"*Stadichoan Wurde Wy Ôfknypt*": The Erosion of Frisian Culture in Contemporary Flood Fiction

Kelly van der Meulen

Abstract

This article situates the Frisian novel *Ûnder wetter* by Koos Tiemersma (2009)—in which an orchestrated flood leads to Fryslân's demise—in the Dutch cultural narrative of *de strijd tegen het water*, wherein flood history is united with national pride and loss. Building on the work by Pieter Vermeulen, with a specific focus on the notion of the 'future reader', it highlights how the novel frames its narrative to build upon reader's cultural memory, and how it intricately links the flood to the death of Frisian language and culture. As such, it concludes that the climate crisis in Frisian *and* Dutch context truly becomes a crisis of culture, too.

Introduction: *De Strijd tegen het Water*

This year, 2023, marks the seventy-year anniversary of the North Sea Flood of 1953, in which 1836 Dutch citizens lost their lives. The 1953 flood, caused by a combination of spring tide and a northwestern gale, has had an unparalelled impact on Dutch cultural memory. The anniversary was marked by numerous commemorative practices, such as anniversary coins, a memorial service at the National Monument, a podcast walking tour, and so forth. Such practices highlight how the flood and its aftermath have shaped recent Dutch history and culture, and how the events of 1953 continue to be relevant today.

These memorial practices establish themselves as part of, and cannot be seen separated from, the Dutch cultural narrative of *de strijd tegen het water* (the battle against water). The first record of flooding in the Netherlands dates back to 838 AD, and disastrous floods on both the river- and sea-front have happened regularly since. Influential in Dutch history are for example the Saint Elizabeth's Flood in 1421, which is often (incorrectly) said to have created the Biesbosch nature reserve, or the Christmas Flood in 1717, with an estimated 14,000 deaths in Groningen and Fryslân. In order to illustrate how such floods and the watery geographical mark-up of the Netherlands have shaped history and culture, historian Simon Schama uses the term 'moral geography' to illustrate how morals and landscape have become interlinked in the Dutch context. In Schama's analysis, the period between 1550 and 1650 was particularly influential in the establishment of *de strijd tegen het water,* in which landscape, religion and moral character became intertwined. This centennial saw a reclamation of land on two grounds: both from Spanish reign, and from the water. The latter is often phrased in literature as a blessed act: surely, the Dutch must be blessed to be able to reclaim land from both the Spanish and the water. In gaining sovereignity on both grounds, the land of the newly-formed Dutch Calvinist republic "was not merely reclaimed but redeemed, and in the process both were morally transformed. So the act of separating dry land from wet was laden with scriptural significance" (Schama 34-5). The increase in poldering (the act of land-reclamation) following the establishment

of the Dutch republic ensured that this narrative became ingrained in Dutch landscape—visible to this day.

Throughout history, the story of *de strijd tegen het water* has been one that narrates loss, the power water holds over land, but simultaneously also captures the way Dutch water management has negated many of the risks of living on land below sea-level, and how life in the Netherlands has persisted despite its flood risks. *De strijd tegen het water* is both about loss and about pride, but in the Anthropocene, that narrative is challenged. Deluges are no longer framed as Biblical punishments, but today they are increasingly caused by climate change—the embodiment of humanity's mistakes. The growing flood-risk in the Netherlands thus not only threatens life below sea-level, but also an entire cultural identity attached to it.

Literature's Answer

The Anthropocene, the epoch centred around humanity's ineffable impact on the planet, challenges our way of thinking: we are confronted with our past actions, that will continue to influence our future on scales we cannot fully encompass. The Anthropocene asks us to navigate past, present, and future, as well as rethinking our role and influence on this planet. This debate gains additional weight in the Netherlands, as global warming positions real, measurable and already visible effects; not only to the livelihood of those living by the coast or in the river deltas, but also to a nation's culture. Consequently, this theme is increasingly tackled in Dutch climate fiction, a subgenre that has been rapidly growing in the past five years (van Uchelen). In this paper, I zoom in on the Frisian novel *Ûnder wetter* (Under Water, 2009) by Koos Tiemersma. Within Anthropocene discourse, the province of Fryslân is a captivating case study, as it holds a unique position within the Netherlands. Fryslân has its own language and culture, complementing its Dutch heritage. The use of the Frisian language, however, is in decline, and the province's rich cultural heritage is thus already facing an issue of survival. Fryslân is a coastal province in the North of the Netherlands, largely situated below sea-level, rich with lakes and rivers and

both known for and dependent on its water for tourism. Across the Netherlands, Fryslân is perhaps most well-known for hosting the *Elfstedentocht* (Eleven Cities Tour), a long-distance skating tour on natural ice, moving through eleven cities in one stretch. The last *Elfstedentocht* was held in 1997, because temperatures since then have not dropped low enough to create enough ice to facilitate the tour. Furthermore, four of the five Dutch islands in the Wadden Sea are considered to be Frisian land. The islands serve a natural protective barrier for the mudflats between the islands and the mainland, which largely falls dry during low tide. The Waddenarea is therefore home to many different species of wildlife, all of which are threatened by climate change should sea level rise and prevent the area from falling dry during low tides.

Fryslân thus holds a unique position within the Netherlands, and its rich regional culture complemented by its ties with Dutch culture and heritage make it a complex and interesting case study for cultural studies. The paradoxical cultural narrative of *de strijd tegen het water* is alive in Fryslân too, but with an additional dimension of a province that is already seeing its language in decline, and where its culture thus was already under threat before we understood that rising sea levels could have catastrophic consequences for the Netherlands. Alongside with the decline in the use of the Frisian language, very little Dutch scholarship focuses on Frisian history, culture, or literature.

Therefore, this article places the Frisian novel *Ûnder wetter* at its centre. The novel reflects many elements of ecocritical discourse, and builds upon cultural memory to establish an affective response amongst its readership. The novel is set in 2065, as plans are fortified to return parts of the low-lying land to the sea as sea-levels continue to rise; including the entire province of Fryslân. The new coastline will be used to build power plants, harvesting the energy of the tides. *Ûnder wetter* is the diary of the Frisian poet Sil Posset, who refuses to leave his homeland behind while military pressure increases. Sil narrates how he and his friends attempt to protest against the 'evacuation', and reflects upon the displacement experienced by the Frisian people when they are forced out of their homes and become displaced as they are moved to refugee camps throughout Eastern Europe following the flood. This

article will ultimately show how the novel builds upon cultural memory to highlight how both Frisian land *and* culture disappear under water.

Future Readers

Recent scholarship in ecocriticism and cultural memory studies alike have highlighted how cultural memory plays a role in Anthropocene discourse. The Anthropocene, with its continuous interplay and mediation of the past, present and future, echoes recent calls for cultural memory studies to become more future-oriented (Craps 486). In a roundtable session on memory studies and the Anthropocene, Stef Craps concludes that cultural memory studies has a "growing consciousness of the Anthropocene" and in turn, focuses on the scalar possibilities cultural memory holds in addressing the scalar complexities of climate change (Craps et al. 500). Timothy Clark has notoriously drawn attention to the discrepancy between the temporal and spatial scale in climatological change, and the temporal and spatial scale commonly found in literature (particularly within literary realism). Climate change, of course, is a planetary phenomenon that has been happening for decades and will continue for centuries. Carbon dioxide for example, the most commonly-known greenhouse gas, is estimated to stay in the atmosphere for 300-1000 years (Buis). Such a timespan far exceeds that of a human life, and particularly the temporal (and spatial) scale commonly found in literature, which often focuses on only a fragment of a human life.

Approaches from what Craps establishes as the new phase in cultural memory studies commonly focus on environmental memory or planetary memory, reconciling the focus on the past in the traditionally humanist memory studies with the future- and planet-oriented focus of climate change and the Anthropocene. Scholarship by Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen, amongst others, have highlighted how environmental memory plays a role in climate fiction (cli-fi). Vermeulen introduces the 'future reader' as the narratological, embodied representation of environmental memory. The future (or: posthumous) reader is a "narrative-enabling device" uniquely situated to provide an image of the

future, as well as a call to action (872). The role of the future reader is to caution contemporary readers, for whom "there still is supposed to be a chance" (872). As such, the future reader might align 'real-world events' with imaginative events, illustrating how one event might lead to a chain of events. Vermeulen writes that the future reader does not attempt to provide a solution to the issues narrated, but merely shows the progression of time and writes a cautionary tale. Such future readers are thus uniquely situated within literature to narrate a world that is far removed from the reader, often temporally, but without losing an affective response amongst readership. As such, future readers are able to navigate common criticism on dystopian fiction: that it should do justice to the temporal and spatial scale of climate change (Clark), but that it also should not create a simple, superficial depiction of climate change that is so far removed from the readers' reality that it loses any affective response (Trexler).

Often, future readers are embodied by characters uniquely situated within literature to make such observations, like a geologist. As such, Vermeulen identifies two modes within the future reader: "that of a future historian and that of a future geologist—the former competently interpreting humanity's current failures, the latter typically dispassionately reading the record of its passing" (874). The geologist records; the historian contextualises. The future reader is thereby able to bridge the scalar discrepancy of climate change in literature (to some extent), as they are able to draw observations alongside different temporal axes.

Embedding the Past

The prologue to *Ûnder wetter* is set in 2140 and is published both in Frisian and Lithuanian, and presents the diary as the book published to mark the anniversary of the flood, to accommodate the three hundred or so Frisians now living in Lithuania. The prologue thus immediately highlights the temporal complexities that are central to the Anthropocene, and positions the diary as a record of past events. The diary, which makes up the main text of the novel, starts in October, three months before the flood. At first, Sil is mostly set in the geologist's

mode, as he writes about his friends, his daily life, and how military presence in Fryslân increases. However, when his university closes, Sil's voice momentarily changes from geologist to historian. The announcement of the university's closing frames the plan, Delta2, as beneficial for all involved: land will be returned to sea and the new coastline will make way for power plants and profitable salt mines. The narrative focuses on the ingenuity of such power plants, and refrains from mentioning the downsides to Delta2.

> Gjin wurd oer de sâltwinning dy't fierder opfierd wurde sil no't it gas derút is, oer de natuer, hoe't se fan slach is, har temperatuer fierder oprint, de simmers ferdroegje en de winters ferreine […] en boppe alles de see dy't straks in part fan ús lan fuortspielt en de sintrales fan mear wetter foarsjen sil. (36)
>
> (No word about how the salt extraction will be increased now the natural gas is out, about the nature, how she's upset, her temperature going up, summers drying up and winters rained out […] and above all how the sea soon will wash away part of our land, and provide the power plants with more water.)

Here, Sil's voice shortly changes to that of a historian, as he comments upon how the video and the speech neglect to mention that this was not a voluntary decision, but a direct consequence of anthropogenic climate change, nor the way it will affect nature and the people living in these areas. All communication regarding Delta2 focuses on the ingenuity of it—leaving it to Sil to contextualise such propaganda. It is Sil who reminds readers of the circumstances leading to this new future: the increase in storms, continued periods of drought alternated with heavy rainfall (36). Such consequences of climate change were already visible in the late 2000s, but are certainly recognisable for a 2023 readership: in 2021, for example, heavy rainfall in an otherwise dry summer led to heavy floods in the south of the Netherlands. Sil's diary then mentions events situated in the novel's alternative future, as he recounts

not only the effects of climate change known today, but also how the Dutch dunes were flooded, or how new negotiations between China and Europe about energy and water distribution led to the implementation of Delta2. Sil thus binds together a past recognisable to readers, including textbook consequences of climate change, with fictional, future events to illustrate how events from the readers' past have led to this future outcome.

This instance, where Sil shortly switches to the historian's voice, is a singular occurrence in the first half of the book. Halfway through, however, Sil's voice permanently changes from the geologist to the historian. Up until this point, Sil has taken very little action, and his diary mostly passively describes events. Although Sil and his bandmates, whom together form the literary band FRL, find that poetry and music no longer suffice to voice their discontent, plan radical action, Sil remains a passive figure in these plans. The rest of FRL, signalling that the economic capital promised by the salt mines is the main reason that Fryslân is being given up, start planning the assassination of one of the key figures in Delta2. Sil goes along, but is afraid to speak up, afraid to take action—his diary is a geologist's record, rarely voicing any discontent. Instances where the narrative touches upon a shared collective memory with its readership, such as in the passage described above, are positioned in the historian's voice: providing context and a historical lesson, along with the narrative. Sil, however, mostly refrains from commenting, and writes his diary in the voice of the geologist.

However, as he walks through one of the desolated parks in Leeuwarden, he questions his place in the world:

> Wolken tûmelen oer my hinne en ik wie de iennichste dy't it seach. Is dat wat my fan belang makket? Dat ik fêstlis, it publik bin by de foarstelling dy't it lot ús foarset?
> Ik soe fuort. Ynienen stie ik each yn each mei in rikelfoks. In koart stuit seagen wy elkoar oan yn in moeting dêr't wy beide net op rekkene hiene. Yn de eagen lies ik dat ik dêr net hearde, it wie sýn territoarium. Dêr't minsken belies jouwe,

> sei er, nimme wy it oer. […] Hy sjachele mei in ûnferskillich sypkjende sturt de strewellen yn, foar him hie 'k ôfdien.
> Lykwols, ik wit wat hy nèt wit. Want sa is it: alles wat net swimme kin sil fersûpe, útsein wy. Wy dy't dit alles yn gong setten, mei de fûgels spylje wy fan ruten, wat oerblieuwt komt om. (88-90)
>
> (Clouds tumbled over me, and I was the only one who saw it. Is that what makes me important? That I record it, that I am the audience to the show fate shows us?
> I intended to leave. Suddenly, I am face to face with a fox. We consider each other for a short moment, a meeting neither of us counted on. In his eyes I saw that I didn't belong there, it was his territory. Where people give up, he said, we take over. […] He trudged into the bushes with a tail floating with indifference, to him, I had been written off. Yet, I know what he doesn't know. Because it is like this: everything that cannot swim shall drown, except for us. We, who have put everything in motion, we can flee with the birds, what remains will die.)

This encounter comes at a key moment in the novel and provides a turning point, as this is the moment Sil takes action. Although his friends are working on 'real' action, Sil remains passive and quiet, only *acting* by recording events in his diary. As mentioned, his voice is mostly that of the geologist, only occasionally venturing into that of the historian. However, in the park Sil starts to wonder about his own role as writer: wondering if his value lies in his act of *recording.* As he turns to leave, he encounters a fox. The encounter foregrounds human agency in the climate crisis. Initially, it is Sil who is trespassing in the park; once a location that signified humanity's constant shaping and reshaping of nature, but now "make in desolate yndruk" (89) (makes a desolated impression), as paths are overgrown. The park is now territory of the fox, highlighting how even before the flood, the centre of Fryslân's capital city is increasingly overtaken by nature, space taken up by non-human

life rather than human life. The historian's voice in this passage, however, also foregrounds the anthropocentrism of the climate crisis, as Sil realises that he knows more than the fox does: namely that the flood will come, brought about by human action, and that all animal life will be displaced. Mankind, having brought about the flood, can flee with the birds, but "alles wat net simme kin sil fersûpe" (88) (everything that cannot swim, will drown).

Displacement

The encounter with the fox highlights that although the Frisians might be able to flee, both are faced with displacement resulting from climate change. The focus on the Frisian community in this novel, and particularly the way they become displaced as a result of Delta2, calls to mind the "temporalities of place" described by Rob Nixon in his work on slow violence. Nixon draws attention to the way the poor are primarily affected by the climate crisis, thus highlighting systemic inequalities between different communities. The Frisian people, of course, do not hold the same position in the Dutch context as many marginalised communities do in the global field, but the Frisian community is a minority within the Netherlands. Nixon's temporalities of place refer to the understanding that "place is a temporal attainment that must be constantly renegotiated in the face of changes that arrive from without and within" (18), foregrounding the physical displacement caused, in one way or another, by the climate crisis. The Frisian people are set aside from the rest of the Netherlands by their language and culture, the rural location, bordering the Wadden Sea, and far removed from the cultural, governmental and economic centre of the Netherlands. The novel illustrates that for the Dutch, there is no question of place; but the Frisian people are forced to leave their homes.

As Sil describes the promotional film for Delta2, he concludes: "Stadichoan wurde wy ôfknypt. Eutanasy, sis mar" (37) (Slowly we are being cut off. Call it euthanasia), articulating how the displacement of the Frisian community eventually leads to relocation entirely. Sil's fellow students, for example, have taken up international internships, but

Sil does not dare to leave his city, even as it becomes increasingly clear that his university will soon close down:

> Jij en je roots, konstatearre se. Soms vind ik je een beetje aandoenlijk. Echt. Steek je energie in je eigen toekomst, de wereld ligt voor je open. Het Instituut hier heeft z'n langste tijd gehad, ze krijgen heus geen dispensatie. Dat heeft ook weinig zin als iedereen weg is, vind je niet? De jaren zijn weken geworden, of is dat je ontgaan?
>
> (You and your roots, she concludes. Sometimes I find you a little pathetic. Really. You should invest your energy in your own future, the world is your oyster. The Institute here has had its day, they certainly won't get dispensation. That makes little sense when everyone is gone, don't you think? The years have become weeks, or has that eluded you?)

The other students are speaking in Dutch, which is particularly striking as the novel rarely includes Dutch conversation. All use of Dutch is directly linked to the displacement of the Frisians: news about impeding measurements, such as travel restrictions, is in Dutch, and like these students, all soldiers only converse in Dutch. In ignoring the Frisian language, the governmental position is made clear: Fryslân is seen as negligible. This is of course only amplified as the Frisian land is evacuated, and the people of Fryslân find themselves spread out across Eastern Europe. The use of Dutch, only ever in relation to the Frisian displacement, highlights how the novel inextricably illustrates that the flood will wash away not only land, but culture too.

Although the novel primarily focuses on the displacement of the Frisian people, Sil's oscillation between the geologist's and the historian's voice highlights humanity's impact upon the climate crisis. The first instance where Sil's narrative voice firmly changes to a historian's voice, for example, is when he recounts how any official communication about Delta2 neglects to mention the circumstances leading up to this plan: namely anthropogenic climate change and its consequences. Likewise,

in his encounter with the fox, Sil recognises how non-human life is impacted by humanity. The encounter is given additional meaning as it marks the shift from Sil's geologist voice to the historian's. Following his walk through the park, Sil starts taking action: he travels to Groningen to meet up with the girl he likes and stays the night. When FRL attempt their assassination plan, it is Sil who holds the gun and pulls the trigger. The contrast between the poet we meet in the early pages of the book, who records but does not act, and the poet who has taken radical action to inspire change, is clear.

The historian's voice works, on the one hand, to draw upon the readers' shared collective memory by connecting the events of the novel's imagined future to events readers remember, such as geo-political relationships between the Netherlands and Eastern Europe, or low turn-outs to national elections in the early 2000s. Consequently, such memories are built upon to illustrate how the future leads to the displacement of the Frisian people, as their land is returned to the sea. The historian illustrates how the flood will mean the disappearance of Frisian culture, but also touches upon the consequences of the flood for other life forms. Ultimately, the climate crisis and the events of Delta2 specifically become a form of "material, embodied memory of past decisions and mistakes" (Plate 494), bound together in the novel.

Conclusion

Following Sil's encounter with the fox, where he wonders if his value lies in his act of *recording*, Sil's voice permanently changes from geologist to historian. He also starts taking action; speaking up against his friends, ultimately being the one to complete the assassination. In the epilogue, we read that upon arrival in Lithuania, he starts editing and translating his diary, ensuring that his story—and as such, the story of Fryslân—is read by future generations. The value of his diary indeed lies in his act of recording; not only the events of 2065, but also the very act of recording and preserving the Frisian language.

In the epilogue, readers learn that some speakers of the Frisian language are left, amongst the three hundred or so Frisians living in

Lithuania. The Frisian language and culture have not completely been washed away, but their futures are bleak. Sil's account of events, which builds upon readers' memory and the meaningful oscillation between historian and geologist, inextricably links the continued existence of Frisians to the threat posed to life in the Netherlands by the climate crisis. It juxtaposes the Dutch narrative of ingenious water management with the harsh reality of displacement. The future of the Netherlands thus is one where water not only erodes land, but culture, too.

Works Cited

Buis, Alan. "The Atmosphere: Getting a Handle on Carbon Dioxide," *NASA*, Oct. 9, 2019, https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2915/the-atmosphere-getting-a-handle-on-carbon-dioxide/.

Craps, Stef. "Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory," *Parallax*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2017, pp. 479-492.

Craps, Stef et al. "Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable." *Memory Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2018, pp. 498-515.

"Hoofdlijnen." *Canon van Nederland*, last modified in 2020, https://www.canonvannederland.nl/nl/page/141570/hoofdlijnen#leven-in-een-kwetsbare-delta.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* Harvard UP, 2011.

Schama, Simon. *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age.* The Regents of the U of California, 1988.

Tiemersma, Koos. *Ûnder wetter*, Friese Pers Boekerij, 2009.

Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change.* U of Virginia P, 2015.

Van Uchelen, Annephine. "Klimaatroman Steeds Populairder: 'Schrijvers Voelen Aankomen Wat Gebeuren Gaat'," *NOS*, Aug. 15, 2021, https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2393920-klimaatroman-steeds-populairder-schrijvers-voelen-aankomen-wat-gebeuren-gaat.

Vermeulen, Pieter. "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2017, pp. 867-85.

Biography

Kelly van der Meulen graduated with a double master's degree in literature from Utrecht University. Her research is centred around ecocriticism and cultural memory studies, with a focus on climate change narratives. Her thesis explored the role of flood memory in contemporary Dutch literature.