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Longing for Light and Love. The Experience of Arctic in Heleen van der Laan's *Waar blijft het licht*

In February 1993, the Uitgeverij Luitingh Sijtoff publishing house in Amsterdam published the travel book¹ *Waar blijft het licht. Een overwintering op Spitsbergen*, written by the young Dutchwoman, Heleen van der Laan.² She wrote a work of creative nonfiction,³ an exceptional and very personal piece of writing, which gained considerable public attention.⁴ It belongs to a series of highly

¹ For a definition of travel writings and the travel terminology see: Jan Borm: "Defining Travel. On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology." In: Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs (Eds.): *Perspectives on Travel Writing*. Aldershot 2004, pp.13-26.

² Heleen van der Laan: *Waar blijft het licht. Een overwintering op Spitsbergen*. Amsterdam 1993, 4th edition: *Waar blijft het licht*. Nu verfilmd als *When the Light Comes*. Amsterdam 1997. When referring to the author I will use her full name "Heleen van der Laan" or only the last name "Van der Laan". When referring to the protagonist and respective narrator of the book I will use the name "Heleen", as she is called in the book.

³ Lee Gutkind, founding editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, answers the question "What is Creative Nonfiction?" by stating that this term "refers simply to the use of literary craft in presenting nonfiction—that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid manner. To put it another way, creative nonfiction writers do not make things up; they make ideas and information that already exist more interesting and, often, more accessible." The editorial can be accessed through the online page of the *Creative Nonfiction* at: <http://www.creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatisconf.htm>.

⁴ The story of Heleen van der Laan was so successful that in 1997 it was made into the film *When the Light Comes*. The film, directed by Stijn Coninx and released in 1998, was an international co-production

popular nonfiction texts that were written by women and described their exceptional lives or life phases. The success of these texts and of travel writing in general lies in the fact that their claim to be true leads the reader to “an environment entirely outside their experience, which is yet authentic and even sometimes extant.”¹ In addition, “it frequently chronicles real lives at their most extreme – the most daring or dangerous actions and the most extraordinary incidents in a setting of rich unfamiliarity.”²

Additionally, the female authors of the autobiographic narratives use their gender very often to “authorize [their] claim to writing.”³ As Sidonie Smith further discovers in her book *A poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, “women who do not challenge those gender ideologies and the boundaries they place around women’s proper life script, textual inscription, and speaking voice do not write autobiography.”⁴ Similarly, Sara Mills shows that the only critics interested in discussing women’s travel writing have been “women critics, who have usually situated themselves, at least implicitly, within a feminist framework.”⁵ This often results in analyzing these writings as “textual artifacts, [or] rather as simple autobiographies.”⁶ To read Heleen van der Laan’s writing from the perspective of a female author is in some way essential, since challenging and transgressing both “gender ideologies” and “boundaries” is important here and in other women’s travel texts. This text, however, must first and foremost be understood as a piece of creative nonfiction and interpreted as such.

between Belgium, Germany, Netherlands and Norway, which has won several important film prizes.

¹ Mark Cocker: *Loneliness and Time. The Story of British Travel Writing. New York 1993. (Original edition: London 1992), p.72.*

² *Ibid.*, p.72.

³ Sidonie Smith: *A poetics of Women’s Autobiography. Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation. Bloomington 1987, p.44.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁵ Sara Mills: *Discourses of Difference. An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism. London 1991, p.4.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4 and especially pp.28-31.

Based mostly on letters to her parents and to her boyfriend Rudolf, Heleen van der Laan recounts her experiences during her yearlong sojourn in Austfjordneset, Spitsbergen.¹ In 1988, as a 19-year-old girl she spent the summer before going to college working as cookmaid on the passenger ship *Plancius*, which sailed through the Arctic waters. When the ship briefly docked at Austfjordneset, she spontaneously decided to spend one year in the solitude of the Arctic world, to work and to live with the seal hunter and trapper, Nils. First, the reticent yet obtrusive Nils regards her only as a sex object and companion, so he doesn't feel compelled to show his true self. Sharing their lives with each other ultimately causes a shift in Heleen's and Nils' minds and leads to a romantic relationship. The realistic description of the life circumstances during the long Arctic night as well as Van der Laan's intimate thoughts on life, future, sexuality, and relationships make this book something far more than a travelogue: It discusses in a literary manner the way Europeans cope with the Arctic world as well as the general gender question and the gendering of place.

The archetypal character of the Arctic experience, usually linked to male colonial exploration in which conquest, danger, and extreme hardship are the focus, is missing in this account. As Ingrid Urberg recently showed,

Svalbard has long been associated with adventure and challenge, a place in which hunters, miners, scientists, explorers, and researchers needed to be physically and mentally tough to survive. [...] Svalbard was also, until recently, an extremely male-dominated society in which [...] the primary occupations and activities – exploration, hunting and mining – were carried out predominantly by men, though, throughout the twentieth century women overwintered and spent extended periods of time on Svalbard as well.²

¹ *Van der Laan does not refer to the whole island group Svalbard, but only to the largest island Spitsbergen.*

² *Ingrid Urberg: „'Svalbard's Daughters'. Personal Accounts by Svalbard's Female Pioneers". In: Nordlit 22 (2007), pp.167-191, here pp.168-169.*

Urberg recently examined seven personal narratives of twentieth century women who “dared not only to enter but also to spend an extended period of time on Svalbard and record their impressions of and experiences in this ‘no woman’s land.’”¹ She discovered that these authors, similar to Van der Laan, “find their Svalbard experiences to be transforming and liberating.”² Van der Laan overwintered in Spitsbergen in order to discover both the world around and inside her, to face her fears and reach her limits: “I couldn’t escape. Neither from myself nor from my problems,”³ she said to the German newspaper *Ostthüringer Zeitung* about her Arctic experience after her book was published in Germany.⁴ Instead, she made an effort to discover the Arctic nature she felt soon as a part of and to harmonize with this nature, rather than conquer and subdue it:

How will it be to live here, so far away from everything and everyone, alone – or maybe as one – with the nature? [...] If one wanted to discover the world, one should not fear the unknown or hesitate to abandon the familiar surrounding for unknown outcome.⁵

Hoe zou het zijn om hier te wonen, zo ver van alles en iedereen verwijderd, alleen – of misschien wel één – met de natuur? [...] Als je de wereld wilt ontdekken moet je niet bang zijn voor het onbekende, niet aarzelen een vertrouwde omgeving op te geven voor iets waarvan je niet weet wat het je brengen zal.⁶

¹ *Ibid.*, p.183. Heleen van der Laan’s book has not been examined in this article.

² *Ibid.*, p.183.

³ Ziepke, Roland: „Eine Existenz ohne Illusionen.“ In: *Ostthüringer Zeitung* 05.08.2008.

⁴ *The German edition* *Wo bleibt das Licht? Eine junge Frau überlebt den Winter im ewigen Eis* has been published by Marion von Schröder publishing house (Munich 2000).

⁵ All quotes from *Waar blijft het licht* rendered in English are my translations.

⁶ All quotes in Dutch are taken from the 4th edition. Heleen van der Laan: *Waar blijft het licht*. Amsterdam ⁴1997, here p.21.

The authors that Ingrid Urberg analyzed “encourage their readers, particularly female readers, to question their life choices, embark on their own quests, and test their own limits” by using “a variety of narrative devices to draw readers into their stories.”¹

Even though Van der Laan shows no obvious didactical intentions to “improve” the reading public and does not directly address the reader as some of the narratives Urberg examined do,² her writing affects one in terms of the empathic link between the author and the reader which intensifies the reading experience. As Casey Blanton argues, travel literature tends to be popular for its „narrative power, both literal and symbolic. The travel narrative is a compelling and seductive form of storytelling.“³ Especially twentieth-century travel literature increasingly focuses on psychological issues⁴ and shows the interplay between the observer and the observed, between self and the world.⁵ A consequence of the psychological processes the author writes about and protagonists experience within his/her narrative is that the readers, too, become a part of the story and live in it. In the chain consisting of story, author, and reader, the author serves on the one hand as initiator of

¹ Ingrid Urberg: „Svalbard's Daughters'. *Personal Accounts by Svaldbard's Female Pioneers*". In: Nordlit 22 (2007), pp.167-191, here p.183.

² The most interesting examples Urberg quotes are penned by Wanny Wolstad: *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard. Oslo 1956, p.31* when she addresses her account to "dear housewives and everyone else who is interested" ["kjære husmødre og alle som leser dette"] and Christine Ritter: *A Woman in the Polar Night. Translated by Jane Degras. New York 1954, p.184* (originally published as *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht. München 1938*): "We find ourselves pitying all the people in the towns of Europe, particularly the housewives, who besides being worn out by the unending struggle against soot and dust, moths and mice, also feel themselves obliged to keep up appearances." See also: Ingrid Urberg: „Svalbard's Daughters'. *Personal Accounts by Svaldbard's Female Pioneers*". In: Nordlit 22 (2007), pp.167-191, here p.183.

³ Casey Blanton: *Travel Writing. The Self and the World. New York 1997* (=Studies in Literary Themes and Genres 15), p.2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

the recorded voyage and on the other hand as mediator and catalyst between the reader and the exterior voyage. Thus, the author facilitates a transformation within the reader, which, according to travel writer Norman Douglas, can only occur if there is also an “interior voyage”:

But the reader of a good travel book is entitled not only to an exterior voyage, to descriptions of scenery and so forth, but to an interior, a sentimental or temperamental voyage, which takes place side by side with that outer one, ... the ideal book of this kind offers us, indeed, a triple opportunity of exploration – abroad, into the author’s brain, and into our own.¹

This definition of “a good travel book” refers to a modern travel book with respect to the author’s relation to the reader. Casey Blanton claims in his study on *Travel Writing. The Self and the World* that the modern travel book features the following elements:

a narrator/traveler who travels for the sake of travel; a narrative organization that owes much to fiction; a commitment to both a literary language and a personal voice; and thematic concerns of great moral and philosophic import.²

Indeed, one can accept Blanton’s definition almost without limitation. Only the first element, “a narrator/traveler who travels for the sake of travel,” has to be revised and defined more clearly. People have always embarked on journeys because of the differences and mysteries of new lands, because of “the very otherness of the visited country that makes the journey valuable.”³ Therein lies the essential difference between tourist and traveler: While tourists are interested in “a more leisured version of what was left behind [...], travellers thrive on the alien, the unexpected,

¹ Quoted in Paul Fussell: *The Norton Book of Travel. New York 1987, p.15.*

² Casey Blanton: *Travel Writing. The Self and the World. New York 1997 (=Studies in Literary Themes and Genres 15), p.30.*

³ Mark Cocker: *Loneliness and Time. The Story of British Travel Writing. New York 1993. (Original edition: London 1992), p.2.*

even the uncomfortable and challenging.”¹ In the depiction of travels, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, authors of travel books often find “a way to create metaphors about a shattered, anxious European world” which results in an expression of “the search for a shattered and scattered self that one sees in much modernist literature.”² In the romantic period, writings about traveling have an aesthetic approach to natural descriptions and rely heavily on portrayals of human emotions.³ These examples demonstrate that both travel and depiction of travel are connected to a specific purpose which varies from traveler to traveler, from text to text. Still, ‘travel’ ought to be understood as a dialog between one’s own self and the world, for the element of “having to react to the places and people encountered, is at the heart of travel.”⁴ In the case of Heleen van der Laan’s book *Waar blijft het licht* all of the above assumptions apply. As mentioned before, some grand thematic concerns are discussed in *Waar blijft het licht*, for example the way Europeans cope with the Arctic world, the general gender question, and human emotions.

Still, it is also important to understand *Waar blijft het licht* as a creative, both personal and authentic depiction of the factual events. This creative synthesis will be in the foreground of this analysis. Heleen van der Laan wrote her book two years after her sojourn in Spitsbergen on the basis of letters she had written to her friend and to her family. By recording experiences in form of letters instead of a diary, the author automatically establishes a dialog between himself/herself and the recipient; factual events take new shapes, shift their weight according to the author’s perception and are modified. These are innate in all creative writing processes, be they fictional or factual. As Jan Borm has recently showed, the contemporary travel writing yearns to transcend the boundaries of the conventional travel book by using

¹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

² Casey Blanton: *Travel Writing. The Self and the World. New York 1997* (= *Studies in Literary Themes and Genres 15*), p.59.

³ *Ibid.*, p.72.

⁴ Mark Cocker: *Loneliness and Time. The Story of British Travel Writing. New York 1993. (Original edition: London 1992)*, p.2.

imaginative structures and literary narrative strategies “of a work of fiction” instead of “the topographical procession from A to B.”

¹ Heleen Van der Laan also goes beyond the scope of the conventional structure of the travel book, which brings it closer to the fiction. She establishes a dialog between herself and her surrounding by employing both different literary elements (strong character development, first-person-narrator, narrative arc etc.) and literary techniques (nonsequential chronology accompanied by flashbacks, imagery, repetitions, metaphor, verbal irony etc.) as well as a poetic language to describe landscapes and emotions. Although the actuality of the tale has nothing to do with its literary quality, the creative nonfiction is often regarded as inferior to the fictional literature, because “art, it would seem, equals imagination.”² And even if there are potential literary deficiencies, the authenticity of the recount would prevail for its readers, because “the events of real life provide the basis for a narrative that is perhaps more extraordinary than one that was entirely a product of the imagination.”³

Still, it should not be forgotten that travel books and, in fact, any writings, are in some way fictional. Selection is an integral part of every writing process and results in omission, emphasis, and sometime intentional, sometime unconscious modification of story elements. After all, “one cannot possibly explain everything one sees on the road, and it is not one’s job as a narrator to do so.”⁴ Thus, the travel writing presents a segment of the reality

¹ Jan Borm: “Jonathan Raban’s ‘Coasting’ and Literary Strategies in Contemporary British Travel Writing”. In: Kristi Siegel (Ed.): *Issues in Travel Writing. Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, New York 2002, pp.281-289, here p.281 quotes from Jonathan Raban’s preface to the Picador Travel Classics edition of *Coasting* (1995, p.xviii), the original edition has been published in 1986.

² Mark Cocker: *Loneliness and Time. The Story of British Travel Writing*. New York 1993. (Original edition: London 1992), p.114.

³ *Ibid.*, p.73. He refers in a similar way to the Frederick Bailey’s *Mission to Tashkent*. London 1946.

⁴ Jan Borm: “Jonathan Raban’s ‘Coasting’ and Literary Strategies in Contemporary British Travel Writing”. In: Kristi Siegel (Ed.): *Issues in*

depending on a personal perspective and “is still an arbitrary and highly specialized version of reality.”¹ Heleen van der Laan’s carefully organized writing may therefore not be mistaken for a novel,² even if the line between the autobiographic novel and a travel book is sometimes blurred. In general, autobiographic novels use the personal experience only as inspiration and framework. They are not obligated to reproduce the actuality in detail, so they offer a higher level of liberation from the boundaries of reality. In contrast, travel books are

“sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or a romance – claims literary validity by constant reference to actuality.”³

When presenting the actuality, creative nonfiction – “like an artist’s rendering of any kind of person, event, or place, in any medium – doesn’t have to be fair, just faithful to the vision, understanding of ‘the implacable I’.”⁴ This faithful rendering of

Travel Writing. Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement, *New York 2002*, pp.281-289, here p.284.

¹ Mark Cocker: *Loneliness and Time. The Story of British Travel Writing*. *New York 1993*. (Original edition: *London 1992*), p.95.

² *There is a certain tendency to write the contemporary travel books “as though they were novels, or non-fiction novels.” Jan Borm: “Jonathan Raban’s ‘Coasting’ and Literary Strategies in Contemporary British Travel Writing”*. In: Kristi Siegel (Ed.): *Issues in Travel Writing. Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, *New York 2002*, pp.281-289, here p.284.

³ Paul Fussell: *Abroad. British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. *Oxford 1980*, pp.202-203.

⁴ Lynn Z. Bloom: “*Living to Tell the Tale. The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction*”. In: *College English (Special Issue: Creative Nonfiction)* 65 (2003), pp.276-289, here p.279. She refers to Joan Didion’s term of “the implacable ‘I’” in Joan Didion: “*On Keeping a Notebook*”. In: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. *New York 1968*, pp.131-141, here p.136 “the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable ‘I’.” Although Joan Didion refers

“how it felt to me,”¹ is key to understanding the genre of creative nonfiction.

To illustrate how Van der Laan utilizes the creative potentials of this genre a close look at the opening section of *Waar blijft het licht* is necessary. I will discuss the prologue in detail as an example of the author's treatment of landscape and human relationships. This will serve as the basis for further analysis of the role of nature, its function and description in Van der Laan's travel narrative. The prologue deals with Heleen's arrival in Spitsbergen and her first impression of her cohabiter and the Arctic, her new home for a period of time.

The way she stands there one can almost see through her. The helicopter noise slowly abates, she seems overwhelmed by the silence. Nothing but emptiness speaks out of her big eyes while she looks around. Suddenly she feels as if she was being watched. She turns around. Seven dogs look at her questioningly. There is no cheerful barking, no welcome that compelled her to react. The dogs were just lying there with their heads on their paws and staring at her, as if they knew that she was not an ordinary visitor. The strange thing is: now that her adventure has begun, now that she has nothing to hang on to and is starting something completely new – she isn't excited. The trapper doesn't look at her, yet she feels his eyes on her somehow. He doesn't move either. Should she say something? Do something? 'Feels good to be back home?' she asks, and at the same time she wonders if his timid chuckle means that he is just shy or that he does not understand her English.

here to a private notebook, not the one “that is patently for public consumption”(p.136), it is possible to apply her thoughts on Van der Laan's book, because her letters the book is based on are highly personal and private records on her sojourn in the Arctic.

¹ Joan Didion: “On Keeping a Notebook”. In: *Joan Didion: Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. New York 1968 (1⁴2000), pp.131-141, here p.134.

Ze is bijna doorzichtig zoals ze daar staat. Als het geluid van de helikopter langzaam wegsterft lijkt ze gevangen door de stilte. Niets dan leegte spreekt uit de grote open ogen waarmee ze voor zich uit kijkt. Plotseling voelt ze zich bekeken en draait zich om. Vragend kijken de zeven honden haar aan. Geen vrolijk gekef ter begroeting, zodat ze op zijn minst terug zou moeten groeten. Niets vraagt haar om een reactie. Met hun kop gestrekt op de poten staren ze haar alleen maar aan, alsof ze inzien dat ze niet zomaar een bezoeker is. Het is raar, maar op dit moment waarop het grote avontuur begint, nu ze alle houvast achter zich gelaten heeft en aan iets geheel nieuws begint, lijkt ze weinig enthousiast. De pelsjager kijkt haar niet aan, maar ze voelt zich betast door zijn blikken. Ook hij doet niets. Moet ze iets zeggen? Moet ze iets doen? “Feels good to be back home?” probeert ze en vraagt zich vervolgens af of zijn schuchtere lachje een blijk van verlegenheid is of dat hij haar niet verstaat.¹

These lines are well placed in the prologue, whose function, for example in the antique or the classical drama, is to prepare the audience for the story development by introducing elements from the ensuing plot (exposition, conflict, thoughts, emotions). Thus, this opening scene ought to be understood programmatically. It leads the reader to the plot by introducing topics such as the Arctic atmosphere, gender issues, and communication as well as the main characters, their reflections and perceptions. I will now discuss the most important prologue elements for reading and understanding *Waar blijft het licht*.

1. The first sentence immediately attracts attention: it does not deal with the landscape, as one might expect, but it refers to the protagonist's emotional constitution and focuses on psychological issues mentioned above. The young Heleen is described as “almost transparent” [“bijna doorzichtig”] (p. 5), as some sort of *tabula rasa*, which has yet to be filled with experiences. First and foremost, though, this phrase indicates that she is detached from

¹ *Heleen van der Laan: Waar blijft het licht. Amsterdam* ⁴1997, p.5.

her past and not yet connected to her new present. Although the adventure begins at that very moment, this particular feeling of not belonging anywhere rises above the desire for an adventure. Furthermore, it creates a discomfort for Heleen and shows how the aforementioned connection between self and the world is not yet established.

2. The feeling of being detached from the world is intensified by the formal literary element of a narrator used in the prologue. Usually, the (creative-nonfiction) travel writings employ the first-person narrator, who represents the author's point of view and offers interpretive comments in addition to the facts. Heleen van der Laan achieves this by letting the first-person narrator recount most of the tale of her sojourn in Spitsbergen. In the prologue, however, she plays with a variety of literary point-of-view elements and lets the limited omniscient narrator, a "third-person-self"¹ describe her arrival and first impression of Spitsbergen. This narrator is limited to her point of view and uses additionally the interior monologue, which is also often employed in the rest of the book. Choosing the third-person narrator to tell the prologue emphasizes the feeling that Heleen is not connected to anything anymore.

3. The narrator conveys Heleen's first impression of the Arctic atmosphere to the reader. She is captured by the silence of the Arctic and sensitive to the atmosphere, which she tries to absorb. The silence is apparent, the whole scene is very visual. Heleen, Nils, and even the dogs communicate only with their eyes. Heleen absorbs the surrounding with her "big open eyes" [grote open ogen] (p. 5), she feels the trapper's "eyes" [zijn blikken] (p. 5) on her, while the dogs "just stare at her" [staren ze haar alleen maar aan] (p. 5). The only acoustic element – besides her own voice while trying to communicate with Nils at the end of the

¹ *The third-person narrator is employed in many contemporary travel books in order to "reinforce the role of imagination", as Jan Borm shows in "Jonathan Raban's 'Coasting' and Literary Strategies in Contemporary British Travel Writing". In: Kristi Siegel (Ed.): Issues in Travel Writing. Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement, New York 2002, pp.281-289, here p.284.*

scene – stems from the helicopter that connected Heleen to the world she left behind. The Arctic is therefore determined by visual aspects rather than by aural ones.

4. From the earliest travel narratives on, the depiction of exotic countries and landscapes has been interwoven with studies of the people of these regions. Here, the inapproachability of the Arctic landscapes is projected onto Nils and his dogs. Just like the Arctic region, its inhabitants are quiet, too: there is no cheerful barking, there is no welcome, there is no greeting at all. Her new home does not approach her, there is no communication between the traveler and the world. To overcome this distance, she must become active and approach her surroundings – the nature as well as the people.

5. Moreover, the prologue introduces the problematic relationship between Heleen and Nils as well as the general gender issue. Heleen's relationship with the trapper Nils depends on her will to take action. The man (Nils) does not only lack the communicative competence (Heleen speaks Dutch and English, while Nils only speaks Norwegian), but also the ability to connect to her physically or even directly visually: Nils neither greets her, nor moves, nor does he look at Heleen directly. The woman is the one taking charge, confronting the situation, communicating with the man. Heleen's activity is, as I will clarify later, usually regarded as a male attribute, while Nils' steadiness and immobility are often considered feminine characteristics.

6. The last paragraph of the prologue is perhaps its most impressive element. Both Heleen's use of verbal irony instead of the conventional greeting and Nils' timid reaction to this 'provocation' indicates Heleen's superiority over Nils. This imbalance is based on the traditional view of the genders, where "men were assumed to possess such characteristics as activity, energy, independence, and intellectual prowess to be used in the public life and the wide world."¹ What first appears as an imbalance will

¹ Linda Kraus Worley: "Through Others' Eyes. Narratives & German Women Travelling in Nineteenth-Century America." In: *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 21 (1986), pp.39-50, here p.40 quoted in Sara

later shape their togetherness and to a certain extent influence the change in Heleen's mind.

After this close analysis of the prologue, I turn to the depiction of the Arctic world in Heleen van der Laan's book. The description of the landscape and the life circumstances cannot be examined here without another look at the psychological and gender issues. In the Western world the physical space has traditionally been gendered as feminine. Since the antiquity the feminine aspect of landscape and geographical sites have included a variety of ideas, such as "sexual metaphors [...] to characterize land as virgin, fertile or barren," personifications of Mother Earth and different countries,¹ analogies between wilderness,² cities,³ landscape parts as forests, jungles, or valleys surrounded by the mountains⁴ on the one hand and woman and woman's body on the other hand. Especially the literary imagination shows continuity in connecting nature to woman's body and in exploiting and colonizing both,⁵ so

Mills: Discourses of Difference. An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism. London 1991, p.70.

¹ Heidi Hansson: "Bayard Taylor's 'Northern Travel' and the Genders of the North." In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here p.19.

² Sigrid Weigel: Topographien der Geschlechter. Kulturgeschichtliche Studien zur Literatur. Reinbek 1990, especially pp.118-142.

³ *Ibid.*, especially pp.149-203.

⁴ Heidi Hansson: "Bayard Taylor's 'Northern Travel' and the Genders of the North." In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here p.19.

⁵ Sigrid Weigel: Topographien der Geschlechter. Kulturgeschichtliche Studien zur Literatur. Reinbek 1990, p.140. Heidi Hansson also illustrates the feminine and sexual connotation of the landscape depiction, when for example "forests embrace the visitor and give motherly comfort and shelter, while a jungle may be conceived of as a femme fatale, ensnaring and entangling, yet waiting to be penetrated. A valley cradled by mountains [...] can also be described as lush and voluptuous [...]." "Bayard Taylor's 'Northern Travel' and the Genders of the North." In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here pp.19-20.

we can claim that the perception of the place as feminine is “embedded in travel writing as a genre.”¹

The depiction of the Arctic landscape in the context of the earlier exploration narratives and the colonial discourse, however, has been traditionally connected to an idea of the white masculinity, which helped develop the social expectations of masculinity and “legitimized the exclusion of women from many public domains of discourse.”² Aspects of masculinity, such as physical prowess, strength, roughness and other stereotypical manly properties have often been mirrored in the nature of the North, which appears in some writings “as dramatic, awe-inspiring and sublime.”³ Masculinizing the Northern landscape within the colonization discourse intensifies the conquering element, so that the (male) protagonist can appear even more heroic and admirable. But there are also travel writings which contain either feminine representations of the landscape, “still and passive, waiting to be discovered by the male or masculinized explorer”⁴ or where the description of the nature is elusive, “sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine, sometimes neither.”⁵

The Arctic landscape in *Waar blijft het licht* is gendered as both masculine and feminine. It often embodies different kinds of action as well as the concept of the all-embracing, vast, pristine space. As mentioned before, activity, motion, fluctuation, and all other varieties of movement are traditionally denoted as masculine properties, while matter, form and permanence are connected to

¹ Heidi Hansson: “Bayard Taylor’s ‘Northern Travel’ and the Genders of the North.” In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here p.22.

² Lisa Bloom: *Genders on Ice*. American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions. Minneapolis 1993 (=American Culture 10), p.6.

³ Heidi Hansson: “Bayard Taylor’s ‘Northern Travel’ and the Genders of the North.” In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here pp.20-21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

the feminine, concurring with Luce Irigaray's concept of space and time.¹

I automatically jump from one big stone to another. By now I know exactly where the slack stones are, so hiking over the glacier moraine costs me much less effort than before. [...] I climb to the top to see the huge ice river wreathing through the mountains to the valley. [...] But as I stand beside this ice mass, I am being dragged into a time dimension where a century lasts no longer than a blip; I feel the ice groaning and forcing its way out through the valley, impounding the moraine walls and retreating during the warmer periods. I sit on a stone, breathe deeply, I am a part of this impressive play the powerful natural forces perform with ice, water, and rocks. Sometimes I hear the water gurgle. [...] Sometimes a loud bang resounds, as if somebody was shooting, but this comes from the ice. Apart from that the silence prevails. The silence of the eternity.

Automatisch spring ik van de ene grote steen naar de andere. Inmiddels weet ik welke los liggen en welke niet en de klim langs de morenen van de gletsjers kost me niet zo'n moeite meer als voorheen. [...] Ik klim naar boven om naar de enorme ijsrivier te kijken, die zich tussen de bergen naar beneden slingert. [...] Maar als ik er naast sta word ik meegesleept in een tijdsdimensie waarin een eeuw met een vingerknip voorbij is; ik voel hoe het ijs zich schurend door het dal perst, morenewallen opstuwt en zich in warmere tijden smeltend terugtrekt. Ik zit op een steen, haal diep adem en doe even mee aan het machtige spel dat de natuurkrachten spelen met ijs, water en steen. Soms hoor ik het gekabbel van water. [...] En soms klinken er luide knallen, alsof iemand een schot afvuurt, maar dat is het ijs. Verder is het stil. De stilte van de eeuwigheid.²

This paragraph offers an example of the elusive description of the nature in *Waar blijft het licht* and its dualism composed with both masculine and feminine gendered elements. This is a

¹ Luce Irigaray: *Ethics of Sexual Difference*. London/New York 2005, pp. 7-19. (Original edition : *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*. Paris 1984).

² Heleen van der Laan: *Waar blijft het licht*. Amsterdam 1997, p.31.

very sensual description of the glacier mountain and the surrounding valleys, where different visual and auditory devices are employed to describe the nature. This way, motion in nature, which can be experienced in different sensory ways, is manifested even more urgently. The impression might be evoked that this landscape could only be gendered feminine, because of the vastness of the space and the round shapes of the river. There are no such expressions in the text; rather, this impression is nothing but an association: here, the landscape is strongly determined by the steady motion and interaction of its natural elements. They even seem to control the time dimension by “dragging” Heleen into the past times. Interestingly, the idea of “shooting,” a stereotypical male preoccupation, is also part of the nature description, a sort of masculinity marker. Combining masculine and feminine elements, the nature of Spitsbergen offers the perfect interplay between these two poles.

What works well at the macro level (the Arctic landscape), does not function at the micro level at first (the daily life of Heleen and Nils). Heleen’s first months in Spitsbergen are shaped by isolation and loneliness. Nils’s reticence and yet sexually focused behavior are hard to stand for Heleen, whereas the beauty of the nature offers her consolation.

I would like to share and enjoy my life with someone so badly, to be happy together instead of alone. To do just about anything together - I’m sick of doing everything alone. [...] I look up to the sun and breathe the clear cold air. Far away I see a pair of ivory gulls. They shine in the sunshine and dance around the cabin searching for something to eat. They are beautiful. Thank God, there is something beautiful here.

How graag zou ik dit leven delen, samen genieten en samen gelukkig zijn in plaats van allen. Samen ik-weet-niet-wat doen; ik heb er genoeg van alles in m’n eentje te doen. [...] Ik kijk naar de zon en adem diep de zuivere vrieslucht in. In de verte ontdek ik een tweetal ivoormeeuwen. Spierwit in het zonlicht dansen zu

sierlijk rond de hut op zoek naar iets lekkers. Ze zijn mooi. Gelukkig, toch nog iets moois.¹

The nature with its perfect interplay of masculine and feminine elements, exemplified by the flying birds, serves as a role model for the partnership of man and woman, where both partners are in charge of managing their everyday life. This must not be the only purpose of a relationship. Equal partners should feel joy and satisfaction living and working with each other, just as the birds “dance around the cabin searching for something to eat,” which is an aestheticising projection of the human partnership onto animal beings. Heleen’s approach to the Arctic ‘macro-locality’ starts by the induction method with the perception of the local animals and spreading to the whole landscape. She observes closely the behavior of kittiwake-birds and sledge dogs and even learns the dogs’ names. By interacting in the nature, she gets closer to the environment and starts to adapt to the difficult life circumstances:

This afternoon we explored both glaciers. [...] Like yesterday, it is still cloudy and moreover very windy. N is annoyed, because the strong wind prohibits him from ferrying across the fjord to hunt reindeers. We still have no meat. But I don’t worry about that. Then we’ll just eat bread or beans? N is quite annoyed about that, though.

Vanmiddag zijn we naar de twee gletsjers geweest. [...] Net als gisteren is het bewolkt en bovendien waait het hard. Daar baalt N van, want nu kan hij niet met de rubberboot naar de overkant van de fjord om op rendieren te jagen. We hebben nog geen vlees. Ik kan me dar niet zo druk over maken. Dan eten we toch brood, of bonen? Maar N windt zich er nogal over op.²

Unlike in the colonial discourse, the protagonist in Van der Laan’s book never tries to conquer nature. The female traveler (Heleen) does not act as a conqueror, but instead endeavors to become an integral part of nature. Since her aim is not to master nature, but to master herself and her own life, she reflects on her

¹ *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.

² *Ibid.*, p.16.

sojourn in Spitsbergen as a basic, instructive time in life by using the metaphor pair 'light-darkness'.

It is strange that the intensity of the light is denoted from the resulting shadow. What would light without shadow mean? Nothing exists without its counterpart. That reminds me of the story about a tree that can only grow tall if it is deeply rooted in the soil. [...] Sometimes in hard times, I say to myself that I am growing deep roots now and however dark my life sometimes is, there is still something positive in it.

Gek toch, hoe onvermijdelijk je de waarde van licht moet aangeven door middel van de schaduw die het werpt. Wat zou licht betekenen als er geen schaduw was? Niets bestaat zonder zijn tegenpool. Het doet me denken aan het verhaal van een boom die alleen dan tot de hemel kan groeien als hij geworteld is in de diepste diepten. [...] In moeilijke tijden houd ik mezelf voor dat ik hele diepe wortels aan het kweken ben en hoe zwart het leven soms ook is, dat is op zijn minst toch één positief punt.¹

Heleen finds her "roots" not only in being one with the nature but also in any kind of work and activity. The work gives her a basic framework for living her life. Focusing on work, being in action and in motion mirrors the search for "her own name, her identity" [een naam voor mezelf, een identiteit] (p. 165).

I like when I have to work. It is fantastic to pick up the dead seals with the dog sledge and to skin them by myself. I did not come here to apply my old prejudices to this life – like I'm disgusted, it stinks, and that I feel sorry for the animals. I am here to do something and to exist. To be part of the hunt is the best affirmation that I am at home and not a guest.

Maar ik vind het fijn om te werken. Ik vind het machtig om in m'n eentje met de slee de zeehonden op te halen en te villen. Want ik kwam hier niet om met vooroordelen – eng, vies en zielig – naar

¹ *Ibid.*, p.65.

dit leven te kijken; ik ben hier om te doen en te zijn. Meedoen met de jacht is de ultieme bevestiging dat ik hier thuishoor en geen bezoeker ben.¹

Heleen develops a new appreciation of the animals, the physical work and extreme weather conditions. She focuses on the rules of survival in the cold, long darkness and learns not only to live *with* the nature, but also to act *in* it. Heleen thus adapts her physical condition, for example by eating and appreciating whatever is available, by learning to ski or to drive dog sledge:

It has been a while since I sat here with a cup of tea to rest from our hike. I have to improve my physical condition. How else would I be able to handle tours on skis? And it's going to be very cold and very dark. [...] How will I handle the four-month long polar night, when the mercury drops to forty degrees below zero? [...]

Ik zit al een poosje binnen met een kopje thee uit te puffen van de wandeling. Ik moet toch nodig wat aan m'n conditie gaan doen, want hoe moet dat anders straks met skiën? En dan is het nog koud en donker ook. [...] Hoe moet dat met mij, in een vier maanden lange poolnacht, als het kwik tot veertig graden onder nul zakt?²

These challenging physical experiences and the beginning of Heleen's sojourn in Spitsbergen necessarily lead to a transformation of her mental condition and the re-reflection of her prejudices and earlier ideas on the Arctic, which results in the demystification of the Arctic space and her view of the stereotypical Arctic trapper:

I have always thought that people became calm and wise after living so long in the wild and learned to accept things as they are. But now I am aware that it doesn't necessarily have to be

¹ *Ibid.*, p.161.

² *Ibid.*, p.16.

that way. [...] N looks quite anxious and undecided. And I do not like undecided guys at all!

Ik ging ervan uit dat mensen die lange tijd in de vrije natuur hadden de dingen te accepteren. Maar ik begin nu te vrezen dat dat niet altijd het geval hoeft te zijn. N komt juist heel zenuwachtig en onzeker over. En ik houd helemaal niet van onzekere types!¹

While Heleen expresses her willingness to connect to her surroundings, for example by starting a day with the sometimes childish excitement and ritual of greeting the nature, she gets emotionally closer to the Arctic landscape. At the same time, she keeps her distance from Nils by referring to him in her account only as 'N', rather than with his full name.

[...] Moreover, I could enjoy the first sunny day in peace without N's continuous, annoying fondles and advances. Still warm after sleeping and drinking tea, I go to get water from the lagoon. I first greet the dogs, then everything else which cannot respond: Good morning sun, Hi mountain, glacier, hello sea.

[Bovendien kan ik dan, zonder me druk te hoeven maken over N's voortdurende aaitjes en toenaderingspogingen, in alle rust genieten van de eerste zonnige dag. Nog warm van de slap en de thee ga ik water halen uit de lagune. Ik begroet de honden en daarna alle dingen die niets terugzeggen: Goeiemorgen zon, hi berg, gletsjer, dag zee.]²

The relationship between Heleen and Nils is tense from the very beginning: They do not have anything in common, not even a language, because Nils only speaks his mother-tongue Norwegian. He is drawn to and simultaneously threatened by Heleen's

¹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

² *Ibid.*, p.22.

attractiveness, her strong will, but also simply by the fact that she is a woman. In contrast, she is annoyed by his awkwardness, inability and sexual advances. In Heleen's perception he is not even a man. According to polar exploration narratives the life circumstances in such harsh conditions provide a frame "where men could show themselves as heroes capable of superhuman feats,"¹ where they can prove their independency, mental and physical strength, and "the boundlessness of the individual spirit"² in order to survive:

How can a man like him survive here? Besides, what am I doing here with such a man? I thank God, myself or whomever for being so independent to decide by myself. [...] He is no man at all, but under these circumstances I am also in doubt about the worth of his five years of Arctic experience.

Hoe kan zo'n man hier overleven? En nog afgezien daarvan: Wat doe ik bij zo'n man? Dank de Heer, mezelf of wie dan ook, dat ik onafhankelijk genoeg ben om voor mezelf te kiezen. [...] Hij is niet alleen geen man, maar ook die vijf jaar poolervaring krijgen op deze manier een twijfelachtige waarde.³

The aforementioned attributes like potency and predominance are traditionally defined as male attributes. Lisa Bloom argues in her book *Gender on Ice*, that such attributes are "part of a social construction of gender [...] and that these constructions have shifted with changing historical situations."⁴ In the case of *Waar blijft het licht* it is obvious that the constructed idea of gender, which we might connect to the "classical role allocation" seen in Irigaray's thoughts, is not maintained. Nils is exactly the opposite

¹ Lisa Bloom: *Genders on Ice*. American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions. Minneapolis 1993 (=American Culture 10), p.6.

² *Ibid.*, p.6.

³ Heleen van der Laan: *Waar blijft het licht*. Amsterdam ⁴1997, p.39.

⁴ Lisa Bloom: *Genders on Ice*. American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions. Minneapolis 1993 (=American Culture 10), p.8.

of the “classical” idea of a man: he is neither strong nor muscular, he is heavy-handed, “dumb” [dum] (p. 70) and he lacks “every single form of logical reasoning” [elke vorm van logisch verstand] (70). Instead, Heleen regards Nils’ friend and trapper Ragnar as a real man, an echo of the stereotypical white male known from the colonial discourses.¹ Heleen is fascinated by all the properties connected with an idea of the northern body:² manliness, muscular stature, physical strength, dauntlessness and intellectual predominance: “He is at least a ‘real man’, he could taught me everything, he would understand me.” [Hij is tenminste een ‘echte man’, hij zal me alles kunnen leren, hij zal me begrijpen.] (p. 39) Even if the protagonist’s (Heleen’s) idea of the real man is the same one used within the colonial discourse, her concept of the woman is not. The genders appear completely conversed in *Waar blijft het licht* regarded in the light of interdependence between space and relationship. From the first day on, Heleen’s arrival to the small cabin in Austfjordneset is a symbol of her own life and refers to her search for her identity:

It will rain today. The luggage for one whole year is scattered everywhere around us. It has to be stored in the cabin before the rain starts pattering. [...] First slowly, than with the greatest accuracy, I arrange my winter clothes, I even sort my socks by the color trying to set up my new life. [...] Only my sleeping bag is left on the living room floor. It’s not clear where it should go and I don’t dare to ask. The bed in the bedroom is obviously meant for one person. Where will I sleep?

¹ We recognize in the description of Ragnar the heir to the Vikings, the typical “northern body”, as discussed in many writings about the North countries. See also Heidi Hansson: “Bayard Taylor’s ‘Northern Travel’ and the Genders of the North.” In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here p.21.

² Heidi Hansson: “Bayard Taylor’s ‘Northern Travel’ and the Genders of the North.” In: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning 106 (2006), pp.18-33, here p.21.

Het gaat regenen. Voor een jaar lang bagage staat nog overal verspreid om ons heen. Dat moet naar binnen voordat de bui losbarst. [...] Langzaam, maar met grote precisie leg ik m'n dikke winterkleden soort bij en alle sokken op kleur, in een poging mijn nieuwe leven in te richten. [...] Alleen mijn slaapzak blijft ergens in de huiskamer op de grond liggen. Waar die hoort blijft onduidelijk en dat durf ik ook niet te vragen. Het bed in de slaapkamer is duidelijk eenpersoons. Waar slaap ik?¹

The cabin, the bedroom, and the bed form the microlocality in contrast to the macrolocality of the Arctic world. Both can be analyzed by means of Luce Irigaray's concept of "time" and "space",² which also occurs in similar ways in the colonial discourse. Nils guides Heleen through the cabin and shows that they will share the bed. Thus, initially, Van der Laan modifies the male role considerably: Nils is gendered mostly feminine, because he masters the domestic space, the cabin. The Arctic world becomes his home, so he denotes permanence and exteriority too. Since the woman is given two speech modes, silence and mimesis,³ this results in Nils's inability to speak to Heleen and to open himself in expressive ways. Heleen, however, being mobile and active, shows masculine properties and masters the time: she crosses the interior and the exterior space by traveling, she sets the time limits of her sojourn, she sets the right moment to sleep with Nils. She expresses herself through a rich interiority and language, both defined as masculine.⁴ The only force able to transgress and

¹ *Heleen van der Laan: Waar blijft het licht. Amsterdam* ⁴1997, p.9.

² *Luce Irigaray: Ethics of Sexual Difference. London/New York 2005, pp.7-19. (Original edition: Éthique de la différence sexuelle. Paris 1984).*

³ *Franziska Frei Gerlach: Schrift und Geschlecht. Feministische Entwürfe und Lektüren von Marlen Haushofer, Ingeborg Bachmann und Anne Duden. Berlin 1998 (=Geschlechterdifferenz und Literatur 8), p.72.*

⁴ *Language compensates for the ability to, as Irigaray says, "touch himself," which requires the man to be active. The woman "touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there*

connect these two categories, according to Irigaray is the divine,¹ which generates a new category of “space-time” ending with the concept of love. Van der Laan’s depiction of her younger self allegorizes in some way the divine power by transgressing the borders between time and space, man and woman. Irigaray’s concept of a divine power that “affects the passage between time and space”² is helpful for constructing the new model of the feminine, presented in *Waar blijft het licht*. With Irigaray’s analysis of the ethics of sexual differences in the background, where women remain “both in motion and stable [...], women move almost without moving,”³ Heleen’s character combines both the unethical masculine act of seizing power and the feminine characteristic of stability and safety. Taking over both roles allows Heleen to play with power within her relationship with Nils: “Since there is no love in this game, I am searching for might. The power gives safety and holds distance.” [“Bij gebrek aan liefde ga ik op zoek naar macht. Macht is veilig, het heeft iets afstandelijks.”] (p. 70)

This shows a repositioning of the female role, unlike that in the colonial Arctic narratives, where white women had traditional supportive positions and deferred to their explorer husbands.⁴ Heleen, biologically of course a woman, shows in her behavior many properties traditionally assigned to a man, and she transgresses the gender boundaries. In certain ways she abstains from the expectations placed upon women in order to make this unusual experience of overwintering in Spitsbergen. Race and national issues can be neglected in the context of *Waar blijft het*

is any way to distinguish activity from passivity.” Luce Irigaray: This Sex Which Is Not One. Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca 1985, p.16. (Original edition: Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un. Paris 1977).

¹ Luce Irigaray: Ethics of Sexual Difference. London/New York 2005, pp.7-19. (Original edition: Éthique de la différence sexuelle. Paris 1984).

² *Ibid.*, p.7.

³ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁴ Lisa Bloom: *Genders on Ice*. American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions. Minneapolis 1993 (=American Culture 10), pp.6-7.

licht, because both Heleen and Nils are of the same ethnicity and from similar Western societies. Heleen, however, shows a certain level of arrogance and intellectual superiority, which could be examined as a class issue.¹ Heleen obviously has an intellectual background, while Nils comes from the working class. Still, his intellectual inferiority is always discussed within his general inability to gain control of the daily routine in the Arctic, therefore within the gender context of literature on Arctic experiences.

The deconstruction of male and female roles and genders is shown by transgressing the traditional role allocation: On the one hand Heleen, a woman, learns to shoot, hunt snow grouse, drive a dog-sled, repair the transmitter and the rubber dinghy, make wood works (traditional male tasks), and on the other hand to draw muddy water from the nearby lagoon for cooking, cleaning and tidying the cabin, gut dead seals and prepare seal hides for sewing (commonly considered female tasks). Hunting is a paradigm for transgressing the role allocations and for discarding the conventions of the animal protecting, environmentally careful Western society. To some extent, the traveler's inner self depends of course on the society standards s/he is living in, but these conventions do not have universal validity. For Heleen hunting becomes not only a way to survive but also an impulse to reconsider her own place in the world by understanding how the hierarchy among beings can suddenly turn into equality:

Now that I have shot an animal myself, the polar bears also have a right to eat me. These are the rules of the game, this is the life. Is my sudden feeling of being an important, significant part of this world a consequence of that? I am here together with everything which lives – what does not live anymore, ends on my table.

¹ See also Lisa Bloom: *Genders on Ice*. American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions. Minneapolis 1993 (=American Culture 10), who deals not only with general gender issues but analyzes them in the greater context of race, class, and nationality.

En nu ik een dier heb geschoten, hebben ijsberen ook het 'recht' om mij op te eten. Zo gaat het spel, zo gaat het leven. Is het daarom dat ik opeens het gevoel heb een wezenlijk onderdeel te zijn van deze wereld? Ik ben hier samen met alles was leeft – en met wat niet meer leeft, maar op mijn bord komt te liggen.¹

Heleen accepts the rules of nature; she plays “the game.” That causes the change in her view of the Arctic as well as a change of her emotional and mental condition. When the first lights come and the dawn lasts longer, Heleen notices a crucial shift in her perception of nature, which also changes her understanding of the nature:

But strangely enough, everything looks suddenly different. Does the light just play with me? No, it's not that. [...] There is a feeling like something important is hanging in the air, but I don't know what. All glaciers and gorges of the landscape around me pass by, but I cannot find anything strange. It is up to me? [...] It feels like I have found again an old, already forgotten dream [...] it feels, it feels like this is my garden, my land. It is not the outside that has changed, but rather I have. [...] I do my best to find the words to grasp my new perception, so I can find it again easily.

Maar raar genoeg lijkt het wel alsof alles er opeens anders uit ziet. Houdt het licht me weer voor de gek? Nee, dat is het niet. [...] Het gevoel da er iets belangrijks in de lucht hangt zonder dat je precies weet wat, laat staan waar. Alle gletsjers en kloven van het landschap om me heen passeren nogmals de revue, maar daaraan kan ik niets vreemds ontdekken. Zou het dan misschien aan mij liggen? [...] Het is als het terugvinden van een droom die je eigenlijk al vergeten bent [...] het voelt, het voelt als mijn voortuin, mijn land. Het is niet de buitenkant die veranderd is, maar ik kijk er anders

¹ *Heleen van der Laan: Waar blijft het licht. Amsterdam* ⁴1997, p.32.

tegenaan. [...] Ik doe m'n best het nieuwe idee zo goed en zo kwaad als het gaat in woorden te vangen zodat ik het makkelijk terug kan vinden.¹

This shift causes Heleen to discard all expectations of and prejudices against the life in the Arctic, which correspond to the conventional idea of the North (within the colonial discourses) as a place where one can experience dangers and adventures amidst Arctic wilderness:

I must abandon the thought that overwintering here must be something awesome. It is like it is, it's nothing else. Bit by bit I let go of my ideas filled with challenges and adventures amidst pure nature, pictures of wise men in the white wilderness. Forget it, it will never be like that – not here and nowhere else.

Ik moet afstappen van de gedachte dat een overwinterin iets fantastisch behoort te zijn. Het is zoals het is en niet anders. Stuk voor stuk zet ik een streep door ideeën vol uitdaging en avontuur temidden van pure natuur, door het beeld van wijze mannen in een witte wildernis. Vergeet het maar, zo zal het nooit worden – niet hier en ergens anders ook niet.²

With the first lights and the longer dawn period Heleen's perception of the nature but also her view of Nils shifts. Their romantic relationship is shaped by friendship and togetherness, not love. Togetherness is an emotion, or rather a condition that Heleen misses, especially during the winter time. The distance between Nils and her, expressed through this single letter 'N' and the lack of possibilities to share her emotional life with someone persist during the dark winter months. Thus, winter, darkness and the unapproachable Arctic winter landscape are used to connote the distance between two persons.

¹ *Ibid.*, p.112.

² *Ibid.*, pp.111-112.

Parallel to the first sun rising in February the relationship between Nils and Heleen becomes closer and warmer – the slow warmth of the sun becomes a symbol for the growing warmth and fondness between man and woman:

The return of the sun is a very exciting event, but this is a strange and surreal image after its long absence. The vague memory of the light rays full of warmth is coming back from far away. Only four days more and I will know again how that feels. [...] I want to sing [...] but I don't dare to, because N could hear it. [...] Back home [she refers to the cabin] I am still in good mood. Surprisingly, my good mood rubs off even on N. For the first time I do not feel choked by his affectionate reaction and I am not annoyed about his absent will or his lack of ability to reflect on life.

De terugkomst van de zon is een razend spannend vooruitzicht, maar na haar lange afwezigheid ook een raar en onwezenlijk idee. De vage herinnering aan lichte stralen vol warmte moet van heel ver komen. Nog vier dagen, dan zal ik weer weten hoe dat voelt. [...] Ik wil zingen, [...] maar ik durf niet te zingen als N het kan horen. [...] Eenmaal weer thuis weet mijn goede humeur van geen ophouden en steekt – en dat is lang geleden – ook N aan. Voor één keer laat ik me niet afschrikken door zijn enthousiaste reactie die in de eerste maanden ook meteen een vraag naar méér inhield en stoor ik me niet aan zijn renzeloze onwil of onkunde om over het leven na te denken.¹

Nils and Heleen spend their first evening “in an uncomplicated, cozy atmosphere, drinking something, listening to these few cassettes we own, chatting and drinking even more.” [ongecompliseerd gezellig; we drinken, luisteren naar de paar cassettebandjes die het hutje rijk is, kletsen wat en drinken nog meer] (p. 117). They behave this evening as good friends and begin a new stage in their relationship: Nils starts opening himself

¹ *Ibid.*, pp.116-117.

to Heleen, he tells her about her earlier life in Norway, which causes her to observe him in a new light and discover her affection for him.

Alas, all my expectations and prejudices I desperately hung on to in order to be able to deal with myself. I'm ashamed, I'm so ashamed. However stupid he sometimes seems, he is a good guy with a warm heart and deserves something better than this tough Heleen who doesn't get along with herself. [...] I think over and over again about the question, if my feelings have something to do with him, or if I feel just a normal, pure lust.

Ach, al die verwachtingen, die vooroordelen waar ik me aan vastklampte om mezelf staande te houden. Ik schaam me, schaam me diep. Hoe dom soms ook, het is een goede vent, hij heeft een warm hart en verdient zoovel meer dan die keiharde Heleen die een probleem heeft met zichzelf. [...] Eindeloos houd ik me bezig met de vraag in hoeverre mijn gevoelens om hem draaien of dat slechts mijn lusten me parten spleen.¹

Heleen is confronted with her old prejudices once again, which causes her to rethink and change her attitude toward Nils. She discovers that he is not "stupid and naïve but innocent" [dom en naïef, maar onschuldig] (p. 128). She follows her feelings and decides to spend the night with Nils and start a new relationship with him, based on her new 'I', curious and hungry for closeness: "Hi, I'm Heleen, I think, and I want you, I want everything." ["Hallo, ik ben Heleen geloof ik en ik wil jou, ik wil alles."] (p. 125). From that point on she refers to Nils only with his full name, because the distance between them has been overcome. Heleen can "show her true self again, burst out laughing spontaneously, even play a merciless femme fatale." ["Ik mag mezelf weer laten zien; spontaan in lachen uitbarsten en een genadeloze

¹ *Ibid.*, p.123.

femme fatale spleen.”] (p. 128). While Heleen learns to understand and love both the darkness and light of the “beautiful“ Arctic reality, her own former idea of the Arctic as an unfriendly, inhospitable place fades away: “Did I say before this land doesn’t fascinate me that much? I take that back. It’s beautiful [...] The world is round, but for a moment I sit on top of it. Everything is white, so white.” [Zei ik daarstraks dat ik uitgekeken raakte op ons landgoed? Ik neem het terug; het is bloedmooi. [...] De wereld is rond, maar voor even zit ik bovenop het topje. En wit, alles wit.] (p. 113).

Heleen’s life in Spitsbergen is a paradigm for her search for identity and inner peace, which she finds through and in the Arctic landscape. Moreover, she identifies herself with the landscape, she even becomes a part of it:

I drown in the calmness, in everything and in nothing. I feel like a slow river near the sea, a river full of small smiles. Is that what is called inner peace? [...] ‘I’m happy, despite of everything and because of everything’, I wrote to Rudolf in December.

Ik verdrink in de rust, in alles en in niets. Voel me als een trage rivier vlakbij zee, een rivier vol kleine lachjes. Is dit wat ze innerlijke rust noemen? [...] ‘Gelukkig, ondanks en dankzij alles’ schreef ik Rudolf een keer in December.¹

After a year in Spitsbergen, Heleen realizes that the infinity she found in the endless ice and calmness of the Arctic space is in some way caused by the structure in her days, by the daily routine and her work.² This sticking to one position, a strong yearning for personal improvement, and a desire to learn more about the world makes her leave Spitsbergen in the end: „Ultimately the urge for new deeds and the desire to meet other people prevail.” [De drang

¹ *Ibid.*, p.115.

² *Ibid.*, p.213.

naar het doen van nieuwe dingen en ontmoeten van andere mensen is weer overheersend] (p. 165).

In the end, Heleen leaves Spitsbergen, but returns to visit Nils after a few weeks, because “nobody will ever be able to understand what we have experienced together, nobody will know us as we know each other – this is something I will never forget.” [Niemand zal ooit kunnen begrijpen wat wij met elkaar hebben meegemaakt, niemand zal ons kennen zoals wij elkaar kennen en dat zal ik niet vergeten.] (p. 168). The coming back ‘home’ to Spitsbergen is composed as the counterpart to Heleen’s arrival described in the prologue: the dogs’ reaction is overwhelming, they bark ecstatically to welcome her. While Nils, haggard and sallow, cries and hugs her and uses an impressive and emotional body language, Heleen is unable to speak, she can only feel the strong affection coming over her and ending in the mute question in her mind: “Should I stay?” [“Zal ik blijven?”] (p. 175). The visual alignment of the prologue, where no relationship between protagonists exists yet, is resolved at the end in favor of the strongly emotional, sensually experienced return.

The Arctic has changed Heleen, she has changed Nils and in the end their relationship: the mutual influence of landscape and humans, the shared experience of darkness and Arctic winter affect relationships between humans, too. The shift in her mind and the improvement of her inner self shown in *Waar blijft het licht* is influenced by the physical isolation, the harsh life conditions and the inevitable and continuous interaction with the Arctic space. The improvement results, on the one hand in countering prejudices against the life in the Arctic, and on the other hand in Heleen’s life in general. Thus, Spitsbergen and the Arctic appear in this creative travel book as a catalyst that provokes and speeds significant changes in the protagonist’s mind, or as a “physical and spiritual magnet.”¹ Heleen proclaims how the experience of an extreme Arctic life helped her find herself: “The wind cannot harm me anymore. The touristy feeling is gone. I am

¹ Ingrid Urberg: „'Svalbard's Daughters'. *Personal Accounts by Svalbard's Female Pioneers*”. In: *Nordlit* 22 (2007), pp.167-191, here p.190.

an Eskimo now. I am happy.” [De Wind deert me niet meer. Het toeristische passagiersgevoel is verdwenen. Ik ben een Eskimo, ik ben gelukkig.] (p. 117).