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## International Eco-poetics Conference “Dwellings of Enchantment : Writing and Reenchanting the Earth”

Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, June 22-25, 2016

Diane Deplante, Caroline Durand-Rous and Fanny Monnier

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# International EcoPoetics Conference “Dwellings of Enchantment : Writing and Reenchanted the Earth”

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- 1 This first edition of the International Conference on EcoPoetics organized by Bénédicte Meillon, under the aegis of the research center CRESEM (Centre de Recherche sur les Sociétés et Environnements en Méditerranée) of the University of Perpignan Via Domitia, explored the literary manifestations of diverse interactions linking humans to the non-human. The conference gathered a hundred scholars, novelists and poets who addressed the artistic means of promoting a biocentric view of the world. In so doing, they engaged with an ongoing reflection upon the interrelatedness of critical approaches beyond the usually assigned labels and categories of “ecofeminism,” “nature writing,” “environmental literature,” or “literature of place.” The communications, arranged in thematic panels, contributed to revealing how written words can re-infuse the land with magic and meaning, and thus how they can “re-enchant the earth.”

## EcoPoetics and Language

**Françoise Besson (Université de Toulouse, France), “Nature Speech and Storytelling : The Voice of Wisdom in the Non-Human”**

- 2 In her paper, Françoise Besson explored the link between human and non-human voices and the possibility of orality granted to the non-human world through literature. Asserting that “the communication has been broken with earth,” she invited us to apprehend landscapes as places of enchantment, enchanted places, that “appear as a

storytelling," thus allowing for the mingling and interaction of human and non-human voices and worlds. Through literary, but also zoological and biological examples, Françoise Besson showed that "the non-human voice must be heard for us to understand our human world and voice" in order to "watch over what is unlike us, not break it."

### **Charles Holdefer (Université de Poitiers, France), "Necessary Wonder : Promises and Pitfalls of Enchantment"**

- 3 Throughout his paper, Charles Holdefer showed that, thanks to the concept of literarity, a text, and in particular ecopoetic writings, could become a "dwelling of enchantment," re-enchanting suggesting the return to a prior state. "A pre-condition to enchantment is to be under the influence of a charm, a spell," he said. Charles Holdefer stated that the text is a territory of its own and that it serves as a source of wonder, thus offering the required pre-condition. According to him, it is necessary to admit that there is a lack of art to talk about nature and that nature is "masticated" by our language. However, literature remains the very medium that allows to change one's point of view and that lets other voices be heard ; "it is an escape *into* the world, and not from the world."

## **Rediscovering Nature**

### **Bénédicte Meillon (Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, France), "The Ecopoet(h)ics of Interspecies Connections in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*"**

- 4 In *Prodigal Summer* (2000), Barbara Kingsolver illustrated a biocentric vision of the world, thus educating her readers about ecology. Bénédicte Meillon analyzed the novel in a threefold study of this literary depiction of an interconnected web of life forms. In a part called 'Revealing Natural Wonders', she addressed the intersections between narratives and a literary tapestry inspired by natural patterns. In 'Becoming Animal', Bénédicte Meillon highlighted the ambiguity of animal representation in the novel: partly anthropomorphic and partly acknowledging the inaccessibility of this otherness. However, a pervasive animalizing of human reactions and some parallels sensually experienced through common textures reveal the possibility of substantial exchanges between realms. In 'Being Attuned and Re-enchanting', quoting Scott Knickerbocker, she compared Barbara Kingsolver's writing to a "sensuous poeisis" that expresses the wild music of the earth and gives a central role to the sense of smell in deciphering the world: drawing on the common etymology of the terms "humus", the French verb "humer" and the notion of humility, she concluded with the necessity to ground ecopoetic analyses back in the sensual experience of the fertile soil.

### **Frédérique Spill (Université de Picardie, France), "Ron Rash's Stories of 'the world's understory' : Renewing Wonder in *Above the Waterfall*"**

- 5 In his latest novel, *Above the Waterfall* (2016), Ron Rash blurred categories to show how difficult it was to understand and preserve the world. This hybrid object, multiplying explicit echoes to literature and other arts (Hopkins' poetry, Johnny Cash's music,

Hopper's paintings, Lascaux...), plays on interactions between text and images, conveying a sense of freedom to its form. Furthermore, Frédérique Spill showed how the author questions the arbitrary form of words as developed by Saussure. Indeed, throughout the novel, Becky, the main character, comments on the animal signifiers, trying to find a correspondence between reality and naming. In *Above the Waterfall*, nature is made of words and subsequently needs to be further invoked by new words that Becky invents in order to reflect her physical experience of the world, thus developing a musical language characterized by alliterations and assonances.

## Native American Cosmivision

### Maxime Petit (Université de Toulouse, France), "Our Land is This Land : Old and New Ways of Filming Indian Land in Native American Documentary Filmmaking"

- 6 Maxime Petit first drew on *Nanook of the North* (1922) to remind the audience of the imagery of early documentaries about Native peoples which aimed to show the remaining traces of a "vanishing race". Quoting Steven Lerhold's assertion that "Native American documentary constitutes an emerging genre," he then moved to contemporary examples of Native filmmaking that, reversely, aim to show a history of survival. Abenaki film director Alanis Obomisawin has thus followed a tribal court fight against the expansion of a golf course on Mohawk territory. Choosing to shoot the Native presence on this contested space, she has illustrated the ancient belief that land is an area of both material and spiritual survival for the band. Their relation to trees is especially significant in that regard. In the documentary, trees materialize the permanency of the Iroquois Confederacy as well as the transmission of tradition from the previous generations to the next.

### Lionel Larré (Université de Bordeaux, France), "Seeing the Indigenous Beauty of the Land : A Reading of John Joseph Mathews' Work"

- 7 This communication explored Native writer John Joseph Mathews' writings and more specifically his statement of a "placental attachment to earth." Lionel Larré studied Mathews' depiction of the visceral need for empathy towards natural elements. Seeing culture from the vantage point of nature, John Joseph Mathews intended to retranscribe the chant of nature that unfolds an invisible landscape only perceptible to the beings attuned to their territory. Underlining the issue of dislocation and the experience of uprootedness of most indigenous peoples, Mathews asserts the natural urge for expression, acknowledging however the limits of words and symbols to convey the song of the land. Arguing for a poetic promotion of land ethics, the Osage author gives voice to a mystical re-enchantment of the earth.

## Ecopoetics in the West

Éliane Liddell (Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, France),  
 "Reenchanting the West's Ecological Dialogue with the World : What  
 a Long Way to Go. Reflections on the 2014 US Documentary *Years of  
 Living Dangerously*"

- 8 To Éliane Liddell, the documentary genre reaches a large public and plays a powerful role in shaping our perception of the global ecological crisis, since it makes visible the changes and the destruction operated by human activities on landscapes and ecosystems. In her presentation, Éliane Liddell focused on a 2014 Showtime TV documentary entitled *Years of Living Dangerously* and more particularly on the second episode, starring Harrison Ford and Arnold Schwarzenegger, in which the issue of palm oil plantations along with deforestation in Indonesia is tackled. The "complacent tone" of this episode towards Indonesia led Éliane Liddell to raise the following question : "How can the West install a new dialogue with poor countries to heal the planet ?"

Paul Linholdt (Eastern Washington University, USA), "Thinking like a  
 River"

- 9 Many aquatic ecosystems, as well as indigenous people, have been endangered by damming in the United States. Fish and tribes have been "dewilded," a word coined by Paul Lindholdt, echoing the term "rewilding"—meaning, from an ecological point of view, a mass restoration of ecosystems and, from a humanitarian point of view, becoming wild ourselves by working on behalf of nature and taking risks in being activists. Paul Lindholdt's paper focused on the impacts of dams on ecosystems and people, and on the rewilding of the US rivers by "artists." These artists of rewilding, along with their productions, represent what it is like to "think like a river." Thus, they show that "wildness is very vital to humankind in a performative mode."

David Latour (Université d'Orléans, France), "Sean Penn's *Into the  
 Wild* or Filming Nature with/and Passion"

- 10 David Latour's paper focused on Sean Penn's depiction and filming of nature, in his 2006 movie *Into the Wild*, through the hero's passionate, though lethal, relationship with nature and the landscapes. David Latour enhanced the latter's naive vision of nature, and drew a parallel between Christopher "Supertramp" McCandless and Thoreau ; both wanted to get away from an oppressive civilization and both found their "Walden," although what appeared as a welcoming and loving nature to Christopher eventually led him to meet his end prematurely. David Latour explored Sean Penn's personal reading of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (2008) and emphasized how, in the process of filming this literary non-fiction, Penn reflected upon the political and philosophical implications of such a return to the wild. Likewise, he analyzed how the director managed to convey the protagonist's admiring and naively enthusiastic vision of nature.

## Questioning Representations

### Pierre-Antoine Pellerin (Université de Lyon, France), "Of (Dying) Mice and (Crying) Men : Masculinity, In/significant Others, and Jack Kerouac's Eco-poetics"

- 11 In his paper, Pierre-Antoine Pellerin focused on Jack Kerouac's autobiographical cycle of fourteen novels, and particularly on *Desolation Angels* (1965), in which the narrator tries to escape from the feminizing effects of civilization and goes into the wilderness to regain masculine virtue and courage, and to fight against his domestication by reconquering an authentic masculine identity through contact with nature and wild animals. However, Pierre-Antoine Pellerin revealed the gendered bias on animality as being linked to an undomesticated, untamed form of masculinity, and showed that Kerouac's main teaching from the animal world is compassion; the relationship between masculinity and animality may lead to intersubjectivity through a process of identification, questioning man's cruelty towards animal life.

## Teaching Ecology through Wonder

### Ansul Rao (University of Delhi, India), "Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* : A Lesson in Ecological Humility"

- 12 In her paper, Ansul Rao explored Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behavior* (2012) starring the monarch butterfly as its main subject and critical force, going away from anthropocentrism. Ansul Rao showed that Kingsolver merged anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches and reckoned that all forms of life are in danger. "All species are endangered by human activities, including humans themselves" was how Ansul Rao interpreted the strong parallels between displaced butterflies and displaced humans. As Ansul Rao put it, notions of reciprocity, interrelatedness, interdependence, non-hierarchical relationship between humans and nature are at the core of Kingsolver's writing and they participate in this lesson she taught us in ecological humility, as defined by Josh A. Weinstein.

### Matilde Martín González (Universidad de La Laguna, Spain), "Lorine Niedecker's poetics of Cyclic Renewal : The Material-Semiotic Perspective in 'Wintergreen Ridge'"

- 13 Matilde Martín González focused on surrealist, imagist and objectivist Lorine Niedecker and her poem "Wintergreen Ridge" (1967) which she considered as a "material" ecocritical text. In this 94-tercet sequence without punctuation, she highlighted the co-presence of human and non-human life where butterflies, men and rocks are placed on the same level, where matter is invested in a community of living creatures. This environmental poetry was consequently informed by the world's material phenomena and interpreted them. Matilde Martín González showed that, this way, Lorine Niedecker's text managed to convey "the material-semiotic reality" of the poet's world through the poetics of entanglement among different life forms.

## Carmen Flys Junquera (Universidad de Alcalá, Spain), "Listening and Seeing Nature : Mutual Discovery and Disclosure"

- 14 Through the study of Linda Hogan's *Solar Storm* (1994) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), Carmen Flys Junquera showed how both works illustrate Val Plumwood's notion of "dialogical interspecies ethics," for nature becomes a subject of its own, allowing for mutual discovery. According to Carmen Flys Junquera's analysis, both authors convey, in their texts, the notions of reciprocity—observing and being observed—and similarity—putting humans and non-humans on the same plane. But they both acknowledge the human bias, human centeredness. She stated that literature allows to experience a sense of wonder as well as the diversity of ways and paths leading to knowledge. Likewise, mutual respect and recognition between human and non-human worlds subjectify nature and establish a dialogical and reciprocal relationship, which, according to Carmen Flys Junquera, enables the discovery of the self through the confrontation with an other glance, offering a "non-anthropocentric perspective" and enhancing humility towards nature.

## Ecofeminist Perspectives

### Margot Lauwers (Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, France), "Oh how brilliant, I have just added aesthetic sensitivity [...] as way to save the world.' Ellen Meloy or How to Reinhabit the 'Empty' Desert"

- 15 Ellen Meloy, an American author, wrote four novels within a decade before her death in 2004. Margot Lauwers' analysis focused on three of her books: *The Anthropology of Turquoise* (2002), *Eating Stone* (2005) and *The Last Cheater's Waltz* (1999). Known as a desert writer, Ellen Meloy gives voice in these novels to the numerous life forms present in the desert. Indeed, the landscapes are often personified and nature becomes a protagonist. Furthermore, she connects the human world and nature arguing that no species is superior to another and that humans can learn from nature. Asserting that she has received knowledge from the animals—a knowledge that does not require language to be understood or transmitted—Ellen Meloy warns us about the greatest threat for humans : the lack of imagination that stems from the absence of the natural world. Calling to the reader's sense of "answerability," Ellen Meloy seeks to re-enchant a land that is seen as empty by most people.

## Dwelling in Landscapes

### Lee Schweningen (University of North Carolina, USA), "Where language touches the earth' : Need, Naming, and Knowledge"

- 16 Quoting Native American author N. Scott Momaday, Lee Schweningen wondered if by losing the ability to accurately name places, mankind had not also lost the ability to relate to such places. He highlighted the general impoverishment of our knowledge of nature when confronted to the multiplicity of species. Subsequently, we now have to deal with

the impossibility to phrase the environmental problems we are currently facing. Lee Schweningen then elaborated on a common political belief: "If we cannot phrase the problem then the problem does not exist." He furthermore addressed the irreversible process at work when the stories are lost, highlighting the fact that we have no means to retrieve those forgotten words. Finally, arguing that language is our only chance for survival, Lee Schweningen advocated the rediscovery of a landscaped-based language through scholarly dialogues about nature writing.

### **Wes Berry (University of Western Kentucky, USA), "Singing the Body Electrified, or Poetics of the Bardo from Walt Whitman to Gretel Ehrlich"**

- 17 In this talk, Wes Berry explored American author Gretel Ehrlich's notion of "organscape" which acknowledged the body as our first landscape, a place where we learned fundamental lessons. A graphic trauma having alienated her from her own body, Gretel Ehrlich needed to find healing through immersion into nature. By doing so she put into perspective the body as a bioregion, our very first home, paralleling outer bioregions. In his study, Wes Berry referred to the Buddhist concept of *Bardo* envisioning a transient place where the soul rests after death before going back to earth to inhabit a new body. Indeed, in her memoir, Gretel Ehrlich erased the limits separating her recovering body and the transient spaces where she successively settled down, by describing natural phenomena through the vocabulary of the body and, reversely, by personifying wind and water.

### **Online Resources**

- 18 The program, abstracts, biographies, and videos of the keynote addresses and of the interviews of the guest writers are available on the EcoPoetics project website : <http://ecopoeticsperpignan.com/>

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