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### Writing the world with Michaël Ferrier - Editors' introduction

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Editors' introduction

Writing the World with Michaël Ferrier

Pour comprendre la France, il est nécessaire de  
passer par d'autres pays. Il faut aller voir ailleurs pour  
comprendre ce qu'est la France...

Michaël Ferrier, *Mémoires d'outre-mer*

When there is enough out-of-placeness in the world,  
nothing is out of place.

Don DeLillo, *Mao II*

Michaël Ferrier describes himself, in an academic context, as 'a French writer, novelist and essayist'. But for anyone who has read his work, that seems far too narrow a description, both biographically and bibliographically speaking. As a Frenchman with Alsatian, Mauritian and Goan roots, living in Japan since the 1990s, who has written about French nationhood, Tokyo by night, his grandfather's life in Madagascar, the Fukushima disaster and his own childhood in Chad, he and his writings – while clearly 'French' – embody a much broader Frenchness, a Frenchness without borders; 'without' in the sense of not having borders, but also being outside of them. His writing transgresses not only such national and linguistic borders, but also those belonging to particular disciplines, genres, or systems of thought. It is generically hybrid, easily taking in autobiography, fiction and reportage within the pages of a single book; his critical essays merge into his creative writings, and he is involved in more and more collaborative endeavours. With the abundance that characterizes both his output and his style, Ferrier's work spills over from the printed pages of his novels onto film screens, the stages on which his novels have been dramatized, and the virtual pages of the Internet, both of his own

website and those of others. The man himself is also prolifically present all over the world, through Zoom calls as well as in person. A full-time professor at Chuo University in Tokyo, he still finds time to participate in conferences in Europe and America, take up writing residencies in Cleveland, attend the launch of a collection of disaster writings in Beirut, or the premiere of a stage production of his book on Fukushima in Chambéry. Reflecting his multiple projects across the globe, his work has gained international recognition with translations of his novels published in China, Japan, India, Portugal, Italy, and the US. Ferrier was also awarded multiple literary prizes in France and beyond, including prix Édouard Glissant (2012), prix Franz Hessel (2015), prix Décembre (2018) and prix Jacques Lacarrière (2020).

Although the profusion of his writings would seem to belie it, Ferrier has only been writing for 25 years or so; his first novel came out in 2004. Accordingly, there are still not many critical works on his oeuvre, although they have been increasing over the last ten years. Articles have been published by a number of scholars, such as Fabien Arribert-Narce, Bernadette Cailler, Catherine Coquio, Akane Kawakami, Hannah Holtzman and Martin Munro, and a volume of essays brought out by Honoré Champion in 2021, edited by Arribert-Narce. The present volume, therefore, is still only the second collection of essays dedicated to Ferrier, although given the number of international conferences that have been organized recently on his oeuvre – four to date, in Edinburgh (2017), London, Sendai (2019) and Florida (2022) – there will no doubt be other essay collections in the near future. Based on the proceedings of an international conference held by the Winthrop-King Institute in Florida State University, at which Ferrier himself was present, this collection thus represents an important reference point in the development of Ferrier Studies, which is still in its early stages but already beginning to flourish.

As we have suggested already, locating Ferrier in the broader landscape of contemporary literature in French is a challenge. ‘Les Français ne savent pas’, he notes in *Mémoires d’outre-mer* (61), ‘où me mettre’ (*Mémoires* 61). He has, however, received widespread and well-deserved recognition, including the prominent prizes mentioned above, and has worked with some of the major publishing houses in France. His residence for over twenty-five years in Japan generates, however, a degree of unfamiliarity in the context of French literature as a national literature, an element that is reflected also in his heterogeneous and in many ways unclassifiable work. This sense of alterity is evident in the interlocutors with whom Ferrier sustains dialogue. He is clearly drawn to French metropolitan authors such as Georges Perec, whose poetics of microsppection underpins Ferrier’s own engagement with urban space. Perec forms a key part of Ferrier’s exploration of Franco-Japanese connections in *La Barrière des rencontres* (2009), a study in which he focuses on the author’s little-known *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l’art subtil du go* (co-written in 1969 with Jacques Roubaud and Pierre Lusson). The award in 2012 of the Prix Edouard Glissant reflects a particularly fruitful relationship with authors from the French Caribbean, most notably Glissant himself, to whose writing and thought Ferrier has devoted a number of searching literary analyses. His thinking on the Japan-Antilles axis is most clearly articulated in a *Small Axe* article in 2010 on ‘Creole Japan; or, The Vagaries of Creolization’. In this, he challenges the monolingual logic of units such as ‘la Francophonie’ or the ‘French-speaking world’ and posits an understanding of literature, culture and thought that is unmoored, yet entangled and engaged in the transcultural and translingual connections that characterize the modern world (and have arguably characterized the world for many centuries before). The result is a recognition of creoleness as a concept that is not geographic, and offers a critique of Western epistemologies:

theories of creolization are also undeniably an intellectual instrument and a political weapon with which to think through the mutations of modern Japan, to struggle against the still vibrant models of insular mythologies (self-

foundation, self-sufficiency, nativism, etc.), and to study to what degree the welcoming of what is different, hospitality, and the trials of living alongside the other create, under very different skies and in ways sometimes quite varied, civilizations' conditions of emergence and existence. ('Creole Japan' 44)

Such an intervention underlines the extent to which Ferrier's work responds to the global as opposed to the national, but nevertheless seeks to think France, Frenchness and the broader Francosphere in a heterogeneous, globalized frame.

Spilling in these ways beyond attempts to define literature according to the boundaries of single nations or languages, Ferrier's work has much in common with that of both postcolonial and translingual writers. His work is not post-national but seeks instead to understand France – to adopt a term used in *Mémoires d'outre-mer* – as 'multi-territoriale' (*Mémoires* 69), i.e., as 'un terrain hétérogène et pourtant cohérent' (*Mémoires* 70). His interest in the creolization of cultures extends to the forging of a historical sensitivity, evident in a text such as *Mémoires d'outre-mer*, to France's colonial past and its impact across oceans and continents. At the same time, the ways in which Japanese culture and language have shaped his own literary production, evident in the generic experimentation of a text such as *Tokyo, petits portraits de l'aube*, reflect what Ferrier himself dubs 'writing *with*' Japan (quoted in Holtzman 563). Such an approach suggests a certain connection with exophonic writers, including authors of Japanese origin such as Aki Shimazaki (in Canada) and Akira Mizubayashi (in France), whose works bridge cultures and can radically defamiliarize French-language literature. Ferrier's own tendency is to challenge such labels and, in the process, to undermine the hierarchies they implicitly or explicitly generate. This emerges eloquently in a 2014 lecture entitled 'Francophonie, cacophonie, multiphonie' where Ferrier unpicks the multiple meanings of the 'F/francophone' in order to propose the alternative concept of 'multiphonie', i.e., of French interacting with a range of different languages, already in evidence in the work of key French-language authors such as Kateb Yacine. His

concluding challenge relates to the institutions of French literature (and to the ways in which that literature is taught), captured in the tension between two opposing understandings: ‘celle d’une entité plurielle et complexe ou celle d’une institution normative et conservatrice, arc-boutée sur son passé’ (‘Francophonie, cacophonie, multiphonie’ 240). It is the former that Ferrier espouses and illustrates throughout his work. It is striking that, while he was not a signatory of the 2007 ‘world-literature in French’ manifesto, his writing engages with that critical tendency both as critique and potential illustration. On the one hand, notably with his recognition of and advocacy for the ‘multiphone’, Ferrier reveals the contradictions of any literature that claims to be global while retaining monolingual boundaries; on the other, with its linguistic and cultural inclusivity, its engagement with a broad range of literary forms and topics from beyond France, Ferrier’s work reveals the possibilities of a literature that is purposefully and proactively – to borrow the terms of the manifesto – ‘ouverte sur le monde, transnationale’.

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A skilled scholar himself, Ferrier provides the first article, in which he reflects on the question of “writing the world,” and situates himself in relation to the work of predecessors (travel writers, Weltliteratur, Littérature-monde, World literature) and seeks a relationship to the world that is not only that of predation or consumption, but rather regulates itself in the mode of dance or gardening, an argument he explores in relation to two instances of ancient Japanese culture: the door of Rashō and the garden of Ryōan-ji. Charles Forsdick also writes on memory, in relation to Ferrier’s novel, *Mémoires d’outre-mer*. Forsdick reads the novel with reference to current debates about *lieux de mémoire*, and in particular the ways in which the concept elaborated by Pierre Nora is increasingly scrutinized in the light of its silences and erasures relating to colonial memory. As Forsdick writes, Ferrier focuses on realms of

memory such as the Mahajanga cemetery around which much of his text is constructed, but also engages directly with one of the subjects of Nora's collection, the school textbook *Le Tour de la France par Deux Enfants*, in order to open up a discussion of contemporary memory practices in France. He argues that French memory is often limited to national boundaries, and that any internal diversity is regulated, sanitized, hierarchized, with France's status as a transculturated, "travelling" culture denied in the process. Forsdick argues that the novel is a creative reaction to this mnemonic tendency, with the work situated at the intersection of the transnational and postcolonial, two concepts that are far from being synonymous but are nevertheless closely related throughout the text.

Fabien Arribert-Narce analyses the ways in which Ferrier's writing is informed by his practice of music, drawing, photography, and calligraphy, and depicts various experiences of border crossing between cultures, languages and media. As such, for Arribert-Narce, Ferrier's eclectic writings are characterized by an aesthetic hybridity that defies generic classifications. In line with his critique of the primacy of the visual in contemporary societies, Ferrier's versatile prose frequently uses synaesthesia and refers to numerous art forms such as jazz, painting, or cinema, thereby appealing to the reader's five senses. Ceaselessly experimenting in his literary work with the flexible form of the novel, between fact and fiction, Ferrier published in 2019 his first photo-text, *Scrabble*, which is analysed in depth in the second part of the article. As Arribert-Narce shows, in Ferrier's autobiographical narrative of his childhood in Chad in the 1970s, the numerous black and white illustrations introduce a complex game of presence and absence that mirrors the way memory functions. Haunted by the traumatic advent of civil war that brutally halted Ferrier's stay in Africa, this multi-media work circles around an ominous image of the author playing Scrabble with his brother as the conflict is about to break out; evoked at the beginning and the end of the text, this decisive image however remains elusive – a "ghost image."

Akane Kawakami also engages with questions of memory and identity, with specific reference to *Mémoires d'outre-mer* and *Scrabble*, a biography of Ferrier's paternal grandfather and an autobiographical account of Ferrier's childhood respectively. Although the books are quite different in many ways, Kawakami argues that they also have much in common: a particular attitude towards the natural world, a non-standard view of space and time as well as of human identity and memory, and a deep-seated belief in the power of language. Kawakami focuses specifically on the theme of identity—human identity within, and as part of, the external world. In her article, Bernadette Cailler draws on a key influence on Ferrier, Édouard Glissant, to argue that although there are many “recognized landscapes” and “lived rhythms” in Ferrier's works, and though they are often labelled “narrative” or “novel”, the books are in fact neither novel nor poem. To support her point, Cailler draws on Charles Baudelaire, Max Jacob, and Henri Meschonnic. Discovering traces of poeticity in seven selected sections of Ferrier's works, this article considers if and how these autonomous texts, excerpts from *Memories d'outre mer*, *Sympathie pour le fantôme*, and *François, portrait d'un absent* fit into the totality of a book, or even the work as a whole.

Alexis Chauchois' article writes of Ferrier as a “novelist of waves,” which are, he says, invisible, and are perceived and transcribed by the author like a seismograph. Chauchois proposes that waves settle at the very heart of the act of writing to establish themselves as a principle because, for Ferrier, waves are the breath of life and, therefore, that of writing. According to Chauchois, waves give and transmit the rhythm, the cadence, the emotion with the will to reveal events of all kinds, ordinary or not, and to mark memories. Like others in this volume, Martin Munro is drawn to Ferrier's uses of the senses, specifically hearing. Taking Ferrier to be a “listening man,” Munro engages with existing scholarship on Ferrier's work, specifically that which identifies the author's sensitivity to sounds, and with Ferrier's own writing on music and literature. Pursuing something of a “sound-studies” approach to



*Mémoires d'outre mer*, the article highlights the various uses of sounds and argues that the author be considered in the same way he writes of his grandfather Maxime, as a man who lives in and by sounds and listening.

Writing on the importance of encounters in Ferrier's work, Mehdi Chalmers compares the writings and aesthetics of Ferrier with those of the Japanese philosopher and essayist, Kuki Shûzô. The comparison is founded on the authors' shared interest in the idea of "meeting," and their experiences of the complexity of understanding the self and the other, both individually, as people, and collectively, as cultures. Chalmers uses Kuki Shûzô's concept of *iki* as a node that ties together both authors' conceptions of identity, difference, self, love, and existence. In another comparative article, Carine Schermann brings together the works of two "painters" of Tokyo: Ferrier and his hybrid collection of poetic essays, *Tokyo, petits portraits de l'aube*, and Japanese mangaka Jirô Taniguchi and his contemplative *bande dessinée*, *L'homme qui marche*. Through a close study of their respective explorations of Tokyo, Schermann argues that fragmentation and detour, foundational motifs of the authors' aesthetics, are carriers of a common ethical project that effects a decentralization of the gaze, one that embraces multiplicity and contradictions, to grasp the human and non-human in a common gesture.

Turning to Ferrier's representations of disaster, Robert Harvey refers to Ferrier's concept of the "coral writer." While Ferrier writes often of the catastrophic nature of human existence, Harvey argues that he also insistently spares his readers complete hopelessness. As Harvey writes, Ferrier achieves this by means that have been likened to the prodigious power of coral and their life cycles. Harvey goes on to suggest that the "coral writer" negotiates and articulates catastrophe in such a way that it can never become apocalyptic. Libby Fowler Beegle similarly refers to the idea of the coral writer. Echoing Arribert-Narce's work on this theme, Fowler Beegle initially identifies Ferrier as an *écrivain du corail* and then expands

this concept further as she finds resonances between ideas of creolization and Ferrier's writing. This article revisits a multimedia project, "Poétique de la dérouté chez Michaël Ferrier : une approche mimétique du fragment" from the 2022 Winthrop-King conference to demonstrate that working with Ferrier's creolized style and aesthetics in this project encouraged participation in and promotion of ideas related to creolization. Using content from the collaborative project, which was created along with Carine Schermann, this commentary accentuates the unexpected but beneficial discoveries that await if one interprets the world in the style of Ferrier: writing "from the inside" and composing seismographically, as Fowler Beagle puts it.

In her article, Brigitte Tsobgny analyses Ferrier's writing on the triple catastrophe of 2011 at Fukushima and its effects on humans and non-humans. As she writes, Ferrier makes important alliances between science and technology on the one hand, and literature on the other. The article shows how Ferrier appropriates the sciences to give us a bold account of the earthquake, the tsunami, the nuclear accident, and their social and political ramifications. Silvia Baage also writes on the disasters, and makes connections between Ferrier's accounts of Fukushima and the work of one of Germany's most famous children's book authors, Gudrun Pausewang (1928-2020). Baage's comparative analysis highlights the synchronic as well as diachronic dimensions of the Great East Japan Disaster and as such shows how Ferrier thinks globally about nuclear energy and technological risks. While Pausewang's novel focuses on the tragic experience of a young adult who copes with the aftermath of a nuclear accident in Germany in the 1980s, Ferrier strategically reveals the complexities of knowledge and uncertainty in the wake of environmental and human catastrophe as an ongoing crisis or déjà-vu of Chernobyl and Hiroshima. Baage's article explores Ferrier's (re)mediation of the convolution of this crisis across various media, including documents of popular culture, by insisting on the thematic and structural connections between his texts with

a 3/11 theme, Pausewang's 1987 novel, and two German adaptations of Pausewang's novel, Gregor Schnitzler's 2006 drama film, *Die Wolke*, as well as Anike Hage's 2008 graphic novel.

Timothy Lomeli writes on the screenplays written by Ferrier with Kenichi Watanabe for their three nuclear documentaries and published by Gallimard as *Notre ami l'atôme*. For Ferrier, these screenplays were not simple publications but expansions of the material they had collected in their three films, which includes expanded interviews and photographs of the disasters. In this article, Lomeli uses adaptation theory to examine Watanabe & Ferrier's film *Le monde après Fukushima* (2013) to understand the limits and possibilities each medium affords. For instance, these documentaries were partially funded by state institutions with a vested interest in the film, its reception, and its depiction of the events. Literature is, Lomeli argues, relatively freer to express opinions because it is less tied to certain forms of state funding. This article thus uses Jan-Noël Thon's concept of transmedial adaptation to demonstrate how both media (film and text) are complementary. Rather than simply publish the screenplay, Watanabe & Ferrier use the publication as an opportunity to share expanded commentary and photography. When the film and text are read together, they become an even more explicit critique of the nations that perpetuate the use of nuclear energy despite their demonstrated dangers. The volume ends with JoungHwa Woo and Alexis Chauchois's close analyses of Ferrier's work, focusing on color and revealing how the color white primarily symbolizes absence and death in the work. However, by writing the blank, they argue, Ferrier chooses to reveal it, and bring to light what has disappeared. The absence thus materialized can no longer be ignored, they propose, and the writer uses white as a memory tool that allows him to rehabilitate those forgotten by history, those he calls ghosts. The volume ends with an unpublished piece of work by Michaël Ferrier, "Le petit tamarinier: Histoire des gens qui n'ont pas d'histoire," which was originally written for but not ultimately used in

*Mémoires d'outre mer*. Fittingly, then, it is a work of memory itself, brought back to life for this volume that brims with the belief that Ferrier's work is one of the most vital in contemporary writing, a multi-volume, multi-layered, multi-genre investigation of the multiplicities that exist within the individual and in the world.

Guest Co-Editors

Fabien Arribert-Narce, Charles Forsdick,

Akane Kawakami, Martin Munro

Editors

Roger Celestin, Eliane DalMolin

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