

Editorial

Creative Writing and Art Ecological In(ter)ventions in the Francophone World

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The adjective “Francophone” is habitually used to address those countries where French is the common language. There are 29 French-speaking countries in the world, with France as the place where the language originated but not the most populous of them, a primacy that belongs to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Although the noun “Francophonie,” from which the adjective comes, was coined in the nineteenth century, it only entered common usage in the 1960s when Leopold Senghor—first president of Senegal, poet, and major theoretician of *Négritude*—started to use it consistently. It would be correct to surmise that the term “Francophone” is associated with the legacy of French colonialism.

The term “ecology” was instead introduced by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, who referred to the meaning of the Greek “oikos”, as “household, dwelling, habitation” (see Jax and Schwarz, 145-182). Etymologically, we may say that to think “ecologically” means to reflect on the intertwined dynamics of linguistic discourse (*logos*) and dwelling upon a specific place (*oikos*). It is significant that the term “vernacular,” which is also used by geographers to indicate any landscape combinations of natural and human structures in the context of ordinary people’s lives (as opposed to a more institutional landscape), comes from the Latin *vernaculus* “domestic, native, indigenous; pertaining to home-born slaves,” thus revealing once again the political tie between language and dwelling.

If we combine the two terms—Francophone and ecology—we are thus immediately faced with some questions about the relationships between the language(s), the place(s), and the politics in which we dwell, insofar as our sense of place is rooted in as well as mediated and expressed by specific languages within situated communities. What happens, though, when the language we are supposed to use to communicate (with) our own surroundings originates instead in another place and within a different community? Can our sense of place be translated – to use a spatial as well as linguistic verb—without losing both sociolinguistic and environmental specificity? And to what extent can a community or an individual inhabit their own place with(in) a language that has been instead imposed upon them?

Inevitably, these are some of the questions that lie behind this issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to “Ecological In(ter)ventions in the Francophone World/ In(ter)ventions écologiques dans le monde francophone.” If one of the merits of so-called French Theory has been to acknowledge that “language is not a transparent medium” but that “it affects the way thinking organizes the world” (Posthumus 2017, 24-25), it is no surprise that the two guest editors, Stephanie Posthumus and Anne-Rachel Hermetet, have not only crafted a bilingual title but also addressed in their introduction the difficulties of outlining “the elements of what might constitute ‘the Francophone world’” when it comes to ecology (Hermetet & Posthumus, Intro). In fact, both English and French have histories of political and environmental colonization and exploitation, with the former lately taking the position of hegemonic lingua franca that—as the very term reveals—once belonged to the latter. The two guest editors have therefore opted for introductory remarks split between English and French without any direct translation, as a practice situating their different ecocritical approaches as well as a way of underlining “obstacles to meaning that can only be overcome by the creation of multilingual communities” (ibid.).

Intercultural friction is at the political core of our current environmental discourses and, unsurprisingly, it has always been central to the experience of those Francophone authors who lived under French colonization. Environmentalism might have in fact been “a taboo subject in philosophical circles in France” (Posthumus 2017, 4), leading to a “delayed engagement with ecocriticism” (Persels, ix), but influential figures in Caribbean thought and Francophone cultural commentary such as Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire [née Roussi], and Édouard Glissant have somehow anticipated our current attempts to think geopoetics and geopolitics together (cf. Last 2017). As Mardorossian has pointed out, Glissant in particular provides “a useful bridge between environmentalism and postcolonial consideration today” (988). In fact, in gathering together crucial environmental issues while highlighting the complex incontrovertible question of the relationship between language and landscape, Glissant’s work emphasizes “how in interacting with human beings, the land’s specificity codetermines and permeates our identity and representational structures” (989). Consequently, Glissant’s creolized ecology does not gesture toward an alleged original harmony of *logos* and *oikos*, a mythical identity of language and soil before colonization. Instead, his work “moves across bodies and land to reconfigure what it means to be human and to expose the schism between the social and the natural that was generated by colonialism” (989). As Glissant himself writes in *Poetics of Relation*, to reactivate a proper earth ecology—or, as he calls it, an “aesthetic of the earth”—artists must give birth to “an aesthetic of rupture and connection” capable of displaying both “the fever of passion for the idea of ‘environment’” and “the half-starved dust of Africa” (151).

It seems no coincidence that some of the artistic in(ter)ventions (a wonderfully articulated double-word that is also a homograph in English and French) collected in the Creative Writing and Art section of this issue of *Ecozon@* can be interpreted in light of Glissant’s poetics. For instance, our first artist, Dominique Weber, shares with Glissant a similar aesthetic concern about the schism between the social and the natural. As demonstrated by Weber’s 2019 art installation entitled “why, my love, did we get

divorced?” (or, in French, “Pourquoi, mon amour, avons-nous divorcé?”), from which the cover image of this issue of *Ecozon@* is taken, Weber is in fact interested in questioning what he calls “a deep divorce” between humanity and other-than-human life through the juxtaposition of a maple branch and a “veil of growth.” As Weber writes in his submission remarks, both objects are “placed opposite each other in a state of suspension that is both uncertain and worried:” while the maple branch has been cut off and “seems to freeze in a death horizontal position,” the veil of growth instead “spreads out a strange and threatening verticality.” Yet, as the guest editors also notice in their introduction, this petrified state of disconnection does not appear definitive, as both the tree branch and the veil carry signs of contamination and life: the spots on the veil and the fruits on the branch appear in fact as surprising mycotic entities ready to grow at any moment in the dawn-like light of the installation. This resistance to a deadly separation is also key to the other two series of Weber’s works anthologized here. Both the drawings made by mud imprints and those integrating other-than-human natural entities such as moss (2018-2019), are geopoetic attempts to listen to the environment and recover a sense of material community with the earth. As Weber writes, these drawings display “the meaning of the crossings, intersections, continuities that link our body to the water and humus of the soil”: in so doing, they represent an idea of love of the earth that is based on the cross-pollinating materiality of the land and are thus a wonderful example of what Glissant calls “aesthetics of a variable continuum, of an invariant discontinuum” (Glissant, 151).

Catherine Diamond’s poems express a different kind of friction between the political, the aesthetic, and the nonhuman. Diamond—a professor of theatre and environmental literature at Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan, as well as the director/playwright of the Kinnari Ecological Theatre Project in Southeast Asia—sets a poetic stage in which not only do the two hegemonic Anglophone and Francophone cultures encounter one another, but also a certain stereotyped idea of French culture as highly intellectual is met by concerns about bodies and the material exuberance of life. So, for instance, in “Rabelais’ Mango,” T.S. Eliot’s conservative, prudent Prufrock (from Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 1920) is mocked by a hedonistic image of a poetic character engaging with a fruit in what is described as “a drooling Pantagrueling ecstasy.” In Diamond’s second poem, “A Day at Giverny,” a day trip to what is known as Claude Monet’s Garden (in the region of Normandy) becomes instead the stage for a reflection upon our aesthetic expectations and a nonhuman nature that is beyond our control, a “wanton act of weeds” that can indeed—and I would add, positively—“corrupt the beauty of the eternal mind.”

The two other poems included in this section of *Ecozon@* are not directly related to the Francophone world but they still express a similar concern for the division between humanity and the nonhuman world. The first one is the English translation of a poem by the Greek poet Nikos Gatsos (1911-1992). The translator, Clayton Miles Lehmann, is a Professor of History at the University of South Dakota who specializes in ancient history, archaeology, and epigraphy as well as classical reception. Gatsos’ poem, entitled “Persephone’s Nightmare” [Ο εφιάλτης της Περσεφόνης] was originally written in 1976 and sets modern Greek environmental issues against Greek mythology. As Prof. Lehmann

notes in his introductory remark, in Gatsos's poem the town of Eleusis becomes the frictional setting for a disparaging contrast between "the most important ancient shrine of Demeter and Persephone, goddesses associated with Earth's fertility" and its modern counterpart, an "industrial wasteland."

The last contribution is also a poetic treat, kindly offered to the readers of *Ecozon@* by Rosemarie Rowley. An Irish award-winning poet and ecofeminist, Rowley has published five books of poetry and several essays on the relationships between feminism, literature, and the Green Movement. For this issue of *Ecozon@*, she submitted an extract from a longer, seven-chapter poem entitled "The Wake of Wonder," which was written in 1987 and was a prize winner in the 1997 Scottish International Open Poetry Competition. In the "Wake of Wonder" the poetic voice interweaves political, personal, sexual and ecological questions, reflecting upon the past as a way to look for a better future. The section anthologized here, the fifth in the original sequence, deals in particular with the relationships between love, humanity, and environmental degradation.

Finally, I want to conclude the Creative Writing and Art section of this issue of *Ecozon@* with a belated thanks to my predecessor, Serenella Iovino. In Fall 2018 I had the privilege of taking over Serenella's role as the editor for this section of the journal. The contribution that Serenella made to *Ecozon@*, and to this section in particular, is incalculable, and the brilliant editorials she wrote during her four-year tenure as the Creative Writing and Art editor are a crucial legacy for ecocriticism as well as for the Environmental Humanities as a whole. Here, I want simply to thank Serenella for her intellectual generosity and thoughtful support: without her friendship, I would not have been up to the task that Carmen Flys Junquera, Axel Goodbody and the entire editorial board of *Ecozon@* kindly entrusted to me.

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