

Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts

Volume 3 *QuebEcology: Voices from Quebec and the Greater North*

Article 11

2021

Author Interview with Novelist Esther Laforce

Esther Laforce

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Recommended Citation

Laforce, Esther. "Author Interview with Novelist Esther Laforce." *Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts*, vol. 3, 2021 , pp. 77-78.

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Green Humanities, vol. 3 (2021), pp. 77-88
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Author Interview

with novelist Esther Laforce,

author of: *In the Early Days of the Anthropocene (Aux premiers temps de l'Anthropocène*: Ottawa, CA: Leméac Editeur, 2018)

Green Humanities [GH]: *In the Early Days of the Anthropocene* is a melancholic but extremely moving novel. What drove you to write your first novel about an impending apocalypse?

Esther Laforce [EL]: It's a theme that concerns me personally and is of great interest to me in literature more broadly. As my attention is generally focused on the ecological crisis, it's hard for me to ignore in my writing what's coming, what's being predicted, the partly unknown but most likely catastrophic consequences of climate change, of the melting polar ice-caps, of rising sea levels, of the loss of biodiversity. We often perceive the environmental crisis as a series of phenomena that will, in the near future, cause a great catastrophe. As if, for the moment, we were living in anxious expectation that everything will crumble and that the world as we know it will fall to pieces. This just can't be the right way to see things. Rather, shouldn't we consider this environmental crisis as an ongoing catastrophe? And perhaps we shouldn't worry so much about the end of our world as we know it; everything depends on what's ending and what we'd like to see change. There are surely many things we're happy to see disappear so as to allow alternative possibilities to emerge.

However, I believe that my novel emerges from a vision in which it's life itself that disappears, where a violent, unjust, avoidable death lurks. This death never occurs "naturally", if I can call it that; it comes early, it afflicts everyone, animals are killed deliberately or as a result of automobile accidents, insects like bees and butterflies vanish. And, alongside this omnipresent

death, Emile's attention is also drawn to the lack of care for humans, animals, and plants. So, if there is a looming apocalypse, or something like it, I wanted to search for signs of its foreshadowing in recurring themes of death, abandonment, brutality, and infertility, all woven into this personal, honestly conveyed story of mourning, loneliness, and infertility which inhabits me and which is anchored in my worry about what we are doing to this world and what will become of life. My work has its foundation in something like the consciousness of the urgent need to preserve what the French philosopher Emilie Hache calls "What we hold dear" (*Ce à quoi nous tenons*, Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

Lastly, I'd also add that when I started to write *The Early Days of the Anthropocene* I'd immersed myself in the "post-exotic" universe of the novel entitled *Des anges mineurs* (Paris: Seuil, 1999) by Antoine Volodine, the French author. I was struck by its post-apocalyptic world inspired by visions of concentration camps along with its landscapes that evoke the Chernobyl exclusionary zone. Even if my novel differs significantly from what Volodine does, I'm nevertheless attuned to post-apocalyptic universes, particularly those that result from ecological disasters, camps, and wars, WWII in particular, as it contained all the ingredients for what we imagine an apocalypse to be.

GH: The word "anthropocene" is an important term in eco-criticism today. Can you explain its usage in the title? Are there environmental factors in particular that have moved you to anchor your book around this concept?

EL: The term "anthropocene" can, I believe, be seen as a sort of backdrop for the narrative thread of my novel. As I wrote above, various themes evoke the ecological crisis. But my intent was not to describe the big picture of the geological implications of the anthropocene as somewhat shown in *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), the film by Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier et Edward Burtynsky. Rather, the idea is to identify its "micro-motifs" and "micro-events" as they arise and manifest themselves in an ordinary life, the life, for example, of an average woman who has known the countryside and the suburbs and lives in a city like Montreal. The death of animals, the extinction of animal and insect species, the melting icecaps, deforestation, urbanization, and—more generally—the industrial exploitation of natural resources by humans, are all themes that needed to emerge through Emilie's intimate and sensitive words to her dying sister. I couldn't allow the "anthropocene", perhaps more accurately named "capitalocene" as is sometimes the case, to remain a purely abstract concept. Environmental problems aren't only a set of complex events about which one learns in documentaries or the news. For me, the primary and most obvious manifestation of the anthropocene, of human domination of the planet, is on my bustling street with its ubiquitous automobiles and constant, speeding, noisy, dirty, alienating traffic. In the same way, distant events that we learn about in the news need to find their way into our emotions and become meaningful to us by connecting with our daily lives, and being felt within that proximate space that we experience directly.

Among other things, my title evokes the "early days" of the anthropocene. One could wonder what "early days" in this context designates by reflecting on the start of this geological era and on its duration. If we set its beginning at the outset of the industrial Age, around 1750,

it would mean that about 300 years have passed since it started. 300 years is certainly significant in human history, so perhaps “early days” is an inaccurate appellation. The Second World War, with its concurrent acceleration of industrialization, could also serve as a historical milestone; so one could still see this period fall within these “early days”. But as we are concerned with geological time, I suspect that 70 or 300 years are meaningless unless, of course, the stress we are causing on the ecosystem is such that the resulting environmental disruptions are sufficient to cause a rapid and abrupt end of our history and, consequently, of the anthropocene . . . In that case, given the ferocity of this period, it will seem absurd one day in the future to talk about the “early days” of the anthropocene (but absurd for whom if we’re all gone?!) In any event, hidden in the poetic turn of the title might lie, after all, a hope that the anthropocene could be long enough to qualify as “early days” that time during which a consciousness of environmental upheavals and the role of humans on ecosystems arose; a time followed, for example, by periods characterized by intense catastrophes, but perhaps also of periods during which we elaborate ways to rethink our relationship to the Earth and its resources.

GH: The novel opens with a disturbing but haunting image of a decapitated roebuck. Can you unpack its significance to you as a metaphor in the novel? How did you come upon this powerful vision?

EL: Without foreclosing other possible interpretations of the scene, I’d suggest that it marks the end of the two young sisters’ attitudes of wonder, innocence, and enchantment towards animals, the forest, the countryside, and nature in general. If at first the countryside is their imagination’s playground, where they can tell each other princess stories, where their mind’s eye arranges living

things and their child's play finds order and symbiosis, the scenes makes those surroundings scary, where death and decomposition reveal themselves, where humans, specifically adults, can benefit from the death of animals, can cause it, organize it, through hunting and also the massive pig farms that appear later on in the novel.

This scene also marks the moment when both sisters realize their own vulnerability. The buck's death stirs within them notions of their own mortality and, perhaps even more than that, the possibility of being killed and thereby being separated from one another, which is the foundation of the entire novel.

Coming face to face with death and this rotting body and the consequent realization of the possible death of one of the two sisters is also a first encounter with horror, ugliness, and pain so severe that it overwhelms the self and tests rationality. I also wanted this scene to describe the very peculiar feeling of needing to imagine the unimaginable, the frightful. The feeling of horror, it seems to me, is appropriate when we imagine and suffer the possible consequences of the current ecological crisis.

GH: The novel is a love letter of sorts to a dying world as well as to a dying sister. Discuss the role of family and human connectedness in your story. Were you pessimistic when you wrote it, or do you see it as a distress call to our planet?

EL: Family can be, though this isn't always the case, where one first learns love, attachment, care, and concern for others. In my novel, sisterhood is where these positive elements in human

relationships find their mooring. The love that binds both sisters parallels Emilie's love for this world in decline, a decline that itself mirrors that of her older sister Melissa's sick body. It is, after all, with her sister that she discovered and experienced the world, so it goes without saying that these characters are as connected as they are. I've always found sisterhood, in movies, in books and in life, to be very moving. When this relationship is shattered by Melissa's death in my novel, Emilie has trouble believing in a brighter future. However, the possibility of projecting Emilie's love for her sister onto others remains, as does her ability to keep her sister's memory alive. This memory also feeds her creativity and her writing about the living world. The figure of the loved and ailing sister as a representation of a world in decline allowed me to experiment through my writing with what it is like to lose something dear, and to recognize and express the precious nature of what we are losing. Here again, I refer back to the French philosopher Emilie Hache who describes the increased appreciation for "what we hold dear" when we are experiencing its imminent loss. The climate catastrophe, the sight of a world on the brink or in decline, pushes us to this same thought experiment of seeking to understand what we hold dearly enough to seek too save it, to preserve it, and how to go about doing that.

There are other images of loss in the novel, of abandoned or dying children, that evoke crisis, the general lack of care in humankind, and in the living world more broadly. The images of Anne Frank, for example, or of a dead child refugee on a Mediterranean beach are heartbreaking. The circumstances of their demise are a source of despair about humanity. There is, however, it seems to me, a way in which writing about these atrocious deaths conjures up feelings of care, and pushes us to consider their ethical ramifications.

Before reading Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: psychological theory and women's development*, translated into French as *Une voix différente* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), I wasn't very familiar with feminist theories of care or with the ethics of care. But I was impressed by the studies in this seminal work on the ethics of care, which describes the female vision of human interdependence, the importance of preserving the human fabric, of fighting exclusion of any kind. I believe that possessing an awareness of a certain unity, an interdependence of humans not just with one another, but also with other living beings more generally, lays the foundation for solutions to our ecological challenges and to our exploitation of the living world.

GH: The novel also treats the notion of single motherhood and the failed attempts of the narrator to conceive on her own. Do you see that as a metaphor for current trends in Quebec or the world? Along similar lines, loneliness and an absence of togetherness play an important role as well. I believe your novel can resonate even more now during our current pandemic and a new era of "social distancing". Perhaps you can say a word about the novel's prescience in that regard?

EL: The theme of infertility is surely metaphoric; it's not about death, but rather about life disappearing, unable to perpetuate, to grow, to develop. Emily's inability to have a child, her winding up alone, at the end of her own lineage, evokes this theme of the end that also finds itself in the ecological crisis. However, though sadly unfulfilled, her desire nevertheless survives. Despite all of her failed attempts at having a child, her desire to do so remains alive within her. As sad as this unfulfilled desire may be, it persists unabated, not so much in the form of hope or optimism, but rather as a wish to see the world carry on, as a belief that it's worth clinging to

beauty and the things we find precious in life. It is in her love that fuels this desire and that she focuses on children that we can perceive another reason to care for the environment.

I feel that solitude and isolation are at once an intuitive element of my writing and also consistent with this theme of the end. Indeed, literature is replete with stories of the end of the world that are carried by isolated and confined characters, witness the novels of Volodine, as prime examples. So, I'm not sure if the themes I'm drawn to cause me to naturally create settings of isolation and confinement; but I feel that I can certainly write better through the voices of isolated and confined women, as if their voices can finally be heard only when all others are quiet.

As for the pandemic that afflicts us now, it does sometimes feel like the end of the world or, at least, as the end of a world. And it has led to isolation and has surely caused many to experience solitude. It's true that it's a fitting setting for Emile. But I believe that this pandemic says more about our local and global interdependence, and that it points out our global vulnerabilities more or less bare depending on our age and social situation. To my mind, that's how environmental issues need to be understood: first, we need to contextualize these sometimes distant problems with a view to understanding how they might affect us directly and locally; second, to situate ourselves within this world so as to assess our own resulting responsibility. Then, it's important to understand the differential impact of these environmental catastrophes on more or less vulnerable people so as to protect the most vulnerable by reinforcing the social fabric. Thus, solitude and isolation need to be considered within a global context as well as within a specific social network in order to comprehend their impact; we are not all lonely and isolated in the same way.

GH: I was particularly taken by your lines towards the end of the story: “I will transport myself to a distant future. I will figure myself among the archeologists who will discover our tombs and the little animals who inhabited our reveries when we were children [...] all dead in the early days of the anthropocene.” Can you explain the “distant future” she is wishing for? It reminds me of Chris Marker’s *La jetée* in its way of foreseeing a future where the world will resemble the Museum of Natural History the main characters visit in Paris when the time traveler at the heart of the film returns to the 20th-century. It also reminds of the contemporary Quebecois poet Caroline Louiseize’s wistful trip through prehistoric times of “mastadons and caves” in her book *Répliques*.

EL: This imaginary future from which Emilie looks back to assess what traces she and her family will leave allows her to put this time she has spent alone into perspective, but it also evokes Melissa’s skills as an archeologist to look back on ancient civilization. I believe that studying the ruins of ancient civilizations with a view to imagining the modes of organization and the life of the citizens whose remains lie in ancient tombs informs a particular sensibility to imagine future civilizations and how they might look back on us. This dynamic is all the more relevant in the context of the current climate crisis which raises questions about the future of humankind and our planet.

My own vision of these distant futures isn’t all that developed, but film and literature are there to feed our imagination in that regard. So it’s perhaps good news that a distant future exists in my novel and that archaeologists are part of that future; it could mean that in the future

there will still be humans and that our modes of organization are robust enough to include that profession which isn't, after all, crucial to humanity's survival. Alternatively, we might imagine those archeologists wearing gas masks or diving suits and undertaking a solitary exploration of an unpopulated world. Or perhaps we should consider them as extraterrestrials, or as humans returning to Earth to understand their beginnings. There are myriad possible outcomes that depend, in part at least, on how we behave today.

GH: Can you say a few words about your outlook on the state of ecological affairs in Quebec at the moment?

EL: I don't believe that Quebec's environmental challenges are very different from those faced by most other western societies. The same things are at stake here: substituting green energy sources for oil, rethinking our economic model and our overconsumption, developing alternative views of what we mean by progress and wealth, reimagining our relationship to cars, developing mass transit, as well as finding better processes for handling waste. Fundamentally, I believe that we need to reexamine our entire organizational paradigm as well as our power structures. This process inevitably requires a critique of capitalism and includes a vision of justice that is anchored in the experiences of those people who've been excluded and marginalized by the current power structure. The voices of women, indigenous people, racial minorities will undoubtedly contribute to make the world a better place. In my view, their struggles are one with the environmentalist cause.

GH: Lastly, as a testament to the power of your novel to heal, I read a very inspiring account in the newspaper *Le Devoir* by Véronique Côté who discussed your novel along with the brilliant poet Jean-Christophe Réhel's *Ce qu'on respire sur Tatouine (What they are breathing in Tatouine)* as books that helped her get out of bed and face life again. "They cured me of all my urges to retreat from society. I'm alive. I want to participate in this imperfect world while there still is not an end of the world that can personally overwhelm me. And then I got up" (*Le Devoir*, 24 Nov, 2018). Can you comment on the healing aspects of your novel. Do you see yourself and your outlook about present times as emblematic of your generation or rather as a clarion call for change?

EL: I wouldn't claim that my writing can heal; only my readers can testify to the emotional impact of my book on them. That said, I was very moved by the words of Veronique Côté, whom I admire and whose book *La Vie Habitable* I thoroughly enjoyed. And I just don't know if my perspective exemplifies that of my generation or that it will move people to action. In fact, many people, thinkers, and writers have influenced me; and the ones who are younger than I (I am 43, after all!) are more focused on environmental problems than are people of my generation. We have to leave them the floor and the power because the future is theirs. And, as Greta Thunberg's example demonstrates, the youngest among them are far from being passive on environmental issues.

If my novel can have a positive effect on its readers, it does so the same way all books do, even the most disturbing among them, even the ones that cause more worry than reassurance; books, literature in general, serve as a medium to share our feelings, our worldviews, our

experiences. That community, comprised of writers and readers, finds its strength in the feeling of participating in a complex, heterogeneous, and often ailing world that we all wish would become ever more just.