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POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE AND LAND ART IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

ABSTRACT This paper analyses the relationships between literature and land art, in a comparative and cooperative perspective. A feeble monument in Kenya, erected by Karen Blixen and dedicated to her beloved, finds echoes in a paper installation by Canadian artist Marlene Creates. Both monuments present a strong gender signature. J.M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) includes writing with stones in the Karoo desert not dissimilarly from what children do in a popular game, where they draw with stones. Finally, Margaret Atwood provides a memorable example of bioart and ecoart in her novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009), where insects co-participate in the artistic project, right as South African artist William Kentridge managed to produce drawings and a film with ants. All these examples show a cooperative approach to art between humans and non-humans, be they rocks, insects, bones.

KEYWORDS: Anglophone Literature, Land Art, Bioart, Anthropocene, Human-Non Human Cooperation.

Reflecting upon art in the Anthropocene might mean interrogating the role of art in the era of the greatest human impact on the planet,¹ and also questioning the centrality of the notion of the *anthropos* in western culture.

An example of an interrogation of such a centrality is the controversial literary case of Karen Blixen. Similarly to the strongly critical approach Chinua Achebe (1977) reserved for Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o fiercely criticized Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937), almost on the same grounds, as a case of simple racism.

The most dangerous representation of Africa according to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is the Africa portrayed in European narratives: Karen Blixen is the perfect example of racism towards Africa and its people disguised as love. The most convincing argumentation, among many, used by the author is Blixen's notorious description of her cook, a Kikuyu man compared to a "civilized dog".

¹Anthropocene is the age that chemist Paul Crutzen dated as beginning in 1789, the year when the steam engine was invented and Kant wrote his essay "What is Enlightenment?", and that the Stratigraphers of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) led by geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, date as beginning in 1945 in the post World War II period, named "The Great Acceleration" (Davis & Turpin 2015, 5); (Burtinsky 2018, 46).

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o concludes that Karen Blixen incarnates the racist myth of western bourgeois civilization (Wa Thiong'o 1993, 134).

A similar attack on Karen Blixen's person, rather than on her literary reputation, is waged by another contemporary scholar, David Bunn, author of the essay "Whited sepulchres: On the reluctance of Monuments", where he deplores the phallogocentric European monumentality in Africa. Although dedicating his study to South African monuments, David Bunn begins his discourse by commenting on Karen Blixen's case as exemplary *Ur-sin*:

When her lover, Denys Finch-Hatton, died in a fiery Kenyan plane crash, Karen Blixen decided to bury him in the Ngong Hills. On a rainy day in 1931, the flag-covered coffin of the white hunter was lowered to its final resting place. At that precise moment, according to Blixen, a startling transformation took place:

As [the coffin] was placed in the grave, the country changed and became the setting for it ... the hills stood up gravely, they knew and understood what we were doing in them; after a little while they themselves took charge of the ceremony... (Karen Blixen 1979 [1937], 304, *author's emphasis*)

Unable to see it from her coffee farm in the valley below, she marked the site with three white poles between which a white cloth was stretched, and then later added an edging of whitewashed stones. Still later, the dead hunter's brother erected an obelisk on the site. (Bunn 1999, 93-118).

If the obelisk here described indeed is an intrusive symbol of European colonial mentality and monumentality in the landscape of the Kenyan hills, I claim that Karen Blixen can be spared criticism in this specific case. Her funereal monument approximates a first attempt at land art – although imposed on the African soil – by a woman artist. If we compare her fragile and naïve construction of white poles intertwined with a white cloth that might very easily crumble under heavy rain, or wind, or storm, to the materiality of the obelisk, we definitely can ascribe it a lighter and gendered signature. Her structure is fragile and answers to a practical need: it should be visible from a distance. It is not a monument according to the European tradition.

If we take the chance to compare her landmark with a proper work of art, one among the various artistic gestures and compositions by Marlene Creates, a contemporary land artist (poet and photographer) from Newfoundland, Canada, we understand better how similarly ephemeral Karen Blixen's own gesture was.



Fig. 1. Marlene Creates, *Gwal Y Filiast Burial Chamber with Paper*, Wales, 1980; Fig. 2. Marlene Creates, *Paper Across the Portal Stones of the Drombohilly Circle*, Ireland 1981; Fig. 3. Marlene Creates, *Paper Crossing the Meeting of Waters: Stream and Sea*, Newfoundland 1982. (<http://www.marlenecreates.ca/works/1981paper.html>)

About her own work, entitled *Paper, Stone and Water* (1979-1985), Marlene Creates writes:

Stone becomes rounded by the action of weather and waves. It takes information from water, but very slowly. Paper is quicker. Paper has a beautiful fragility which stone does not have. It is vulnerable and sensitive to any information which is acted on it: the waves, the rain, the wind, the forms underneath. The very deep past found in stone becomes concealed by a very fragile present. ... With the paper I was able to make a simple gesture which left no permanent mark yet had a great impact on the landscape. Still, several feet of white paper are not the artwork. The hill, the stones, the grass, the wind, the rain, the tide are all a part. ... The kind of order I impose is unlikely to occur naturally. But the imposition is slight. (<http://www.marlenecreates.ca/works/1981paper.html>).

The slightness of her artistic intervention is what Marlene Creates self-consciously underlines. She claims that nature can easily re-arrange the elements, and even eradicate and uproot her own paperwork. White paper is not exactly white tissue, but it is very similar in its effect and it is comparably non-resistant and fragile enough. This shows and proves that Karen Blixen's memorial monument was in fact a work of provisional, transient and slight land-art: a flag easily blown by the wind and crashed by the rain, rather than a racist, colonial or proprietary symbol of European appropriation of the African land, soil and territory. Indeed, there is a sharp contrast between the later, public and even nationalist obelisk erected by British males, and Blixen's own provisional and pragmatic structure, whose purpose was to help her locate the place of her private mourning.

Moving to South African literature, another instance of shy land art can be detected: a literary work dealing with a gesture that seems a claim or even “a plea” to a Logos that is also a perfect medium of communication, yet it might as well be intended as a work of land art, signed by a woman. The novel here referred to is *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), by Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee. The protagonist is a lonely daughter of the colony, named Magda, who defines herself as capable of matricide and parricide, and who lives an isolated life in a farm in the Karoo. Here, she witnesses miscegenation, between her father and a black girl servant; kills her father; is raped or fantasizes of being raped by the black servant in revenge for her father's misdeeds. Towards the end of the novel, Magda, in a state of confusion, or in a fit of madness, starts writing words in the desert by piling white stones in order to compose messages for the flying gods, arriving in airplanes in the sky:

The voices speak to me out of machines that fly in the sky. They speak to me in Spanish.

...

251. The stones. When first the machines began to fly overhead and speak to me I was eager to speak back. I would stand on the head of rock behind the house dressed for preference in white, in my old patched nightdress and signal with my arm, ... first in English, then later, when I began to see I was not understood, in Spanish. “ES MI,” I shouted, “VENE!” ...

252. ... “ISOLADO!” I shouted against the roar, dancing about and waving a white handkerchief. Like a ghost the machine drifted above me. “ES MI! VIDI!” I heard no answering voice.

255. I turned to writing. For a week, toiling from dawn to sunset, I trundled wheelbarrows full of stones across the veld until I had a pile of two hundred, smooth, round, the size of small pumpkins, in the space behind the house. These I painted, one by one, with whitewash ... Forming the stones into letters twelve feet high began to spell out messages to my saviours: CINDRLA ES MI; and the next day; VENE AL TERRA; and: QUIERO UN AUTR; and again: SON ISOLADO. (Coetzee 1976, 131-132).

Even though the plot of this otherwise complex novel is only drafted here, it is clear that Magda wants to signal her solitude, her need for another human being and for words, speech, a voice, an answer. She fails to be heard and she resorts to writing, trusting the power of the written word, the Logos. “In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is the law that is written in stone” (Davis-Turpin 2015, 7).

Her logocentric faith, however, is not based on monolingualism. She speaks and writes neither in English nor in Afrikaans, the two colonial languages in South Africa, but in Spanish or, critics say, in Esperanto, a language that is also a line of flight. More explicitly, as Magda herself explains, she longs for a universal language that is a medium: “LA MEDIA ENTRE. The medium! Between! ... a mere conjunction ... The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!” (Coetzee 1976, 133).

In her crazy or ex-centric attempt at communicating with the wider world, crying out her loneliness, isolation, and exile, Magda repeats a gesture that is common among children in the Karoo, as proven by a photograph by the South African photographer David Goldblatt:



Fig. 4. David Goldblatt, “Remains of a children’s game and incomplete units of a housing scheme that stalled, Kwezinaledi, Lady Grey, Eastern Cape, 5 August 2006. 98.5 x 124cm”. The game is known as *onopopi*. (www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr)

Goldblatt’s photo shows a would-be new residential area that has remained unfinished. The poor quality of the housing and the desolation of the wasteland in which the houses ghostly stand show how apartheid and its legacy compelled minorities to dwell or be relocated in dry and sterile

wastelands, far away from urban centres, facilities and infrastructures. In spite of the desolation and vast dusty emptiness, children “play house” in the desert. That is, they draw houses on the ground with stones, for after all this is their land, the land where they grow up and where they visualize their abode and dwelling place, and where they project their future family life as adults.

Magda, by piling stones into words, is just mimicking those invisible children of Goldblatt’s picture. She is inscribing her own house in the same territory, claiming not possession – in her white gown of symbolic infant and girlish purity – but claiming a right to company and partnership that apartheid had denied and negated, because of its Manichean philosophy of separation between whites and blacks, and also between hierarchies of powers, that is to say Patriarchy as a form of Anthropocene, moulding and forging the landscape of the human and animal life on the farm, according to the father’s will, versus a possible form of “Gynecene” as envisaged alternatively by Magda in her – Cinderella-like – voice and language, when she claims “I wish only to be at home in the world” (1976, 135). Therefore, in conclusion, Magda’s gesture, rather than expression of a fit of colonial folly, might well be considered as an early attempt at land art in South Africa, besides being a possible indirect homage to Virginia Woolf’s writing airplane in *Mrs Dalloway* (1922).

Changing context, children playing “houses” is a universal experience. Yet, in postcolonial countries the dialectics between longing and belonging and even the problem of where to place “home” are crucial existential dilemmas:

Nick, smiling, asked me if I thought I could find my way around the house as I had through the streets.

I had to think a bit to orient myself. I turned to face the door and said: Correct me if I’m wrong, but if I go out of this door and turn right and keep walking straight for a few paces, that would take me to the kitchen, wouldn’t it? And if I were to turn right before I reached the kitchen, wouldn’t I come upon a flight of stairs that would lead me down to the cellar if I were to go down them? [...]

It was my turn to laugh now, at their astonished faces. It’s incredible, Ila sighed, shaking her head. How does he do it? And all the while, of course, it was she herself who had shown me. She had taken my hand and pulled me under the table, and when I was sitting beside her, she had drawn a line in the dust and said: Now remember, that’s the road outside, and that, over there, is where they play cricket.

Then, boxing off a small dusty square, she said: That’s the garden, and that’s the cherry tree, and there’s the front door, and after you’ve rung the bell and wiped your feet on the door mat you can come in.

She drew a long narrow rectangle, pointing inwards from the door.

That, she said, is the hall.

She added another large square to the left.

That’s the drawing room, she said. It looks out into the garden, through the big windows, like this, and you can go through this door, into the dining room, and through that again

into the kitchen, right back over there. And then there's the kitchen garden out at the back.

While I was staring at this dusty chequerboard of lines, she crawled around me, to my right, and drew another room, a smaller one this time.

That's the bedroom where Ma and I live, she said. It's right next to the hall.

She added a couple of lines to it and said: That's the cellar, and that's the staircase. That's where Nick and I play Houses sometimes. (Ghosh 1988, 51)

In the quoted paragraph two children are playing under the table in a house in Bengal and they draw on the dusty floor a house that is in London. In that other house, the real one, Ila plays the same game with a child called Nick. The first person protagonist in the novel moves from one house to the other, from one continent to the other, from Country to Country perfectly at ease, and knowing everything by heart, having figured it out in his imagination so vividly as to conjure up real paths in the real colonial Motherland. India and England are both home and displaced places. Where do the characters really belong in the novel is difficult to say. Playing "Houses" is also a way to exorcise a sense of loss and exclusion, similar to the one embodied by Magda in Coetzee's novel.

The third case study here considered is the artistic intervention of a woman eco-activist or "artist", in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Amanda is a member of the environmentalist sect of the so-called God's Gardeners, a group of activists who prepare themselves to survive the "waterless flood", a pandemic that will extinguish humans on our planet in a – not too distant and not too unrealistic – dystopian future. Amanda is one of three female survivors and protagonists in the novel. She has lost her parents in a terrible drought, that has killed humans and animals.

Amanda was in the Wisconsin desert, putting together one of the Bioart installations she's been doing now that she's into what she calls the art caper. It was cow bones this time. Wisconsin's covered with cow bones, ever since the big drought ten years ago when they'd found it cheaper to butcher the cows rather than shipping them out – ... she was dragging the cow bones into a pattern so big it could only be seen from above: huge capital letters, spelling out a word. Later she'd cover it in pancake syrup and wait until the insect life was all over it, and then take videos of it from the air, to put into galleries. She liked to watch things move and grow and then disappear. ... Her Wisconsin thing was part of a series called *The Living Word*. [...] Her word was *kaputt*. When she'd told me that earlier, she'd said she was sending a message. "Who to?" I'd said. "The people who go to the galleries? The Mr. Rich and Bigs? "That's who," she said. (Atwood 2009, 57).

Amanda, like Magda, speaks in words written in stone, on/in the desert. Words that come alive, from a woman artist whom people believe to be crazy ("They think I'm crazy" 57). Not only the cows are literally *kaputt*, but the entire planet is soon going to be destroyed, in the novel, by a plague that hits

humans as an epidemics. And Amanda's gigantic word, in the German language, must be seen from above. She has a helicopter flying her up to take her video.

"Many scholars have pointed out how our experience of humanity's impact has been predominantly visual and sensorial", writes Canadian artist-photographer Burtynsky. "The view from above has been one predominant method for relaying these changes. This grows out of a long history, at first, of seeking out elevated vantage points and later creating views from the air, from various aircraft, spacecraft, and now also drones. ... Such representations found new purposes and reached new levels of ubiquity with the invention of the airplane after World War I." (Burtynsky 2018, 16) Both literary characters, Magda and Amanda, but also Karen Blixen in real life, understand the importance of "the view from above", and use this imagery of the airplane/helicopter as anthropocenic piece of technology *par excellence*. Karen Blixen was writing in the first years of aerial flights, Magda, too, writes in an epoch of transition from coaches carried by horses and donkeys to planes, while Amanda speaks from a post-apocalyptic world. Yet for the three of them planes and helicopter are the symbol of modernity and of male-dominated technology. Something they can only admire from a distance, or aspire to, or, even, experience only briefly. Blixen flew once with Fynch Hutton, before his final accident, while Amanda has to bribe the pilot in order to accomplish her video-recording from high above. Women have to ask for permission, in order to be able to fly.

Amanda is a literary example of art in the Anthropocene, when humans have become a dangerous species and a threatening presence for the entire ecosystem. The dead cows of the novel remind us of the foot and mouth disease that hit bovines and, by affinity, of the aviary disease that hit poultry in the past decades. The novel, and Atwood's trilogy at large, alludes to such another plague that might put an end to life on the planet as we know it today. Amanda's art is a woman's or feminist's response to this patriarchal and techno-scientific worldscape: "Crazy women cut your dong off" – she threatens (Atwood 2009, 57).

This peculiar literary example of land art, or bioart (Davis-Turpin 2015, 15), has a real counterpart in an artistic experiment carried out by South African artist William Kentridge: drawing with ants. This cooperative work of art has been turned into a video:

In the middle of summer last year in Johannesburg we had a plague of ants. There were ants everywhere. ... However, we tried to kill them they still came in, through the windows, through tiny cracks. Through the whole city there was this infestation of ants. And then I noticed one morning that on the bread board there was a series of black shapes, particular patterns of abstract black shapes. And it turned out that some syrup

had been dropped there overnight and it was covered with ants, making these intense black shapes. I thought that if one starts then arranging that, certainly you can do drawings or paintings with ants. I was in the middle of a different project but I thought I would just do this as an aside; I put up a camera in the studio and a sheet of paper, and worked with sugar-water making drawings with ants, training ants to do drawings. (Kentrige 2017, 36).

Instead of working in the desert, Kentridge works in his own studio, which is suddenly invaded by ants, definitely the most characteristic of African insects. Like Amanda, instead of killing them, he creates bioart with live insects, and he finds a use for them. He trains them, as he claims: he nourishes them with their favourite food. This might be seen as an act of anthropocentric control over the natural world, but as an artistic gesture it has a slight consequence and impact, as Marlene Creates was claiming for herself.

Ants were filmed while, over three hours, they slowly complete a whole circle made with sugar, where “ants ... park themselves as if in a very large parking lot, parallel and next to each other, very neatly all the way around.” Then the artist explains: “if you make a sharp sound or a movement, they all scatter ... suddenly they jump into their cars and go away very fast then they slow down and eventually the brave ones start coming back to the sugar and after three hours they are back there again, parked.” Kentridge understood that the trick was to play the film in reverse to see how they run back to the circle. He adds: “Fortunately ants are symmetrical front and back so you can't tell if they are going backwards rather than forwards” (Kentrige 2017, 37).

Kentrige also used the ants for a second film he was creating, where he needed to symbolize constellations. He used a negative image of the ants drawing, by using a black sheet of paper on which the insects became white dots, thus creating the constellations for his film *Journey to the Moon* (2003).

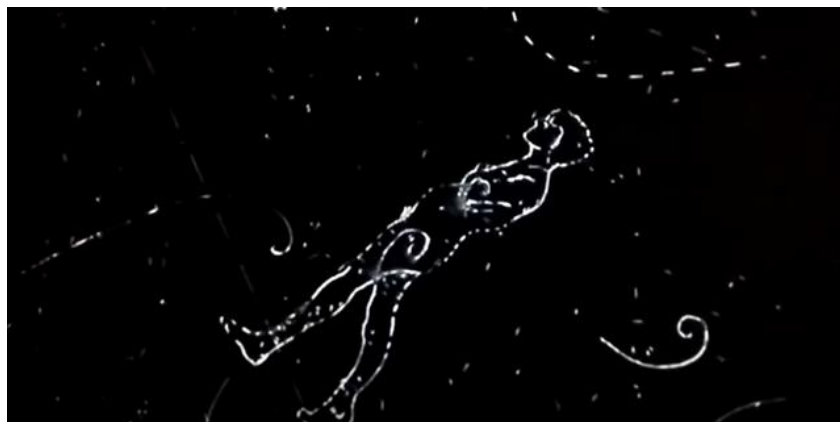


Fig. 5. William Kentridge, *Day for Night*, 2003, showing “ant-drawing” (36). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ro-03mkWti0>)

Since the two films were completed successfully, the artist wished to be able to make more, but the ants never returned. As Denis Hirson clearly sees, Kentridge's success lays in his transforming a potential disaster into an act of creativity. This shows that even in the era of the Anthropocene, a crisis, a natural disaster, a catastrophe will always leave space to literary and artistic representations.

All three examples of literary and artistic mutual cooperation and interaction between the author or the artist and the natural agencies, in the specific cases stones, bones and insects, show how art – and literature as such – help us to “remain exposed and let us think about what is happening [*ce qui nous arrive*] to us”, as Jean Luc Nancy incites us to do, but also as Morton claims “art happens in the liminal spaces between things” in conversations between humans and “storied” nonhumans (Morton 2014, 271). In the three examples here illustrated, it is true that

The artwork acts as a gathering point, a kind of lens that focuses the attunements between beings. The artwork is a thing, a meeting place between beings (Old English, *ping*). ... Present and presence are simply the uneasy, shifting relative motion between different beings, unfolding their temporalities together in a way that becomes visible because of the focusing lens of the artwork. (Morton 2014, 272).

Art exposes us to the world and exposes the world to us, or even exposes us in the world. Bioart and land art are an example of mutual cooperation between humans and more-than-humans based on *zoe*, that is on live matter, so that the agencies are not only interrelated but are also independent from each other. Beauty, claims Morton “is given: an epiphany that coexists anarchically alongside us, physically before us, and despite us” (Morton 2014, 279).

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