

Ecological In(ter)ventions in the Francophone World An Introduction

Anne-Rachel Hermetet
Université d'Angers, France
anne-rachel.hermetet@univ-angers.fr

Stephanie Posthumus
McGill University, Canada
stephanie.posthumus@mcgill.ca



What ways of thinking, reading, and writing ecologically can we invent in order to intervene in the current environmental crisis? This special issue invites the reader to reflect on what ecological inventing and intervening mean in the Francophone world of literary texts, art, and theory, as well as on the gaps between ecological actions and the kinds of cultural production under consideration.

The issue's cover image acts as a catalyst for these reflections. Taken from French artist Dominique Weber's 2019 art installation entitled 'Pourquoi, mon amour, avons-nous divorcé?', the photograph shows a suspended tree branch, removed from its original habitat and floating in the air almost as if by magic. The placement of the branch in a barren indoor space creates a sense of other-worldliness that is amplified by the lighting techniques. Its height suggests a mysterious, levitating object that reminds the viewer of the times tree branches are ignored despite their amazing capacity to grow out and up. The fact that the branch has been cut and now exists in an artificial environment brings to mind an amputated nature, that suffers greatly from the effects of human intervention, a nature that may one day only exist in petrified form because of earth's uninhabitability. Yet the branch continues to hold the promise of future natures, with the possibility of grafting and the existence of buds or seeds that can remain dormant for many, many years. Moreover, the branch has lost none of its affective power. In fact, the installation highlights this power with the striking contrast between the room's right angles and the incredible shapeliness of the branches' bifurcations. The object's beauty resonates in the strange luminous yellow-green colour of the branch and the darkness of the burrs or fruits. The branch appears both dead and alive, more isolated and more individual, asleep and yet not completely stripped of life or liveliness.

The image invites the viewer into an affective space in which humans and nature coexist uneasily, with the constant danger of destruction lurking just below the surface. We are not being taught how to live symbiotically with the earth or how nature should be understood scientifically. Rather, we are asked:

What does it mean to draw or to paint or to write poems in the light of contemporary emergencies due to the advent of what many now call the Anthropocene era ? [...] What can we expect from the arts ? That they make us feel and think – avoiding the pitfall that would consist in merely illustrating this or that thesis coming from the natural sciences or the human sciences, while knowing how to be open to their teachings. But that the arts make us feel and think what, and, above all, how ? How can we ensure that our media and our surfaces become spaces that appropriately welcome the unity, the equality and the community of everything that is and everything that lives ? (Weber)

In these reflections taken from the artist's website and in particular his "Working notes, 5 - 13-14.VI.2018 : walking out," Weber poses the questions at the heart of this issue. How can the notion of the ecological be articulated in ways that are specific to the artistic experience (including literary)? How do artistic and theoretical in(ter)ventions enrich the notion of the ecological by creating their own interpretive spaces both detached from and implicated in their socio-political realities? How should theorists, literary scholars, and artists evoke the power of art and literature in response to current discourses about climate catastrophe and the future effects of global warming?

To answer these questions, the articles in this special issue draw on different disciplinary perspectives. One of the objectives of our call for ecological in(ter)ventions was to go beyond the traditional literary essay focused on an individual text and create a space for interdisciplinary, creative work. We are extremely pleased that the articles in this issue reflect the many ways in which ecological approaches are necessarily multidisciplinary with contributions from the fields of philosophy, literature, art history, anthropology and environmental activism. Ecological invention takes the form of creative thinking in Marine Legrand's ethnographic exploration of urban waste systems as semiotic and material, Vincent Lecomte's rhizomatic analysis of artist Pierre Huyghe's bestiary, and Édith Liégey's ecomorphic analysis of/from trees in museum spaces. Art and writing are brought together in order to think about the spaces between constructions of the human, nature, and animals. The issue also includes critical analysis of a wide variety of texts such as Pilar Andrade's analysis of the nuclear imaginary in fiction and non-fiction texts, Kenneth Toah Nsah's environmentally-informed reading of the Cameroon/Congo-Brazzaville theatrical coproduction *Le Cri de la forêt*, Gina Stamm's literary investigation of the role of the physical environment in Antoine Volodine's works, and Mariève Isabel's socio-historical reading of *Mainmise*, as a counter-cultural, alternative magazine for rethinking nature-human relations in Quebec in the 1970s. These articles intervene in the sense that they open the text up to multiple ecological interpretations. But they also intervene in the larger discourse of literary studies by drawing attention to texts that would not have been considered worthy of literary attention by more aesthetically-driven approaches. By not respecting the traditional lines between fiction and non-fiction, between the canon and popular culture, these essays work to change the climate of traditional literary studies.

The second part of this issue's title speaks of 'the Francophone world.' We come back to the image on the front cover to address some of the problems raised by this

reference. While a text necessarily requires a kind of linguistic competency, an image does not. True, the viewer brings to the image a set of previous experiences and interpretive lenses, but it is not necessary to map the image onto a geographical place or a cultural framework. On the artist's website, we learn that the branch is from a maple tree and so we can imagine the biome from which the branch may have come. But maple trees are found in many different geographical locations and are certainly not unique to the Francophone world. Moreover, the quote from the artist's 'working notes' is an English translation provided on the website where the user can find a much larger collection of reflections that are for the most part all in French. The elements of what might constitute 'the Francophone world'—a use of the French language, references to Francophone culture or national literary traditions—become muddy when we consider the image on the front cover.

Similarly, the articles in this issue do not allow for a mapping of the Francophone world onto a well-defined geographical or cultural reality. Contributors are from Cameroon (studying in Denmark), France, Madrid, Quebec, the USA, and five of the articles are written in French and two in English. This diversity reflects a global spread that is characteristic of literary studies more generally. Academics often move from place to place during their careers even if they continue to research in the same disciplinary field. As for the cultural productions under consideration, they come from French writers and artists, but also European journalists, African playwrights, and Quebecois magazine writers. It is impossible to speak of a 'French' or 'Francophone world' contained within a set of borders in this case. There are thematic similarities across the articles, but they are grouped more around ecological issues than cultural or linguistic issues. For example, the problem of nuclear power and its devastating consequences are taken up in the European context by Andrade, at the Fukushima site by Lecomte, and in a fictional post-apocalyptic setting by Stamm. Art and writing as forms of local activism that resist the forces of global capitalism are addressed in Quebec by Isabel and in the Congo Basin by Nsah whereas the semiotic-materiality of urban spaces like Paris is written about by Liégey and Legrand. It would clearly be misleading to reduce this diversity of perspectives and approaches to a 'French' or 'Francophone' ecocriticism that some of the articles outrightly refute and that others acknowledge as a call to heed cultural differences.

Instead of trying to define the 'Francophone world,' we have opted instead to practice a form of cultural and linguistic diversity by writing our introduction in English and in French but without any direct translations. Writing in French, Anne-Rachel Hermetet offers an overview of the issue's main objectives and the seven articles from her own situated perspective. Her introduction is geared towards a Francophone readership and adopts a set of theoretical concepts specific to Hermetet's ecocritical approach. Writing in English, Stephanie Posthumus provides an introduction to this special issue, again from her own situated perspective, as a bilingual Canadian living in Montreal. As for the article summaries, Hermetet provides comments in French on the two articles written in English whereas Posthumus gives detailed explanations in English of the five articles written in French. The goal of the article summaries is to bridge the language gap between

ecocriticism and *écocritique*. At the same time, the lack of translation means that only a bilingual French-English reader can understand the entire introduction. To some extent, this approach constructs obstacles to meaning that can only be overcome by the creation of multilingual communities. We acknowledge the problems with this way of thinking but also want language to serve as a cog in the capitalist machine of instantaneous communication. We apologize in advance for any frustration this may cause for eco-minded readers who only understand one of the two languages.

Lorsque nous avons conçu le projet de ce numéro d'Ecozon, notre objectif était, en effet, de dégager nos approches de strictes considérations nationales ou linguistiques et ce dans deux directions au moins. D'une part, il s'agissait d'interroger les modalités de transfert de l'*ecocriticism* à des objets et des corpus non anglophones sans limiter le débat à des délimitations de territoire entre *écocritique* et *écopoétique*. Dans cette perspective, nous souhaitions opérer un décentrement pour reconsidérer les grands paradigmes initiaux de l'*ecocriticism*, fortement inscrits dans l'espace et la culture nord-américains : *wilderness*, *nature writing*, pastorale... Notre objectif était de prendre en compte un changement d'échelle dans les lieux de production des œuvres et dans les espaces dont celles-ci rendent compte. Notre choix de faire porter les interventions sur le monde francophone relevait de cette volonté de ne pas cantonner le discours à une hypothétique *écocritique* « française » ou en français. De fait les contributeurs n'appartiennent pas tous aux aires linguistiques et culturelles francophones et leurs interventions envisagent des cultures diverses : Cameroun et Congo Brazzaville, Québec, France, mais aussi des œuvres d'artistes non francophones exposant en France. D'autre part, les objets sont également variés : si les œuvres littéraires font l'objet de plusieurs articles - ceux de Pilar Andrade examinant des récits de la centrale nucléaire, de Gina Stamm étudiant le post-exotique de Volodine, de Kenneth Toah Nsah présentant la pièce *Le cri de la forêt*- d'autres types de textes sont aussi proposés : le rôle des revues dans le développement des mouvements écologistes est abordé par Mariève Isabel dans son analyse de la revue québécoise *Mainmise*. Trois contributions portent sur des productions artistiques : Vincent Lecomte étudie la vidéo *Human Mask* de Pierre Huyghe, Edith Liégey développe la notion d'*écomorphisme*, objet principal de ses recherches, en interrogeant la relation des humains aux arbres, à partir des vidéos *Horizontal* de la finlandaise Eija-Liisa Ahtila et *Les Yeux ronds* de la française Ariane Michel. Marine Legrand, enfin, propose un essai relevant de la recherche-action pour analyser les flux à l'œuvre dans la métropole parisienne, en recourant aux métaphores de l'ingestion et de la digestion.

Il nous semblait en effet nécessaire de croiser les objets et les approches critiques, de donner la parole à des universitaires comme à des artistes, de faire dialoguer des interventions académiques avec des essais. Cette diversité reflète la variété des questionnements que suscite la crise environnementale : les corpus, tous contemporains, en portent la trace, tout comme les analyses dont ils font l'objet. On est loin, toutefois, d'une approche purement circonstancielle, d'un effet de mode : dans les œuvres présentées ici, les risques environnementaux n'apparaissent pas sur un simple plan thématique, comme marqueur historique et culturel, mais informent profondément les

projets littéraires et artistiques. Emergent ainsi, dans plusieurs contributions, de nouvelles modalités de prise en charge de la notion d'inquiétude environnementale, aussi bien dans les œuvres que dans les perspectives théoriques ouvertes par les auteurs.

In the opening article, "Singer l'homme pour mieux le démasquer. Le projet écologique de Pierre Huyghe," Vincent Lecomte adopts an ecocritical, animal studies perspective to outline the shadowy forms of human exceptionalism in Huyghe's short video (*Untitled*) *Human Mask*. Inspired by a viral YouTube video of a monkey serving clients in a restaurant, Huyghe's film shows a solitary macaque wearing an anthropomorphic mask in what appears to be a former restaurant in the nuclear devastated zone of Fukushima. Lecomte analyzes the ways in which the film draws on notions of the animal and animality to trouble human temporalities and spatial orientations. He explains that the masked monkey stages mimesis not as referentiality but as a human-animal mirroring effect. In addition, Lecomte situates the film in the larger work of Huyghe's bestiary while also identifying what makes it unique, that is, the movements of an animal playing out the human condition, alone in a post-apocalyptic setting. In a fascinating reversal, the animal survives the human, leaving the spectator with a set of ghostly images that take on a life of their own.

Pilar Andrade's article, "Écrire, représenter, imaginer la centrale nucléaire," examines the representation of nuclear power plants in fiction and non-fiction texts written in French over the last thirty years. Contributing to the field of nuclear studies that seeks to understand the socio-political and environmental implications of nuclear power, Andrade outlines a transnational imaginary that includes disasters in Chernobyl and Fukushima. She adopts a literary perspective to analyze the nuclear power plant as a monstrous body that ingests human workers and dehumanizes labour in Elizabeth Filhol's novel *La centrale* (2010). She then looks at Antoine Volodine's novel *Terminus radieux* (2014) in which the reader discovers a post-apocalyptic landscape dotted with abandoned reactors. Despite the specter of radioactive toxicity that takes the form of missing and misshapen humans, an explicit environmentalist politics remains absent from the nuclear imaginary of this novel, explains Andrade. In Hélène Crié-Weiner and Yves Lenoir's speculative fiction *Tchernobyl-sur-Seine* (1987), Andrade focuses on the key narrative structures of the nuclear imaginary like the trope of inside and outside (ex. exclusion zones that keep humans out and a contaminated nature in). Turning to non-fiction, she then examines the trope of the visible/invisible in environmental journalist Sylestre Huet and photographer Éric Dexheimeyer's *Fessenheim Visible/Invisible* (2016). Andrade concludes that the nuclear imaginary gives rise to a new 'onto-gnosiology,' that seeks to theorize knowledge of invisible risks like radioactivity, 'strange beings' that cannot be perceived by the senses but whose effects prove devastating.

Dans « Inventing a Vegetal Post-Exotic in the Work of Antoine Volodine », Gina Stamm explore les modalités et les enjeux des représentations du végétal dans les romans de Volodine et de ses hétéronymes et leur importance dans la constitution de l'univers post-exotique. L'univers post-apocalyptique ouvre ainsi à une réflexion écologique sur les relations entre les espèces. Stamm analyse en particulier les listes que met en œuvre le

romancier dans *Terminus radieux* et dans les “shaggås” qui constituent *Herbes et Golems*. Elle montre comment le processus de répétition favorise la constitution d'une communauté fondée non sur des bases ethniques ou idéologiques mais sur l'occupation d'un espace détruit ou dégradé. Elle analyse aussi comment ces énumérations questionnent la possibilité d'identifier des espèces définies et contribuent à un brouillage générique. Elle établit ainsi que la communauté post-exotique selon Volodine doit s'étendre au-delà des seuls humains: dans une perspective éthique, l'univers post-exotique permet aux plantes de faire partie intégrante de la communauté, sans hiérarchie des espèces, les “shaggås” devenant la forme littéraire de cette interaction.

L'article de Kenneth Toah Nsah, “The Screaming Forest: An Ecocritical Assessment of *Le Cri de la forêt*”, propose une analyse de *Le Cri de la forêt*, pièce écrite en 2015 par Henri Djombo, homme politique originaire du Congo Brazzaville et Osée Colin Koagne, dramaturge camerounais. En s'appuyant sur une documentation précise sur la situation géopolitique du territoire, il s'inscrit dans la perspective d'une écocritique postcoloniale pour mettre en évidence les spécificités, mais aussi les limites, d'une pièce qui met en scène un conflit villageois autour de l'exploitation des forêts. Il interroge ainsi les potentialités de l'activisme et le postulat, qu'il considère comme partagé par presque tous les courants écocritiques, que l'art et la littérature peuvent avoir une action effective sur le monde réel.

Taking up a similar theme of environmental activism, Mariève Isabel examines the influence of Quebec's 1970s counterculture on the emergence of an environmental discourse in Quebec. In her article “Contre-culture et environnementalisme au Québec : Une écosociété à bâtir,” she traces the notion of an ecosociety back to the countercultural magazine *Mainmise* and more specifically to the publication of the *Répertoire québécois des outils planétaires* (1976) that was directly inspired by American biologist Steward Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue* (1968). Isabel then connects *Mainmise's* call for a new society, for an *U.T.O.P.I.E.*, in the 1970s to the work of Quebecois ecologists like Michel Jurdant and Pierre Dansereau in the 1980s and 1990s as well as to more contemporary examples of eco-neighbourhoods, community gardens and coops, and urban farming initiatives in Quebec. Isabel concludes her article by reasserting the importance of the countercultural movement's legacy for understanding environmentalism in Quebec today.

Working at the intersection of art history and cultural anthropology, Édith Liégy presents one component of a much larger research project that aims to create an ecomorphic typology for over 700 works of art by contemporary European artists (see her website “Jardin-eco-culture, Art contemporain et écologie”). In “Vu(e) des arbres au musée. Ecomorphisme, un transcourant écopoétique vers une culture du vivant,” Liégy examines the ways in which art acts as a ‘life form’ in museum spaces. She invents the term ecomorphic to describe works that celebrate the beauty of nature in/and its state of crisis, but that are not explicitly eco-political or eco-militant. For example, in French artist Ariane Michel's video *Les Yeux ronds* (2006), the viewer contemplates the city from the perspective of an owl and is struck by the beauty of the landscape. Similarly, in Finnish

artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video *Horizontal* (2013), the viewer is confronted with a tree filmed horizontally and is mesmerized by the movements of the branches in the wind. According to Liégey, art in the museum creates the conditions of ecomorphism; viewers are able to experience perspectives on the natural world that would not be available to them otherwise. At the same time, they become aware of the fact that these landscapes are in danger, that these views of nature may be all that is left of a much larger 'living network.' It is in this way, asserts Liégey, that ecomorphic aesthetic wonder can push the viewer to go beyond the nature/culture binary and develop new relations with the environment outside the museum.

In "En terre-ventre. Une approche organique de la métropolisation," material anthropologist Marine Legrand combines text and image to reflect on and in the underground systems of metropolitan Paris and its surroundings. Her text makes a valuable contribution to the field of waste studies by exploring the city as living organism that ingests, digests, and excretes matter on scales ranging from the microscopic to the global. But Legrand does not limit her perspective to waste and instead critiques more broadly processes of excavation and expulsion that accelerate the destruction of social cohesion and biodiversity in the city. She adopts the extended metaphor of the stomach or belly to underscore the ecological continuity between human existence, the urban space, and the planet itself. Legrand revisits ecofeminism from a non-gendered perspective to posit the Earth-Body as the site of vital processes that make life possible. Digestive systems become the way to compose a common world. But such a concept-driven summary of Legrand's article does little justice to its poetics of embodied language. To build an ecological politics, Legrand uses surprising word and image combinations (for example, a backhoe reminds her of a cow, a reflection that reverses the 'animal-machine' paradigm and instead leads to a rich description of the machine as a digesting, feeding and vomiting animal). In contrast to nature writing's 'first-person ecology,' Legrand only partially and intermittently appeals to the 'I' as the site of autobiographical experience. Embedded in place, the writing embraces ecological relatedness and so erases binaries like human vs. non-human, nature vs. culture, I vs. other. If we have chosen Legrand's article to close this special issue, it is because her essay so beautifully illustrates language as a theory and method that makes space for happenstance, the chaotic, the unexpected.

Ce numéro marque aussi, à nos yeux, une étape dans la réflexion écocritique : s'il ne saurait prétendre à une exhaustivité thématique ou théorique, il atteste l'inclusion de cette réflexion dans la perspective plus large des humanités environnementales. Il s'agit bien de tendre vers une redéfinition de l'écologie politique qui s'ouvre aux questions que posent les relations entre humain et non humain, que le non humain désigne l'animal ou le végétal -et on retrouve ici l'arbre horizontal qui nous interroge. Nous ne pouvons que souhaiter le développement de tels travaux, comme celui de recherches, sur des corpus littéraires ou artistiques, qui contribueraient à dessiner les contours d'une justice environnementale, attentive à la diversité des conditions sociales, aux déterminations spatiales et politiques. Dans cette perspective, l'écocritique ne peut être que plurielle, attentive aux phénomènes de métissage, aux questions de genre, aux processus de

mondialisation et à leurs conséquences. Le bilinguisme de ce numéro n'est, pour nous, qu'une première étape vers cette pratique largement comparatiste. Dans le seul monde francophone, il apparaît nécessaire d'ouvrir les corpus et les travaux vers une plus grande prise en compte de la diversité linguistique effective : le joual québécois, les créoles antillais, par exemple, ont pleinement leur place dans la réflexion écocritique. Au-delà, la réflexion ne peut que gagner à confronter des productions issues d'aires culturelles différentes, non pour les réduire à une pensée unique, affadie, mais pour faire entendre la singularité des problématiques et des œuvres et favoriser, ainsi, une prise en compte plus sensible et plus critique des questions environnementales dans leur complexité.

Intervention/invention : nous tenions à cette possibilité de rencontre qu'attestent, pensons-nous, les articles qui composent cette livraison. Il est clair que le dialogue ne saurait s'arrêter ici.

Works Cited

Weber, Dominique. "Working notes, 5 - 13-14.VI.2018: walking out." www.dominiqueweber.com/traduction-1.