, and in the language Aaron uses to describe their experiences and the change in temporalities, we can see that life inside the garden is entirely different to that outside. In the sense that *’t Hof*, in the novel, is a world of its own, existing in contrast to the city, it echoes the ideas Van Gessel expressed in his park design: to create a space that is clearly separate from the city.

In this section, then, content, language and time all conspire to create a world that is different to and separate from the world of the city outside the boundaries of the park, and in this way it is transformative in a way that has far-reaching effects. Otis' new-found enthusiasm for the world and the emergence of a lighter side of his character, which up to this point has been marked by nervousness and aggression, that are reflective of this separation prove to be transformative and have a lasting influence on the relationship between Aaron and Otis. When Aaron sees this happier, friendlier side of him, he is convinced that the dog, in spite of its current situation, might have a bright future ahead of him: "He finally came along and for a moment forgot what a shitty life he had. There was more in him than a rescue dog. Maybe, if Nelis saw how he behaved, there was still a chance that he would find a good home" (117)⁹⁴. In this statement, Aaron recognises that the dog's emotional transformation that occurs in the park shows potentially life-long effects.

As in the two poems discussed in the first section of this chapter that imagined a brighter future inspired by the environment, the park also allows Aaron to dream of a better life to come. Throughout the novel, Aaron struggles to connect with other people. His dysfunctional family cannot provide a safe place to call home and his teachers at school, like his parents, expect very little from him. Otis is, in this way, not only a friend, but a kindred soul, as he, too, is perceived as nothing more than an outcast. Yet, the park's ability to inspire Aaron to dream of a better future for Otis demonstrates the powerful imaginative force of green spaces. The fact that the park exists as a separate sphere from the world of the city, away from parents and teachers, and contrasting grey and green, allows for the park's function as a place of healing, inspiration and hope.

⁹⁴ Hij liep eindelijk mee en vergat voor een moment wat een kloterig leven hij had. Er zat meer in hem dan een asielhond. Misschien, als Nelis zag hoe hij zich gedroeg, zat er nog een kans in dat hij een goed tehuis kon vinden.

Still, the comfort and inspiration the park provides have limits. On a later walk, Aaron gets in a fight with two other boys, and Otis bites them repeatedly in an attempt to defend Aaron. Nelis is then forced to turn Otis over to the police, who put the dog down. Aaron is devastated over the loss of his friend, but also the fact that in the end, everyone but him failed to see beyond Otis's appearance. Since Aaron very much identified with the dog for this reason, he sees this as a personal loss as well. His mother bluntly confirms his feelings after Nelis, who she had earlier described as "a filthy bloke at the door" (195), visits the recovering Aaron and she remarks: "What people! The kind of folk you attract" (197). Although the novel makes it quite clear that the comfort that can be found in city parks is limited, their inspiring force is very real, as a later scene shows.

While Aaron's experiences in *'t Hof* with Otis ended in a devastating way, later in the novel, another park emerges as a site of great importance, one that inspires Aaron to turn his life around for the better. Harrison argues that gardens are common sites for such moments of revelation: "gardens in the human imagination often figure as the sites of visions and epiphanies, be they spiritual, erotic, or otherwise" (55). After Aaron loses an important match as a professional Muay Thai fighter, he finds himself in Central Park in New York City. As he wanders through the park, he experiences an epiphany about the state he is in. As Aaron encounters a field of wild flowers, he imagines the appearance of Nadine, his girlfriend who has left him shortly before, and he understands what actions he must take to be able to have the kind of life he aspires to have:

I was here with Nadine and her perfumed bouquet, because if she was anything, if I had to describe her as grandpa would like it, so he could understand, she wasn't any one flower. She wasn't a species, not a type, not a class. She was this entire field. She was a field of wild flowers. Every time different, and every time rich in colour, in

movement, full of smell and life, and here I knelt down with my painful, tense legs.

With her, with Nadine. Beautiful, soft, passionate Nadine. (480)⁹⁵

Again resonating with Harrison, who states that appearances like these “usually come with the enjoinder ‘You must change your life’” (56), it is in this park that Aaron decides to leave the world of Muay Thai behind: “I turned around and looked at the bright light and an indigo coloured sky. Everything had to start again, and that is what I realised in this green heart in the centre of the world” (480)⁹⁶. In spite of earlier losses, then, the park remains a site that enables dreams.

The Urban Sublime

Another place that shows the relevance of the environment to Aaron is the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, where Aaron’s father Leen takes his young son on several occasions. Rather than providing comfort like *t Hof*, this setting inspires awe in the forces of nature, and its descriptions show that Aaron recognises not only picturesque, tame green spaces in urban settings, but also the power of wild nature. Life in the city constitutes an endless supply of constraining forces on Aaron’s life, and social issues of many kinds including incarceration, poverty, debt and a general lack of opportunity, hit close to home. The natural environment presents an alternative to this in different ways, both in its power to comfort and to overwhelm. Much like the municipality’s statement that it is the presence of heavy industry that makes the citizens of Vlaardingen appreciate an outlook on nature, the novel suggests that it is because Aaron’s circumstances are so dire that the imaginative force nature provides is so much needed and so acutely appreciated.

⁹⁵ Ik was hier met Nadine en haar parfumboeket, want als ze iets was, als ik haar moest omschrijven zoals opa graag wilde, zodat hij het kon begrijpen, dan was ze niet één bloem. Ze was geen soort, geen type, geen klasse. Ze was dit hele veld. Ze was een veld met wilde bloemen. Steeds anders, en elke keer rijk aan kleur, in beweging, vol met geur en leven, en hier knielde ik neer met mijn pijnlijke, verkrampte benen. Bij haar, bij Nadine. Mooie, zachte, geestdriftige Nadine.

⁹⁶ Ik draaide me om en keek naar het schitterende licht en een indigokleurige hemel. Het moest allemaal opnieuw beginnen, en dat realiseerde ik me in dit groene hart in het centrum van de wereld.

Aaron's relationship with his father Leen is a complicated one. Aaron's mother Jo marries Leen when Aaron is very young and, for a long time, Aaron believes that Leen is his biological father. One early morning, Leen, dressed in a shirt and underpants, takes Aaron, who is wearing his pyjamas, to the water's edge at the *Lickebaertse Bos*. Leen tells Aaron, whom he calls Tiger cub:

“I am alone. ... You are alone. We are all alone. Listen, Tiger cub. No-one concerns himself with you. Nobody cares for you, nobody cares about you. You have to do it all on your own. I know it's a fucking awful message, but you'd better get used to it.” He sounded sad and scratched his hairy stomach.

“But what about Jedis?”

“What's with them?”

“Jedis are never alone. They help each other. And they have the Force.”

“The Force?” He got out of the car, walked towards me, grabbed me under my armpits and lifted me up. “What do you think will happen to you if I chuck you in the water now? Will the Force save you, you think?” (22)⁹⁷

While the water flowing through the *Waterweg* out to sea inspires nihilist musings in Leen, the young Aaron is not so sure about his environment's significance. He will later state that he found the *Waterweg* at night awe-inspiring. Aaron's view of the river proves far more inspiring and hopeful than Leen's nihilism. As he reflects on this scene, Aaron is mostly concerned with and deeply conflicted by his father's behaviour. He recognises the discomfiting nature of the scene and assures the reader that “daddy Lion meant nothing of

⁹⁷ “Ik ben alleen. ... Jij bent alleen. We zijn allemaal alleen. Luister, Tijgerwelp. Er is niemand met je bezig. Niemand bekommert zich om je, niemand geeft om je. Je moet het helemaal alleen doen. Ik weet dat het een kloteboodschap is, maar wen er maar aan.” Hij klonk somber en krabde aan zijn harige buik. “En Jedi's dan?” “Wat is ermee?” “Jedi's zijn nooit alleen. Die helpen elkaar. En ze hebben de Kracht.” “De Kracht?” Hij stapte uit, liep naar me toe, pakte me onder mijn oksels beet en tilde me omhoog. “Wat denk je dat er met je gebeurt als ik je nu in het water flikker? Zal de Kracht je redden, denk je?”

all of this, and he was actually really nice” (23)⁹⁸. At the same time, however, he is forced to recognise the fact that, not much later, Leen kills a man on the doorstep of the Bachman family home, making it hard to see him as a nice man anymore. Referring to this incident in oblique terms, Aaron ends the chapter with the words: “But two years later daddy Lion beat [a] man up and there was nobody left who believed me” (23)⁹⁹.

Aaron’s musings on the *Star Wars* galaxy in this scene are also telling in terms of Aaron’s and Leen’s differing attitudes to life, hope and dreams and their existence in the particular place they inhabit. Aaron’s thoughts about Jedis and the Force shows that he identifies something in his prosaic environment that transcends his own personal existence, a set of imaginations that inspire hope, a sense of community and an idea of justice in the face of hardship and danger. The *Star Wars* universe is twice removed from Aaron’s world, as it takes place in a different galaxy and is part of a fictional universe (within the fictional realm of *Alleen met de goden*), but the implications of its story are also relevant to Aaron’s life. *Star Wars*’ message of hope and goodness inspires Aaron, sitting at the water’s edge, despite the distance of its universe to his direct environment. Leen, on the other hand, sees only the distance between the world of film and the world which he physically inhabits.

In a later scene, one in which Aaron remembers seeing an unnamed *Star Wars* film in a theatre with Leen, Leen complains about “every action scene” (295)¹⁰⁰ proclaiming that “This is impossible. This Han Solo should have been dead a long time ago! *Jesus* what a fake! This Yoda is a puppet, dammit. You can tell it’s fake. Can’t you see?” (295)¹⁰¹. To Leen, the story of *Star Wars* has little significance because it lacks verisimilitude. Aaron, however, is unconcerned about its qualities as being more or less realistic and replies to

⁹⁸ papa Leeuw er niets van meende, en dat hij eigenlijk heel lief was.

⁹⁹ Maar twee jaar later sloeg papa Leeuw [een] man neer en was er niemand meer die mij nog geloofde.

¹⁰⁰ elke actiescène

¹⁰¹ Dat kan helemaal niet. Die Han Solo moet allang dood zijn! *Jézus*, wat een nep! Die Yoda is verdomme een pop. Je ziet dat het netp is. Zie je dat niet?

Leen's criticisms: "It's science fiction, dad. It isn't supposed to be real" (295)¹⁰². To him, it is the film's message and the inspiration of hope that it can deliver that really matter, showing that Aaron, more than Leen, is able to recognise and appreciate hopeful narratives.

Aaron's ability to recognise and acknowledge inspiring forces in unlikely places returns throughout the novel, as it does in a later reflection on the moments he spent by the *Waterweg* with Leen as a child. These scenes collectively make a grave impression on Aaron, and years later, he is still trying to make sense of the meaning of these trips in musings that directly address the role of the environment in his memory. In an attempt to come to an understanding of what happened, he brings up a recollection of another night spent at the *Waterweg* when he visits his father in prison. He is upset when he finds that his father does not seem to remember, or is unable to:

"Do you remember that we sometimes drove to the *Nieuwe Waterweg*?" I said to my father.

"The *Nieuwe Waterweg*?" He pretended he didn't know what I was talking about. He only looked around him, at the other prisoners, who all looked much bigger than him and were busily talking to their women. ...

"That river near the *Lickebaertse Bos*," I said, "We sometimes drove there in the middle of the night and looked at the passing boats." ...

I asked my father if he could remember.

"Sorry, what?" he asked. He didn't seem to be able to concentrate anymore. Maybe you couldn't really talk to anyone if you'd been in prison for a long time. (257)¹⁰³

¹⁰² Het is sciencefiction, pap. Dat is ook niet echt.

¹⁰³ "Weet je nog dat we soms naar de Nieuwe Waterweg reden?" zei ik tegen mijn vader. "De Nieuwe Waterweg?" Hij deed alsof hij niet wist waar ik het over had. Hij keek alleen maar om zich heen, naar de andere gevangenen, die allemaal veel groter leken dan hij en die druk in gesprek waren met hun vrouwen. ... "Die rivier bij het Lickebaert-bos," zei ik. "We reden er soms midden in de nacht naartoe en keken dan naar de boten die voorbijgingen." ... Ik vroeg aan mijn vader of hij zich dat nog wist te herinneren. "Sorry, wat?" vroeg hij. Hij leek zich niet meer te kunnen concentreren. Misschien lukte het niet meer om echt met iemand te praten als je heel lang vastzat.

Although his father shows himself unable or unwilling to talk about the episode, Aaron continues to muse on the significant impact it made on him as a child, and still does even in the present. He narrates:

When I lived in the city centre I didn't even know that our leaning house was so close to the river. The first time my father took me there it stormed. The river was flooded because of the heavy rainfall. The waves beat on the quay. The wind blew and it rained. First we sat in the NSU, but he took me outside. My father held me tight and said: "If I let go of you now, you will float to the open sea. Is that what you want? We will find you again in England. *Hahaha!*" He seemed insane.

"Don't let go, daddy Lion," I said. My father just kept laughing and pretended he lost his grip.

"Dad!"

I was scared, but the waves and the wind fascinated me too. There was such threat, such noise and chaos. I was attracted to it and at the same time I was afraid, as I was of the dark creature from my dreams that wanted to overpower me and was part of me just the same." (258)¹⁰⁴

The way Aaron describes the river here is reminiscent of the concept of the Sublime. Edmund Burke theorised the Sublime as a type of scenery that inspires feelings of terror, but is distant enough to simultaneously be a source of enjoyment. This concept, which was very important during the Romantic period, is associated with great expanses of rough landscapes, such as mountainscapes or violent seas, or even the notion of a divine being. In the young

¹⁰⁴ Toen ik nog in het centrum woonde wist ik niet eens dat ons scheve huis zo dicht bij de rivier stond. De eerste keer dat mijn vader me meenam stormde het. De rivier was overstroomd door de zware regenval. De golven sloegen op de kade. Het waaide en het regende. We zaten eerst in de NSU, maar hij nam me mee naar buiten. Mijn vader had me stevig vast en zei: "Als ik je nu loslaat, dan spoel je naar open zee. Wil je dat? Dan vinden we je terug in Engeland. *Hahaha!*" Hij leek wel krakzinnig. "Niet loslaten, papa Leeuw," zei ik. Mijn vader bleef maar lachen en deed alsof hij zijn grip verloor. "*Pap!*" Ik was bang, maar de golven en de wind fascineerden me ook. Er was zoveel dreiging, zoveel lawaai en chaos. Ik voelde me erdoor aangetrokken en tegelijk was ik er bang voor, zoals het donkere gevaarte uit mijn dromen dat mij wilde overheersen en dat tegelijk bij mij hoorde.

Aaron, however, the entirely artificial waterway incites the same feelings of terror and beauty as it is trying to break through the shackles of its quays. Although a vast wildness of nature is unavailable to Aaron, and in fact would have been centuries before the construction of the port of Rotterdam got underway, the feelings related to the Sublime are as accessible to him in the “nameless hole” as they are to any Romantic traveller in the Alps. Aaron’s response to the landscape he encounters shows that he feels affinity for the landscape and recognises its beauty. It also indicates that, even in a world where the environment is thoroughly shaped by human intervention, its extraordinary qualities can still be recognised and leave a lasting impression.

Later in the novel, the imaginative force of the *Nieuwe Waterweg* appears again, albeit in a very different setting. After a fight with his mother and a chance encounter with an old friend who has become addicted to drugs, Aaron runs 13 kilometres from the city centre of Vlaardingen to the *Maasboulevard* in Rotterdam. The *Maasboulevard* sits along the *Nieuwe Waterweg* where houses and apartment buildings overlook the city and the water on which large ships pass throughout the day. He runs to the apartment of Nadine, whom he has first met shortly before, to let her know he loves her. Although Aaron appears confused by his feelings, the river no longer scares him and the fear he experiences now centres entirely on his own emotions:

Nadine Marceau, what do you show me? I’m on fire. I know you feel it too. I’m on fire and the waves beat the quay and the rain streams down our faces. What is this? I want you to know, Nadine, that I am afraid. I don’t know this. I don’t know what this is. I don’t dare to hold it. Will you give it a name? I won’t. I’m afraid. Afraid, I tell you. A coward. And afraid. (426)¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Nadine Marceau, wat laat je me zien? Ik sta in brand. Ik weet dat jij het ook voelt. Ik sta in brand en de golven beuken tegen de kade en de regen stroomt langs onze gezichten. Wat is dit? Ik wil dat je weet, Nadine, dat ik angstig ben. Ik ken dit niet. Ik weet niet wat dit is. Ik durf het niet vast te houden. Geef jij het een naam? Ik doe het niet. Ik ben angstig. Angstig, zeg ik. Een lafaard. En angstig.

There is a sense of joy hidden in the fear that Aaron experiences in this scene: he is aware that the vulnerable state he finds himself in now contains the promise of a deep personal connection; one that is based on love. The fact that this promise of a loving future unfolds itself at the edge of the once again violent *Nieuwe Waterweg* indicates that as Aaron has matured, his environment has not lost any of its imaginative force. Indeed, it has become a site of exciting and hopeful dreams in which the prospect of a future shared, in spite of Leen's warnings, with someone who cares about Aaron, unfolds itself.

The novel's portrayal of seemingly unassuming sites as ones that not only provide comfort in the turmoil of city life, but also exemplify the terrible forces of nature shows both the power of the imagination in the conception of ideas of nature, and the wide range of emotions that are attached to the natural environment even within the limits and constraints of a city. In showing the range of ways the landscape affects Aaron emotionally and imaginatively, *Alleen met de goden* validates and expands the imagination of the citizens advocating for green spaces in the city.

Dreams and Reality

Although the *Nieuwe Waterweg* may not be a natural body of water, it speaks to Aaron's imagination just as directly as any river could, and it inspires hopeful dreams of a better future, much like the two parks he visits. Such dreams are central not only to Aaron's character, but also to that of others he meets and interacts with throughout the novel. These different characters have to navigate the significance of the fact that their ideas seem to be unnatural in different ways, particularly Noni, a transgender woman who renegotiates her gender and her expression of it, and Leen, whose status of adoptive parent is reassessed by different characters throughout the novel. These negotiations of identity are relevant to contemporary ideas of natural landscapes, since, if the age of the Anthropocene teaches us that nothing is entirely natural anymore, Noni and Leen turn this notion on its head. These

characters suggest that, because pure nature does not exist anymore in the contemporary world in any sense of the word, their dreams and imaginations take the place of nature: nature is whatever they imagine it can be.

Noni is a character who is a great source of inspiration to Aaron in this regard. Aaron meets her while on a trip to Thailand where he takes a short training course to become a Muay Thai fighter. After the course ends, his trainer takes him and several other young men on a trip to the island of Ko Samet in the very north of the Gulf of Thailand, where Noni works as a waitress. Noni is a transgender woman, of whom one of the Aaron's friends suspects "that she was actually a man" (339). The friend teases Noni but she does not respond. When Aaron apologises to her, she says: "*Actually your friend was right. I am not ashamed. My name is Nung, I was born as a male. Now I am called Noni.*" (344, italics indicate original English). In the conversation that follows, Aaron struggles to make sense of her appearance and questions her to the point of being intrusive, although he is never judgemental: "I looked at her again. The tight skirt betrayed nothing. Her slim legs were perfect. She had small breasts, as many Thai women did, and her arms were long and slim. How had she done it? Or he. Or she. They say you can tell from the Adam's apple, but I saw nothing. She didn't have an Adam's apple. She had a wonderful, slim woman's neck" (344)¹⁰⁶. Despite the fact that he has difficulty putting his thoughts about Noni into words, Aaron learns an important lesson from her, namely that, although she may have appeared a certain way when she was younger, she is now growing into who she really is, and her former appearance is in no way more natural than her current one. Noni explains: "In Thailand it's different to the rest of the world In Thailand they accept people with their deviations and

¹⁰⁶ "*Actually your friend was right. I am not ashamed. My name is Nung, I was born as a male. Now I am called Noni.*" Ik bekeek haar nog eens goed. Het strakke rokje verraadde niks. Haar slanke benen waren perfect. Ze had kleine borsten, zoals zoveel Thaise vrouwen, en haar armen waren lang en slank. Hoe had ze dat geflikt? Of hij. Of zij. Ze zeggen dat je het kunt zien aan de adamsappel, maar ik zag niks. Ze had geen adamsappel. Ze had een prachtige, slanke vrouwennek.

needs and desires. Everyone looks for his or her form And sometimes it takes us our whole lives. That is understood, not condemned” (347)¹⁰⁷. Aaron is very much impressed by Noni’s words:

She sounded wise and prophetic, and I asked her if she really believed that. She nodded and put her shirt on and lay down against me, as if she was cold. I loved what she said, about looking for a form. Most people never found out who they really were, because they stayed on the safe side of the street, and just because of that, they kept falling into the same pitfall, and lost themselves and picked themselves up again, until they finally dared to accept themselves with all their talents and shortcomings. Nung discovered there was a Noni hidden inside him. And Noni showed herself, every day more and more clearly. There would be a moment she would say goodbye to Nung forever.

“*One final step,*” she said. (347-348)¹⁰⁸

In a time when society’s understanding of gender expression has become disassociated from biological sex, novel expressions of the gender have become possible, as Noni demonstrates. Judith Butler argues that these non-traditional expressions of gender find their source in the imaginations and dreams of the people who choose to express their identities in new ways: “To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it

¹⁰⁷ In Thailand is het anders dan in de rest van de wereld, zei ze. In Thailand accepteren ze mensen met hun afwijkingen en behoeften en verlangens. Iedereen zoekt naar zijn of haar vorm, zei ze. En soms zijn we daar ons hele leven mee bezig. Dat wordt begrepen, niet veroordeeld.

¹⁰⁸ Ze klonk wijs en profetisch, en ik vroeg of ze daar echt in geloofde. Ze knikte en trok haar topje aan en ging tegen me aan liggen, alsof ze het koud had. Ik hield van wat ze zei, over het zoeken naar een vorm. De meeste mensen ontdekten nooit wie ze werkelijk waren, omdat ze aan de veilige kant van de straat bleven, en juist daardoor vielen ze steeds weer in dezelfde valkuil, en verloren ze zich en raapten ze zichzelf weer op, totdat ze zichzelf uiteindelijk durfden te accepteren met al hun talenten en tekortkomingen. Nung ontdekte dat er een Noni in hem verscholen zat. En Noni liet zich zien, elke dag meer en duidelijker. Er kwam een moment dat ze voorgoed afscheid van Nung zou nemen. “*One final step,*” zei ze.

is” (28)¹⁰⁹. Noni seems to have recognised this and uses her fantasy to shape her life and make it better. Butler argues that there is nothing unreal about this fantasy; in fact, fantasy is what enables reality: “The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (28-29). Gender performances that differ from a subject’s sex as it was assigned at birth, then, are in no way less natural than ones that match the assigned sex. Indeed, the fact that gender performances are imagined *makes them natural* in their own right. Noni’s fantasy thus enables her to make the male body she was born with into the female one she identifies with. Noni’s narration of herself suggests that there is nothing less natural about Noni than there is about Nung: Noni is not so much a fantasy as something that has always been there, hidden inside Nung, waiting to come out.

The way Noni understands her identity, then, is very similar to the way Aaron understands the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, and the people involved in the development of Vlaardingen’s green spaces understand their significance: the artifice that lies at the base of their appearance in no way detracts from their power and value. Indeed, they hint at a new way of understanding nature. In this way, Noni’s conception of her gender identity, and imaginative engagements with human bodies in the contemporary world in general, reinforce the notion of the force of the imagination in relation to conceptions of nature in the Anthropocene. In fact, Timothy Morton argues that the studies of ecology and queer theory have a common agenda: both have a nonessentialist view of the world and show that their objects of study, respectively nature and people, do not consist of discreet entities that can be

¹⁰⁹ In 2018, Butler defended a colleague who was found responsible for sexual harassment of a graduate student by questioning the intentions of the student and by pointing out the professional and intellectual achievements of the accused. This shows that unfortunately, she herself utterly fails to commit to truly imaginative conceptions of a better world.

easily defined. Instead, they change and overlap and borrow from each other, and that is part of their beauty.

A similar process of negotiation of the meaning of the word *natural* unfolds in the relationship of Aaron and Leen. Growing up, Aaron believes Leen to be his biological father, but when Leen is imprisoned, Aaron discovers this is not true. Instead, Aaron learns that when his mother found out she was pregnant at a young age, her then-boyfriend left her to raise the child by herself. Shunned by her family, Aaron's mother struggled to raise the child alone until Leen married her and adopted Aaron, giving him his last name and making him his legitimate son. The fact that there is no genetic relationship between Aaron and Leen is hinted at in the nicknames the family have for each other: while Leen is daddy Lion, Aaron and his mother are referred to as, respectively, Tiger cub and Tiger Lily. Leen also uses animal metaphors when he tries to argue that, in spite of the lack of a genetic bond, he is still very much Aaron's father. Aaron writes about letters Leen sends him, in which he hints at, but does not explain, the secret he is still keeping from Aaron:

I didn't understand all of the letters at all. Sometimes it seemed as if he wanted to tell me something, but didn't do it after all, and then he began to write long pieces about nature and about wild animals. He wondered if I knew that other wolves raise the pups in the pack when the biological father or mother of the pups isn't there anymore. I had heard stories about wolves that sometimes even raised human babies. That was what *The Jungle Book* was about. (177)¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Ik begreep lang niet alle brieven. Soms leek het erop dat hij me iets wilde vertellen, maar het dan toch niet deed, en dan begon hij lange stukken te schrijven over de natuur en over wilde dieren. Hij vroeg zich af of ik wist dat andere wolven de welpen in de roedel helpen opvoeden als de natuurlijke vader of moeder van de welpen er niet meer is. Ik had verhalen gehoord over wolven die soms zelfs mensenbaby's opvoeden. Daar ging *The Jungle Book* over.

Leen's digressions about the habits of wolves imply that he looks towards nature to find a source that can justify his relationship with Aaron; he wants to show that, in spite of the lack of a genetic bond, their relationship is no less natural than any other parental relationship.

Like Noni, who ascribes to herself a natural femininity despite the fact that she was born with male genitalia, Leen tries to relate his role as an adoptive father to nature. Yet, while to Noni this view came easily, or naturally, if you will, Leen's suggestion seems strained and fraught with anxiety, a desperate attempt at attaining a justification of his role. Other characters are more comfortable with the thought that a father need not share a genetic bond with his son to truly be his parent. The most eloquent discussion of this question comes from Gerrit, a family friend. He tells Aaron:

Your mother said you figured it out. It probably kept running in your old man's head in gaol and he couldn't keep his mouth shut again. Maybe he shouldn't have said anything. And what is "real"? Is it someone who fucks an eighteen year old woman when he's twenty-three and leaves her with the mess? Someone who leaves your mother in the lurch and starts a business soon after, him and his head for mathematics, marries another woman, buys a mansion in some hole somewhere and pretends you don't exist? Is that real? And all you father did for you, does that mean nothing? Is that not real? (271)¹¹¹

Rather than natural, Gerrit then uses the word *real* as a standard by which to judge the relationship, and he concludes that Leen's efforts for Aaron constitute a better claim of fatherhood than any gene could. Butler makes a similar claim in *Undoing Gender*, in which she questions the relevance of genetic heritage in parental relations, and suggests that social

¹¹¹ Je moeder zei al dat je het had uitgedokterd. Die ouwe van je zat natuurlijk te malen in de bajes en kon zijn kop weer niet houden. Misschien had hij je niks moeten zeggen. Maar wat is "echt"? Is dat iemand die op zijn drieëntwintigste een vrouw van achttien neukt en haar met alle ellende laat zitten? Iemand die je moeder laat barsten en niet veel later met zijn wiskundeknobbel een business opzet, een andere vrouw trouwt, in een of ander gat een kast van een huis koopt en doet alsof je niet bestaat? Is dat echt? En wat je vader allemaal voor je heeft gedaan, stelt dat allemaal niks voor? Is dat niet echt?

relations are at least as important, if not more so, as genetic ones (14). In Leen's acting the part of a father, or imagining himself as a father, he becomes one in a most direct sense: the fact that his relationship with Aaron is not a traditional one makes it in no way less meaningful.

The idea of people's nature and their capacity to dream and imagine advancement in their lives is central to Aaron's character and the novel as a whole. In its engagement with this theme, the novel articulates the complex interrelations between the world of dreams and the world of matter. Aaron has always been an outcast: even his own mother says of him: "He was standing at the back of the queue when they were giving out brains" (16)¹¹², "Born for a dime, you'll never amount to a quarter" (153)¹¹³ and "It would have been better, ... for everyone, even for you, if you hadn't been born" (33)¹¹⁴. Although he is ambitious and gains confidence from his success as a Muay Thai fighter, he is also convinced that there are other, more worthy goals to aspire to, but that he will never achieve these because of his working-class background. Even after Aaron finds out that Ernest Hemingway was a boxer besides being an author, he sighs: "I was nothing. I amounted to nothing. I wouldn't become a doctor who saved lives. I wouldn't invent things. I was the proverbial dime. I would never become much more. If I could achieve glory anywhere, it would be in the ring and nowhere else" (368)¹¹⁵.

What Aaron hopes to achieve beyond fighting is writing. Rather than engaging in physical combat, he aspires to take on the world on paper, in the realm of dreams and the imagination. His reasons for writing also find their origin in dreams. Aaron first starts writing as a form of therapy. He suffers from nightmares, in which a demonic creature chases him,

¹¹² Hij stond achteraan toen ze de hersens aan het uitdelen waren.

¹¹³ Je bent voor een dubbeltje geboren, een kwartje zul je nooit worden.

¹¹⁴ Het was beter geweest, ... voor iedereen, zelfs voor jou, als je er niet was geweest.

¹¹⁵ Ik was niks. Ik stelde niks voor. Ik zou geen dokter worden die levens zou redden. Ik zou geen uitvindingen doen. Ik was het spreekwoordelijke dubbeltje. Veel meer zou ik nooit worden. Als ik ergens zou gloriëren, dan was het in de ring en nergens anders.

and writing about these dreams calms him down. It is the creature from his nightmares that Aaron is reminded of when he has his encounter with the sublime *Nieuwe Waterweg*. He finds that the only way to calm his mind is to write at length in notebooks he hides under his mattress, and later, when they grow too numerous, under the comic books in a box under his bed.

When he finally asserts that he will dedicate himself to becoming a writer, Aaron announces his intention to engage with the world of the imagination as a move away from the material world. His grandfather, who works in a port in Japan, sends him a copy of Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings*, a 17th century Japanese text on martial arts. Aaron cites a phrase of the book: "*It is said the Warrior's is the twofold Way of pen and sword, and he should have a taste for both Ways.*" (250, italics indicate original English) and comments on it: "Was that possible? Could you really apply yourself to the fight *and* to writing? I didn't believe any of it. Maybe in Mediaeval Japan, but not here" (250). He seems to never really be able to shake off this doubt, as he continually values writing over fighting. Indeed, he never lives as both writer and fighter simultaneously. After losing a fight, he quits his career as a professional fighter and by the time he accepts his new existence as a writer, he has suffered from an accident that will prevent him from ever performing martial arts again.

The relation between the world of language and the material world is a complicated one and Aaron is not alone in his struggle with it. Literary critic Jonathan Bate argues that language necessarily separates humans from non-human nature, and is therefore a potentially destructive force (qtd in Hutchings 188-198). However, Kevin Hutchins suggests in response that language may also be a medium to recognise the complex interrelations that exist between humans and the non-human world, and to understand that they are, in fact, inseparable (189). It is hard to say which of these positions holds most truth; perhaps, they do so equally. Language may very well equally obstruct and enlighten complex connections

between humans and their non-human environment. Indeed, *Alleen met de goden* never resolves this issue, either. While the novel approaches the idea of merging the realms of language and matter and then shies away from doing so, it does show that word and world are closely related and that each has much to gain from the other.

At the end of the novel, Aaron shows that writing is not that different from fighting, the word not so different from the world, bringing the two together again. When his grandfather sends him an old typewriter, his engagement with the machine shows that words in their manifestation on a page are fundamentally material entities, and the process of writing in Aaron's mind is completely bound up with the experience of fighting¹¹⁶:

I lay on my bed, that night that I got the ERIKA, with restless hands and a restless mind, and Nadine came back and she said: "A typewriter?" And I nodded. I let her hear the magical sound of the letters beating on the paper. I saw myself again in the empty hall, with my boxing gloves on and a shiny punching bag. I hit a letter, and then another, and another. "What a pretty thing," she said. "Come on, write something." This was my weapon and it was time I started using it. I would ram, rescue, fight and protect. (519)¹¹⁷

Conversely, as he becomes a more proficient fighter, Aaron starts to describe his fighting as a mental, as much as a physical activity:

Now that I had been unbeaten for a while and knew my body and my mind was developing, I started to see every fight as a game of chess, as a strategic battle of attrition where you had to pay attention so you wouldn't be surprised. I didn't see a

¹¹⁶ The fact that this is true not only for Aaron but for Boogers, too, becomes apparent in a television interview in which he is described as "the kickboxing writer" (Maassen 0:10-0:12) and, as special personal items meant to summarise his personality, he brings a typewriter and a pair of boxing gloves (Maassen 1:56-2:26).

¹¹⁷ Ik lag op mijn bed, die avond dat ik de ERIKA kreeg, met onrustige handen en een onrustige geest, en Nadine kwam weer terug en ze zei: "Een schrijfmachine?" En ik knikte. Ik liet haar het magische geluid horen van de letters die op het papier sloegen. Ik zag mijzelf weer in de lege zaal staan, met mijn bokshandschoenen aan en een glimmende bokszak. Ik sloeg een letter aan, en daarna nog een, en nog een. "Wat een mooi ding," zei ze. "Schrijf 'ns wat." Dit was mijn wapen en het werd tijd dat ik het ging gebruiken. Ik zou rammen, redden, vechten en beschermen.

fight. I saw an exchange of information, a game of power and a battle of knowledge. You had to be flexible both mentally and physically to keep adjusting to the game and to insights you had gained in that moment.

The students looked at me stupidly.

“He talks about it as if it’s fucking maths.” (456)¹¹⁸

Aaron indicates that the material is mental as much as the mental is material. Although the world of the imagination and the physical world remain separate, they are connected and dependent on each other, and attention to the one can much improve the other.

This meeting of imagination and matter also occurs in relation to landscape, more specifically to the city of Rotterdam, a city built on dreams after it had been reduced to ashes during the German invasion of the Netherlands in the Second World War. Here, too, the imaginary proves crucial for the existence of the real. The city of Rotterdam has been able to rise from its ashes and become an important hub in European trade because of dreams and ideals that its citizens held, and this inspires Aaron to dream and to rise above himself as well. He says:

Nobody was any good. Was the city responsible for this? Was it because of the working class mentality that was present everywhere? Was it my father? Rotterdam, you have to give me more. Why don’t you care about me? You gave me a father who watched over me, but also threatened to throw me into the river. Dreams weren’t there to fight for, but to lose. This can never be your way. How did you rebuild yourself if there *wasn’t* a dream? (293)¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Nu ik al een lange periode ongeslagen was en mijn lichaam kende en mijn geest zich aan het ontwikkelen was, begon ik elk gevecht te zien als een schaakspel, als een strategische uitputtingsslag, waarbij je steeds moest oppassen dat je je niet liet verrassen. Ik zag geen gevecht. Ik zag een uitwisseling van informatie, een machtsspel en kennisstrijd. Je moest geestelijk en lichamelijk soepel zijn om steeds het spel aan te passen aan inzichten die je op dat moment had verworven. De studenten keken me stom aan. “Hij praat er verdomme over of het wiskunde is.”

¹¹⁹ Niemand deugde. Was de stad hiervoor verantwoordelijk? Kwam het door de arbeidersmentaliteit die hier heerste? Was het mijn vader? Rotterdam, je moet me meer geven. Waarom kijk je niet naar me om? Je gaf me een vader die over me waakte, maar die ook dreigde om me in de rivier te gooien. Dromen waren er niet om na

In *Alleen met de goden*, as in the green spaces of Vlaardingen, the landscape is both the result of dreams and an inspiration for the imagination. Even when the scenery does not appear to be too impressive, the different texts discussed in this chapter show that better futures may be imagined and may be realised too. In the Anthropocene, humans' influence on the landscape has thoroughly destabilised the meaning of the word nature, but *Alleen met de goden* shows that in this assertion we can find not only desperation, but also hope. Just as Aaron was able to find solace in the enclosed space of 't Hof, the visitor of the real-world 't Hof today, and visitors of city parks worldwide may be comforted and inspired by the care with which parks everywhere are designed to provide a refuge from city life, and the contrast their green spaces provide to the grey concrete and steel that lies outside the park limits.

The novel confirms in many ways that such inspiration and hope may come from many unexpected places, including but not limited to unassuming city parks. Aaron, as well as Leen and Noni, all accomplish significant feats in defiance of expectations, despite their otherwise unassuming lives. Both *Alleen met de goden*'s environment and the people that inhabit it show that in the contemporary world, categorisations regarding landscapes, identities and relationships are becoming increasingly fluid. These shifts, the novel suggests, may be confusing, but can also be sources of great hope and inspiration, and motivate us to work to dream and make our world better than we found it.

te streven, maar om te verliezen. Dit kan nooit jouw manier zijn. Hoe heb je jezelf opgebouwd als er géén droom was?

“The Wind that Shapes Spurn, Shapes All of Us”:
The Perennial Transformations of Spurn



View of Spurn Point from the lighthouse



Shifting sands seen from the lighthouse



Overgrown coastal gun station with interpretation sign

Shifting Lands

Spurn is a place of meetings. A tidal island off the coast of Yorkshire, it is the end of the north bank of the Humber Estuary, where the land stretches out into the sea, like a five-kilometre long arm. The sea, accepting the invitation, joins the land in a dance of shifting sands, where parts of the peninsula are beaten away continuously, while in other parts, silt is deposited, so that Spurn migrates westwards in a perennial process of transformation. Its shape is always shifting and it never looks the same from one day to the next. It is a place where seals like to sun on the beach, and an important spot for migratory birds. In Western European terms, Spurn is a fairly remote place. Spurn lays 40 kilometres east of Hull, the nearest large city, and the nearest bus stop sits in Easington, an hour's walk away from the beginning of the landform. From there, the visitor follows a long, straight road south, through agricultural fields, past farms and caravan sites and the Kilnsea wetlands, to arrive at the place where the land ends in the sea, and where the cliffs of the Yorkshire coast give way to a beach that reaches out into the channel.

Spurn is also a site where humans and non-humans meet. Visitors from across the country tour the tidal island on foot, by bike, or on the Spurn Safari Unimog, a truck-like vehicle operated by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT), the charity that owns the site. The sights are not limited to the local lighthouse, the coastal wetlands and the many seals and migratory birds that frequent Spurn. The visitor can also see the offshore wind park, the port of Grimsby, the many ships passing by and the numerous on-site defunct military buildings that have remained from the time that Spurn was owned by the War Department. In fact, the YWT runs a *Communities Along the Sand* project that educates visitors about Spurn's heritage from a nature and wildlife as well as naval and military point of view. These themes are the focal points of interpretation signs in the lighthouse and three trails that guide visitors around the site.

This chapter analyses the different ways that Spurn has been reflected on in writing, newspapers, protest signs, and management documents from the YWT. Historically, Spurn has often been a site marked by conflict, and these texts show how the most recent dispute on Spurn has been narrated in different media. To understand the motives and emotions that lie behind this debate, this chapter then analyses the long poem “East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation” by Ian McMillan. This poem interrogates the ways in which Spurn has been seen as a physically and emotionally moving site, and how it has been regarded as singular and apart from the surrounding environment, but at the same time continuous with and connected to it. I argue that the reflections on geography in McMillan’s poem create insights into the relationships between memory, landscape and human relationships. The particulars of Spurn’s geography allow the poem’s speaker to reflect on the boundaries and connections that people perceive between different places, people and communities, and the poem can be read as an invitation to think about these critically. In its capacity to sketch the connections between people and landscapes disinterestedly, literature may help us to better understand and appreciate the processes and connections that inform different actors’ strongly held opinions about landscape management, in particular that of Spurn.

The geography of Spurn as a site between land and sea makes it a place of meetings and transformations, and these can generally work out in one of two ways: they can be hostile or they can be peaceful. Spurn, as this chapter shows, has seen encounters of both kinds, some marked by conflict and some by cooperation. Examining these encounters through the lens of literature allows us to look at this site from a more reflective point of view, one that can transcend opposing views and help us understand how our deep connections to landscape are formed and transformed along with the landscape itself. This appreciation of how landscapes are valued and celebrated fosters an understanding of the many ways in which

they are also contested, and allows us to grasp the depth and significance of opinions that citizens have about Spurn.

Because it reaches out into the sea, Spurn has been recognised as a site of strategic importance many times throughout history. In 1399, Henry IV landed here to start a military campaign and eventually take the throne and become king of England; Edward IV did the same in 1471. From the early 19th century until the mid-20th century, when the Yorkshire Naturalists' Trust (YNT), the forerunner of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, acquired the site, Spurn was owned by the War Department and hosted an ever evolving system of military installations. These were first built to defend the British coast against the French army in the Napoleonic Wars, and later served to protect it from German invasions in the First and Second World Wars.

However, while Spurn has, historically, been the location of potential violence over the government of the nation, today it is a site of contention about its very local management. After the YNT bought Spurn in 1959, it has become the subject of heated discussions about its management that have continued for decades in different iterations. Even today, Spurn's management is a point of contention between local residents and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. Visitors approaching Spurn are welcomed by a large number of roadside signs and stickers urging them to "SAY NO TO YWT VISITOR CENTRE" and to "#keepspurnwild".

The conflict voiced in these signs has a decades-long history of debate that exists within a dialectic framework in which the forces working on Spurn along with the beings living on it are depicted as either endangered or threatening, depending on the perspective of the speaker. For example, in 1959, an article in the *Yorkshire Post* suggested that the YNT should become the proprietors of Spurn to save the little tern, a small seabird, from extinction on this site. However, two months later, the national tabloid *Daily Express* wrote that if the YNT were to manage the site, the residents on Spurn Point rather than the seabirds would

become endangered. The *Daily Express* feared that the YNT, or “Birdmen” (Lees n.pag.) as they mockingly called the organisation, would discontinue the War Department’s upkeep of the sea defences that had secured Spurn’s connection to the mainland. According to the newspaper, without this protection, the tip of the island would become closed to visitors and residents would be stuck “on Alcatraz” (Lees n.pag.), essentially cut off and isolated from mainland society like the convicts of the famous prison-island, with no social interaction. The inhabitants would also lose livelihoods and side businesses that catered to tourists, who might no longer be able or welcome to complete the journey to their settlement. The article cited a councillor from the nearby town of Withernsea who opposed the sale to the YNT because he believed that the YNT might close access to Spurn and deprive people of the possibility to enjoy the “beauty spot” (Lees n.pag.). Finally, the *Daily Mail* published an article that pointed out that the Lake District had recently fallen victim to acts of “shameful vandalism” (“Preservation” n.pag.) and said that the YNT’s adoption of Spurn was the only way to safeguard the site from “such spoliation” (“Preservation” n.pag.).

Several decades later, with Spurn now in possession of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, controversies over the management and preservation of the peninsula continued to abound. Ever since the Victorian era, Spurn’s naturally shifting position was fixed by a system of groynes which kept the influence of the sea at bay. The YWT, however, decided to let them decay, allowing the sea’s processes to have more free play. In the 1997 *The Times Magazine* article “Coastal Retreat,” which responded to this decision, the author identified the sea, rather than French or German armies as the “enemy” (Franks n.pag.) beleaguering the United Kingdom. Conjuring up the ghost of Winston Churchill, Britain’s Prime Minister during the Second World War, the article recalled his idea of Fortress Britain and referenced his “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech. Rather than the Nazi regime, the sea now posed a threat to the “Island Fortress” (Franks n.pag.): “It is hard to fight on the beaches when the enemy

keeps stealing them from beneath your feet” (Franks n.pag.). The sea is anthropomorphised here, and many more times throughout the article. It is said to “march,” take “revenge against man’s past tamperings” and “snatch homes” on the “battle site” of Spurn. Anthropomorphism is also used to emphasise the pathetic situation the sea defences find themselves in: “The groynes stand in lines of surrender, hopelessly outmanoeuvred. The older rows are buried up to their necks” (Franks n.pag.), while the land remains locked in a “life and death struggle” (Franks n.pag.).

The article recognises that at least some part of this process is inescapable, and its position regarding the best course of action remains inconclusive. Instead, it broadens the scope of the issue, and draws attention to the question of erosion across the Holderness Coast, and the conflict between landowners who stand to lose property, and the state which will gain land as “the lost land is likely to reappear at some time as part of the coast’s new configuration” (Franks n.pag.). Landowners and state are thus involved in a conflict that echoes that of land and sea: “Like the east coast and the North Sea, the two are facing each other with everything to play for” (Franks n.pag.). By drawing society and property law into the equation, the conflict of Spurn becomes ever more all-encompassing.

The 2000 article “Commerce or Conservation” published in the *Hull Daily Mail* presents another conflict involving wildlife conservationists in the Humber Estuary. It announces that “The Humber Estuary, one of the region’s most coveted areas of natural wildlife, is at the centre of a simmering row between environmentalists and the company that owns the Port of Hull – Associated British Ports” (Lyon n.pag.). In this article, the author quoted Associated British Ports (ABP), which labelled the conservationists that care for the Humber Estuary’s wildlife, of which Spurn is a part, as a dangerous organisation. At issue were efforts to designate part of the Humber Estuary as a Special Area of Protection, a status meant to protect the Humber’s wildlife that would place restrictions on some of the Port’s

activities. The article explains the effects of these limitations for the port in ecological terms, portraying the port as an organic entity that needs to grow in order to survive. ABP warns that a special status for the area would “restrict” and “damage the future growth” of the port, in fact the plans “threaten the existence” of the ports altogether (Lyon n.pag.), thereby damaging the region’s economy. Again, alarming words suggesting conflict are used to argue for the safeguarding of one specific interest group from harm inflicted by another.

Although the YWT’s management of Spurn has its critics, not all writing about Spurn has been marked by such hostile tones. The YWT has, on several occasions, advocated an approach that specifically appealed to many different stakeholders, including wildlife, visitors, local citizens and others, in the hope that they might work together productively. For example, a management plan proposal from around 1970 detailed a large number of focal points in the management process, such as research, recreation, education and navigation, that are intended to draw support from the community for the YWT’s activities. This is important because they recognise that “ill-considered action could attract adverse publicity that might hamper the Trust’s work by disaffecting potential new members from joining and landowners from negotiating with the Trust; at the other extreme, an inflexible policy could not impossibly stimulate action to secure a compulsory purchase order in the interests of some party concerned” (Yorkshire Wildlife Trust “Outline”). Although these different parties hold opinions and have priorities that might be quite different to the YWT’s main objectives, they are not portrayed as adversaries, but rather as important potential allies whose support is necessary and whose perspectives should therefore be considered in the proposed activities.

In the late 1980s, the YWT again acknowledged the importance of recognising the interests of both local citizens and visitors from farther away. The YWT Management Plan from 1987 argued that “safeguard[ing] the interests of the local community” was one of its central objectives. Similarly, the YWT Marketing Plan for Spurn Point from that same year

indicates that the organisation aimed to improve the experience of tourists. It argues that so far, the YWT had failed to present Spurn in a way that was appealing to visitors and tourists and to facilitate the activities of these parties, and it very much regrets this: “The casual visitor to Spurn Point may well wonder why he bothered to make the 45 minute, 21 mile drive from Hull ... No effort was made to promote the Trust or the Reserve and they will probably never come back.” Again, although neither the local community nor tourists are the main interest of the YWT, the organisation recognised that their support is indispensable to their work.

The YWT Marketing Plan also stressed the importance of educating visitors about Spurn’s position within a larger network of forces and beings, all of which are not necessarily in conflict, but work together to create the site the visitor encounters. It specifically stated that attention should be paid to “the way the east coast from the Tyne to the Thames is a living, moving entity which is never the same from one day to the next” as well as “the industrial, urban south bank and the problems it brings.” In an informative leaflet once distributed on the site, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust also recognises the different ways in which Spurn is a moving site, both physically and emotionally, as it addresses “Spurn’s moving story.” In spite of these attempts at connection, however, the sea still beats on the sand, and the human conflicts about Spurn still linger today. To understand the emotions behind the current conflict between the YWT and the local community, I will now turn to McMillan’s poem “East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation,” which investigates the speaker’s emotional connections to and memories of the landscape of Spurn.

Tide and Time

“East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation” was published in 2011 in the book *Edge of Heaven: The Yorkshire Coast*. The poem, much like the YWT leaflet, presents Spurn as a place that transports the sand as much as it transports the soul. It presents Spurn as a

transformational place both literally and figuratively, and shows the powerful emotional connections people make with their environment. The insights it provides can help us see why conflicts over this site are so heated. By inviting the reader to partake of the musings of one individual, the poem inspires her to imagine how other people come to value a place and perhaps, to understand them better. Over the course of this long poem, presented in *Edge of Heaven: The Yorkshire Coast* alongside beautiful photographs of Spurn, the speaker exposes the connections between landscape and memory and the way time and tides transform all parties connected with this site. This becomes apparent in the poem's engagement with issues of time and processes of geological transformation, language, memory, personal development and social relations, which I will discuss in this chapter.

Early in the poem, the speaker remarks on the Spurn's instable geography: "This is a coast that constantly redresses itself" (9). Spurn's transience is reflected in the poem's shape: every new line's margin is further to the right than the last, so the poem's position on the page shifts, much like Spurn itself. The speaker also mimics the tides by using phrases that are repeated throughout the poem. Like the waves that keep returning to the beach, and leave it slightly different than it was before, these phrases return periodically throughout the poem, but change slightly every time. For example, the poem opens with the lines: "There's an ice cream birdcall, here; / A licking of winter's wind though my hat" (1-2) and the phrase returns later with a slightly different orthography: "There's an ice-cream birdcall, here, / A licking of Winter's wind through my hat" (68-69). The word *ice cream* is now hyphenated, and *winter* is capitalised, suggesting that, over the course of the poem, the speaker has gained a sense of the season's agency. Winter is no longer just a noun, but a name. With this agency, it also gains singularity. The poem concludes with a line that conflates these two lines and gives them an explicit, emotional charge: "This ice-cream wind is making me cry" (112). Like the

beach, which appears differently after every wave, the repeated lines are slightly changed each time they occur, and their meanings shift with them.

Throughout the poem, the speaker emphasises the strong personal connection that he feels to the existence of Spurn in time and place, and suggests that there is a friendly or even familial bond between them, and he himself has a duty of care towards the site:

... I'm just

Going to check on Yorkshire, on Spurn, on

Movement and stasis, history and geography (40-42)

In many ways, the poem negotiates between Spurn as a singular place that exists separately from the rest of the world and Spurn as part of a network that is deeply connected with other places and beings that exist on and around the site. While he first mentions Yorkshire and Spurn, these places then lead him to contemplate abstract universal concepts that cannot be seen, but have a deep impact on his personal life: *movement*, *stasis*, *history* and *geography*. This pattern recurs throughout the poem, as we will see later on.

The speaker's discourse that likens Spurn to a child who needs checking on brings to mind a consideration that is vital to our understanding of physical spaces, namely the usefulness or the danger implicit in our emotional connection to them. Ursula K. Heise warns against seeing a sense of place as an easy way for developing an ecological consciousness (21), and instead argues for developing a notion of eco-cosmopolitanism, a concept she argues "reaches toward what some environmental writers and philosophers have called the 'more-than-human world' – the realm of nonhuman species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange" (61). Alongside his attachment to the place, the speaker of "East Coast Memories" also hints at this kind of connection. His emotions about the place, while they are very real, are intricately connected with the network of agencies that work on the landscape both in a local and in a broader

sense, as the swift mental move from the physical site of Spurn to a mention of the processes and temporalities that lie at its base shows.

By referencing the academic disciplines of history and geography, the speaker stresses two factors that shape Spurn's appearance as a geologic feature: time, the focus area of history, and space, the interest of geography. Both fields also engage with each other, for events need a place to occur and places need time for developments to unfold; they can never be strictly discreet. In the poem, the two disciplines are conflated when the speaker uses the word *long* to mean both a period of time, and a stretch of space, into which the speaker himself is also collapsed. In the same utterance, the speaker states: "'Off you go, and don't be long' / But I might be. I might be as long as Spurn" (45-46).

In this section, and its description of Spurn's appearance, the two disciplines meet closely in the subject of geology: "The branch of science concerned with the physical structure and substance of the earth, the processes which act on these, and the earth's development since its formation" ("Geology" 2a). This description, while it focuses on spatial matters, explicitly notes the importance of time to geology as well. The poem's tension between singularity and connection, which I mentioned before, is apparent in its engagement with Spurn's geology as well.

The tension between exceptionalism and interconnection lies at the basis of the history of geology. Although two scientists are celebrated as founders of the discipline, the field would not exist without networks of different kinds. The age of the earth and the concept of deep time, the scale in which this newly discovered knowledge forced people to think, were theorised over centuries by people with expertise in many different disciplines including, apart from geologists, also "theologians, historians, archaeologists, historians, and linguists" (Gould 4). It was also, as Stephen Jay Gould notes, based on the sets of convictions and beliefs held by the people practicing science. Rather than resulting from discreet units of

information found in research, the theory of deep time resulted from a complex network of theories, thoughts and ideas that pre-existed the data:

Hutton and Lyell, traditional discoverers of deep time in the British tradition, were motivated as much (or more) by such a vision about time, as by superior knowledge of rocks in the field. Indeed, ... their visions stand prior – logically, philosophically, and in the ontogeny of their thoughts – to their attempts at empirical support. ... Deep time, in other words, imposed a vision of reality rooted in ancient traditions of Western thought, as much as it reflected a new understanding of rocks, fossils, and strata. (9-10)

The discipline of geology thus owes its existence both to the work of two remarkable individuals, and to the extensive set of thoughts and ideas that informed their work.

The notion of deep time and the implications it has for the way humans are able to see their position in the world, is similarly multifaceted. The discovery of geologic time is a testament to human thought and science, but its main intellectual force lies in the fact that it fundamentally humbles the human species. Charles Lyell himself expressed the “threatening” (Gould 2) power of the “almost incomprehensible immensity” (2) of time as follows:

Such views of the immensity of past time, like those unfolded by the Newtonian philosophy in regard to space, were too vast to awaken ideas of sublimity unmixed with a painful sense of our incapacity to conceive a plan of such infinite extent. Worlds are seen beyond worlds immeasurably distant from each other, and beyond them all innumerable other systems are faintly traced on the confines of the visible universe (Charles Lyell qtd in Gould 2)

The understanding of deep time both aggrandises and humbles us; it sets us apart in our scientific achievements while simultaneously minimising our role in world history. These considerations show that our understanding of the world is shaped much more by ideas than

facts and that our scientific discoveries not only lead to insights into the workings of the world, but also inspire emotive responses. Recognizing this connection reinforces the power of emotional relationships to landscape that the speaker of “East Coast Memories,” as well as others who have engaged with Spurn in writing, show in their respective texts.

Spurn’s geological history also makes it both unique and a part fundamentally connected to a larger whole. Its shapeshifting form sets it apart from the region beyond, and makes us question the very concept of land, which is usually regarded as being fixed. However, Spurn’s geological history also connects it to the shaping of the island of Great Britain at large. The materials that make up Spurn have travelled by sea from other places, and in this way, Spurn is thus connected to these other landscapes far away, where its sand and shingle originated. Furthermore, boreholes taken at Spurn Point have exposed peat in its underlying strata, suggesting that, at about 4,500 BC, the site was part of the extended mudflats that lay above the high water level and were later rolled back as the sea level rose (“Humber” 3-4). Geological studies thus reveal that Spurn fundamentally is and always has been a part of Holderness.

The speaker’s emphasis on the many different forces that contribute to the perpetual destruction and construction of Spurn make it into a site that is unique and exceptional, one that is somehow set apart from the rest of the world just as much as it is a part of a global network. The speaker struggles to compare Spurn to any other place or entity; it is so transient and unstable that it can never be likened to anything other than Spurn itself. Spurn’s unique nature is reinforced when the speaker grants Spurn its own measure of time, as if the regular calendar did not apply:

... Spurn

Constantly shifting and drifting sand-sculpture

That looks like itself; at least for a day, or

Half-an hour, some Spurn time

That you can only count on your sandy fingers

In the time it takes the sand to shift again. (31-36)

The exceptional timekeeping on Spurn does not end there. Besides Spurn having its own measure of time, time itself varies its pace. Spurn disregards not only the calendar, but even the laws of the universe:

This is a coast that constantly redresses itself,

Where the sand always moves through the timer

Slower than a fossil and faster than a gull's swoop

Onto a spare chip curled on the salted path. (9-12)

In this way, the poem suggests a disconnect from the world beyond Spun. It is a site that is not only set apart from other places, but in fact one that obscures and denies these. In this way, it is presented as exceptional. Spurn thus stands in contrast to Heise's suggestion that a careful consideration of a place figures "the local ... as a miniature version of the globe and indeed the cosmos" (38). Instead, this passage shows the local as unique and disconnected from the rest of the world.

While the poem emphasises Spurn's exceptionalism, it simultaneously unfolds an argument to the contrary. The speaker's very inability to describe Spurn and to find appropriate metaphors for it links it to the global scale, and shows that Spurn is part of a larger world made up of objects and phenomena that Spurn might be compared with. Heise warns that there exists a tension "between the assertion that the local provides a familiar ground from which to expand one's awareness to larger scales and the uneasy realization that the local itself is thoroughly unfamiliar to many individuals, and may be epistemologically as unfathomable in its entirety as larger entities such as the nation or the globe" (41). This sentiment is one that is acknowledged in the poem. Although the speaker appears

knowledgeable about Spurn, the landform also remains fundamentally indefinable to him. Any feature he discusses, once identified, immediately eludes description: as soon as he registers its appearance, it has become altered; as soon as he attempts to measure time, its speed changes. In this way, the speaker recognises that accurately describing the local necessarily introduces contradictions and conflicts, and by calmly mentioning these phenomena and marvelling at them, he shows that he embraces this fact.

The speaker's personal relation to the land reinforces the notion of connectivity. In his talking of Spurn as a child, the speaker hints at a deep interrelation between subject and place. Later in the poem, he asserts that he has been deeply influenced by Spurn in the process of his reaching maturity. In this way, the speaker suggests a relationship of exchange, in which place becomes a subject, and subject is shaped by place. Neal Alexander notes that humans shape their identities in an ever-transforming web of encounters with other beings in which "distinctions between person and place, self and landscape are dissolved in a flux of movements, relations, and becomings" (43). The collapse of these distinctions is very clear in this poem, and as the subject becomes part of the environment, his emotions become inscribed in the landscape, which he imbues with memories. Conversely, the landscape also becomes part of him. He muses that "the wind ... shapes Spurn, shapes all of us" (96), and later states:

...I've learned

This: that the past blows back into your mind,

Like the tides, in and out and back again, shaping

The coast, shaping your life as you stand there in your hat

And remember the child you were, on all those holidays

Those Yorkshire holidays (104-109)

Just as much as the speaker adds layers of meaning to the landscape, his environment does the same with him, and he recognises its agency, and how it has shaped him into the person he has become. While he has constructed memories about the landscape, his environment has influenced his memories. Their interrelations are so deep and complex that the speaker could not exist in the way he does now were it not for the landscape, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally. This poem can thus be read as a powerful argument regarding the connection of humans and their environment more broadly. Awareness of these connections is important in this time in which they are ever more precarious because the environment changes in multiple and profound ways. As hostility continues between the YWT and the local community, the recognition of these attachments, which are equally important to both sides, can also enlighten our perspective on this conflict.

Landscape and Memory

Another key focus issue of the poem, besides the environment, is the foundation of memory in the material world. The speaker shows that he is keenly aware of this as he explicitly makes memory concrete when he refers to “tides of memory that slip down the coast” (29). Here, the speaker grounds memory in the landscape as he does in numerous instances throughout the poem, and thereby reinforces the importance of landscape to human experience. In fact, everything he says about Spurn throughout the poem is based on memory because the speaker himself is not there. Instead, as he makes clear, he finds himself “walking on the tops at Cleethorpes” (3), a seaside resort on the south bank of the Humber, opposite of Spurn, in the bordering county of Lincolnshire. From the coast at Cleethorpes, the visitor can see Spurn, but only faintly, as Spurn Point lies 9 kilometres away. Standing on the Cleethorpes beach, the lighthouse can just be made out, but the land itself is almost indiscernible. It is, then, not so much the sight of Spurn, but the memory of it, that occupies the speaker’s mind. As he walks in Cleethorpes, he says:

The wind slows me down, makes me remember

Other years, by other shores,

Other winds carrying Yorkshire thoughts

Across the Humber to Lincolnshire

And me in my hat, me in my scarf. (4-8)

Everything the speaker says about Spurn over the course of the poem is then not a direct impression, but a memory that is the result of a process that has developed over time.

Much like Spurn itself, the speaker's thoughts are products of other places which have travelled and taken time to crystallise into a coherent whole. Spurn's function in the poem is that of what literary critic Barbara Piatti calls a "projected place" (185): for the reader, Spurn is a place that is twice removed: it is presented as the imagination of a speaker who is himself also imagined (Piatti 186). By introducing these two removes, "East Coast Memories" focuses on the role of place in memory and the imagination. In showing Spurn's significance to the speaker even when he is not there and seems to have little reason to be engaged with the site, he emphasises Spurn's imaginative force and the power of his memories.

Simultaneously, the fact that Spurn exists at a remove from the speaker also contributes to its imaginative powers. For the poem's speaker, Spurn is a place that is defined by its being elsewhere: he is not on Spurn, he is in Cleethorpes. Cleethorpes, too, is in a way an elsewhere: the speaker mentions that he is himself from Barnsley, a place further inland that is "About as far from the sea as you can get" (75), at least on the island of Great Britain. Cleethorpes by the seaside is a place to go to on outings. To the speaker, both Spurn and Cleethorpes owe much of their importance to the fact that they are elsewhere, removed from and different to everyday life in the landlocked city of Barnsley. Because they are not connected to the practicalities of the day-to-day, they are places that have a particular ability to invite the imagination to wander and memories to flood the speaker's mind. This has little

to do with their physical features, but very much with the circumstances of an individual's life. In this poem, the emotions that Spurn calls to his mind are as important as its physical features. The poem thus shows that speaker and place are deeply interconnected, and in fact, geographer Juha Ridanpää argues that the imagination is crucial to an understanding of place (187). Projected places and places that are somehow elsewhere to the characters who narrate them are particularly interesting for literary criticism concerned with matters of place, as they draw attention explicitly to the ways people make sense of landscapes in their minds, and the importance of these mental landscapes for them personally. "East Coast Memories" is a very good example of exactly how far-reaching its significance is.

In the matter of the memory and imagination of Spurn, as in the matter of its physical geology, particularity exists alongside collectivity in "East Coast Memories" as the speaker's very particular and individual memories are shown alongside the memories of a much larger community. The poem suggests a parallel between the site's materiality and memory in the ways that for their existence, both are heavily dependent upon their surroundings. Much like Spurn exists as a singular site and as part of the larger whole of Holderness and the land beyond, it also exists as part of the speaker's memory as much as the memories of members of his community. In this way, the poem reflects ideas about the formation of memory in individuals as it is described by scholars in memory studies. Maurice Halbwachs argues that "a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered" (*Collective* 69). Memories are thus shapeshifting, transforming and mutable in the same way that Spurn is.

In the poem, it is not only the speaker's own memories that become manifest in the image of Spurn, but those of many others as well. The multiplicity of memories is likened to the different materials from a range of places that are collected at Spurn. Spurn is made up of

debris that washes off the more northern parts of the east coast of Yorkshire, which are composed of porous Cretaceous chalk and glacial compounds that are prone to erosion. The remains of all these different parts of the country mingle in the sea's waters and end up rearranged at the spit. If the matter that composes Spurn is infused with the speaker's thoughts and emotions, then the same infusion must have happened in the north, before the matter broke off from the coast to begin its journey south.

It is therefore not only the speaker's memories, but the memories of places further up the coast as well that are deposited here. In the elements, the speaker hears these stories:

... And I'm listening

To the East Coast talking in the breeze.

A Yorkshire language, blowing down the shore

Down to chilly Lincolnshire this Winter afternoon

It's talking the language of Brid

And Whitby sentences, and a Scarborough clause

And Staithes grammar (15-21)

The fact that the land addresses the speaker with language emphasises the motif of the land as compound. Language, like Spurn and like memories, is an amalgamation of different elements with different origins. In the case of language, these are rules, conventions and a vocabulary that have been adopted and influenced over time into the means of communication we use today. The English language, for example, finds its origins in the middle ages, but it has been profoundly influenced by Latin, French and Norse, and even today, it exists in many different varieties, dialects and accents. The compound nature of language is reflected in the speaker's recognition of different dialects. The language of the wind shows particulars originating from all the places the wind visited further up the coast,

mingling to form a message delivered to the shore across the Humber. In its ability to use language, the wind also becomes anthropomorphised.

By including different forms of language and thereby hinting at different sets of memories, the poem suggests the existence of many different opinions regarding the site. Unlike the conflicting voices we have studied above, the ones in the poem exist alongside each other and have equal value in their assessment of Spurn. In the poem's recognition of different voices and potentially differing opinions, all of which give expression to a deep attachment to the landscape, it may inspire us to better understand opposing sides in disagreements over landscape management.

The language of the wind also serves to connect the landscape to the concept of memory. According to Halbwachs, language is vital for the creation and retention of memories for human beings (*Collective* 45), and they need to be reiterated to be kept alive: "One cannot in fact think about the events of one's past without discoursing upon them" (Halbwachs *Collective* 53). Jan Assman confirms this: "Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others" (127). In writing this, Halbwachs as well as Assman connect memories both to language and to the social environment in which language is produced: "individual memory is ... a part or an aspect of group memory, since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over – to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu" (*Collective* 53). Like Spurn, and like language, then, memories too are constructs composed of different people's impressions in the framework of their social environment. Both consist of many parts and are open to change, but are ultimately only meaningful in the wider geographical and social context of the regional landscape and the communications and memories of the community.

Near the end of the poem, the speaker returns to the relationship between the specific locality and the individual by zooming back in from this larger picture of extended geographical and social networks, and focusing on the importance of memories to an individual's sense of self, and on the connections between individual memories and landscape. The geological processes shaping Spurn are here mirrored in the speaker's shaping of his identity through memory, which is a similarly eclectic process of assemblage. Indeed, the geographical features and meteorological circumstances of Spurn are amongst the memories that make the speaker who he is. This process comes to a very touching and personal conclusion when the changes that Spurn undergoes are linked to the speaker's memories of his own past, and the ways he has changed as a person over time:

... Somehow I can feel my own

History blowing in the chill mist,

My Yorkshire life hanging in the air. (70-72)

Not only are the memories of wind and mist emotionally significant to the speaker, but he suggests that his memories are physically present in the air. Air is intangible and history and memory are even more ephemeral, existing only in people's minds, and the speaker's suggestion that they exist in the space and particles around him therefore both makes them seem tangible and emphasises that they ultimately are not.

The speaker's sense of wonder at this overpowering emotional response to his environment is reflected in his use of long vowels in "Somehow," "I", "feel," "own" (70) and "blowing" (71), which linger in the air, much like his memories, while the short vowels in "chill mist" (71) sound like a shiver in the sentence. This connection between sound and content draws the reader into the narrative and makes her feel as if she is present at the scene, wondering about life and land, shivering in the sea wind with the speaker. In this way, the

significance of the speaker's thoughts is communicated to her very directly, and his connection to the landscape becomes very evident.

If Spurn is an image of history, then it is one not only of the speaker's own history, but also, as the speaker recognizes, the histories of many others. Returning again to the notion of interconnectivity, he shows the way both his own memories and those of other people are shaped by the forces of geology. Spurn, this site where many geological factors and many people's memories come together, showcases how intricately memories are bound to landscape, so much so that Spurn becomes a symbol for history itself:

And somehow all those memories are carried

In the wind that shapes Spurn, shapes all of us.

So I stand in the raw fridge of a Cleethorpes winter

And screw up my eyes and look at the past,

Or Spurn as I call it; it's as though all our Yorkshire stories

Have been blown to the edge of this shifting finger

Of sand. This shifting finger that erodes over the years

And builds itself back up again, differently. (95-102)

Again, the sounds used in these lines reflect the content of the poem. The repetition of the *s*, which starts at least one word in every line but the last one in this quotation, is reminiscent of the sound of the sea and its waves rolling onto the shore, while the plosives *b* and *d* that mark the quotation's final line with their direct, affirmative sounds, emphasise the constructiveness of the processes playing out at Spurn. Again, this effect makes the reader feel present in the scene and establishes a close personal connection between speaker and reader. The repetition of different phrases, "shapes Spurn, shapes all of us" (96) and "this shifting finger / Of sand. This shifting finger that erodes over the years" (100-101) again reflects the waves and the tides that beat on the shore, always returning, but never quite in the same way. This trope is

also used to enliven the scene before the reader, and make her feel connected and personally involved. Spurn becomes a site where history seems to concentrate its force in one small spot at the end of the world, where the stories and memories of the people of Yorkshire come together. Although Spurn may seem like the end of the world, the stories do not end there. Spurn keeps changing, and so do the stories, finding their image in this site.

The close relation between the physical place of Spurn and the abstract notion of memory points to the deep ties that exist between the landscape and human cultures of narration. This notion is at the heart of Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory*, in which he writes: "Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (6-7). This connection, in fact, is what makes a place a landscape, for this concept is fundamentally linked to human presence and activity. Just as humans are fundamentally connected to and deeply grounded in the landscapes they inhabit, the landscape takes on meaning that humans lend to it. As Schama writes: "At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape" (9-10). "East Coast Memories" presents a poignant argument to this effect, and shows that engagements with Spurn, as with any other site, are highly emotionally charged.

Boundaries and Transformations

The focal point of the poem thus far has been the interconnectivity between humans, their memories, and the way their memories form and have been formed by the landscape. However, as the poem nears its end, it makes room for the interpersonal connections between different people present in the landscape. By highlighting these connections, the poem uncovers the ways that interpersonal human connections are related to memory, and it suggests that not only are individuals deeply connected to their landscapes, their wider social sphere is bound up with it, too. The connection between human and environment is not only

formed individually by and through single persons, but it also is part of a larger network that includes relations between different people, all of whom are similarly connected with the landscape. Understanding this helps us realise that the conception of the environment is embedded in the many different aspects of a human life, not an isolated part.

Memories are a means by which we relate ourselves to other people; they are part of a process of finding our place in the social universe. This is true for adults, who, as Halbwachs argues, shape their experiences according to the social groups they belong to, and whose ability to recollect memories is dependent upon these groups (*Collective* 44). The social framework is equally important for the memories of children and memories from childhood. In fact, Halbwachs suggests that “we recall nothing of early childhood because our impressions could not fasten onto any support so long as we were not yet a social being” (35). Like the landscape, which exists both as a demarcated site that is unique in its physical features and as a place that is connected to the surrounding land and sea, memories allow us to study humans as discreet individuals as well as actors in a wider social network.

The speaker of “East Coast Memories” shows that his childhood memories, much as they are unique to him, are ones that are formed within the comfortable social environment of his family, from which he is able to reach out to others as well. He recalls being at the seaside with his father when the following scene unfolds, which shows the speaker finding great joy in a particularly exciting act of communication:

... We walked by the sea

And I wrote a message in a glowing pop bottle

And threw it in the water and it splashed

And bobbed like a glass ship from a story (82-85)

Here, a message is written and sent off to an expected recipient, and the speaker’s comment that the bottle seems to come out of a story links it to a wider web of communication that has

existed and connected people throughout the centuries. It turns out that, exactly as the young boy had hoped, the message is indeed found by another person, some distance away down the beach, so he can see the scene of the bottle's retrieval unfolding:

... And the kid

Was as excited as this kid who chucked it in

And as excited as this big kid is now, remembering

How he ran to his dad and I turned to my dad

And the sky was a colour you'd have to call Yorkshire

The sky was a colour you'd have to call Coast (89-94)

The speaker's memory is thus one of connecting with another person. Although he does not actually meet the other boy, they share the same joy, and are both able to experience this joy with their respective fathers. We thus witness the possibility of new bonds being formed, although not ultimately pursued, and old relations being strengthened in the exciting environment of the sandy seaside. In this moment of intense emotion, the landscape's force is concentrated. In the synesthetic and self-referential description of the sky as being the colour of the region over which it is located and its topographic name, the speaker, again, describes the landscape as its own category, standing alone. However, again, it also simultaneously connects the beach to the larger historic county of Yorkshire, including its large inland parts, and the coast that stretches towards Lincolnshire to the south and County Durham to the north, and from there all around the island of Britain.

Another memory that comes to the speaker's mind's eye involves his father being berated by the hostess of a bed & breakfast for flushing the toilet at night. This memory also shows the strong bonds of the social network of the family and grounds it firmly in the environment. Although the memory concerns a conflict, it is not a threatening one. The

speaker describes the event with a decisive eye for beauty and great empathy: despite the hostess's warnings not to "Flush owt" (54), his father

... forgot, and flushed

In the middle of the night and flushed

Red as a sunrise when she told him off

The next morning in front of the guests

And the bacon and the eggs. (55-59)

The humour of the scene immediately deflates the humiliation of it, staging the speaker's father against an audience that is composed of possibly judging guests as well as the breakfast buffet itself and punning on the word *flushed*. The speaker relates the colour his father's face takes in humiliation to the colour of the sky at dawn, an image of beauty, and one that is closely tied to the surrounding landscape, too: there are few places better for watching a sunrise than an east coast. The embarrassment of the scene is thus mitigated by the speaker's use of humour and his reference to the beauty of the landscape. This works, in large part, because the speaker is unequivocally siding with his father, alleviating the blame. Release comes because they are together; the familial bond means the father is not alone.

In this rumination, the speaker acknowledges another aspect that is vital to forming a sense of identity and community; that of the limits between one's own group and others. Memories are defined by their relevance that is particular and singular to a certain group, and may have different meanings to other groups, or none at all. Jan Assman argues that, while memory systems are open because people exist in different groups, they are also closed, because a group is always defined by its inclusion of people as well as its exclusion of others, and memories are always tied to the individuals and groups who possess them: "Memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a

community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition” (113-114). In this way, memories interrogate the boundaries between communities that separate different groups of people and set some apart from others.

The boundaries that mark memories are reflected in the boundaries that define place. For a long time, these boundaries were so important that they constituted the main interest of an entire discipline of human geography. Geographer Tim Cresswell points out that, before the 1960s, this discipline was to a large extent concerned with categorising and demarcating regions, teasing out specifics that made them different to other regions: “A great deal of time was spent differentiating one particular region from others around it – in other words, in drawing boundaries” (31), and this priority was applied to geographical features as well as to cultures (Cresswell 31). Both memory and place exist because of the borders between that which is included and that which is excluded. Traditionally, culture is also thought of “almost exclusively [as something that is] shared, patterned, and homogeneous” (Lugo 54) and thus set apart from elements that are different to the common narrative of a community.

Memory and space are very much interlinked, as memories need space to be grounded in (Cresswell 30), and ultimately, the physical appearance of a space is also dependent on culture, and therefore on memory. The human geographers of the 1960s argued that cultures emerge in specific areas that can be demarcated. Similar to geographical areas, there are also “culture areas” (Cresswell 32), and cultural geography was occupied with “ranking and classifying” (Cresswell 32) these, as well as providing “an analysis of the ways in which cultural groups affect and change their natural habitats” (Cresswell 32).

Cresswell argues that, by studying place, we encounter “a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. we see worlds of meaning and experience” (18). Spurn, in the way McMillan describes it, epitomises

this idea and makes it concrete, even as it changes. He professes to have been changed and indeed shaped into the person he is now by his past, as well as his environment. In fact, when he speaks of the past, he speaks of it in material terms, echoing Bachelard's argument that memories are primarily spatial rather than temporal entities (Cresswell 30):

... I've learned

This: that the past blows back into your mind,

Like the tides, in and out and back again, shaping

The coast, shaping your life as you stand there in your hat

And remember the child you were, on all those holidays

Those Yorkshire holidays (105-110)

In his bringing together of his own identity and that of the landscape, and emphasising the ways both influence each other, the speaker celebrates transience and change. Changes to his personal life, as well as changes to the landscape, are pleasant and exciting. This idea of transience is also made concrete, as the speaker compares it to the feeling of the sand moving under foot as one stands in the sea. The sensation of the sand retreating with the water after the waves roll on the shore, as anyone who has stood in the sea herself can testify, is a very pleasant one indeed, and change is seen in a positive light, as an opportunity:

... the sand shifting under your feet

And you didn't mind a bit. Time to go back. See you, Spurn:

You'll be different next time I come. Like I will be.

Like we all will be. This ice-cream wind is making me cry. (105-112)

This insight is an important one with regard to the way we conceptualise culture as well. Although cultural traditions are sometimes seen as monolithic and fixed, in reality, they are not. Just like borders can be crossed, and memories can be contested and are always being renegotiated, the differences within cultures can be "sites of creative cultural production that

require investigation” (Rosaldo qtd in Lugo 50-51), as the speaker of “East Coast Memories” clearly shows.

Read against the context of the disputes that have existed around Spurn, the poem invites us to take a step back and allows us to contemplate Spurn’s existence as a site that is unique in itself, and that is also connected to other places and to the beings that exist in relation to it. The poem shows that places are more than demarcated pieces of land: they are infused with memories and emotions that are complex and exist in multiplicities that emerge even through the narrative of a single person. In drawing the reader’s attention to the intricate processes in which these entanglements are formed, the literary text invites her to contemplate different relations and views, and understand the complex ways in which these come about and coexist. Perhaps, this can help us look at the disputes about Spurn today with a wider understanding and appreciation of different parties’ perspectives.

“The Things that are to Come”:
Ways to a New Nature



Under the flyovers of Kleinpolderplein



Reeds at Kleinpolderplein



Flyovers past, present and future

The Park on the Motorway

The Rotterdam ring road is the largest and busiest ring road in the Netherlands. It is made up of four national motorways; the A20 between Westerlee and Rotterdam, the A16 between Rotterdam and the Belgian border, the A15 between the port of Rotterdam and Bommel and the A4 between Amsterdam and the Belgian border. Shaped roughly like a lozenge, it is sometimes referred to as *Rotterdam's diamond*. It traverses four municipalities and includes two bridges, one tunnel and six interchanges. One of these interchanges is *Kleinpolderplein*, which sits on the A20 and connects it to the A13.

Kleinpolderplein is built around a large roundabout with several connecting roads leading to different parts of Rotterdam. This roundabout consists of a single carriageway with two traffic lanes that is separated by barriers from a bikeway and a footway. In the centre of the roundabout sits a large pond with plants, mostly reeds, growing around its edges. On the north side of the carriageway are steps going down to an area with a number of sculptures on pedestals and graffiti on the concrete. Over and under this ensemble twist and wind the different motorways that connect at the tangle that is *Kleinpolderplein*. Approaching *Kleinpolderplein* on the A20 from the west in an eastbound direction towards Utrecht, the traveller has to dip down to the lowest level of the structure and go straight, while to go north, she would dip down, swoop to the right and then make a half circle left, over the eastbound lanes, and enter the A13 towards Den Haag. Moving upwards instead, and turning right at ground level, she enters the roundabout that leads to connecting roads to the city of Rotterdam. Arching over this structure is a fourth layer of roads, consisting of the connecting roads from the north, branching out like a tree over the entire structure.

In this final chapter, I will describe how *Kleinpolderplein* has been imagined as a structure that is representative of hope in the post-war and the contemporary era in different texts that have reported on it. After the Second World War, *Kleinpolderplein* became one of many symbols of reconstruction in a city that had been devastated by an aerial bombardment

during the German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940. Today, plans for its future in which infrastructure will have been modified dramatically imagine it anew as a place that integrates mobility, recreation and nature. The unlikeliness of this combination is a testament to the imagination that can reinvent places to suit changing demands, and to create places that are beautiful and sustainable beyond what their present appearance might suggest.

After looking at these different representations, I will consider the songs of folk musician broeder Dieleman, which are often firmly rooted in his native region of Zealantic Flanders in the south of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta. Broeder Dieleman also composed a piece of music and a poem inspired by *Kleinpolderplein* and performed his music at this site in 2016. I will investigate how Dieleman's music, including songs about, or otherwise grounded in Zealantic Flanders, presents relationships between humans and their environment as part of a broader network that encompasses ancient traditions, local culture and religious experiences. In his songs, old ways of life are confronted with the advent of modernity and the changes that heavy industry brings to the region and people's livelihoods, threatening to disband the strong ties of the community.

These changes lead broeder Dieleman to imagine a landscape devoid of all human activity but awash in beauty. Despite the fact that no humans are there to observe and value the landscape's physical features, non-human life and traces of past human existence, they are still presented as beautiful and even inspiring. Finally, I will explore the motifs of frames and layers that broeder Dieleman uses in his work and show how art allows people to narrate their lives and find a place in a world of perpetual change. In this way, I emphasise the constructive force of the imagination and the political nature of hope, which can be a choice as much as a feeling. The imagination is relevant both to the cultural iterations in which humans assess life in all its complexities, and to the way they construct its many defining aspects, including landscape, in many different ways. Hope influences not only the way we

look at the world, but also the path we choose to take and the roads we pave, rebuild and redesign for future beings.

Since classical times, roads, paths and ways have been an important literary trope. They have found their way into our language in words like “viable,” “obvious” and “routine” and our expressions, such as “way of life”. In fact, life itself is, in many cultures, described as a path (Ferber 149). Crossroads, on the other hand, often constitute a choice between good and evil, between the right or the wrong path. As sites, crossroads are potent symbols in literature and mythology, both ancient and modern. Oedipus kills his father on a crossroads, and it is the place where Robert Johnson, supposedly, sold his soul to the devil, in exchange for the ability to play the blues. Roads are thus symbols of change: they are the lines along which we progress and adapt. Crossroads are places where we make choices.

Kleinpolderplein, too, is representative of continuous change and decision-making on many levels. A long time ago, residents imagined that the wetland that existed here might be safer and more productive, and a decision was made to drain and develop it. Later, it became a place representative of modernity and the logistical choice to design Rotterdam as a car-friendly city. Today, it is a place where, every day, a multitude of travellers decide which way to take their cars. Looking toward the future, it is also a place that asks questions about how one society imagines its life in the coming decades, and where decisions will be made on the direction of its collective future.

When the Second World War started in the Netherlands, the Nazi *Luftwaffe* heavily bombed Rotterdam and most of the city centre was completely demolished. The bombing killed hundreds of inhabitants and 25,000 buildings in the heart of Rotterdam were destroyed (Damen “Wederopbouw” n.pag.). This was a hard blow for the city and the country, and a day after the bombing, the Netherlands surrendered to the Nazi invaders. Today, Ossip Zadkine’s sculpture *De Verwoeste Stad* (The Destroyed City), a dramatic representation of a

man without a heart who lifts his arms up towards the sky, memorialises this event. While the bombs and the war left destruction, several architects also saw them as a source of inspiration; they “created a ‘tabula rasa’ which presented an ideal starting point for a new, modern city” (Damen “Wederopbouw” n.pag.¹²⁰)¹²¹. Architect W.G. Witteveen, who had spent years thinking of ways to restructure Rotterdam, now saw an opportunity to make Rotterdam fit for the modern world (Damen “Wederopbouw” n.pag.). One area that architects like Witteveen sought to remake was Rotterdam’s smallest polder, the *Kleinpolder* (Gemeente Rotterdam “Kleinpolder” n.pag.). Sitting northwest of the devastated city centre, it soon became the site of a new residential area, plans for which were based on a suburban model with communal gardens. The architects strived for this design because they believed that “community solidarity, lost in the process of urbanization and consolidation, could be recovered through the formation of independent districts” (Damen “Kleinpolder” n.pag., Trans. D’Laine Camp and Donna de Vries-Hermansader.).

During the city’s reconstruction, the number of residents in Rotterdam, as well as the cars they owned, increased exponentially, clogging up the city’s roads that struggled to process daily traffic. To manage the traffic, the city planned to construct a ring road, and *Kleinpolderplein*, then a large, one-level roundabout, was to be transformed into an enormous, four-level interchange with flyovers (Van Winden n.pag.). When it was completed in 1972, it was the most complex interchange in Rotterdam’s diamond, and the most modern urban interchange in the Netherlands (Van Winden n.pag.).

A promotional video made by contractor Van Hattum en Blankevoort stressed the urgency of the project. It used cheerful music and incorporated several traffic-related witticisms: for example, when the voice-over declared that “All these troubled car drivers

¹²⁰ Although a translated summary of the chapter is included in the publication, the striking phrasing did not come across in this text, so I have provided my own translation of this phrase.

¹²¹ Creëerden een ‘tabula rasa’, die een ideaal uitgangspunt vormde voor een nieuwe, moderne stad.

needed to be rescued” (1:38-1:43)¹²², the film showed a fire engine stuck in traffic¹²³. The film also explained the methods of construction used at *Kleinpolderplein*, including the connections between prefabricated units, reinforcement of concrete and the use of rails and other supportive equipment for machinery. The message that the film ultimately drove home was that the construction workers engaged in hard and complex work that was vital to life in the modern city. The narrator asserts: “Only a radical approach like the one used in Rotterdam will suffice if we want to avoid being confronted with a complete traffic chaos on our roads” (14:23-14:34)¹²⁴. The sense of grave importance and urgency, but also of enthusiasm for the enterprise of construction was apparent from the title: *Erop of eronder*¹²⁵ (“Make It or Break It”).

Following the ring road’s construction, *Kleinpolderplein* spent decades watching traffic zip into, out of and past Rotterdam, but today, it processes much more traffic than it was expected to and its structures are ageing. A recent decision to restructure the ring road has presented both a challenge and an opportunity for *Kleinpolderplein*. As a result of these plans, the pressure on traffic at the interchange will be greatly reduced in the future (Gemeente Rotterdam “Slimme” 10), and in 15 years, *Kleinpolderplein* may be redundant, “useless and superfluous” (Maandag “Vingerwijzing” 14). However, once it is no longer needed for traffic, possibilities open up for other uses of the infrastructure, including that of a city park, which has been advocated by different people. In this situation, *Kleinpolderplein* again becomes a site where the imagination has free play, and where many people find hope

¹²² Al die getergde mobilisten moesten uit de brand geholpen worden

¹²³ In Dutch, the hilarity of this situation is even greater, as the phrase the voice-over uses for *rescue* is *uit de brand helpen*, which literally means *help (someone) out of a fire*.

¹²⁴ Alleen een radicale aanpak zoals die bij Rotterdam is afdoende, wil men in de toekomst niet geconfronteerd worden met een complete verkeerschaos op onze wegen. Er is geen keus: het is erop of eronder.

¹²⁵ In Dutch, *erop of eronder*, literally means “on top of it or under it,” in which the former refers to a successful intervention, and the latter to an unsuccessful one. The use of this expression as the title for the promotional film is a pun on the interchange’s flyovers.

to make this place into one that is both functional and beautiful in a wholly new way than it was before.

Since 2010, when they were asked to participate in a project to beautify entrance structures to Rotterdam, including *Kleinpolderplein*, the artist bureau Observatorium has been working on plans to transform the interchange into a park (Maandag “Vingerwijzing” 14). The plan to make a park out of an interchange is a large, complex and multifaceted one, with many actors involved. However, in the past few years, it has been off to a good start and many features have been added to beautify the area and provide the beginnings of an ecological structure; The pond and the sculptures mentioned above are two of these features, although the graffiti is not. The project is to have both cultural and ecological value.

The first step towards this goal was the creation of the pond. A large basin was dug in the centre of the roundabout, and thus the centre of *Kleinpolderplein*, that stores rainwater from the adjacent neighbourhood of *Overschie*. In case of heavy rains, a low lying area can serve as an additional basin that can temporarily store more water. In these basins, a system of drains and filters, as well as plants and fish, prevent the water from becoming putrid (Maandag “Het recept” 19). The plants are native species and reference the site’s history. Landscape architect Annemieke Diekman says: “Originally, this was a landscape rich in water. It was a landscape that was predominantly ancient marshland, which is very wet. The city has paved over this landscape over time, meaning nothing of that can still be seen. With our plan, we have introduced something of that native landscape, visually attractive, ecologically interesting *and* sustainable” (qtd in Maandag “Onder” 13)¹²⁶. Project developer Johan Goossens, who coordinated the development of these new features, comments proudly

¹²⁶ Oorspronkelijk was het een waterrijk landschap. Een landschap dat voornamelijk bestond uit oermoeras, dat van nature erg nat is. De stad is in de loop der tijd over dat landschap heengewalst, waardoor er niets meer van is terug te zien. Met ons plan hebben we dat gebiedseigen landschap naar binnen gebracht, visueel pakkend, ecologisch interessant én duurzaam.

that it is now: “[a] landscape with ... a roof on top” (qtd in Houdijk 7)¹²⁷; a rather pleasant, somewhat green space covered by flyovers.

In the area that can serve as a second, emergency basin, but that is typically dry, pedestals were erected to display old public artworks. After the Second World War, as part of the reconstruction efforts, artists were hired across the city to create public art to enhance the city’s sense of community (Damen “Wederopbouw” n.pag.). These artworks were to be a testament to the fact that from Rotterdam’s ruins, a better place would emerge. Over the years, however, many of the sculptures that were displayed on, inside or near public buildings have been decommissioned, removed, stolen or simply lost for a variety of reasons. Buildings may have been demolished, tastes changed or art no longer called for. Some of the statues that have become redundant over the years have found a new home on the pedestals at *Kleinpolderplein*. Art critic Sandra Smets recognises a sense of poetic justice in this practice: “Many of these forgotten artworks are from the same period as *Kleinpolderplein* It was built in a time of optimism and progressivism that you can recognise in this period’s modern art as well” (25)¹²⁸.

The first statue exhibited at *Kleinpolderplein* was a little sandstone girl whose maker and place of origin remain unidentified. She was therefore simply called “Meisje uit Heijplaat” (*Heijplaat Girl*) after *Heijplaat*, a neighbourhood in Rotterdam, where she was thought to have come from. Like the plants that grow at *Kleinpolderplein* today, the statue’s name refers to the site’s past ecosystem. *Heijplaat Girl*’s name recalls the names given to bog bodies who, similarly unidentifiable, are typically named after the places they are found (e.g. Tollund Man, Lindow Man and Lindow Woman, Yde Girl). Her name evokes the deeper history of *Kleinpolderplein*, a time when it was still marshland, a wet landscape like the bogs

¹²⁷ [e]en landschap met ... een dak erboven.

¹²⁸ Veel van deze vergeten kunst stamt uit dezelfde tijd als het Kleinpolderplein ... Het is gebouwd in een tijd van optimisme en vooruitgangsgevoel dat je ook herkent in de moderne kunst van toen.

that preserve bog bodies. The allusion created between Heijplaat Girl and the bog bodies entwines different kinds of heritage. Observatorium suggests that this tentative museum park will be healing for both the city and its art (Smets 24), redeeming both the orphaned sculptures and their environment. Smets argues that they may play an important role in “remembering an idealist age that was so important to the formation of modern Rotterdam” (25)¹²⁹. The presence of the statues is thus a testament to the role of the imagination as well as the power of hope in the construction of *Kleinpolderplein* and the city of Rotterdam in general.

Recently, Observatorium installed a new work of art called *Die Bocht* (“That Bend”). It consists of two metal walkways that curve over the water, but are not attached to the ground or any other pavement, making them inaccessible to would-be users. According to Ben Maandag, they seem to lead “from nothing to nowhere” (“Onder” 14)¹³⁰. However, while seemingly without purpose, Maandag suggests that they make an imaginative connection, if not a physical one: “the bridges do make a connection. Between old and new, east and west, up and down” (“Onder” 14)¹³¹. Instead of leading us from A to B, they show us where our imagination might take us: to new places and new ideas. They suggest that one day, pedestrians might saunter across the flyovers overhead. In this way, they are a promise of what is to come, and a suggestion that this future is exciting. One of the teams of architects involved in the project writes, “Art is changing ideas!” (Team Bijvoet 65, their translation)¹³², and *Die Bocht* shows this very directly. Simply by projecting ourselves stepping onto the walkway and strolling up to the flyovers, we can imagine a wholly new prospect for

¹²⁹ herinneren aan een idealistisch tijdperk dat zo belangrijk is geweest voor de vorming van het moderne Rotterdam.

¹³⁰ van niets naar nergens

¹³¹ de bruggen [leggen] wel degelijk een verbinding. Tussen oud en nieuw, oost en west, beneden en boven.

¹³² Kunst verandert denkbeelden!

Kleinpolderplein. In our minds, it may no longer be only an interchange; perhaps it is also a future park.

The plan to make *Kleinpolderplein* more attractive started in 2006, but even today, in 2019, this project is far from finished, and *Kleinpolderplein* has years to go before it can become the park some people are eager to see. However, to keep the park in the public consciousness, events are organised to introduce citizens to the possibilities for *Kleinpolderplein*'s future. *Team Bijvoet architectuur en stadsontwerp* (Team Bijvoet architecture and city design) organised an open day on the flyover, closing off traffic and allowing people to walk and play on the motorway. They were invited to discuss and develop new ideas for its future. On other occasions, visitors to festivals were served *Kleinpolder Punch*, a drink prepared with ground ivy, stickyweed, herb-robert, mint, nettle, horsetail and dead-nettle, all of which can be found at *Kleinpolderplein*, emphasising its potential as a green site with even a culinary dimension. Broeder Dieleman performed music about *Kleinpolderplein* as artist-in-residence, encouraging visitors to look at the familiar interchange in a new way, and imagine what it might be in the future.

Landscape and Text

Kleinpolderplein is an interchange that sends travellers across northwest Europe, but it also sits at the intersection of modernist and Anthropocene thought. It is a product of the former and its future is moving towards the latter, not only temporally, but also imaginatively as its prospect of a future park references the complex historical human and non-human entanglements that are at the heart of the Anthropocene. In this way, the site invites the visitor to question her relationship to the environment, her wishes and desires, as well as her hopes and fears for the future and the way these dreams relate to human action. These considerations are also at the centre of broeder Dieleman's work. Broeder Dieleman sings of agrarian societies in Zealantic Flanders, a low-lying region where the perpetual threat of

destruction from the sea make the human connection to the environment precarious but also, just because of this precarity, particularly meaningful. Confronted with industrialisation and rising sea levels, the landscapes these societies are familiar with are threatened by the consequences of both modernism and the conditions of the Anthropocene, and they are therefore forced to reassess their relationship with the environment and their sense of belonging and identity that this relationship entails. Studying the environmental impacts of different human and human-induced changes to the landscape through the medium of song can facilitate an understanding of the way we conceive of landscape and the possibility of hope for its future in the age of the Anthropocene, both in rural Zealandic Flanders and urban *Kleinpolderplein*.

Zealandic Flanders sits in the southernmost region of the Dutch province of Zeeland. Its flat and monotonous landscape is at the heart of many of broeder Dieleman's songs. Many of his music videos show endless fields of wheat and pasture and his music reflects this aesthetic in its minimalist sound. His songs are typically accompanied by gentle picking or strumming of strings, sometimes a piano, and occasional backing vocals and muted percussion. The songs have a calm, murmuring quality. Several songs include sound recorded outside or parts of conversations and sermons, giving the impression that they were not recorded in a replaceable and abstract studio, but in a specific place, a feature that draws the listener into the soundscapes. The minimalist accompaniment combined with lyrics that are half-spoken, half sung, places emphasis on broeder Dieleman's words, forcing the listener to pay attention to them.

Much like his music, broeder Dieleman's lyrics and language convey a sense of place. He sings in the distinct dialect of Zealandic Flanders, which is occasionally hard to understand for speakers of other versions of Dutch. In many places, dialect is often regarded

as provincial or even backwards¹³³ (Kraaykamp 390), but in broeder Dieleman's songs, this notion is turned on its head. Rather than backwards, the language makes the lyrics sound elemental and firmly rooted in the soil from which they sprung. In the 2015 book *Uut de bron* (From the Source), broeder Dieleman published the lyrics from his first three albums, as well as several miscellaneous songs. The book reinforces the notion of pre-modern language, since on several occasions, the language defies standardised orthography as the same words are spelled in different ways, sometimes even within one song. The line "who has ridden our horse" (5) from the song "Lovenpolder Boerengat" is, in the original Zeelandic Flanders dialect rendered twice as "*wie n et r op ons perd gerejen*" but the third time as "*wien et er op ons perd gereejen*" (8). The song's "plastic hearts" (13) are, in the original, spelled twice as "*plestiek arten*" (13) and once as "*plastiek harten*" (16). The words *birds* is spelled sometimes as "*veugels*", as in the songs "Duzend Veugels" (A Thousand Birds) (10), "Morgen" (Tomorrow) (26) and "Water" (Water) (2), while in "Zilverspa" (Silver Fir) it is spelled "*vogels*" (9), as it is in standard Dutch. With these particular and diverse spellings, the written lyrics defy conventions of capitalisation and punctuation. The words appear to speak from the pages from pre-modern times, before the emergence of standardised spelling.

Broeder Dieleman's stage name also refers to the local culture he comes from. In some of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, the title "broeder" designates an elder and is a sign of respect. The title itself originates from the book Acts, in which the Israelites ask the apostles "*wat zullen wij doen, mannen broeders*" (2:37) ("Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?"¹³⁴). However, broeder Dieleman, whose first name is Tonnie, has distanced himself

¹³³ G. Kraaykamp notes that speaking dialect is seen as a feature of the lower class, while standard language is regarded as the appropriate means of communication for the middle and upper classes (390), and he argues that, in the Netherlands, speaking dialect negatively affects a subject's education and position in society. Even corrected for social background, speakers of dialect typically achieve a lower level education and have jobs of lower status than their peers speaking standard Dutch (401).

¹³⁴ In the Dutch *Statenvertaling* the appealed to party lacks the *and* that was added in the King James Version, allowing for the words *men* and *brethren* to become the compound *mannenbroeders*. This title for an elder in the reformed church is in its vocative form shortened to *broeder*.

from the church and his relationship with religion is ambiguous. When Melchior Hurdeman asked him in an interview if he was really a *broeder* in the religious sense of the word, Dieleman sighed “No” (0:21), but he also emphasized that “there is a certain sense of community to calling each other *brother* and *sister*” (0:22-0:30)¹³⁵. In stressing community, Dieleman might reject religion, but he acknowledges, respects and even celebrates the feelings of care and respect are implied in the church’s appellations. These feelings are reflected in his songs, many of which feature homely settings and motifs inspired by a remote but close-knit society, that create an atmosphere of familiarity around the songs. The religious connotation of the stage name, then, is to be taken as one whose significance is primarily cultural, but no less poignant.

Religious motifs, which proliferate in *broeder Dieleman*’s songs, serve a similar purpose that is not so much spiritually but rather culturally relevant. In the song “Aalscholvers” (Cormorants), from his 2014 album *Gloria*, religion provides a lens to interpret the landscape and to understand the singer’s state of mind. The song begins by referencing *Acts* and asking “men *and* brethren what shall we do?” (1)¹³⁶; exemplifying Dieleman’s use of religious narratives that connect the individual to the landscape. This motif is not marked by any sense of romanticism: the singer notes that “our mouth is dry from calling / our feet are weary from walking” (3-4)¹³⁷. This sense of exhaustion reminds the listener that life is hard and that existence is precarious, a motif that is typical for Dutch national mentality. Religious experiences do not invite feelings of exaltation or glory, but rather of humility and suffering. Sociologist Meerten B. Ter Borg explains the lack of glory in this context as follows: “Because of our mentality of the polder, the Dutch hardly have any inclination towards that which the French admire so much: *grandeur*. The only *grandeur* they

¹³⁵ Nee, ... als je mekaar broeder en zuster noemt, ‘t heeft wel iets van een zekere gemeenschapszin

¹³⁶ wa moeten we doen mannenbroeders

¹³⁷ Onze mond is droog van t roepen / onze voeten zien van t lopen moe

recognise is that of the sea” (47)¹³⁸. Not only is the singer in “Aalscholvers” tired and thirsty, but he also finds himself in a world that is in a state of unrest, an anxiety echoed in the singer’s state of mind. The refrain of the song consists of a thrice repeated plea to be able to return home:

outside the world
 is in terrible turmoil
 in us too, is unrest
 where do we lay this down

may I go home
 may I go home
 may I please go home (5-11)¹³⁹

In the last verse, the singer identifies parallels and differences between his own state of mind and that of non-human beings, namely trees and animals, a connection that breaks with the Bible’s traditional dichotomy between humans and nature. The Bible asserts that humans are “freed ... from the determinism of nature. They are distinct from the animals, which are also made from the dirt, and can transform the natural world to create civilization” (Simkins 950). This freedom and sense of possibility, however, also comes with responsibility and doubt. As the singer shows, this makes his life more complex and difficult than that of non-human creatures:

the trees go to sleep naked
 show all their nests
 and you sit here, wondering

¹³⁸ Door onze poldermentaliteit hebben de Nederlanders nauwelijks enige neiging tot wat de Fransen zozeer waarderen: grandeur. De enige grandeur die zij erkennen, is die van de zee.

¹³⁹ buten gaat de wereld / vreselijk tekeer / oek in ons is het onrustig / waa leggen we di neer / mag ik naar uus / mag ik naar uus / mag ik asjeblijft naar uus

if you have deserved such rest (23-26)¹⁴⁰

The singer compares his doubtful waking, which implies that he denies himself sleep, to the peaceful quiet of the trees and their nesting birds, which rest without worry. Unlike them, he cannot readily submit to the cycle of activity and repose because, unlike them, he has a conscience that presents him with the question of his worthiness. Since this is a question that no human can possibly answer, it hints at a perpetual sense of unease on the part of the singer.

The singer's doubt, however, does not only make his life one of weariness, it is also what makes his life meaningful. Throughout the song, the singer consistently engages in this exercise of meaning-making. He observes cormorants diving for food and then sitting with their wings held up to dry, and points out that their posture makes it seem as if they are praying, but really, this is "praying without thinking / only but a gesture" (16-17)¹⁴¹. The anthropomorphism of the perched cormorant as a praying animal is clearly an idea that exists only in the singer's mind and has no bearing on the cormorant's psychology, as he himself acknowledges. Yet, the singer's valuating musings stand in a long tradition of people attaching meaning and values to the creatures around them. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the cormorant is designated as an unclean bird and in *Paradise Lost*, Satan assumes the shape of a cormorant when he breaks into Paradise and sits in the Tree of Life, spying on Adam and Eve. The categorisation of unclean and distrustful animal also adds another layer of suspicion to the cormorant's behaviour.

The full complexity of this meaning-making process emerges when we consider the other birds that are mentioned in the song. The singer compares himself to a blackbird, a bird which, although it is not mentioned specifically in the Bible, would, as a "small bird"

¹⁴⁰ de bomen gaan naakt slapen / laten alle nesten zien / en jie zit je ier af te vragen / of je wel zuk een rust verdien

¹⁴¹ bidden zonder dienen / mee een enkel gebaar

(Younker 189) probably be counted as a “bird for offering” (Younker 189). The blackbird is therefore appreciated in a way that cormorants are not. In the same verse, God himself is likened to a bird, in a reference to Psalm 91:4 (*Uut de bron* 50): “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust”:

as the blackbirds hide
 to softly die
 so I hide beneath your wings
 to get up in the morning (27-30)¹⁴²

Different birds thus have different meanings and valuations to the speaker, that are just as much the result of his own cultural background and imagination as they are the result of the specific characteristics of the creatures around him.

Like the birds, the landscape the singer inhabits is also a valued one. As he wanders, tired and looking for a home, and as he repeatedly calls out his wish towards the end of the song, a second vocal (rendered here in italics) describes features of the landscape, all of which seem to be at peace, or at home, if you will:

may I go home
 may I go home
 may I please go home
everything calls and sings
 may I go home?
the starling, the lapwing and the jackdaw
 may I go home?
teasel and hogweed

¹⁴² zoat de merels zich verstoppen / om zachtjes dood te gaan / zo kruip ik onder Uw vleugels / om morgen op te staan

may I go home?

may I please go home? (31-40, my italics)¹⁴³

The juxtaposition of the longing for home with landscape features and non-human creatures shows that the connection between the feeling of home and a specific landscape is strong, but it also indicates that a sense of home is more than just a landscape. The long, drawn-out last syllables of the lines emphasise the deep longing that shows that home is an emotion and a narrative just as much as it is a place. In this emotional rendition of the words and the complex set of valuations and cultural and religious considerations that are attached to landscape features and nonhuman creatures, the song shows that places are more than their physical attributes and inhabitants: they are also hooks to which imaginative cultural and religious networks can be attached. The song thus exemplifies the human connection to place and the imaginative force of the landscape.

The deep connection between faith, the individual and the landscape is reiterated in the song “OLV van de polder” (Our Lady of the Polder), off the 2012 album *Alles is ijdelheid* (All is Vanity). In it, the landscape and religion inform a contemplation of humanity, humility and love. This song makes the grandeur of the sea that Ter Borg mentions as an important theme in Dutch consciousness explicit, and it presents religion as a mechanism that allows the singer and his fellow community members to live with the threat of the water. “OLV van de polder” is strongly inspired by an earlier song of a similar name¹⁴⁴ written by Martien Beversluis. This song, called “O.L. Vrouw van den Polder” is part of a cult devoted to a miraculous image of the Virgin Mary from a village in Zeeland that was supposedly painted

¹⁴³ mag ik naar uus / mag ik naar uus / mag ik asjeblijft naar uus / alles roept en ziengt / mag ik naar uus? / de spreek, de kievit en de kauw / mag ik naar uus? / kaardebol en berenklaauw / mag ik naar uus? / mag ik asjeblijft naar uus?

¹⁴⁴ The earlier song was written in 1945/1947 by Martien Beversluis and is printed in a songbook, on holy cards and inside the chapel that is the destination of pilgrimages of the Our Lady of the Polder cult (Sijnke n.pag.). It is called “O.L. Vrouw van den Polder” which, like broeder Dieleman’s “OLV van de polder” can be translated as “Our Lady of the Polder”.

by an angel (Sijnke n.pag.). From Beversluis's song, broeder Dieleman borrows the rhyme scheme of the verses, the epithet "Mother of this polder land" (6)¹⁴⁵, as well as the following verse, translated from Beversluis' standard Dutch into Zeelandic Flanders dialect:

pray for us who are sinners
 keep us from evil
 o, Mary make sure nobody
 of us will be lost here (21-24)¹⁴⁶

The verse alludes to both the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, and its final line refers to the souls of the faithful parishioners, but because of the many references to the sea and weather that are present throughout both broeder Dieleman's and Beversluis' songs, it also hints at the community's worldly existence in a precarious area. For both the people working on the land and those at sea, disaster is but a storm away.

The song opens with an awe-inspiring image of water, juxtaposed with the homely reality of everyday life. It serves as a poignant reminder that the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away:

all the water of the world
 every sea and ocean
 flows here before us along the land
 on which our houses stand (1-4)¹⁴⁷

Beside the incomprehensible amounts of water that the singer describes, the people's homes sit in humility awaiting the actions of a mercurial God and the inevitable return of the tempestuous sea. The notion that all of existence is in God's hands, and therefore precarious, is relevant to the Reformed church of the Netherlands: Calvin argued that God kept the world

¹⁴⁵ moeder van di polderland

¹⁴⁶ bid voor ons die zondaars zien / bewaar ons voor het kwaad / o, Maria zurg da geen / van ons ier verloren gaat.

¹⁴⁷ al het water van de wereld / elke zee en oceaen / stroomt ier voor ons langs het land / waarop onze uzen staan

in order and that “Without God’s providence the earth would fall away” (Conradie 214). In the fragile environment of low-lying coastal areas, the precariousness that sits at the heart of this conviction is apparent every day. Ter Borg argues that this is why Reformed Christianity remains popular in this area: it is “A religion in which people are not judged in the sacrament of confession, according to oblique guidelines from a far and dry country, but directly, on their actual functioning in the reality of the polder. This religion suits the Dutch so well that they have started to identify Calvinism with the mentality of the polder” (47)¹⁴⁸.

Broeder Dieleman affirms this connection between religious experience and landscape and also asserts the significance of Biblical stories to his lyrics, and by extension, the society to which he belongs: “The Bible ... is about shepherds and farmers and fishermen, they are all very earthly affairs” (“Interview” 3:41-3:51)¹⁴⁹. Like many people in Zeeland, the communities of the Bible relied on working on land and water for their subsistence, and Biblical narratives thus have much to contribute to contemporary society in their engagement with these topics. Environmental historian Donald Worster confirms this, explaining that “religion has deep ecological, functional, and material connections” (349) as it was initially constructed as a framework to help people to survive in the physical environment (349). This conviction that Biblical stories are pertinent to contemporary relations with land and sea has a long history in the Netherlands. Schama contends that, after they gained independence from Catholic Spain, the protestant Dutch developed a moral and religious geography in which they saw themselves as New Israel and particularly blessed, and different stories, including those of the books of Exodus and Esther, came to represent their own situation (*Embarrassment* 102, 104). The relations with the water that surrounds the country have an

¹⁴⁸ Een godsdienst waar de mensen niet beoordeeld worden in het sacrament van de biecht, volgens ondoorzichtige richtlijnen vanuit een ver en droog land, maar rechtstreeks, op hun feitelijke functioneren in de realiteit van de polder. Deze religie past zo goed bij de Nederlanders dat ze calvinisme en poldermentaliteit zijn gaan identificeren.

¹⁴⁹ En de Bijbel ... gaat ook over schaapherders en landbouwers en vissers, dus da’s ook allemaal ook heel aardse bezigheden.

important role in this as they saw “survival against the flood [as] itself a token of divine ordination” (*Embarrassment* 35). “OLV van de polder” shows that even today, the sea plays an important role in religious experiences.

In Zeeland, water remains an ever present threat: even the strongest dyke can break if the water level rises too high and the winds blow too fiercely. In the face of this looming disaster, the prayer that is “OLV van de polder” pleadingly addresses the Virgin, asking her to keep the singer, his family and his community safe:

appease the storm

keep the waves in check

make that we live in peace here

and the children never more afraid

let us live in peace here

keep us from the flood

bless also my very dearest

who is so beautiful and good (11-18)¹⁵⁰

Although the singer pleads with much conviction for quiet seas, he knows full well his prayer cannot be answered eternally: sooner or later, the storms will return, and in an era of rising sea levels, they will do so with increasing danger of destruction. The tentative nature of his requests is further reinforced by the singer’s characterisation of his beloved, which shows him vulnerable especially as, again, he is fully aware that the flood, once it strikes, will mind neither the lover’s beauty nor goodness.

¹⁵⁰ maant de sturm tot stilte / oud de golven in bedwang / zurg da we ier in vrede leven / en de kinders nooit mee bang / laat ons ier in vrede leven / bewaar ons voo de stormvloed / zegen oek mn allerliefste / die zo mooi is en zo goed

In the final lines of the song, broeder Dieleman, together with a group of other singers (whose voice I render in roman type) and a female voice (whose voice I represent in italic type), show differing approaches in their communication with the saint.

do not leave us alone

pray for us

do not leave us alone

regard us

do not leave us alone

have mercy on us

do not leave us alone

*love us (27-34, my italics)*¹⁵¹

The voice of the group repeatedly utters an informal but heartfelt, urgent plea. The female solo voice, on the other hand, sings formulaic liturgical phrases from prayers, observing a more formal distance, until the last line, when she, too, asks for a human understanding and connection, and abandons the religious register in favour of a plea for simple love. While the competing voices both turn to a higher power to come to terms with the sea that may turn against them any day, they struggle to strike the right tone in their communication, balancing between propriety and emotion. In this way, the song shows the emotional impact of living in dignity in a precarious environment.

In the song “*Zilverspa*” (Silver Fir), religion provides comfort in a precarious region and helps the singer understand the world, but it also allows him to discern meaning in an otherwise mundane existence. Similar to ‘t Hart, broeder Dieleman uses landscapes to connect personal experiences and environments with biblical stories and landscapes,

¹⁵¹ laat ons nie alleen / bid voor ons / laat ons nie alleen / zie ons aan / laat ons nie alleen / heb gena / laat ons nie alleen / heb ons lief

connections that establishes a sense of continuity between his existence and that of biblical characters. “Zilverspa” is about the death of the singer’s mother (*Uut de bron* 26), and he uses this event to bring the Biblical landscape into his home. The song sees the mother’s departure to the other world as a very literal journey; one that she takes over land towards the sea, and from there, onwards to the horizon. As the journey progresses, the singer watches “all the birds of the sea / fly with you slowly” (9-10)¹⁵², and the nearby river Scheldt “now becomes the River Jordan” (12)¹⁵³, the river in which Jesus was baptized and which the Israelites crossed to reach the Promised land. Unlike ‘t Hart, who compared Biblical and contemporary landscapes to enhance the sense of destruction of the environment, Dieleman uses the transformation of the rivers to provide a message of redemption. Now, with the River Jordan so close, the singer can say “it is only seven kilometres / to the promised land” (25-26)¹⁵⁴.

When the funeral procession arrives at the sea, the reflection of the light on the water becomes a path that the dead follows to the other side, and angels appear, singing:

at the end of the road
 we halt on the beach
 there is a path of light on the water
 along which the ship must go
 who can ever understand
 what you see in the distance
 though I do hear a thousand angels
 they sing you a song (48-55)¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² alle vogels van de zee / vliegen langzaam met je mee

¹⁵³ de Schelde wordt nu de Jordaan

¹⁵⁴ het is maar zeven kilometer / naar het beloofde land

¹⁵⁵ aan het einde van de weg / op het strand blijven we staan / er is een pad van licht op t water / waarlangs dat schip moet gaan / en wie kan er ooit snappen / wat jie in de verte ziet / wel hoor ik duzend engelen / ze zingen je een lied

The distinction between Biblical narratives and everyday life is blurred here, as a meteorological phenomenon, the sun shining on the water, is given metaphysical relevance, and angels enter the scene. In the face of death, these connections between the contemporary and Biblical world give meaning to life:

and I see that you disappear
 where the first light is still shining
 all signs ever seen
 gain worth now maybe (60-63)¹⁵⁶

This process of finding meaning in the alignment of two worlds works in two ways. On the one hand, seeing individual events, such as a mother's death in the context of a larger narrative that has shaped cultures, such as Christian traditions, allows them to be connected to the experiences of large numbers of people across space and time, who have all lost loved ones and found ways to mourn them and see their lives as meaningful. Conversely, life experiences may make the stories found in the Bible more relatable, relevant and therefore more meaningful. Broeder Dieleman's songs not only observe, but imagine and create narratives about life in a specific environment in a profound way. Understanding not only the aesthetic, but the cultural and religious significance of landscapes may help us grasp the implications of landscape change, which are similarly far-reaching regardless of whether they unfold in a positive or a negative sense.

Tradition and Modernity

Several of broeder Dieleman's songs see a traditional community, one of agrarian culture, religion and conservatism, converging with the contemporary world of modernisation, industrialisation and progress. They explore what this meeting means for the community by

¹⁵⁶ en ik zie dat je verdwient / waar het eerste licht nog schient / en alle tekens ooit gezien / kriegen waarde nu misschien

engaging both with the clash that occurs when the latter world uproots the former, and with imaginations of a future far beyond the time in which industrialisation becomes established in the local environment. The songs explore the emotions and cultural and religious contexts in which the contemporary changes and imaginations of the future are framed. While the songs mourn the loss of traditional ways of life, they also imagine how change, if it is inevitable, can be a force of creativity and beauty. In this way, they can provide insights into the ways we can imagine life in the Anthropocene, and suggest hope can exist even in a damaged world.

The song “Lovenpolder Boerengat,” from *Uut de bron*, is set in the hamlet of *Boerengat* in the *Lovenpolder*. This location’s name is highly evocative and hints at agrarian identity, remoteness, deep religiosity and land reclamation. Yet, while it was once a quiet agrarian place, today, most of *Boerengat*’s residences have been demolished to make way for a Dow Chemical plant. “Lovenpolder Boerengat” is a song of mourning, and it presents the changes that transform both the landscape and the community as something scary and demonic. To explore these transformations, the song uses myth and religion, particularly local stories of activities of the devil, who comes to personify the new factory.

Acoustically, the song is bare; it starts with a white noise, soon accompanied by a humming sound that is meditative but also slightly disconcerting. Broeder Dieleman’s voice then sings over this sound acapella, invoking an atmosphere that suits the lyrics, which are delivered in a contemplative tone but are highly unsettling. “Lovenpolder Boerengat” opens with two verses that describe the loss of nature and traditional ways of life in oblique terms. They are phrased as simple questions that are repeated thrice at the opening of the verse, only interrupted by some circumstantial information that urges the addressee to recollect past events:

who shot the buzzards down

who shot the buzzards down

‘twas on a Sunday when the weather was fine

who shot the buzzards down (1-4)¹⁵⁷

The sudden loss of local wildlife that is implied here represents the large scale interventions that transformed the landscape of *Boerengat* from an agrarian society into an industrial area. The fact that this event is said to have taken place on the day of rest makes it doubly sinful and contributes to the sense of horror that marks it, while the fine weather reinforces the sense of unfairness: it was completely unexpected.

The format of this verse is repeated throughout the verses of the song. The next verse directly references local religious mythology:

who has ridden our horse

who has ridden our horse

on a dark night not long ago

who has ridden our horse (5-8)¹⁵⁸

In a note to this song, Dieleman mentions that in many regions in the Netherlands, horses that were sweaty and shaking in the morning were assumed to have been ridden by the devil at night (*Uut de bron* 90). The song, however, suggests that what has upset the horses has not been a literal nightly ride with Satan, but rather an encounter with another entity that is the personification of evil. By following an explanation of horse-riding myths with a mention of the arrival of Dow Chemical in *Boerengat*, the liner notes suggest that Satan is a symbol for industrialisation and the Dow Chemical plant that destroyed the village. (Dieleman *Uut de bron* 90).

¹⁵⁷ wie schoot er de buuzerds neer / wie schoot er de buuzerds neer / t was op een zondag mee schoon weer / wie schoot er de buuzerds neer

¹⁵⁸ wie n et r op ons perd gerejen / wie n et r op ons perd gerejen / een donkere nacht nie lang gelejen / wien et er op ons perd gerejen

In the third verse, the factory and the way it devastated the village and its inhabitants are more explicitly alluded to:

plastic hearts from the assembly line

plastic hearts from the assembly line

set the corpse straw on fire

plastic hearts from the assembly line (13-16)¹⁵⁹

The line “set the corpse straw on fire” references a 19th century Zealanic custom in which individuals placed bushels of straw in front of a house where a mortality had occurred (Kuipers and Swiers 233). By invoking this old tradition here, the singer does not mourn a single person’s death, but recalls a way of living in which individuals were known, respected and remembered by the community through rituals and customs. The fire that engorges these symbols of old times indicates that their time has passed, and also hints at the industrial fires burning in the plant itself, not for memory but for productivity.

The fourth verse builds on the imagery of fire, and as the singer repeats the first line, the flames grow to apocalyptic proportions:

and oh how big are the flames

oh how big are the flames

and now even the creek is dead

oh how big are the flames (17-20)¹⁶⁰

The music video makes the connection between fire and factory even clearer. It opens with images of humble houses and flowers blooming in the gardens of Boerengat. The images are peaceful and quaint, but very few people are seen. The streets are devoid of human presence except for two men working in a garden. Prominently displayed in the house window is a

¹⁵⁹ plestiek arten van de band / plestiek arten van de band / steek het liekstroo ma in brand / plastiek harten van de band

¹⁶⁰ en o wa zien de vlammen groot / o wa zien de vlammen groot / en noe is zelfs de kreeke dood / o wa zien de vlammen groot

sign that reads: “THIS RESIDENCE IS STILL INHABITED! BY KLAAS MUELLER” (sic, 3:20)¹⁶¹. The sign also provides a phone number and the warning: “ACCESS PROHIBITED” (3:20)¹⁶². The next image displays a site where buildings – presumably some of the ones shown earlier – have just been demolished. The video then cuts to a man on a bicycle – one of only six humans that appear in the video for a few seconds in the over 10-minute video. In the almost empty village, these solitary figures seem out of place and thereby reinforce the sense of abandonment that emanates from the empty streets. Over images of more deserted houses, the voices of several men can be heard discussing land purchases of Dow Chemical in a strong dialect. When they stop talking, the humming sound becomes more ominous. A wind starts blowing in the video and we hear loud clanging, buzzing and rumbling of machinery. The shots increasingly start showing faults and the video ends with an image of the plant in the dark, flares flaming. The deserted streets and demolished houses mourn the loss of the community, while the factory’s fires, here made visual, and the disturbing sounds indicate that Dow Chemical’s arrival in the village bodes only evil.

Another of broeder Dieleman’s songs, “Land van verandering” (“Land of Change”) speaks of these changes in the landscape and community in less oblique terms and introduces the possibility that, while they may be a source of sadness, there is some comfort to be found in the beauty of the landscape in itself. The song, which was released with an accompanying video, was made for a documentary about Zeeland and also references the flames of Dow Chemical in the *Lovenpolder* (19). Speaking about social and environmental change and heavy industry, the song addresses the changing ways of life in the late 20th and early 21st century and the contrasts between the stability of tradition and the fast-paced increasing

¹⁶¹ DEZE WONING WORDT NOG STEEDS BEWOOND! DOOR KLAAS MUELLER

¹⁶² VERBOODEN TOEGANG

mechanisation and globalisation of the contemporary world. The old ways are sung with a sense of longing and melancholy:

we once lived with all types of weather
 sometimes too wet sometimes far too dry
 we were happy and we complained
 food rose from the land (5-8)¹⁶³

There was a feeling of duty and stability to this life, which made it comforting. Life had been, if not the same, then at least similar, for decades or perhaps centuries, creating a sense of justification through its permanence.

going to sleep when it was dark
 putting yourself to bed
 and getting up in the morning
 as a sign of eternity (13-16)¹⁶⁴

Now, the rhythm of that life is gone, and so are its certainties. Today, fruit and vegetables are no longer exclusively grown locally, but around the world or in greenhouses, meaning that strawberries and spinach are available year round. In the song's lamentation of the idea that there is no longer a yearly cycle, it echoes John Keats's lamentation of science's "unweav[ing the] rainbow" (2:237):

but now the seasons
 have been demystified
 we sit and we wait
 for the things that are to come (9-12)¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ we leefden ooit mee elk soort weer / soms te nat soms vee te droog / we waren blieje en we klaagden / eten kwam uut land omhoog

¹⁶⁴ slapen gaan as t donker wier / je n eigen in bed geleid / en wee opstaan mee de morgen / as teken van de eeuwigheid

¹⁶⁵ maa noe zien de seizoenen / van mystiek ontdaan / we zitten en we wachten / op de diengen die kommen gaan

One of the things to come are “torches in the *Lovenpolder* / the light that brought us wealth” (19-20)¹⁶⁶, but otherwise, there are more leavings than comings:

the horses have left a long time ago
 the children study in the country
 soon the cries of the gulls will die
 in the winter at the lonely beach (25-28)¹⁶⁷

Still, the song is not wholly sad. Towards the end of the video that accompanies it, the developing tourist industry is shown. The tourist industry hardly connects with the desires and needs of the local people and instead it brings many new problems to these regions. It does not bring back resources such as banks, supermarkets and public transport that increasingly disappear, and it consumes ever more land which then becomes unavailable to the community (Remie n.pag.). However, in the video, a visit to the area is shown to bring genuine joy to the tourists. A family drives up to a holiday resort, and the children are given pink balloons by a mascot and a resort staff member as they utter a joyful “We’re here!”¹⁶⁸ and wave their balloons from the car windows (5:04-5:17), showing that although some may regret the developments in coastal towns in Zeeland, they bring happiness to others.

The singer, too, is able to see some beauty in the situation. Even if society changes and its characteristic features transform, in fact, even if humans were to cease existing altogether, the landscape would still be as beautiful as it always has been:

but over our land of change
 sun and moon still wander
 and the most beautiful skies

¹⁶⁶ de fakkels in de Lovenpolder / t licht dat ons de welvaart brocht

¹⁶⁷ de perden bin allang vertrokken / de kinders studeren in t land / streks versterft gekrijs der meeuwen / swinters weer aan t eenzaam strand

¹⁶⁸ We zijn er!

long after we cease to exist (29-32)¹⁶⁹

There is beauty even in the face of detrimental landscape change, notwithstanding industrialisation disrupting the lives of the inhabitants, and the ghastly flames of Dow Chemical bursting through the night sky.

However, much like the cormorants, blackbirds, teasel and hogweed from “Aalscholvers,” the skies are not only impressive because of their aesthetic qualities, but also because of the cultural framework that informs the singer’s appreciation of them. The skies over the Netherlands that the singer praises have been famous since the 17th century, when Jacob van Ruisdael was the first to rise to fame with his landscape paintings with elaborate cloud constellations floating above them. Much like the landscape in broeder Dieleman’s songs, the skies’ fame is also highly dependent on cultural framing and construction. Physically, they are the result of a combination of natural factors, including the temperate climate, proximity to the sea and flat, low-lying land, but their fame is derived from the paintings in which they were recorded, and, indeed, improved (Lange n.pag.)¹⁷⁰.

A similar sense of accepting the passing of time, change and indeed loss arises from the poem “Kleinpolder,” in which a landscape devoid of human presence is imagined in a more direct and elaborate way. “Kleinpolder” was published alongside the CD of *Kleinpolderplein*, the music inspired by the interchange discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The poem and some images of reed are printed on two pieces of white paper that are stapled together and fit inside the CD sleeve. The CD contains 15 minutes of instrumental music and comes in a sleeve of handmade paper, with a unique photograph glued on the front. The photograph on my copy shows a reflection of a flyover in the water under the interchange. This image, framed by the edges of the photograph and showing a reflection of

¹⁶⁹ maa over ons land van verandering / trekken nog altied zon en maan / en de allermooiste luchten / tot nog ver na ons bestaan

¹⁷⁰ An anecdote tells how his friend remarked to 19th century painter Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch that the sky looked particularly lovely that day, to which Weissenbruch replied: “Ah, I paint it lovelier” (Lange n.pag.).

an object rather than the object itself, references the fact that, in broeder Dieleman's work, landscapes are always seen in the context of social and cultural relations, and are always conceived anew and imbued with meaning by the person observing them.

“*Kleinpolder*” is a short poem about reeds, the plants that grow most abundantly at *Kleinpolderplein*. As a pioneer species, reeds are one of the first plants to grow in barren environments (*100 Species* n.pag.). The poem shows an ecological awareness by recognising this fact, but it also connects the reeds to religious imagery, referring to the creation of the first day, although no God is not mentioned:

when the sun rose
 over the endless water
 and created the very first day
 the reeds shot up (1-4)¹⁷¹

In terms of intertextuality, the reed is highly significant: in the book of Exodus, Moses is put in a basket made of papyrus, which, like reed, is a sedge. When he is an adult, he leads his people away from Egypt through a body of water identified as “the Sea of Reeds” as they begin their journey to the Promised Land. Here, the reed is thus a symbol of hope and a chance at a new and better life; a suggestion that the poem also carries. The biblical connotations of reed, however, are very diverse. Jesus was given a reed in lieu of a sceptre when he was mocked by his guards in captivity, making it a symbol of humiliation as well as of salvation. The Hebrew word that is typically translated as *reed* is also the word for a measuring stick and is the origin of our word *canon* (Bishop Moore 1114). Even in this imagined total absence of human habitation and meaning-making processes, the plant that dominates the scene implies a complex and conflicting set of cultural connotations that the contemporary reader may pick up on. In its connection to the canon, the standard list of

¹⁷¹ toen de zon opkwam / over het eindeloze water / en zo de allereerste dag schiep / schoot het riet omhoog

cultural works that a societies supposedly agree are most valuable, the reed in fact symbolises valuation.

The third stanza connects the physical features of the reed, which is “swaying along on land and water” (16)¹⁷² with people, adding an emotive aspect to the plant:

and reed always sways along
 even from the rhythm of the people
 she takes in all the songs
 provides shelter to farmers and singers
 to everything that sounds (17-21)¹⁷³

This stanza references another feature of reeds, one that is not intrinsic to the plant itself, but that humans have developed: the physical properties of reed make it useful for constructing roofs and houses and making musical instruments, although one may wonder about the practicalities regarding a singer equipped with a flute. The fact that the speaker claims that the reed “takes in all the songs” means that the poem’s speaker not only acknowledges the connotations and meanings that people attach to the plant, but suggests that the reed actively absorbs these. Rather than having meaning passively imposed upon it, the landscape thus becomes an agent involved in the process of meaning-making and valuation, suggesting that it can continue carrying meaning even in the absence of humans.

At the end of the poem, the reed’s properties as a pioneer species are inverted: if reeds are the first plant, then they may, after a catastrophe has left a landscape bare, also be the last:

and some time, later
 when the city is ruined
 the reeds will cleanse all the waters

¹⁷² meedeinend op land en water

¹⁷³ en riet geeft altijd mee / zelfs van het ritme van de mensen / neemt ze alle liederen op / geeft onderdak aan boeren en zangers / aan alles wat klinkt

and the sun will set
 on endless plains
 of swaying rustling reeds (22-27)¹⁷⁴

In the contemporary world, visions of disaster are never far away. In this one, the reed offers a sense of hope: even after the city of Rotterdam has dissolved into ruins, the reeds will come up to clear the waters and make them new, paving the way for new life to come, while continuing to carry the history of the old. Like the ruins of the Second World War, which were rebuilt to become a modern, vibrant city, the ruins of the Anthropocene might also become the foundations for something beautiful.

Frames and Layers

Broeder Dieleman's songs emphasise their narrativity in different ways, for example by referencing many different cultural and narrative traditions and by making abstract narrative techniques, such as, frames, concrete. In the song "Adriana," for example, a window frame is an important motif. The songs thus elucidate the processes involved in our perception of the world. They also indicate that the expectations we have for the planet's future are similarly shaped by the stories we tell, and that the perspective we take on stories thus influences what we will be able to see in the future physical world. Our imagination is not only influenced by the stories we have heard from the past, but it is also determined by the narrative techniques that we use to shape it. When it comes to stories about the environment, these choices are not merely stylistic, but political. They influence the way we imagine our place in the world, and our ability to contemplate the effects of our actions. In this way, storytelling and meaning-making allow people to lead a fulfilling existence that has purpose, to conjure a sense of mystery in their daily lives and, potentially, to create hope for the future. Broeder Dieleman's

¹⁷⁴ en straks later / as de stad is vervallen / dan zal het riet alle waters schonen / en de zon zal ondergaan / over oneindige vlaktes / wiegend ruisend ried

emphasis on the narrative structure of his songs reminds us of this. His awareness of the constant mental restructuring of landscape, according to poet Dennis Gaens, emerges from the motif of the frame, that occurs throughout his oeuvre:

It starts with a window. He can immediately recall the window of his parents' house, as if he looks through it this moment. "In my songs, someone is almost always looking through a window. Windows are important to me." To Dieleman, windows are not only your view, they also provide a frame: "This symbolism of interpretation is already in this window; a frame with something in it." He used to draw everything in little squares, nowadays he takes photos that he frames. "All I want is to frame things all day." (12)¹⁷⁵

In "Adriana," a song from *Gloria*, broeder Dieleman emphasises the narrative structure that people employ when they tell stories about finding their place in life and making sense of the events that befall them. In this song, the window takes centre stage and its frame is used to include or exclude different parts of life, creating a narrative of existence that is meaningful and comforting. This is clear in the chorus in which the window presents a picture of homeliness that contrasts with the dangers of the world outside:

I have a table, a bed
a chair by the window
outside is
outside darkness (14-17)¹⁷⁶

As in many of Dieleman's songs, the scene is visually very potent. The homely furniture is clearly outlined with a window in the background that is pitch black, as the polder lacks an

¹⁷⁵ Het begint met een raam. Hij kan zich zo het raam van zijn kamer in zijn ouderlijk huis voor de geest halen, alsof hij er op dit moment doorheen kijkt. "In mijn liedjes kijkt er bijna altijd iemand uit een raam. Ramen zijn belangrijk voor me." Voor Dieleman zijn ramen niet alleen je uitzicht, maar geven ze ook een kader: "Die symboliek van het duiden zit eigenlijk al in dat raam; een kader met iets erin." Vroeger tekende hij alles binnen vierkantjes, tegenwoordig maakt hij foto's die hij inlijst. "Het liefst zou ik de hele dag dingen inlijsten."

¹⁷⁶ ik ed een tafel, een bed / een stoel bie het raam / daar buten is / butenste duusternis

abundance of street lights. The difference is remarkable; while the inside world is comfortable, the outside world is frightful, and the window is the interlocutor that connects the two.

The contrast between light and darkness permeates the song and has religious connotations as well. The song opens with a contemplation on doubt regarding religious conversion: “I have never seen the light” (1)¹⁷⁷, but the metaphorical light in this statement is immediately juxtaposed with natural light, in the mundane action of closing the curtains at dusk: “but now the evening is here / and I close the curtains” (2-3)¹⁷⁸. Shutting the world out, keeping the remaining evening light outside and the artificial lamplight inside, and inhibiting the view from the outside in and the inside out, is an act with narrative implications. It indicates a decision regarding the things deemed worthy to consider, and the people invited to observe, and therefore influences the kind of story that is told.

Later on, the song addresses two specific types of stories that are relevant to the singer and emphasise the importance of narration to his existence. Both of these stories are religious in nature; the first is personal, and the second is scriptural. The personal story involves the conversion experience of a relative, a story passed down in the family (*Uut de bron* 64) that becomes the context for another display contrasting light and darkness, inside and outside:

should it ever happen
 that You stand here before me
 and like my uncle Jakob
 dress me in new robes
 but I have to go to sleep now
 it is already much to late

¹⁷⁷ ik e nog nooit het licht gezien

¹⁷⁸ maa noe is hier de n avond / en sluit ik de gordienen

and I have never seen the light (18-24)¹⁷⁹

This experience with the divine and the concurring sartorial transformation is reminiscent of the Transfiguration of Jesus, in which his clothes became a brilliant white, the prophets Moses and Elijah appeared and God acknowledged Jesus as his son. Unsurprisingly, although the singer has still failed to see the light himself, he is deeply impressed by the profound religious experience of his relative. Nevertheless, as in the first verse, he ultimately faces the practical reality of everyday existence by proceeding with his bedtime ritual. His going to bed will involve another act of exclusion: the shutting of his eyes is the next step from the shutting of the curtains. The outside world is shut out again, this time on a smaller scale, and all the singer can see now is his mind's eye.

In the following verse, the more explicitly scriptural narrative is introduced. The singer meditates on his expectations for the future, which are very much informed by the religious narratives that have shaped his worldview. This verse addresses the comfort that religion provides and the reassurance that comes from God's grace in an otherwise mundane existence:

the Lord is my shepherd

I sing and softly whisper

I shall not want

I go through the night singing

where, like the morning

Jesus waits for me

and I have never seen the light (28-35)¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ mocht het ooit nog eens gebeuren / dad U ier voor me staat / en net as ome Jakob / kleedt in een nieuw gewaad / maa ik moe noe gaan slapen / het is a vee te laat / en ik e nog nooit het licht gezien

¹⁸⁰ de Heere is mijn herder / zieng ik en fluuster zacht / mie za niks ontbreken / ik ga zingend deu de nacht / waa net as de morgen / Jezus op me wacht / en ik e nog nooit het licht gezien

The first and third lines of this verse come from Psalm 23, and they communicate both a desire and an expectation that is based on the cultural framework in which the singer exists. He may not have seen the light, or have had an experience similar to that of his relative, but the stories of the tradition of which he is part still play a major role in shaping his life and making it meaningful. Even in absence of any practical impact, their emotional significance is very important.

Despite this reliance on framing and narrative tradition, unexpected events do occur, and when they do, the surprise inherent in them makes them all the more poignant. In the final verse, this is made evident as the sky colours a spectacular red. When the light of the moon appears, it shines not because of an opening that lets it in, but in spite of an obscuring measure that is intended to keep it out.

I have never
 seen the light
 but yesterday
 the sky was
 on fire behind us
 the moonlight
 through the cracks
 shines silver on the wall (40-47)¹⁸¹

Here, two scenes of striking beauty emerge unexpectedly, and the fact that the second one surprises the singer by breaking through and disrupting the established frame makes it all the more arresting. The sun and moonlight become meaningful and poignant through their inclusion in the song and in the framework of the contrast between light and darkness,

¹⁸¹ ik e nog nooit / het licht gezien / maa gister stond / de lucht ier / achter ost in brand / het maanlicht / deu de kieren / schient zilver op de wand

inclusion and exclusion, that the singer has established throughout the song. This framework also allows the light to be seen as an approximation of the hope of one day seeing the light in a spiritual sense; they are a promise of redemption. The scene exemplifies theologian John F. Haught's notion that the relationship between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms, and the foreshadowing of the latter in the former, is central to the Christian faith because of Jesus and his followers' belief in the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. He writes that their faith

was steeped in expectation of the coming of the reign of God. Reality is saturated with promise, and the authentic life of faith is one of looking to the fulfillment of God's promise, based on a complete trust that God is a promise keeper. True faith scans the horizon for signs of promise's fulfillment. For this faith present reality, including the world of nature in all of its ambiguity, is pregnant with hints of future fulfillment.

(278)

While the play of light in the sky and on the wall may be beautiful in itself, it is the recognition of this promise in its beauty that makes it meaningful.

Through the spiritual connotations of this verse, the political significance of imaginations of our planet's future gains a religious dimension. Since God became material in the incarnation of Jesus, "we must acknowledge that in every place there is the immanence of the sacred; in every act of interpreting place we have the opportunity to build the sacredness of place by seeking its manifestation as builders" (Clingerman 51). The conviction that the spiritual has actively engaged with the material world, and has in fact, in the singer's narration, done so as recently as his relative's conversion, has significant implications for the ways in which we engage with the places we inhabit. It is in this recognition that politics emerge: "'Building Heaven' becomes the practice of recognizing the sacredness which exists in our secular places; it is the labor of seeking the truly necessary completion of the task of thinking in embodied, spatial ways" (Clingerman 51). Thus, the religious framework from

which the world is approached and understood has very real implications for the ways in which the environment and its development can be imagined and managed.

So far, broeder Dieleman's songs have all been very much rooted in a modern, western and Christian context. However, the song "Nehalennia," from *Uut de bron*, has a much broader cultural scope and focuses on the centrality of narration and religion to human lives in different cultures. In this song, the tradition of storytelling is traced back to times far before the Reformation or even the advent of Christianity in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta. Nehalennia was a Germanic or Celtic goddess of merchants and seafarers whose cult was observed in the region that is now Zeeland in the second and third centuries AD. In 1970, a fisherman from Colijnsplaat found parts of an altar dedicated to her in the Eastern Scheldt, and since then, archaeologists have found many more in the region. The song explores the motif of a miraculous object carried to the people by the sea; however, instead of an archaeological object, or a religious relic, the findings are not tangible but mythical:

look here what the wind brought

from far over the sea

look here what the wind brought

it is the morning star

messenger of light

searched for so long

look here what the wind brought (1-7)¹⁸²

A sense of wonder is apparent because of the repeated urging of the singer to observe and consider the object that has just appeared. The apparition, however, is fictional at most. The reflection of the heavenly body may be visible in the waves, but, rather than an object, the

¹⁸² kiek noe wat de wind meebrocht / van over zee zo ver / kiek noe wat de wind meebrocht / t is de morgenster / voorbode van het licht / zo lang gezocht / kiek noe wat de wind meebrocht

singer has found an image that symbolises the miracles of the sea. In fact, even the concept of the morning star itself is a construction: it is not a star, but the planet Venus. Through the ages, the morning star has had many connotations in different cultures: In the New Testament, for example, the morning star is linked both to Jesus and also to Lucifer (Ellenburg 918). The find on the beach, then, is hardly a beachcomber's treasure. It is an awareness of narrative complexity and, as the morning star is the *messenger of light*, also a sign of hope.

The song's namesake also indicates the importance of narration. Our knowledge of Nehalennia comes from archaeologists, and the study of archaeology is heavily dependent on narrative construction. Archaeologist Cornelius Holtorf notes that, in its first century, the study of archaeology "relied much on intuition, a certain amount of speculation, and relatively simple epistemological assumptions" (101). Although nowadays, the discipline's standards are more rigorous, it is still very much marked by the construction of stories. As Holtorf affirms, this is in fact its goal:

the usefulness of archaeology does not necessarily lie in the accuracy of the insights it provides about the past. In recent years the potential of archaeology to contribute to physical, mental, and social rehabilitation of human beings suffering from various conditions has begun to be explored. Other uses of archaeology draw on the potential to tell stories (in a variety of genres) that are significant for the inspiration they provide, and occasionally for their moral. (101)

The study of archaeology is, like anthropology and literature, a way of engaging with the fundamental questions that have occupied humanity since time immemorial: "Archaeological stories engage with the big questions of what it means to be human; what human life was like in other periods; who we are, where we are coming from, and where we are heading as members of specific cultural groups" (Holtorf 101). By embedding the song in this discussion

through its name, broeder Dieleman makes “Nehalennia” part of this long narrative and makes it political.

Archaeological knowledge of the goddess Nehalennia is very sparse. Archaeologists P. Stuart and J.E. Bogaers are unable to identify the goddess’s origins and the time frame of her cult, nor are they certain she was always a patroness of seafarers (43). Their description of Nehalennia’s cult is full of hedging language: “[i]t is hardly plausible” (43)¹⁸³, “[p]robably” (43)¹⁸⁴, “[i]t is highly improbable” (44)¹⁸⁵, “[o]ne could suspect” (44)¹⁸⁶, “as far as we know today” (44)¹⁸⁷, “[o]ne may infer” (46)¹⁸⁸, “one is inclined to think” (46)¹⁸⁹. As for the geography of the area surrounding the now-lost temples to Nehalennia, they have nothing more than suspicions: “In the vicinity of the temple, towns must have appeared, in which people lived, who had some kind of relation to the sanctuaries” (44)¹⁹⁰. In the absence of clear facts, our ideas of Nehalennia are highly dependent on the imagination.

The second and third verses remain in the realm of the imagination; they celebrate the arrival of a cultural motif and an abstract concept, namely the “tree of life” (19)¹⁹¹ and “eternity” (11)¹⁹². In including the concept of infinite time and a motif that is used across different cultures, the song emphasises that narrating, dreaming and hoping, and thereby shaping both individual lives and environments, are universal human activities. The evidence for this comes to us from archaeological objects from the sea and from our minds in the form of literature and music. It also comes from the landscape, which has been influenced and shaped by humans since time immemorial. Nehalennia was the goddess worshipped by

¹⁸³ [e]s ist ... kaum anzunehmen

¹⁸⁴ [w]ahrscheinlich

¹⁸⁵ [e]s ist höchst unwahrscheinlich

¹⁸⁶ [m]an könnte vermuten

¹⁸⁷ soweit wir heutzutage wissen

¹⁸⁸ [e]s ist anzunehmen

¹⁸⁹ man [ist] geneigt ... zu denken

¹⁹⁰ In der Nähe der Tempel müssen Ortschaften entstanden sein, in denen Menschen wohnten, die in irgendwelcher Beziehung zu den Heiligtümern standen.

¹⁹¹ levensboom

¹⁹² eeuwigheid

people who sailed to distant lands, and the tree of life and the morning star have been significant to different people who lived in different societies in different periods of time. The power of the imagination, in this song, is not the product of one specific society, one that is Christian, reformed, speaks a dialect of the Dutch language and lives in small communities; rather, the song reminds the listener that the imagination is a global phenomenon that all humans share. The connection that the song establishes with humans from different places and different times gives it a sense of hope. Regardless of the circumstances and in spite of the passing of time and the many changes it brings, the possibility to see “the tree of life” (19)¹⁹³ “at night in a dream” (17)¹⁹⁴ is always there.

In this chapter, we have seen the imagination work in different contexts, time periods and societies, from merchants of the classical era to contemporary rural Zeeland and future park visitors in Rotterdam. The imagination brings meaning to our existence, has the ability to connect people from different backgrounds and eras and influences the way we perceive the landscapes we inhabit and the way in which we understand our place in them. All these factors are at work when we face the task of imagining and shaping our future in a fast-changing world. In the age of the Anthropocene, humanity finds itself at a crossroads: understanding where the road it has taken so far has led us, we must decide how we act on this knowledge and in which direction we want to proceed. We can try to go straight and act, as much as possible, in the ways we always have, or we can turn, change our ways, and move in the direction of a more sustainable and liveable future.

As we ponder this question at the crossroads, we may hear in the music of broeder Dieleman an exploration of it, and see in *Kleinpolderplein* a symbol of it, as well as a miniature model from which we can explore the question of what direction, and indeed what

¹⁹³ de levensboom

¹⁹⁴ snachts in een droom

road, we decide to take from here. From both music and place we can learn how vital the imagination is in making that decision. In broeder Dieleman's songs, and in the literature of the other writers whose work is discussed in this thesis, the environment is not merely a place in which we happen to find ourselves that serves as a background to our human lives. It is a landscape that has a profound imaginative, cultural and religious significance to the people that inhabit it. This chapter has explored these themes and shown that, even in the most surprising of places and the direst of circumstances, people may imagine futures of profound beauty. In an age in which our future often looks grim, the persistence of imaginations of hope may create an alternative to this bleakness. We may yet imagine a future in which the beauty of landscapes is recognised and celebrated in ever more diverse ways, in which urban, industrial and natural worlds coexist, and in which we recreate our contemporary infrastructure to become recreational, sustainable and beautiful. In this way, art can show us how to mourn environmental degradation, and teach us, in spite of our grief, never to give up hope.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analysed a number of very different approaches to the subject of landscape in the literary and non-literary textual imagination. Starting with the mourning of lost landscapes in *De Jacobs ladder*, I moved to a more abstract questioning of the relation of humans to place in the poetry of O'Brien and Didsbury. *Alleen met de goden* has a more loco-specific setting, to use Barry's term (49), with a more hopeful view of the future. "East Coast Memories," although it focuses on a specific site, also makes more abstract observations on the ways we connect with place, and how meaningful these connections are. In the songs of broeder Dieleman, many of these aspects come together to create a narrative that has space for mourning, relating and hope, and the belief that the stories and imaginations we create and narrate are meaningful and may strengthen us on our path into the future.

In discussing the stories presented by these authors, this thesis itself is also a narration, which is shaped by different stylistic and narrative choices. I want to discuss three of these here: first the use of the pronoun *we*, then the thematic division between Dutch and English texts used in this thesis, and finally the difference between what I have called literary and non-literary texts. Throughout this thesis, I have occasionally used the word *we* to create a sense of community and a sense of urgency. As environmental crises are mounting and governments and other centres of power still often fail to present measures that match the urgency of the problem, thinking about the future can be paralysing and even isolating. In speaking of *us* and *we*, I have invited you to read and analyse the texts with me, hoping to make you feel involved, and to communicate that your imagination does not stand alone, but is part of a network that involves many people. In this way, I hope not only to comfort, but also to motivate. By using the word *we*, I have tried to show that the insights from the analysed texts are relevant to *you* and many people like you across the globe, and that the imaginations of the authors discussed in this thesis are not the only ones that are important; yours is too, and so are the imaginations of people everywhere.

The second narrative issue is the division between the way Dutch and English authors engage with the landscape. Whereas the Dutch authors speak more concretely of physical places and the ways they value them and imagine their past, present and future, the English ones often take a step back and consider more abstractly how the connection of person with place is established. It is impossible to say why this divide exists: we can never know why a different kind of literature was not written. While the difference in approaches may tell us something about different cultural and regional interests, it may also emerge from the different genres of the chosen texts: novels and songs in the Dutch context and poems in the English one. It is also linked to my selection of texts, and it might have been different had I chosen different texts¹⁹⁵. Partly, the division is one I have imposed, and it may be contested. I have used it because it allows me to emphasise one way in which the two bodies of texts complement each other. The English texts show the intangibility, complexity and deep-rootedness of our relation to place, thus establishing a foundation for the role of the imagination in political discussion. The Dutch texts, on the other hand, show the political implications of these connections and the way the imagination may shape how we remember our past, regard our present and build our future.

The third important issue that has recurred throughout this thesis is the distinction between literary and non-literary texts; however, this is also, to a certain extent, arbitrary and imposed. Through the ages, different societies in different times have regarded different texts as literary. Letters and works of history are amongst the finest works of what we call literature, yet I have grouped the letters and histories used as primary texts in this thesis as non-literary. While music is often considered an art form separate from literature, we know that some of the earliest works of literature that survive today, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,

¹⁹⁵ Alan Plater's television play *Land of Green Ginger*, which is set in a very recognisable Hull, could have been included; despite its mysterious title, Land of Green Ginger is a real place, too. The poetry of Lévi Weemoedt could have been a less loco-specific Dutch counterpart.

were originally sung, and this thesis includes songs in its definition of literature. Indeed, one definition of *literature* in the Oxford English Dictionary is “Printed matter of any kind; *esp.* leaflets, brochures, etc., used to advertise products or provide information and advice” (5), which would include every primary text used in this thesis. One of the central arguments of this thesis is that these text are all highly imaginative and politically relevant; therefore, while dividing them into categories, I have shown how similar their concerns often are. For reasons of clarity and conciseness, I have used a distinction between the different texts. I have designated as non-literary those texts that have a specific and fairly narrow primary focus, which is usually informative or argumentative. While much may be said about their use of language, their style and the different layers of meaning of their content, their main aim is to inform their intended audiences of a specific history; they lay out a plan or argue for or against a goal. By literary texts, on the other hand, I mean texts that are primarily motivated by an interest in a particular story, development or scene, that explores its complexity without conveying a single identifiable message, but that invites a contemplation of a diverse range of ideas.

By contrasting these different texts, I have shown that the many and diverse literary imaginations of landscape, different as they are in terms of perspective and interest, all have one thing in common: they are highly imaginative and very much politically relevant. Each non-literary text is an imagination of one person who exists in a society that includes many others who have also imagined the same landscape, but with different agendas: to present it to a public, to show its particular aspects of note, to defend decisions made about it in the past that influence its appearance today, and to argue for new interventions that will shape its future. All of these texts are imaginations, and through reading them, we can see that interventions in the landscape are based on, and reflections of, imaginations. Literary imaginations, as this thesis has shown, are highly politically relevant as they respond to

decision makers' earlier transformations of landscapes in the past and contemplate their significance in the present; moreover, the imagination provides the foundation for the decision-making process and will shape the future. Literature, too, may point forward as it imagines what the future may hold, and the actions and prospects we may yet lose or accomplish in times to come.

We can imagine the future in a wide variety of different ways. In the age of the Anthropocene, it often takes a more or less apocalyptic shape. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt encourage readers to think of future landscapes as haunted by the ghosts of species and relationships of the past (G2). In this thesis, I have discussed a number of such ghosts. In Didsbury's poetry, the landscape continuously eludes the reader's grasp and becomes a spectre, and ghosts are also depicted in the figures of Aeolus and Cowper's three hares. Other texts presented ghosts of different kinds: in *De Jacobs ladder*, Adriaan's grandfather mourns the ghosts of the bitterns on Rozenburg and the trees on De Beer, and "*Land van verandering*" and "*Kleinpolder*" present future landscapes haunted by the loss of the society that exists there today. Tsing, Swanson, Gan and Bubandt see ghosts as a mnemonic device that forces us to remember landscapes lost:

As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the "shifting baseline syndrome." Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality. Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails forgetting many others. Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others. Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces. (G6)

The ghosts in this thesis are all effective in different ways in reminding us of the landscape's past losses in terms of nature, sometimes mourning it explicitly and sometimes obliquely hinting at unsettling environmental circumstances. Together, these ghosts show the complexity of the cultural implications of environmental degradation. However, many texts take a different approach to imagining their respective environments by focusing on the possibilities that new landscapes offer.

Aaron in *Alleen met de goden*, who has no memory of the nature in the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta as Adriaan witnessed it, is able to dream of new futures because he is released from grief about the landscape. His cultural memory is instead one of post-war reconstruction, which allows him to dream of a future that is brighter than his present. O'Brien's "Fireweed," while set in a rather bleak landscape, focuses its attention on the regeneration of nature rather than on what was lost in the scene it presents. The text by McMillan and even the ghosts of broeder Dieleman, similarly, may encourage a sense of hope emanating from the deep and meaningful relations between the individuals and landscapes that they present. In these texts, the imagination of landscape suggests a "dream of a better life" (Bloch 156), an "unfinished forward dream" (Bloch 157) and we can grasp its "power of anticipation" (Bloch 157). Even the poems by O'Brien and Didsbury that do not engage with physical landscapes, as well as *De Jacobsladder*, which mostly engages with the landscape in terms of mourning, offer hope in thinking about the future as they explore different possibilities for connections and relationships. In this thesis, then, I have shown that remembering is only part of the process of environmental thinking and imagining. While it is necessary and important to grieve what is lost, forgetting means more than loss alone: it also enables creativity.

Contrasting these literary sentiments with the non-literary texts that reflect the relation between imagination and landscape management, we may conclude that the sense of hope is

highly politically productive. The literary-non-literary constellation shows literature's "[u]topian function" (Bloch 158), which "tears the concerns of human culture away from such an idle bed of mere contemplation: it thus opens up, on truly attained summits, the ideologically unobstructed view of the content of human hope" (Bloch 158). Between the literary and non-literary sphere, a space opens up that shows the political possibilities of the imagination, indicating that it shapes the difference between what was in the past and what is today, and that between what is today and what might yet be in the future. In allowing for mourning but also emphasising the possibilities of connections, relations and creativity, this space may encourage hope.

By focusing on highly urbanised and industrialised regions, I have argued for seeing these as regions at the forefront of engaging with the difficult questions the Anthropocene presents. The Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary are both places where human influence on the landscape has been far-reaching for centuries, and both have seen their environments dramatically changed with the modernisation and globalisation of the Great Acceleration. Therefore, they are important sources of information regarding the relationships between humans and landscape in a time in which they become ever more enmeshed. Focusing on these specific regions, this thesis reflects David Harvey's argument that

The created environments of an urbanizing world, their qualities and particular difficulties, their proneness to new configurations for the development and transmission of new diseases, their extraordinarily difficult problems of sustainability (in whatever sense) have to move to the center of our attention relative to much of the contemporary preoccupation with wilderness, peripheral peasant movements, preservation of scenic landscapes, and the like. (186)

Reading imaginations of the environment in close relation with texts about nature and its management, I agree with Harvey that “human activity cannot be viewed as external to ecosystemic projects” (186). Indeed, rather than “argument[s] about protection or management of the natural environment” (Gottlieb qtd in D. Harvey 186), I have focussed on “a discussion of social movements in response to the urban and industrial forces of the past hundred years” (Gottlieb qtd in D. Harvey 186). Seeing the urban and industrialised world, the most emblematic of human-made landscapes, as the centre of debates around ecology and environment, might, I hope, inspire courage in addressing environmental problems, and hope that if our influence on the planet is as great as we have, in the past decades, found it to be, we can also exert that influence for the better.

In this way, this thesis has shown one way in which the imagination may guide a path towards what critics call a “good Anthropocene” (Malhi 95). This concept suggests that “optimism is needed to be able to engage successfully with the societal and political change needed in the Anthropocene” (Malhi 95). While there are many different ways in which such optimism may be shaped, I have attempted to give one suggestion. In this approach, I have shown a belief that “the thesis of ‘mastery over nature’ (laying aside its gendered overtones for the moment) does not necessarily entail destructiveness; it can just as easily lead to loving, caring, and nurturing practices. It was ... precisely the intent of the esthetic tradition to assert ‘mastery without tyranny’ with respect to the natural world” (189). If this seems acceptable in theory but unimaginable in practice – indeed, I have provided strong evidence neither in favour of nor against – I think it is important that we nevertheless believe it to be true, for the alternative will get us nowhere. The vast scale of the Anthropocene requires radical action and, as Williams writes: “To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing” (118). To me, the Anthropocene is an opportunity for us to

recognise that hope is necessary, and showing that it is indeed possible is a large part of what I have tried to achieve in this thesis.

The local scale on which this thesis focuses is closely linked with its tone. Both Harvey and Mike Hulme, for slightly different reasons, argue that those seeking to address the environmental problems that impact the planet should focus more on the local level. Harvey suggests that the global scale might make issues seem “far-fetched and improbable” (195) on the one hand, while on the other they might encourage actions on a global scale that will be executed with a mind to “corporate capital’s concerns to rationalize planetary management in their own interests” (195) rather than to serve local communities and the people that they encompass. Hulme argues that presenting climate change as a problem of a scale beyond our grasp has led to its perception as a “political log-jam of gigantic proportions, one that is not only insoluble, but one that is perhaps beyond our comprehension” (qtd in Garrard 470). He suggests that instead, the debate should centre more on “[t]he meaning and significance of climate change” (Garrard 470), thereby “democrati[sing] ecology” (470).

In focusing on five small-scale places in two regions, I have shown environmental concerns on a more comprehensible scale, and within this context, the inclusion of non-literary texts has been informative. Through the political dimension of the imagination that they have allowed me to explore, I have shown that memories and imaginations of small-scale places and communities have great influence on the ways they are engaged with and managed. In several cases, they have shaped or are about to create green landscapes that may inspire hope for the future. For example, the *Lickebaertse Bos* and the *Volksbos* were planted, respectively partly and entirely, by activist citizens, and *Kleinpolderplein*’s possible future development into a park also largely depends on citizens’ engagement.

Another important argument of this thesis is that the landscapes of the future must be ones in which communities of people can forge sustainable relations with non-human beings, their environment, and their fellow humans, too. In focusing on the environmental imaginaries of the people most closely involved with them, I have hinted at the connection between environmental and social issues. Not every chapter has explicitly engaged with socio-economic issues; they were most directly addressed in the chapters on *Alleen met de goden* and O'Brien's and Didsbury's poetry. However, they are of vital importance to the problems at hand. It is essential that, as we venture into the Anthropocene, social issues are not neglected, and this thesis is also an argument to this effect. As far as the protagonists of the novels and speakers of the poems discussed have had identifiable social backgrounds, these have been lower to middle class, and their stories remind us that class has an important position in environmental debate. Indeed, Harvey argues:

[A]ll ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa. Ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than socio-political arguments are ecologically neutral. Looking more closely at the way ecology and politics interrelate, then becomes imperative if we are to get a better handle on how to approach environmental/ecological questions. (182)

In showing the narratives and ecological imaginations of different people from different social backgrounds, I have shown that their experiences are all highly significant in understanding the full cultural impact of environmental change on a region and in conceptualising political measures to mitigate them.

It is in this context that this thesis shows evidence for hope most concretely. In the past years and decades, both the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary have consistently been viewed as ugly, somewhat dilapidated regions that were left behind after

the post-war boom passed and the United Kingdom lost the Cod Wars. Many of the texts discussed in this thesis, particularly those of O'Brien, Didsbury and Boogers, demonstrate this feeling. However, in spite of this dominant narrative, the texts discussed in this thesis overwhelmingly show that beauty and meaning are discoverable in these landscapes, even easily so, if only we are willing to look. They have shown creative attitudes towards relating to and shaping landscapes, and creating beauty, even natural beauty, in places where it seemed to be lost. In this way, they present a novel and refreshing view of nature. Ingo Kowarik identifies two distinctive approaches to nature: a retrospective one that studies the original states of landscapes, whatever those may have been, and a prospective one that "focuses instead on a natural capacity for process" (Storm 119). Anna Storm argues that this second approach to nature is especially productive in urban and industrial contexts (119). If we think about the progress of nature and its potential for the future, the urban and industrial contexts of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary may become symbols of natural beauty. They remind us of what we stand to lose, but they simultaneously show us both what we have to look forward to and what we need to work for. Although the imagination of natural beauty in two specific river mouths may be small, especially in comparison to the looming threat of all the Anthropocene entails, it is one that may nevertheless inspire us and give us hope.

Summary in English

Introduction

The introduction provides an overview of the environmental histories of the Netherlands and Great Britain and shows that both countries' landscapes have been heavily influenced by human activity for centuries, if not millennia. It also shows that their literary histories have responded to this environmental history quite differently: while nature is all but absent in Dutch literature, it is a very common theme in English literature. Following this, the key critical terms *naturecultures* and *Anthropocene*, and the important methodologies that have informed this thesis, such as the close reading of literary and non-literary texts are addressed. This approach showcases both the imagination of politics and the politics of the literary imagination. Next, this section introduces the two specific regions that this thesis focuses on, the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary, and explores the geological, historical and social connections between the two river mouths. A study of the imaginations of place in the two regions, which are examples of places that have witnessed extremely dramatic changes in their landscapes and societies, provides an insight into the creative ways humans think about nature in their changing world. Reading literature is a particularly fruitful approach to this question. Literature is a medium that is not only highly eloquent, but it also has the power to engage with the complex questions around environmental degradation and climate change even when it is not outspokenly environmentalist. Lastly, the introduction explains the contributions this thesis makes to the academic fields of Dutch and English literature, ecocriticism and environmental humanities. It argues for the inclusion of the particular texts addressed in this thesis and introduces the main chapters, and finishes by suggesting that reading the literary and non-literary imaginations of landscape in the chosen texts about the relevant regions may inform a landscape aesthetic for the Anthropocene.

Chapter 1: “The Tide Had Turned”: Remembering and Reimagining the River

This chapter considers texts about the imagination of nature and its maintenance, destruction and development in the *Nieuwe Waterweg*, a branch of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta, in the past, present and future. By examining these imaginations over time, the chapter shows the ideas that lie at the basis of different interventions in landscape management in this region and therefore the imaginative nature of politics. The chapter then reveals the political nature of the imagination by examining the implications of imaginations of landscape in this region in Maarten ‘t Hart’s 1986 novel *De Jacobs ladder* (Jacob’s Ladder). The novel shows the importance of landscape – and therefore ideas about its management – to the people who inhabit it. Nature is imagined as a vital force with a particular agency, its subsequent loss is mourned, and both the beauty and loss of nature are intimately connected with the protagonist’s own personhood and the religious experiences of his community. Besides reflecting on old ideas about nature, the novel also demonstrates new ways of thinking about nature in its hopeful ending and its emphasis on materiality. The chapter shows how these may inspire hope in thinking about nature in the Anthropocene.

Chapter 2: “This Kingdom of Metaphor”: Imagination and Materialism in the Construction of Place

This chapter examines texts about Sunk Island, an area east of Hull on the Humber Estuary, and the poetry of Sean O’Brien from 1983’s *The Indoor Park*, 2007’s *The Drowned Book* and 2011’s *November*, and Peter Didsbury from 1986’s *The Classical Farm* and 1994’s *That Old-Time Religion*, including a poem about Sunk Island, to discuss the different ways poetry can engage with, or distance itself from, the particulars of places. It focuses on the political implications of the engagement or disengagement with place in the context of environmental degradation. After discussing the non-literary texts about Sunk Island, which negotiate the

site's position as a material and an imagined place, it reflects on the way this region is presented in O'Brien's "Sunk Island," which shows a similar tension. It reveals how, in O'Brien's poetry, the material particulars of sites can inspire hope even in unlikely places, and, conversely, that a sense of placelessness can be highly alienating. Furthermore, it reveals that engaging with place is a political choice since it implies a responsibility towards a site. Didsbury's poetry also shows an alienation that is implied in dematerialised spaces. Here, alienation marks both space and interpersonal relations. However, Didsbury's poetry also shows that the plane of the imagination can offer grounds for connection that are unavailable in the real world. As the physical world is increasingly under threat, this understanding of the imagination as a force that can connect subjects in spite of disruptions that problematise relations to the physical environment, may bring hope.

Chapter 3: "And What is Real?": Landscapes in the Anthropocene

This chapter explores the value of nature in an environment that is seemingly devoid of it and shows that the imagination of nature can be particularly powerful in industrialised regions. It analyses Alex Boogers' 2015 novel *Alleen met de goden* (Alone with the Gods) and texts about *Lickebaertse Bos* and *'t Hof*, two green spaces in the city of Vlaardingen that are relevant to the novel. The chapter demonstrates that even when memories of earlier, now destroyed green spaces have been lost and environmental changes are no longer mourned, people can still be inspired, comforted and awed by urban nature in new incarnations. *Alleen met de goden* also shows that the powerful and creative force of nature in urban and industrial areas is relevant and poignant not only for attitudes towards the environment, but also towards social issues such as family relations and gender. In this way, this chapter demonstrates that contemporary society and the world of the Anthropocene, in which different categories increasingly become blurred, offer new interpretations of the word *nature*

that may not only cause us to grieve what we lose, but also allow us to imagine a different and better world.

Chapter 4: “The Wind that Shapes Spurn, Shapes All of Us”: The Perennial Transformations of Spurn

This chapter focuses on the many different ways that the tidal island of Spurn on the Humber Estuary has been reflected on in different kinds of writing, in newspapers, protest signs, and management documents from the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, and in the 2011 long poem “East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation” by Ian McMillan. It interrogates the ways in which Spurn has been seen as a physically and emotionally moving site and how it has been regarded as unique and apart from but also connected to the surrounding environment. It argues that reflections on geography in McMillan’s poem create insights into the relations between memory, landscape and interpersonal relationships. The particulars of Spurn’s geography allow the speaker of the poem to reflect on the boundaries and connections that people perceive between different places, people and communities, and the poem can be read as an invitation to think about these critically. By encouraging thinking about the ways in which people come to understand and connect with their landscapes, the poem also helps us reflect on the relationships between the different groups of people who think about the management of Spurn in highly conflicting ways, and understand the connections that lie at the basis of their strong emotions.

Chapter 5: “The Things That are to Come”: Ways to a New Nature

The final chapter examines *Kleinpolderplein*, an interchange on the Rotterdam ring road. Using pieces of journalism and history, it shows the ways that *Kleinpolderplein* has been imagined as a structure that is representative of hope in both the post-war and contemporary

eras and can encourage thinking of constructing a more sustainable future in the Anthropocene. To do so, it focuses on the period when *Kleinpolderplein* was first built into the most complex and modern interchange in the Netherlands to today, as different parties plan to transform it into a city park. The chapter compares this imagination of *Kleinpolderplein*'s past and future with its representation in singer broeder Dieleman's poem "Kleinpolder," and relates these imaginations to songs from his albums *Alles is ijdelheid* (All is Vanity) from 2012, *Gloria* from 2014 and *Uut de bron* (From the Source) from 2015. Broeder Dieleman's songs show the strong connections between people, traditions, landscape and religion and the ways they are questioned when heavy industry appears in the region. This leads to an imagined landscape that is devoid of all human activity, but that, even so, is a landscape of beauty. The songs show how art allows people to narrate their lives, and find a place in a world of perpetual change. This chapter argues that in this way, the songs show the political nature of hope, which can be a choice as much as a feeling, and influences not only the way we look at the world, but the path we choose to take in it, and the roads we pave, rebuild and redesign for future beings.

Conclusion

The conclusion first discusses the stylistic and narrative choices that have shaped this thesis. To create a sense of community and urgency, the word *we* is used throughout the thesis, which involves the reader in the narrative. Within the Dutch and the English texts discussed in this thesis, a division exists between the ways the two bodies of texts imagine nature. This allows them to complement each other: while the English texts explore the foundation for the imagination's role in political discussions, the Dutch texts show its political implications. The literary and non-literary texts similarly complement each other as the non-literary texts show the imaginations that lie behind political decisions while the literary texts explore the depth

and significance of these imaginations. Following these explanations, the main conclusions of the thesis are discussed. In examining the regions of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary through literary and non-literary texts, this thesis shows that landscapes in times of environmental change are often imagined as objects of either grief or hope, places to mourn loss or imagine a better future. The regions of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt Delta and the Humber Estuary are particularly important places to explore hope because, as urban and industrial regions with long histories of human influence, they invite imaginations of sustainable rather than destructive human influence on the landscape. Furthermore, the regional approach shows environmental problems on a comprehensible scale. Rather than the paralyzing fear of a global crisis, this regional analysis shows the innovative imagination of humans and the ways in which the global crisis might be addressed on a local scale. Moreover, any discussion of the landscape or the environment must address both ecological and social issues as they are deeply entwined. Communities that are most profoundly affected by climate change are often those whose voices are not heard, and this thesis shows the significance of these communities' voices and imaginations in thinking about landscapes. Finally, the description of landscapes in these two regions suggest that even in places that have suffered comparatively significant environmental damage, beauty and hope can be found.

Summary in German

Zusammenfassung der Arbeit in deutscher Sprache

Einleitung

Die Einleitung bietet einen Überblick über die ökologische Geschichte der Niederlande und Großbritanniens. Es wird aufgezeigt, dass die Landschaften beider Länder seit Jahrhunderten – wenn nicht Jahrtausenden – entscheidend von menschlichen Aktivitäten geprägt sind.

Außerdem wird deutlich, dass die Literatur die ökologische Geschichte in sehr unterschiedlicher Art aufgegriffen hat: Während die Natur in der niederländischen Literatur so gut wie keine Rolle spielt, wird sie in der britischen Literatur sehr häufig thematisiert. Anschließend werden die zentralen Begriffe „Naturkultur“ und „Anthropozän“ sowie die wichtigsten Methoden, auf denen die vorliegende Arbeit beruht und zu denen die sorgfältige Lektüre literarischer und nicht literarischer Texte gehört, erläutert. Dieser Ansatz verdeutlicht zweierlei: die in der Politik herrschenden Vorstellungen und die politische Dimension der literarischen Vorstellung. Als nächstes werden in diesem Kapitel die zwei Regionen vorgestellt, auf die sich die vorliegende Arbeit konzentriert: das Rhein-Maas-Schelde-Delta und der Humber. Dabei werden die geologischen, historischen und gesellschaftlichen Verbindungen zwischen beiden Flussmündungen untersucht. Beide Regionen sind Beispiele für Gegenden, die einem stark ausgeprägten, einschneidenden Wandel hinsichtlich Landschaft und Gesellschaft unterworfen sind. Die Analyse von Vorstellungen des Konzepts „Ort“ in diesen beiden Regionen ermöglicht Einblicke in die kreative Art und Weise, wie die Menschen in einer sich verändernden Welt über die Natur nachdenken. Die Literaturlektüre ist für diese Fragestellung ein besonders lohnender Ansatz. Denn Literatur ist nicht nur ein sehr wortgewaltiges Medium, sondern sie ist auch in der Lage, mit den komplexen Fragen rund um die Themen Umweltschädigung und Klimawandel in Wechselwirkung zu treten, selbst wenn sie sich nicht ausdrücklich mit Umweltschutz befasst. Außerdem wird in der Einleitung der Beitrag der vorliegenden Arbeit zu den wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen

niederländische und englische Literatur, Ecocriticism (Ökokritik) sowie Environmental Humanities (Umweltgeisteswissenschaften) dargestellt. Dann wird die Berücksichtigung der in der vorliegenden Arbeit behandelten spezifischen Texte begründet und zu den Hauptkapiteln übergeleitet. Abschließend wird in der Einleitung darauf hingewiesen, dass die Lektüre der literarischen und nicht literarischen Vorstellungen von Landschaft in den ausgewählten Texten, die sich mit den betrachteten Regionen befassen, die Grundlage einer Landschaftsästhetik für das Anthropozän bereitstellen könnte.

Kapitel 1: „Die Flut hatte eingesetzt“ – der Fluss in Erinnerung und Vorstellung

In diesem Kapitel werden Texte zu Vorstellungen von Natur und zur vergangenen, gegenwärtigen und zukünftigen Instandhaltung, Zerstörung und Entwicklung der natürlichen Umwelt am Nieuwe Waterweg, einem Seitenarm des Rhein-Maas-Schelde-Deltas, besprochen. Anhand der Analyse derartiger Vorstellungen im Verlauf der Zeit werden in diesem Kapitel die Ideen aufgezeigt, die den verschiedenen Eingriffen im Rahmen der Flächennutzung in der Region zugrunde liegen – und somit auch die politischen Narrative. Dann werden die Konsequenzen von Vorstellungen der Landschaft am Nieuwe Waterweg im Roman *Die Jakobsleiter* (1986) von Maarten ‘t Hart untersucht, was den politischen Charakter der Vorstellungen hervorhebt. Der Roman stellt die Bedeutung von Landschaft – und folglich von Ideen über deren Bewirtschaftung – für die vor Ort lebenden Menschen dar. Die Natur übernimmt in der Vorstellung die Rolle einer lebensnotwendigen Kraft mit besonderer Wirkung, deren späterer Verlust betrauert wird. Schönheit und Verlust der Natur sind eng mit der Persönlichkeit der Hauptperson und mit den religiösen Erlebnissen in deren Gemeinschaft verknüpft. Neben der Reflexion über alte Gedanken zur Natur beschreibt der Roman mit seinem hoffnungsvollen Ende und seiner Betonung der Materialität auch neue

Perspektiven gegenüber der Natur. Diese werden in Kapitel 1 als Möglichkeit für eine hoffnungsvolle Sicht auf die Natur im Anthropozän herausgestellt.

Kapitel 2: „Das Königreich der Metapher“ – Fantasie und Materialismus bei der Konstruktion von Orten

In diesem Kapitel werden Texte über Sunk Island, ein Gebiet östlich von Hull im Humber, untersucht. Auch Gedichte von Sean O’Brien aus *The Indoor Park* (1983), *The Drowned Book* (2007) und *November* (2011) sowie von Peter Didsbury aus *The Classical Farm* (1986) und *That Old-Time Religion* (1994) einschließlich eines Gedichts über Sunk Island sind Teil der Analyse. Diese Werke dienen als Ausgangspunkt für die Beschäftigung mit den vielfältigen Möglichkeiten, wie die Lyrik sich mit den Besonderheiten von Orten befassen oder sich davon distanzieren kann. Der Schwerpunkt liegt auf den politischen Konsequenzen der Beschäftigung oder Nichtbeschäftigung mit Raum im Kontext von Umweltzerstörung. Nach der Analyse nicht literarischer Texte über Sunk Island, in denen die Insel als materieller und fantastischer Ort situiert wird, wendet sich die vorliegende Arbeit der Art und Weise zu, wie die Region in O’Brien’s Werk „Sunk Island“, in dem sich eine ähnliche Spannung zeigt, beschrieben wird. Hier wird deutlich, wie die materiellen Einzelheiten von Orten auch dort Hoffnung geben können, wo man es nicht erwarten würde, wohingegen ein Gefühl der Ortlosigkeit extrem entfremdend wirken kann. Außerdem wird klar, dass die Beschäftigung mit Orten eine politische Entscheidung ist, weil damit auch die Verantwortung den Orten gegenüber verbunden ist. An Didsburys Lyrik lässt sich zudem eine in dematerialisierten Räumen implizierte Entfremdung ablesen. In diesem Fall markiert die Entfremdung Raum sowie zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen. Gleichzeitig verdeutlicht Didsburys Werk aber auch, dass die Vorstellungsebene ein Fundament für Verbindung bieten kann, das in der wirklichen Welt nicht vorhanden ist. Während die materielle Welt zunehmend bedroht ist,

kann dieses Verständnis von Vorstellung als Kraft, die Subjekte verbindet, Hoffnung machen – trotz Störungen, die zu Problemen im Verhältnis zur materiellen Umwelt führen.

Kapitel 3: „Und was ist nun echt?“ – Landschaften im Anthropozän

In diesem Kapitel wird der Wert der Natur in einer davon scheinbar entleerten Umwelt untersucht. Im Ergebnis zeigt sich, dass die Vorstellung von Natur besonders in industrialisierten Gegenden sehr einflussreich sein kann. Dazu werden der Roman *Alleen met de goden* (2015) von Alex Boogers sowie Texte über De Lickebaert und 't Hof (zwei im Roman eine Rolle spielende Grünanlagen in der Stadt Vlaardingen) analysiert. Dabei zeigt sich: Selbst wenn Erinnerungen an frühere, inzwischen zerstörte Naturflächen verloren gehen und die Veränderungen an der Umwelt nicht mehr betrauert werden, lassen sich die Menschen weiterhin durch neue Inkarnationen städtischer Natur inspirieren, trösten und beeindrucken. *Alleen met de goden* macht zudem klar, dass die starke, kreative Kraft der Natur in städtischen und industriellen Gebieten nicht nur für die Haltung gegenüber der Umwelt, sondern auch gegenüber sozialen Themen wie Familienbeziehungen und Gender wichtig und entscheidend ist. Auf diese Weise verdeutlicht Kapitel 3, dass die zeitgenössische Gesellschaft und die Welt des Anthropozäns, in der unterschiedliche Kategorien immer stärker verwischen, neue Interpretationen des Worts „Natur“ bieten, die nicht nur das Betrauern unseres Verlusts, sondern auch die Vorstellung einer anderen, besseren Welt ermöglichen.

Kapitel 4: „Der Wind prägt Spurn genau wie uns alle“ – Spurn im beständigen Wandel

Der Schwerpunkt dieses Kapitels liegt auf den vielen unterschiedlichen Sichtweisen auf die Gezeiteninsel Spurn im Estuär Humber, die auf vielfältige Weise schriftliche Erwähnung findet: in der Zeitung, auf Demonstrationsplakaten, in Verwaltungsdokumenten des

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust und im Langgedicht „East Coast Memories: A Spurn Meditation“ (2011) von Ian McMillan. In Kapitel 4 wird untersucht, auf welche Art und Weise Spurn als gegenständlich und emotional berührender Ort, als einzigartig und als getrennt von der Umgebung, aber doch damit verbunden betrachtet wird. Es wird argumentiert, dass die in McMillans Gedicht enthaltenen Überlegungen zur Geografie Einblicke in das Verhältnis zwischen Erinnerung, Landschaft und zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen gewähren. Die geografischen Details von Spurn ermöglichen dem Leser die Reflexion über Grenzen und Verbindungen, die Menschen zwischen verschiedenen Orten, Personen und Gemeinschaften wahrnehmen. Das Gedicht kann als Einladung verstanden werden, sich kritisch mit diesen auseinanderzusetzen. Doch das Gedicht ermutigt nicht nur zum Nachdenken darüber, wie die Menschen ihre Landschaften verstehen und sich mit diesen verbinden. Es hilft auch, die Verbindungen zwischen den verschiedenen Menschengruppen, die höchst gegensätzliche Ansichten zum Umgang mit Spurn haben, zu reflektieren und die Gemeinsamkeiten zu erkennen, die das Fundament ihrer starken Emotionen bilden.

Kapitel 5: „Die Dinge, die da kommen werden“ – Wege zu einer neuen Natur

Im letzten Kapitel wird Kreuz Kleinpolderplein auf dem Rotterdamer Autobahnring untersucht. Anhand von journalistischen und geschichtlichen Texten wird dargestellt, wie Kleinpolderplein als Struktur gedacht wird, die in der Nachkriegszeit und in der Gegenwart für Hoffnung steht und zum Nachdenken über den Aufbau einer nachhaltigeren Zukunft im Anthropozän ermutigen kann. Dabei liegt der Schwerpunkt auf dem Zeitraum ab der Errichtung von Kleinpolderplein als komplexestes, modernstes Autobahnkreuz der Niederlande bis heute, wo verschiedene Akteure es zu einem städtischen Park umwandeln wollen. Diese Vorstellung der Vergangenheit und Zukunft von Kleinpolderplein wird mit dem Gedicht „Kleinpolder“ des Sängers Broeder Dieleman verglichen und dann mit Liedern

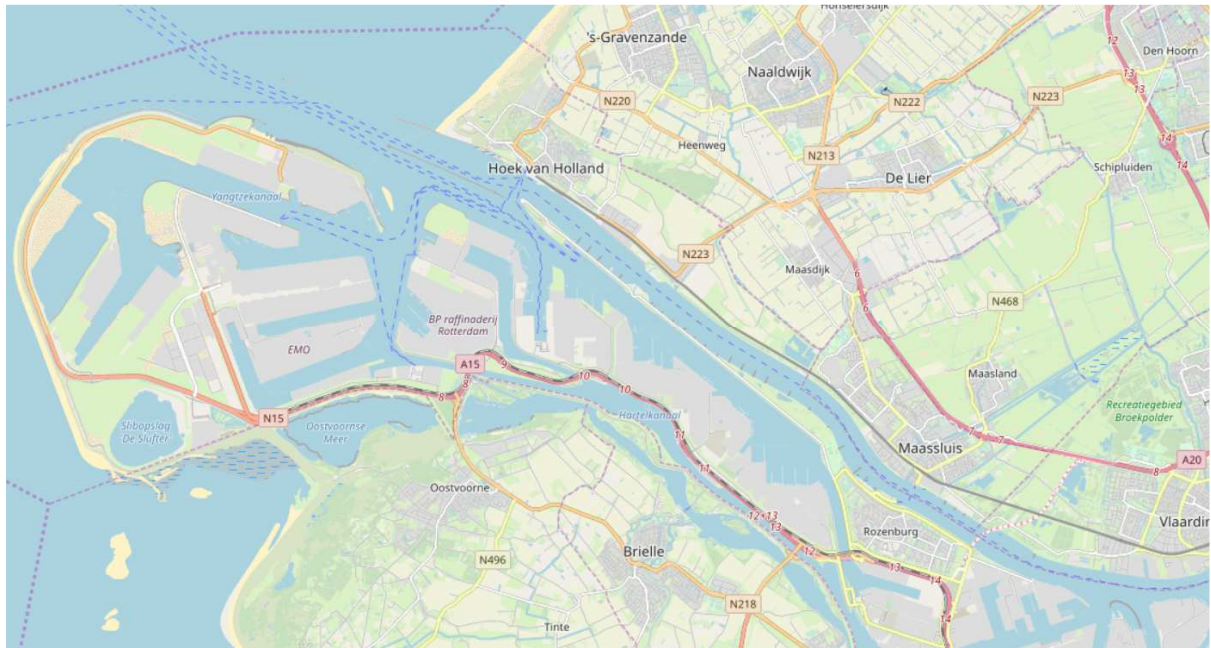
von dessen Alben *Alles is ijdelheid* (2012), *Gloria* (2014) und *Uut de bron* (2015) in Relation gesetzt. Die Lieder von Broeder Dieleman verdeutlichen die starken Verbindungen zwischen Menschen, Traditionen, Landschaft und Religion sowie die Art und Weise, wie diese Verbindungen in Frage gestellt werden, wenn die Schwerindustrie in einer Region Fuß fasst. Dadurch entsteht in der Vorstellung eine Landschaft, die jeglicher menschlichen Aktivität entbehrt, aber dennoch eine Landschaft voller Schönheit ist. Die Lieder zeigen, wie die Kunst es den Menschen ermöglicht, ihr Leben zu erzählen und in einer Welt des kontinuierlichen Wandels einen Platz zu finden. In diesem Kapitel wird argumentiert, dass die Lieder den politischen Charakter von Hoffnung hervorheben, die sowohl Entscheidung als auch Gefühl sein kann, und nicht nur unseren Blick auf die Welt, sondern auch den von uns gewählten Weg in der Welt sowie die Zukunft, die wir für die kommenden Generationen vorbereiten, wiederaufbauen und neu gestalten, beeinflussen.

Schlussfolgerung

In der Schlussfolgerung werden zunächst die stilistischen und narrativen Entscheidungen erörtert, die die vorliegende Arbeit prägen. Im Sinne eines Gefühls von Zusammengehörigkeit und Dringlichkeit wird in der gesamten Arbeit das Pronomen „wir“ verwendet, das die Leserschaft einbezieht. Es besteht ein Unterschied bei der Art und Weise, wie die im Rahmen der Arbeit analysierten niederländischen Texte einerseits und englischen Texte andererseits die Natur denken. Dies ermöglicht eine gegenseitige Ergänzung: Während die englischen Texte das Fundament der Rolle von Vorstellung in politischen Debatten untersuchen, verdeutlichen die niederländischen Texte die politischen Auswirkungen. In ähnlicher Weise ergänzen einander auch die literarischen und nicht literarischen Texte: Die nicht literarischen Texte weisen auf die den politischen Entscheidungen zugrunde liegenden Vorstellungen hin, während die literarischen Texte die Tiefe und Bedeutung dieser

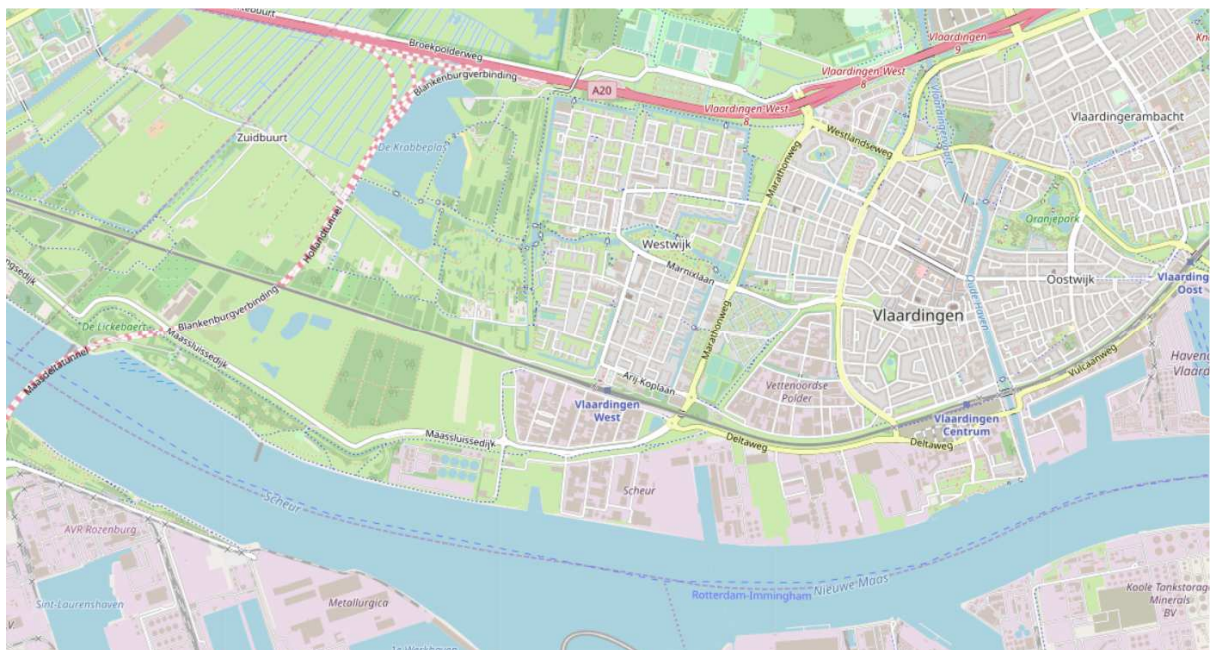
Vorstellungen analysieren. Nach diesen Erklärungen werden die wichtigsten Schlussfolgerungen der Arbeit erörtert. Anhand der Betrachtung zweier Regionen – des Rhein-Maas-Schelde-Deltas und des Humber – im Spiegel von literarischen und nicht literarischen Texten zeigt die vorliegende Arbeit, dass Landschaften in Zeiten ökologischen Wandels oft als Objekte von Trauer oder Hoffnung sowie als Orte zum Betrauern von Verlusten oder zum Erdenken einer besseren Zukunft wahrgenommen werden. Am Rhein-Maas-Schelde-Delta und am Humber lässt sich besonders gut die Hoffnung erkunden, denn als städtische, industrielle Regionen mit langjährigem menschlichem Einfluss auf die Landschaft laden sie zu einer Vorstellung menschlichen Handelns ein, die mehr der Nachhaltigkeit als der Zerstörung zuneigt. Gleichzeitig ermöglicht der regionale Ansatz eine Darstellung ökologischer Probleme in verständlichem Maßstab. Statt der lähmenden Angst vor einer weltweiten Krise führt die regionale Analyse die innovative menschliche Vorstellung vor Augen und weist auf Möglichkeiten hin, mit denen der weltweiten Krise in lokalem Maßstab begegnet werden kann. Außerdem muss jede Debatte über Landschaft oder Umwelt sowohl ökologische als auch gesellschaftliche Fragen einbeziehen, denn beide Themen sind eng miteinander verwoben. Die am stärksten vom Klimawandel betroffenen Gesellschaften sind meist jene, deren Stimmen nicht gehört werden. Die vorliegende Arbeit weist auf die Bedeutung dieser Stimmen und Vorstellungen für die Sicht auf Landschaften hin. Schließlich legt die Beschreibung der Landschaften in diesen beiden Regionen nahe, dass auch an Orten, die einer vergleichsweise starken Umweltzerstörung unterworfen sind, Schönheit und Hoffnung zu finden sind.

Maps



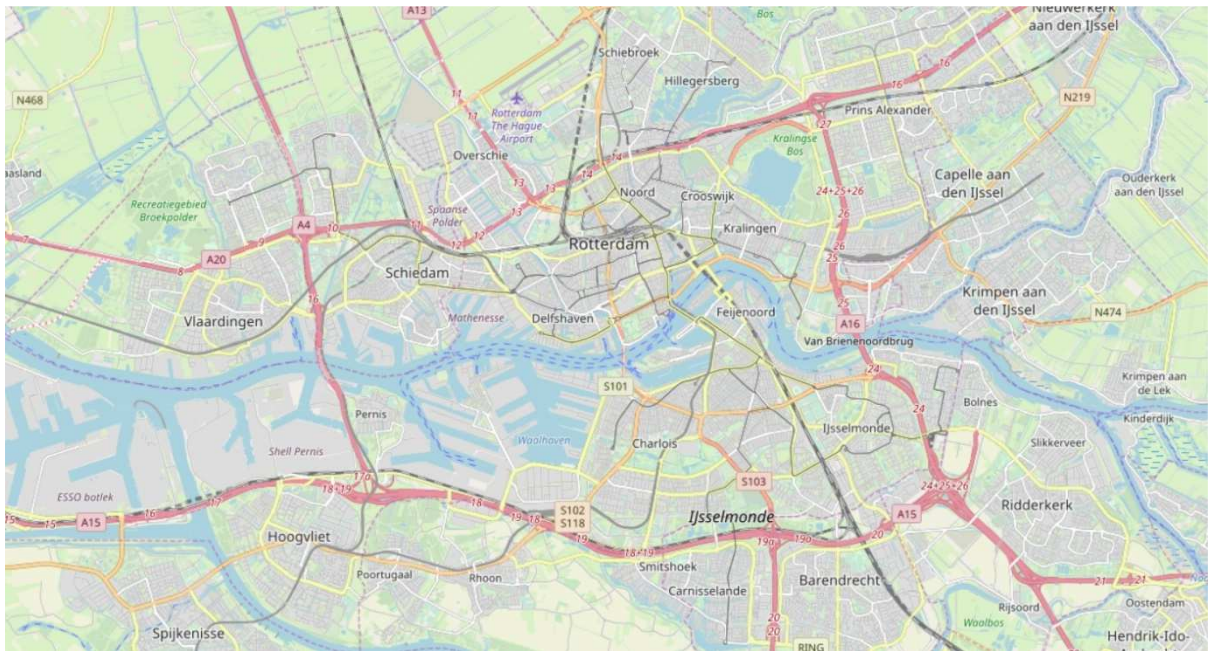
Nieuwe Waterweg with Maassluis, Rozenburg and Europoort, the former location of De Beer

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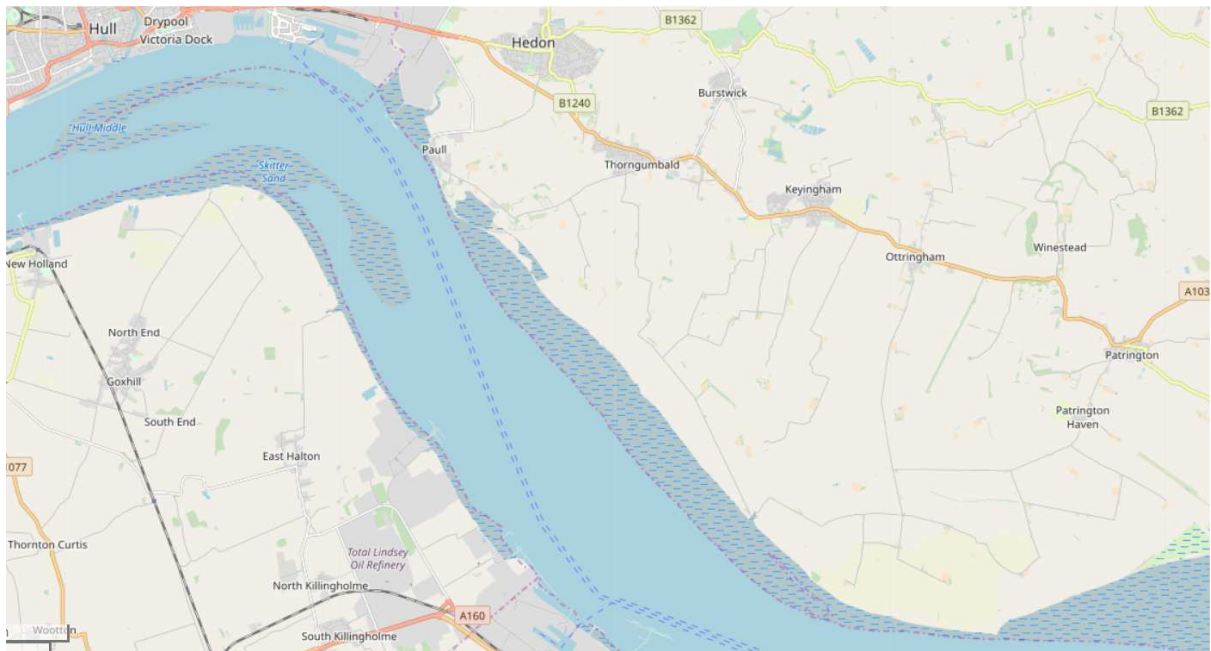


Vlaardingen with the Nieuwe Waterwerweg, the Lickebaert Forest and Oranjepark (with 't

Hof west) © OpenStreetMap contributors

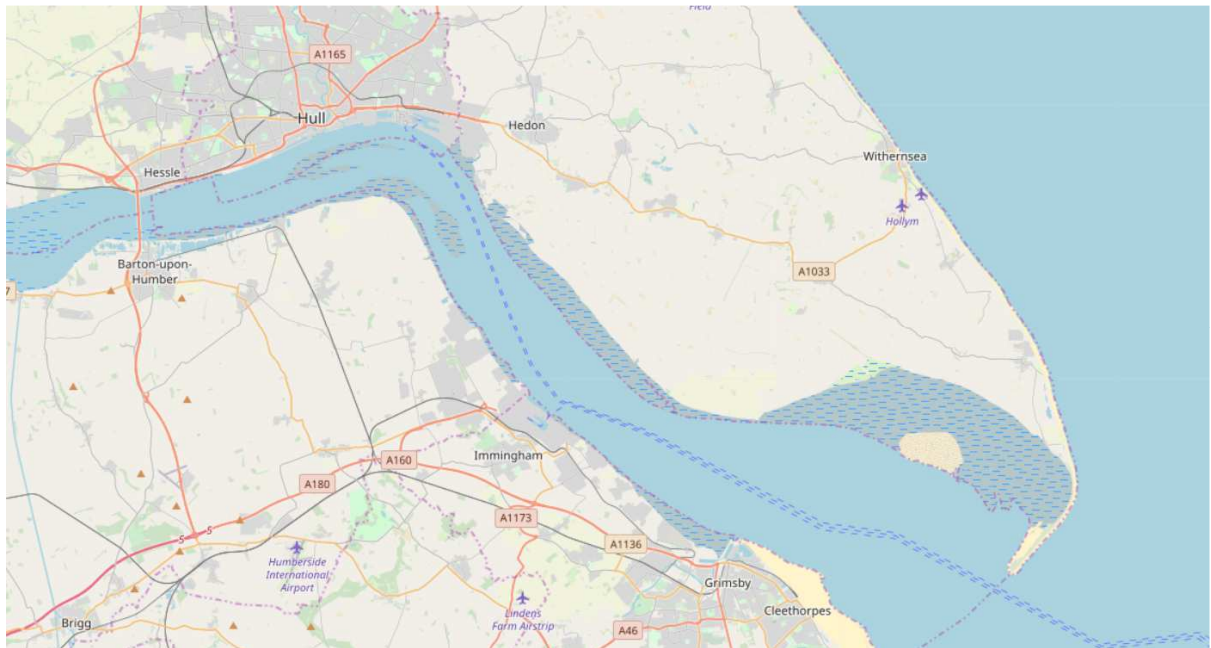


Rotterdam ring road with Kleinpolderplein at exit 13 © OpenStreetMap contributors



Humber Estuary with Sunk Island at four-way intersection south of Ottringham ©

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Humber Estuary with Spurn Point and Cleethorpes © OpenStreetMap contributors

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