

# **Part VII**

## **Horizons and Prospects**



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## Engaging with Cultural Differences: The Strange Case of French *écocritique*

**Abstract:** Ecocriticism has taken its place on the stage of literary and critical theory in the anglophone world, yet its reception in France has been mixed. In this chapter, I outline the cultural differences that contribute to the slow emergence of a French *écocritique*. Taking my cue from comparative literary studies, I avoid the construction of culture as an unchanging set of clichés and stereotypes, instead exploring diverse linguistic and socio-historical specificities that are useful for framing a ‘French’ *écocritique*. I take into account approaches such as *écoloétique* and *géocritique* that have emerged in France over the last ten years, and I argue for politically informed ecological readings of French literary texts. I draw on the non-dualistic, nature-culture thinking of Félix Guattari and Michel Serres to articulate the concepts of ecological subjectivity and ecological dwelling. These two concepts are used to develop ecological readings of contemporary fiction by Marie Darrieussecq and Marie-Hélène Lafon. My theorisations of French *écocritique* bring literature and ecological thinking together in the context of the contemporary French intellectual landscape.

In *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* [*The New Ecological Order*] (1992), Luc Ferry denounces attempts made by environmental philosophy and animal ethics to attribute an elevated status to nature and to animals.<sup>1</sup> Rejecting what he sees as an anti-humanist sentiment, Ferry takes up Immanuel Kant’s rational philosophy in order to assert a renewed humanism. Working from the thesis of man as anti-natural, and the notion of a universal human nature, Ferry defends the position of the Moderns as the only foundation on which to build a democratic humanism that can sufficiently address social and political injustices:

The most fundamental ethical requirement among Moderns, that of altruism, is in its very principle antinatural, since it requires a form of disinterestedness. It presupposes ‘good will’ and is inevitably expressed in the form of an imperative. But the reference to universality, which is incomprehensible outside of the framework of this new philosophical anthropology, also becomes necessary. For the separation from historical-natural codes, through which man manifests his difference from animal, is still a refusal to allow oneself to be limited to any particularity. It is because he is capable of taking his distances not only from the cycle of his biological life but also from his particular language, nation, and

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1 Luc Ferry, *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique: l'arbre, l'animal et l'homme* (Paris: Grasset, 1992).

culture that man can enter into communication with others. His capacity for universality is a direct function of this distancing.<sup>2</sup>

Given my objective to construct a culturally specific French *écocritique*, why start with a quotation from a philosopher who argues against language, nation, and culture, and in favour of universal humanism?

Despite what was largely a reductive reading of ecological thinking at the time, Ferry's book had a long-lasting effect on environmental philosophy in France. Philosophers avoided subjects related to the environment, fearing that any association with this branch of thinking would marginalise their work. As Catherine Larrère points out, environmental philosophy and ethics as an academic discipline developed largely outside of France: 'ce débat affecte plus particulièrement la communauté de langue anglaise, américaine principalement [...]. La France, jusqu'à présent, est restée à l'écart [this debate has principally affected the English-language community, especially in the USA [...]. France has, until now, kept out of it].'<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, environmentalism was associated with anti-humanist discourse or with a 'less serious' attitude towards the 'deeper' philosophical questions of reality, existence, death, and morality.<sup>4</sup>

To grant so much weight to a single book may seem exaggerated, but Ferry's *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* embodies a French humanist and republican way of thinking that continues to hold sway in contemporary French society.<sup>5</sup> Conventional, mainstream voices like Ferry's have sidelined the work of thinkers like Michel Serres and Bruno Latour who question nature-culture dualism, and work towards a new ecological politics. Despite Ferry's claim about universal humanism, his reaction to environmental thinking and the reception of his book reveal socio-historically shaped attitudes towards nature and the environment. It is in

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- 2 Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. by C. Volk (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15–16.
  - 3 Catherine Larrère, *Les Philosophies de l'environnement* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997), 5 [unreferenced translations are mine].
  - 4 In *A Brief History of Thought*, Ferry dismisses concerns related to bioethics and ecology as 'dreadfully reductive, when one thinks of the ideals which were common to all the great philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche'. Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. by T. Cuff (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011), 220.
  - 5 From 2002–4, Ferry was Minister for Youth, Education, and National Research, and he continues to publish regularly on subjects such as the need for innovation, the history of philosophy, and how to be happy.

this sense that Ferry's book offers a perfect opening for discussing the need for a French ecocritical approach.

### Setting the stage: French eco-thought

Ferry's negative influence on environmental philosophy did not hinder efforts to bring ecological issues into the political arena in France. The rise of the *Verts* and the creation of the *Ministère de l'Environnement* in the 1970s show France as an early leader in ecological politics. Thinkers such as Jean Dorst, René Dumont, Edgar Morin, and Serge Moscovici refused to view nature as something outside of the human, and instead developed a coherent political agenda founded on thinking nature and culture together. As Kerry Whiteside explains, 'French green theorists tend to study how conceptions of nature and human identity intertwine. They elaborate green thought more often by *reciprocally problematising* "nature" and "humanity" than by refining the distinction between them.'<sup>6</sup>

Reciprocal nature-culture thinking has been at the heart of Serres's philosophy since *Le Contrat naturel* [*The Natural Contract*] (1990). Twenty years before the term Anthropocene became popularised, Serres carefully outlined the process of historical time becoming imbricated in geological time: 'histoire globale entre dans la nature; la nature globale entre dans l'histoire: voilà de l'inédit en philosophie [global history enters nature, and global nature enters history: this is truly a novel situation for philosophy]'.<sup>7</sup> While nature and culture had previously been bound together at the local level, they were becoming inextricably linked at a global level. Our planetary ecological condition does not, however, give rise to a universal environmentalism. Serres acknowledges cultural differences that affect the way in which concerns about the environment are imagined, represented and politicised in different socio-historical contexts:

Ce mouvement [écologiste] a plusieurs composantes: géopolitiques, économiques, culturelles [...]. Occidentale, la bataille oppose l'Europe et les États-Unis dont les sensibilités diffèrent, en raison de l'ancienneté, ici, de la tradition agricole, et là, de son caractère récent et vite industrialisé.<sup>8</sup>

6 Kerry H. Whiteside, *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 3 [emphasis in original]. For another largely positive analysis of French attitudes towards nature and environment, see Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960–2000* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

7 Michel Serres, *Le Contrat naturel* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 18.

8 Michel Serres, *Hominescence* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2001), 95.

[This [ecological] movement has many components: geopolitical, economic, cultural [...]. In the West, the conflict arises between Europe and the USA where political sympathies differ because of the former's long agricultural traditions and the latter's more recent and rapidly industrialised practices.]

Serres is careful to distance himself from North-American environmentalism that reduces ecological politics to the preservation of wilderness. In addition, he rejects the expression 'environmental philosophy', and describes his thinking as a *philosophie de la nature* according to which nature is constantly being born anew through and alongside scientific knowledge and social practices.

Without subscribing to linguistic determinism, the English word 'environment' does not have the same history or the same connotations as the French *environnement*. For Serres, the word *environnement* problematically reinforces an anthropocentric perspective because there is necessarily a centre around which the action *environner* takes place.<sup>9</sup> This poses some challenges for translating even the basic idea of ecocriticism, defined as the study of the relationship between literature and environment. Should a French *écocritique* highlight the difference between *écologie* and *environnement*, and opt for a more native term like *écologisme* to build an environmentally oriented approach to literature? Or should the word *environnement* be retained in order to highlight the 'strangeness' of French *écocritique* as a literary theory that did not originate in French literary studies? Bringing awareness to these differences is the first step in developing a French *écocritique*.

In the early stages of my theorisations of a French *écocritique*, I was often asked if the term applied more generally to the critical analysis of environmental discourse and rhetoric. The term *critique* did not have a clear connection to literary studies, and so gave rise to some confusion as to what role literature might play. The English term 'ecocritique' is typically used to refer to a critical analysis of environmentalism;<sup>10</sup> ecocriticism has an uneasy relationship with ecocritique. In *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Timothy Morton endorses the latter's alignment with deconstruction philosophy, and criticises the former's 'flogging the dead horse of "postmodern theory"'.<sup>11</sup> While a French *écocritique* can take note of the problematic pro- or anti-theory positions that have marked ecocriticism's past, it cannot solely be an ecocritique. It must work to construct a set of ecological principles and concepts with which to analyze literary and cultural texts on a broader scale.

9 Serres, *Le Contrat naturel*, 60.

10 Timothy W. Luke, *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

11 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.

In order to build such a toolbox, I have focussed on ecological thinking that has emerged in France over the last thirty years. In earlier work, I drew on Serres's concept of the natural contract, arguing that his non-dualist, anti-Cartesian approach offers an excellent foundation for such ecological principles.<sup>12</sup> More recently, I have been working to integrate Bruno Latour's 'parlement des choses [parliament of things]'<sup>13</sup> and Félix Guattari's vision of a three-part 'écophilosophie [ecosophy]'<sup>14</sup> into this political orientation. Even if these different philosophical systems do not perfectly align and form some sort of unified French eco-thought, they point to the necessity of including non-humans in our understanding of social, political and ethical relationships. Moreover, they model a careful analysis of the complex interactions and networks that characterise the contemporary world. Without claiming that these concepts are unique to the landscape of French eco-thought, I posit that the kinds of ecological politics entailed in them must be at the heart of a French *écocritique*.

### 'L'exception française': fact or fiction?

The act of positing the need for a specifically French *écocritique* begs the question of what 'French' means. I will respond to this question by looking at some of the ways in which French cultural differences have been constructed and deconstructed. An obvious example is the notion of *l'exception française*: the reference point for this expression – the *République*; universal humanism; *fraternité, égalité, liberté* – is not clear, yet it has staying-power, even in today's globalised world. As Roger Célestin, Eliane DalMolin, Marc Dambre, and Richard J. Golsan note, 'the expression is invoked almost incessantly to emphasise the uniqueness or peculiarities of, among many other things, [...] a national political and social model that has supposedly run its course.'<sup>15</sup> The idea of cultural and political exceptionalism may not fit with reality, but it continues to give rise to lively debates.<sup>16</sup>

12 Stephanie Posthumus, 'Vers une écocritique française: le contrat naturel de Michel Serres', *Mosaic* 44.2 (2011), 85–100; 'Translating Ecocriticism: Dialoguing with Michel Serres', *Reconstruction* 7.2 (2007), 37 paragraphs, <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/072/posthumus.shtml>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

13 Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), 197.

14 Félix Guattari, *Les Trois Écologies* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), 70.

15 Roger Célestin, Eliane DalMolin, Marc Dambre, and Richard J. Golsan, 'Editors' Introduction', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 12.3 (2008), 317–19 (317).

16 In her careful analysis of the French nation-state, Monica Prasad argues that centralisation and the welfare state have marked France's pragmatic neoliberalism, which differs

In the online version of the European edition of *Time* in November 2007, Donald Morrison published a feature about the death of French culture.<sup>17</sup> The article unsurprisingly gave rise to heated debates in and outside of France, revealing more about the relationship between the United States and France than about the state of French culture.<sup>18</sup> My concern is to look more closely at how the idea of ‘culture’ is being used: the cover of the magazine version – showing actor Marcel Marceau’s famous character Bip wearing a beret, miming sadness, and holding a wilted red flower – illustrates that culture is largely reduced to a set of clichés. References in Morrison’s article to French art, cinema, literature, and culinary traditions – in short, to the easily exportable products of French culture – confirm this initial impression. Even the article’s hopeful conclusion that French culture will one day ‘reclaim its reputation as a cultural power’<sup>19</sup> does nothing to offer a more complex view of culture.

Stereotypical images of French culture – such as wearing a beret, riding a bicycle, carrying a baguette, eating cheese, and drinking wine – are hardly useful for developing a French *écocritique*. In order to avoid such reductionist understandings of culture and cultural differences, it is helpful to consider comparative studies that discuss the specificities of the culture of nature and environmentalism in France: historian Caroline Ford traces the influence of American national parks on the creation of French *réserves naturelles* in colonised Algeria;<sup>20</sup> Jean Viard contrasts Catholic theology, which gave rise to long-lasting agricultural traditions in France, with the Protestant ethics that informed wilderness preservation policies in the USA.<sup>21</sup> These comparative studies can be used to construct an understanding of attitudes towards nature and environment in France, as long as

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from a similar economic system in the USA. Prasad does not go so far as to speak of French exceptionalism, but she points to a specific socio-political system that is unique to France and its history. Monica Prasad, ‘Why Is France So French? Culture, Institutions, and Neoliberalism, 1974–1981’, *The American Journal of Sociology* 111.2 (2005), 357–407.

- 17 Donald Morrison, ‘In Search of Lost Time’, *Time* [Europe, Middle East and Africa] (21 November 2007), <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1686532,00.html>> [accessed 16 May 2016].
- 18 Bernard-Henri Lévy, ‘American Talk of the Death of French Culture Says More about Them than about Us’, *The Guardian* (8 December 2007), <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/dec/08/france.international>> [accessed 16 May 2016].
- 19 Morrison, ‘In Search of Lost Time’.
- 20 Caroline Ford, ‘Nature, Culture and Conservation in France and her Colonies 1840–1940’, *Past & Present* 183 (2004), 173–98.
- 21 Jean Viard, *Le Tiers Espace: essai sur la nature* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1990).



they are not used to assert rigid categorical differences. As Ford's example shows, environmental policies do not develop in isolation; they are the product of cross-cultural exchanges, even if they play out in different ways.

Comparative studies, if carefully done, avoid generalisations about cultural differences, and argue for a well-defined politics of diversity. In literary studies, Gayatri Spivak asserts the need for a comparative approach that reads texts in their original language, and cultivates a 'care for language and idiom'.<sup>22</sup> For a French *écocritique*, this means paying careful attention to etymologies of words like *nature* and *écologie*. Spivak also points to the need for a 'responsible comparativism' that avoids foregone conclusions through attunement to the ways in which literary texts use language to subvert ideas about nationalist identity.<sup>23</sup> In other words, a comparative approach to themes like nature and environment must be complemented by close readings of texts that complicate any notion of a specific culture of nature. Even when a French literary text speaks of *nature* or *écologie*, it may do so in order to destabilise or trouble commonly held meanings of these words. By focussing on individual texts, comparative literary studies provide a way of charting the muddy waters of culture, nation and language.

Anthropology and ethnography, concerned with carefully navigating these waters, work to expose claims that are used to police cultural boundaries. In 'Writing Against Culture' (1991), Lila Abu-Lughod critiques the normalising effects of anthropological descriptions that project fixed identities onto others' cultural practices. In order to counter this use of culture, Abu-Lughod calls for 'ethnographies of the particular' that do not move towards generalising claims about 'culture'.<sup>24</sup> A French *écocritique* can take heed of Abu-Lughod's warning by focussing on the particular as far as possible. Through close and detailed readings of French literary texts, it can delve into particularities as a way of countering the idea of French culture as a monolithic whole. It can use literature to deconstruct notions of a geopolitically bounded France and a singular French language.

Another way to avoid generalisations is to acknowledge the specific socio-historical and material conditions that have influenced my thinking about French *écocritique*. I have been able to outline such an approach because I am not working strictly within French literary studies, but from a comparative perspective in a

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22 Gayatri C. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 19.

23 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 26.

24 Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Writing Against Culture', in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. by R. G. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137–62.

Franco-Canadian context. I have had the opportunity to participate in transnational dialogues about ecocriticism, and so have experienced the problems and the possibilities of international (largely monolingual) cultural exchanges. This has made me aware of the political factors that affect how literary studies are taught and practised on each side of the Atlantic.

In the end, *l'exception française* is neither fact nor fiction. It has been used to emphasise cultural difference, occasionally polarising national identity, and occasionally outlining diverse and changing conditions and characteristics. It may have run its course in today's globalised world, but it remains part of how French cultural difference has been constructed. A French *écocritique* does not subscribe to the notion of exceptionalism; instead, it calls for mindfulness of the particularities of the contemporary French context. As an imagined community different from nation and state, and as an evolving *oikos* for language and literature, culture matters in the field of environmental literary studies.

## Cultures and climates of literary studies

The case of 'French theory' is a fascinating example of the ways in which systems of thought migrate across cultures without transcending cultural differences. 'French theory', which was almost completely absent from the French intellectual scene in the 1970s, thrived in North American universities, as identity politics drove new feminist, African-American, gay and lesbian approaches, and cultural studies more generally. As François Cusset points out, theorists like Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault garnered much more attention in the USA than in France in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Even if these thinkers are now more recognised in France, queer studies, postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies remain largely marginalised.<sup>26</sup> For scholars working in these areas, it has been difficult – at times impossible – to receive recognition within the French institutional world.<sup>27</sup>

25 François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003).

26 In terms of the reception of queer theory in France, see Scott Gunther, 'Alors, Are We "Queer" Yet?' *The Gay & Lesbian Review* 12.3 (2005), 23–5; Claire Boyle, 'Post-Queer (Un)Made in France?', *Paragraph* 35.2 (2012), 265–80.

27 Anne Simon offers a careful comparative analysis of the rise of Animal Studies in North America, in contrast to its development as *la question animale* in France. Anne Simon, 'Animality and Contemporary French Literary Studies: Overview and Perspectives', trans. by C. Maillard and S. Posthumus, in *French Thinking about Animals*, ed. by L. Mackenzie and S. Posthumus (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 75–88.

Given that North American ecocriticism is firmly rooted in political positions and orientations – deep ecology, ecofeminism, environmental justice, or social ecology, to name a few – its reading of texts is necessarily political. While this poses less of a problem in the North American context, it is clear that literary studies in France continue to be constructed along the dividing lines of ‘theoretical’ and ‘political’. In *Petite écologie des études littéraires* [*Brief Ecology of Literary Studies*] (2011), Jean-Marie Schaeffer explains that general theories of reading and fiction need to be kept separate from more applied, ‘practical’ approaches such as feminist studies, post-colonial studies, etc.<sup>28</sup> While other French scholars dismiss such ‘studies’, Schaeffer recognises their value, but reduces it to the classroom; in other words, to a pedagogical value. So where does this leave a French *écocritique*?

Ecocriticism came to France by way of American and English Studies departments. Americanists working on nature writing by poets, authors and thinkers like Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard and Rick Bass first introduced ecocriticism to a French readership.<sup>29</sup> This is not that different from the spread of ecocriticism in places outside North America. What was specific to the reception of ecocriticism in France was the careful distancing that took place with respect to what was considered solely an American phenomenon. In their 2005 introduction to a collection of ecocritical articles about American nature writing, Tom Pughe and Michel Granger explain that the environmental imagination arises from ‘des préoccupations logées au cœur de l’histoire culturelle américaine [preoccupations lodged at the heart of American cultural history]’.<sup>30</sup> It is true that nature writing as a genre does not have an exact equivalent in the French literary tradition.<sup>31</sup> The understanding of ecocriticism as solely the study of nature writing meant that this critical approach was seen as having very little to do with French literary studies.

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28 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Petite écologie des études littéraires: pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature* (Vincennes: Marchaisse, 2011).

29 The attitude towards American nature writing can take a slightly condescending tone; Catherine Larrère describes the genre as ‘le récit de ce-que-j’ai-vu-dans-la-forêt’. Catherine Larrère, ‘Éthiques de l’environnement’, *Multitudes* 24 (2006), 75–84 (80).

30 Tom Pughe and Michel Granger, ‘Introduction’, *Revue française d’études américaines* 106 (2005), 3–7 (4).

31 Bertrand Guest argues convincingly that Élisée Reclus’s writings are similar in tone and genre to those of Henry David Thoreau in that they combine the essay (*essai* is difficult to translate; ‘non-fiction’ might be a fitting rendering), natural history and a strong ecological political orientation. Bertrand Guest, ‘L’Essai, forme-sens de l’écologie littéraire naissante? Humboldt, Thoreau, Reclus’, *Romantisme* 164 (2014), 63–73.

Literary representations of place and landscape have given rise to critical approaches in France that avoid taking an explicitly eco-political stance. Bertrand Westphal's *La Géocritique* [*Geocriticism*] (2007) calls for a return to the real in its emphasis on actual places (largely urban) named in literary texts,<sup>32</sup> but remains silent on how such an approach may be brought to bear on the environmental crisis. In *Pour une géographie littéraire* [*Towards a Literary Geography*] (2014), Michel Collot provides an overview of space and place in contemporary French literary studies, but does not name *écocritique*.<sup>33</sup> In an earlier article, Collot speaks of bringing together literature and geography in order to understand literary representations of space: 'l'espace semble ainsi profiter de la crise du récit et de la psychologie traditionnelle pour occuper une place croissante dans la fiction contemporaine [space seems to benefit from the crisis of narrative genre and traditional psychology, taking up a growing place in contemporary fiction]'.<sup>34</sup> He cites a number of French contemporary 'récits d'espace' that call into question the centrality of the Cartesian subject, and explore the representation of place by experimenting with literary form. In the end, though, Collot retreats from an engagement with place as a physical reality that has formed – and transformed – human culture and civilisation.

The situation is different in the case of *géo-poétique* – an approach that places an 'emphasis on developing a body and mind relationship to the earth'.<sup>35</sup> Geopoetics, founded by Kenneth White (a bilingual writer, traveler and philosopher who is Scottish by birth, but who has lived in France for many years), has spread quickly into an archipelago of different research centres, institutes and groups, only some of which have homes in academic settings. The main goal of geopoetics is to develop practices of reading and writing that cultivate more careful and attentive relationships to the physical world. White explains:

Un monde, bien compris, émerge du contact entre l'esprit et la Terre. Quand le contact est sensible, intelligent, subtil, on a un monde au sens plein de ce mot, quand le contact

32 Bertrand Westphal, *La Géocritique: réel, fiction, espace* (Paris: Minuit, 2007).

33 Michel Collot, *Pour une géographie littéraire* (Paris: Corti, 2014).

34 Michel Collot, 'Pour une géographie littéraire', *Fabula-LhT* 8 (2011), 34 paragraphs, <<http://www.fabula.org/lht/8/collot.html>> [accessed 16 May 2016], paragraph 30. Interestingly, Collot uses a similar term – 'crisis' – but does not venture beyond cultural representation, steering well away from the political territory of ecological crisis.

35 Rachel Bouvet and Stephanie Posthumus, 'Eco- and Geo- Approaches in French and Francophone Literary Studies', in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. by H. Zapf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 385–412 (393).

est stupide et brutal, on n'a plus de monde, plus de culture, seulement, et de plus en plus, une accumulation d'immonde.<sup>36</sup>

[A world, well conceived, emerges from a contact between Mind and Earth. When the contact is sensitive, intelligent, subtle, you have a world in the full sense of the word. When the contact is stupid and brutal, you have nothing like a world, nothing like a culture, only, and increasingly so, an accumulation of refuse, including a lot of 'cultural products'].

At the heart of geopoetics is a transdisciplinary approach that aims to improve understanding of the relationships between humans and diverse environments. Geopoetics and ecocriticism follow parallel paths, but have developed in distinct linguistic and intellectual communities.

An ecologically informed view of literature and cultural texts is similarly adopted in the case of *écopoétique*. In the article 'Littérature & écologie' ['Literature and Ecology'] (2008), Nathalie Blanc, Denis Chartier and Thomas Pughe define an *écologique* that dislodges the author or artist as the source of meaning, instead looking to the material conditions and the reception of a work of art. They prefer the term *écopoétique* to *écocritique* because it provides the possibility of distinguishing a more aesthetically oriented approach to themes of place and environment in art.<sup>37</sup> Although key ecocritical texts such as Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1996) are summarised,<sup>38</sup> and the urgency of the environmental crisis is acknowledged, ecological politics take a backseat to ecological aesthetics. In this way, Blanc, Chartier and Pughe offer a rethinking of ecocritical concerns within the context of the French literary tradition, which has always paid careful attention to the role of form and structure.<sup>39</sup>

If *écopoétique* is doing the work of analyzing nature and environment in French literature, and working towards a more general theory about a literary *éco-logique*, why continue to assert the need for a French *écocritique*? While it is true that *écopoétique* engages with the questions of aesthetics and poetics, it tends to sidestep the issue of political engagement that is at the heart of ecocriticism. Given the

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36 Kenneth White, 'Le Grand Champ de la géopoétique', *Institut International de Géopoétique* (2015), 18 paragraphs, <<http://institut-geopoetique.org/fr/textes-fondateurs/8-le-grand-champ-de-la-geopoetique>> [accessed 25 May 2016], paragraph 9.

37 Nathalie Blanc, Denis Chartier and Thomas Pughe, 'Littérature & écologie: vers une écopoétique', *Écologie & Politique* 36 (2008), 17–28.

38 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1995).

39 For further discussion in this regard, see Pierre Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu: essai d'écopoétique* (Marseille: Wildproject, 2015).

importance and originality of ecological politics in France, such a move misses an excellent opportunity to bring together two spheres of knowledge: literary texts and ecological thinking. While French literary critics may be hesitant to make such a move, thinkers like Latour and Serres are already doing so, calling for new narratives about our current geo- and eco-conditions.<sup>40</sup>

### Key concepts for a French ‘écocritique’

Rooted in theories of place, space and landscape, *écoloétique*, *géocritique*, *géopoétique*, and *géographie littéraire* have their place alongside a French *écocritique*. They contribute to a better understanding of how literature represents the ways in which humans imagine the world and their relationship to it. They also offer a viewpoint for understanding the particular climate of French literary studies. Yet there needs to be more work on ecological thinking as an essential component of analyzing literary representations of space, place and landscape. One French scholar who has been working to fill this gap is Alain Suberchicot. In his first book, *Littérature américaine et écologie* [*American Literature and Ecology*] (2002), Suberchicot adopts a position similar to that of other Americanists in France, presenting ecocriticism and nature writing as strictly an American phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> However, in his second book, *Littérature et environnement* [*Literature and Environment*] (2012), Suberchicot works with three national literatures – American, Chinese, and French – as he analyzes literary texts in which environmental themes are raised.<sup>42</sup> While I applaud Suberchicot’s call for a comparative ecocritical approach, his study looks for similarities across different national literatures, leaving less room for the specificities of the cultural contexts under consideration.

My own approach draws inspiration from the work of Verena Andermatt Conley, who outlines the important contributions that French thinkers have made to ecological thinking in the last fifty years. In *Ecopolitics* (1997), Conley examines a wide array of thinkers, from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Michel de Certeau, from Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers to Hélène Cixous and Luce

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40 In ‘Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene’, Latour ends by asking how we can tell the stories of all sources of agency on Gaia, not only those of the Earthbound (humans). Bruno Latour, ‘Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene’, *New Literary History* 45.1 (2014), 1–18.

41 Alain Suberchicot, *Littérature américaine et écologie* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002).

42 Alain Suberchicot, *Littérature et environnement: pour une écocritique comparée* (Paris: Champion, 2012).

Irigaray.<sup>43</sup> Post-structuralism constitutes, according to Conley, a deconstruction of an anthropocentric view, and a shift towards an ecological view of differential processes in a material world. In *Spatial Ecologies* (2012), Conley illustrates that the 'spatial turn' in French contemporary thought comprises a political ecology in the sense that it asks what makes place habitable.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Collot, Conley works to close the gap between ecological thinking and the spatial imagination. She does not, however, include the analysis of literary texts in her book, and so creates an opening for an *écocritique* that brings together ecological thinking, political reading, and French literature.

I will briefly outline two of the critical terms and theoretical concepts that I am developing for a French *écocritique*: ecological subjectivity and ecological dwelling.<sup>45</sup> Given the number of contemporary French thinkers who are redefining human and non-human relations, my choice of Félix Guattari and Michel Serres may appear restrictive, but the concepts that I am articulating are not taken solely from their work. They are the result of reading these thinkers alongside the fictional works of two contemporary French authors: Marie Darrieussecq and Marie-Hélène Lafon. The general concepts of French ecological thought become entangled with the particularities of each story-world, complicating the relationship between philosophy and literature so that neither has precedence in a French ecocritical approach.

## Ecological subjectivity

In response to the anthropocentric thinking of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism, ecocriticism has adopted what has occasionally been a categorical and problematic anti-anthropocentrism. The environmental text had been defined as one that gives centre stage to the natural world,<sup>46</sup> yet much literature continues to be driven by human-derived plots and characters. Even in nature writing, the central lens for describing the physical world continues to be the human I/eye, and

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43 Verena A. Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997).

44 Verena A. Conley, *Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Cultural Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

45 For a more in-depth engagement, see my French 'Écocritique': *Reading Contemporary French Theory and Fiction Ecologically* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

46 See Buell's definition of the environmental text in *The Environmental Imagination*, 6–8.

human language is the central tool. A French *écocritique* begins with the premise that the human subject cannot be so easily dissolved into the environment.

Without rehabilitating Cartesian dualism or a subject/object binary, Félix Guattari builds a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which subjectivity takes form within environments, and apart from them. In *Les Trois Écologies*, Guattari describes the material processes of subjectification and desubjectification taking place in mental, social and environmental ecologies.<sup>47</sup> These three ecologies form the basis of Guattari's ecosophical thinking that remains hopeful about, yet wary of, the possibilities made available by new media and technologies. By carefully attending to subjectivities as dynamic, transforming and relational processes, Guattari offers a way of defining ecological subjectivity as something other than a set of practices or characteristics (such as 'environmentally friendly'). In addition, Guattari turns to literature and the arts for examples of a new 'ethico-aesthetic paradigm' that works to undo the hold of advanced capitalism on the contemporary imagination.<sup>48</sup>

The act of pairing Guattari's ecosophy with Marie Darrieussecq's novels *Bref séjour chez les vivants* [*A Brief Stay among the Living*] (2001) and *Le Pays* [*The Country*] (2005) illustrates the literary imagination's contribution to (re)thinking the processes of subjectivity that emerge in and from a material world.<sup>49</sup> In her novels, Darrieussecq explores the state of flux in which the subject is caught as she – Darrieussecq's main characters and narrators are all female – struggles against and with language to express and explode the limits of being and becoming. Subjectivity is always embodied in Darrieussecq's novels, and necessarily involves a set of ecological conditions that change as the character inhabits different places and times. In the end, ecological subjectivity is a tenuous, fragile affair that terminates in death as often as it gives birth to new life.

Darrieussecq's emphasis on processes of female subjectification and de-subjectification is also a way to counter Guattari's lack of attention to gender differences in his theorising about ecosophy. While refusing to self-identify as a feminist, Darrieussecq speaks out against French gendering of pronouns where the *masculin* always dominates the *féminin*.<sup>50</sup> Darrieussecq's concern about how language informs our perception of the world is complemented by a desire to use language

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47 Guattari, *Les Trois Écologies*, 32–53.

48 Guattari, *Les Trois Écologies*, 67–8.

49 Marie Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (Paris: POL, 2001); *Le Pays* (Paris: POL, 2005).

50 Marie Darrieussecq, 'Je est unE autre', in *Écrire l'histoire d'une vie*, ed. by A. Oliver (Santa Maria Capua Vetere: Spartaco, 2007), 106–20.



to create new worlds. Darrieussecq's novels are deeply engaged with what it means to be a living being in a material, vegetal, animal world. She explains that her aim is to expose readers to the materiality of the world on a microscopic level:

Le monde est aussi fait d'électrons, de microbes, d'ondes, de planètes... bientôt sans doute de clones, d'OGN, de nouveaux sons, de nouvelles odeurs... etc... Je participe au mouvement permanent des défricheurs. Je veux ouvrir des yeux sous les yeux des lecteurs, des oreilles sous leurs oreilles, une nouvelle peau sous leur peau.<sup>51</sup>

[The world is also made up of electrons, microbes, waves, planets... and soon, no doubt, clones, GMOs, new sounds, new smells... etc... I am part of the ongoing movement of discoverers. I want to open the eyes that are underneath the readers' eyes, the ears underneath their ears, the skin underneath their skin.]

By exploring Darrieussecq's fictional world, the reader discovers the embedded and embodied nature of subjectivity in a world composed of local, regional landscapes, as well as global connections and technologies. As Guattari notes, literature – and art more generally – can bring about change, not because of an inherent political message, but by placing the reader in the position of co-creating new worlds, new subjectivities and new practices.

## Ecological dwelling

Ecological dwelling, the second concept that I am developing, raises the question of the ways in which we create connections to a place that we call home. In *Ecocriticism* (2011), Greg Garrard defines dwelling as the 'long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work'.<sup>52</sup> He examines models of rural dwelling in georgic literature, and calls ecocritics to explore the inflections of this model in today's contemporary culture.<sup>53</sup> Responding to this call, I articulate the notion of ecological dwelling in terms of the particular context of the *paysans* who have all but disappeared from the landscape in France today. But where Garrard emphasises 'long-term imbrication', I underline continued change and transformation. I define ecological dwelling as a set of practices that evolve with respect to new socio-historical and material conditions.

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51 Marie Darrieussecq, Becky Miller and Martha Holmes, 'Entretien réalisé par Becky Miller et Martha Holmes en décembre 2001', *The University of Arizona* (2001), <<http://darrieussecq.arizona.edu/fr/entretien-réalisé-par-becky-miller-et-martha-holmes-en-décembre-2001>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

52 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2011), 117.

53 Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 145.

In this larger sense, ecological dwelling emerges in multiple places, and at multiple times, without simply reiterating previous modes of living.

The notion of the rural continues to mark the French cultural imagination. Jean-Pierre Le Goff notes in *La Fin du Village* [*The End of the Village*] (2012) that ‘dans l’imaginaire national, la France reste encore associée à un univers rural et villageois [in the national imaginary, France remains linked to a rural, village setting]’.<sup>54</sup> But rather than lament the end of rural life as Le Goff does, I examine the ways in which the *paysan* can be framed in terms of a larger transformative moment in French culture. According to Serres, the reduction of the French farming population over the last sixty years represents a dramatic and destabilising change.<sup>55</sup> Yet he takes up the figure of the *paysan* as a way of outlining a more general relationship to knowledge and the world. In *Les Cinq Sens* [*The Five Senses*] (1985), he examines the kinds of landscapes that traditional farming has created – patches and bits, sewn together *pagus* by *pagus* – and asks how we can extend this model of dwelling.<sup>56</sup> This does not mean that we all become farmers; rather, it means that we learn to cultivate knowledge piece by piece, and always only contingently, according to specific experiences, activities and practices.

In addition to using the variegated countryside as a symbol for thinking contingently about the world, Serres also adopts the figure of the *paysan* as a way of thinking about ecological dwelling on a global scale. Without romanticising a lost way of life, Serres works to imagine an ecological relationship with the land that takes into account the contemporary realities of GMOs, global warming, and advances in biotechnology.<sup>57</sup> He speaks of a *paysannerie généralisée* that translates into caring and managing the world on a global scale, all the while knowing that nature’s power goes far beyond our own. Serres asserts that a relationship of symbiosis, not parasitism, must emerge if we hope to continue to call the earth our home. In this way, the *paysan* becomes a symbol for our constantly transforming relationship to the land; one that takes on a global scope in the contemporary world.

Much like Serres’s writing about the *paysan*, Marie-Hélène Lafon depicts rural life as a story of loss and transformation in her novels *Les Derniers Indiens* [*The Last Indians*] (2008), *L’Annonce* [*The Advertisement*] (2009) and *Les Pays* [*The Countries*]

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54 Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *La Fin du village: une histoire française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 11.

55 Serres, *Hominescence*, 89–91.

56 Michel Serres, *Les Cinq Sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 259–80.

57 Michel Serres, ‘Peut-on dire encore le pouvoir spirituel?’, *Critique* 726 (2007), 803–29. In *Détachement*, comparing farming practices in France and China, Serres discusses the ways in which agricultural practices have informed cultural practices. Michel Serres, *Détachement: apologue* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986).

(2012).<sup>58</sup> They reveal a similar need to articulate a crucial turning point in terms of the ways in which relationships to the land are imagined in France. While Serres focusses on the emergence of global ecological problems as the moment of change, Lafon draws attention to individual stories and experiences as they play out in local places, specifically in the Cantal. Lafon's characters develop intimate, but not harmonious, relationships with objects and beings. *Intense* might be a better word to describe the characters' experience of a world that is very present, and includes kitchen tables, chairs, silverware, cows, dogs, storms, and trees. In other words, *rural* does not mean *nature* in Lafon's novels. Her rural world offers the body a sense of intense presence, but can also stifle connections and interactions with others. It is when the rural becomes a place of transformation capable of integrating others and adopting new modes of living on the land that it illustrates ecological dwelling.

## Conclusion

In closing, I want to comment on the subtitle of my chapter, with its echoes of Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).<sup>59</sup> I am certainly not suggesting that a French *écocritique* follows acceptable social conventions by day and then performs murderous, violent acts by night. I am using the adjective 'strange' in the etymological sense of *external* or *outside* since the very word *écocritique* – a neologism created from the English term 'ecocriticism' – contains traces of an 'elsewhere'. The combination of the English adjective and the French noun gives rise, moreover, to a sense of linguistic dissonance, as it brings together two unlike things to form a bilingual hybrid that sits between different literary traditions and histories. This linguistic dissonance forces a reader to reflect on the ways in which language performs culture in the area of ecology and environment. In addition, it reveals an in-between position that is highly productive for formulating, exploring and experimenting with new ecological concepts and approaches. Emerging outside the 'governing bodies' of French literary studies, a French *écocritique* can continue to challenge commonly held notions of 'nature', 'ecology' and 'environment', as well as references to 'representation', 'mimesis' and 'aesthetics'.

There is not a universal set of ethics and politics that a French *écocritique* seeks to apply to literary and cultural texts. The meaning of the adjective 'ecological'

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58 Marie-Hélène Lafon, *Les Derniers Indiens* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2008); *L'Annonce* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2009); *Les Pays* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2012).

59 Robert L. Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1886).

is constructed and deconstructed through the interpretive process, revealing a micro-politics of diverse encounters and orientations. This does not mean that there is no passage from the micro-politics of an ecocritical reading of the text to the macro-politics of ecological thinking. But this passage very much resembles the one described by Serres in *Le Passage du Nord-Ouest* [*The Northwest Passage*] (1980): singular, transitory, time- and space-dependent, full of obstacles, yet extremely enriching. In the end, it is this transitory passage that brings the reader to the real world, one which is ‘frangé de sommeil et de songes [fringed with sleep and dreams]’, ‘plongé dans la démente et la beauté [immersed in madness and beauty]’, ‘concret, flottant, solide, fragile, précis et fondu, résistant ou sans prise [concrete, flowing, solid, fragile, sharp and blurred, steadfast, or slippery]’.<sup>60</sup>

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