Transculturality and ecology in francophone North African poetry

Human/non-human and global/local communities

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As an alternative to a model of world literature complicit with global capitalism and its ecological destruction, critics have proposed the 'planetary turn' to name the emergence of a mode of thinking capable of accommodating both social and ecological diversity. Global relationality in this context is understood not only as connectivity between different cultures but also that between the human and the non-human, and emphasizes not only cultural differences and interactions but also our deep embeddedness in and reliance on the ecological environment. Planetary thinking champions the dynamic entanglement between manifold peoples and cultures at the same time as it insists on the connections between the human and the physical world. This article focuses on the ways in which francophone postcolonial North African poetry also betrays a peculiar attentiveness at once to cultural hybridization and to the riches of the ecological landscape. The Moroccan Abdellatif Laâbi and the Tunisian Tahar Bekri are contemporary writers whose poetry has combined, over the last forty years or so, a passion for multilingualism and cultural exchange with a fascination with the singular plant life they discover at home and abroad. Both use both French and Arabic, though most of their work is in French, and write against the forces of oppression left by the legacies of colonialism in part by celebrating transculturality. Both also evoke a form of intimate communion with the ecological environment, and portray it as a force with agency in order to condemn the history of ecological destruction. Their 'ecocosmopolitan' poetry in this way proposes a salutary communality that responds in far-reaching ways to human mastery and oppression as it acts both on cultural difference and on the delicate ecology of planet.

Keywords: planetary, ecology, non-human, plant, North Africa, Laâbi, Bekri

Comme alternative au modèle de littérature mondiale complice au capitalisme global et sa destruction écologique, des critiques ont proposé la notion du « planétaire » pour nommer l'émergence d'un mode de pensée capable de s'adapter à la diversité à la fois sociale et écologique. Dans ce contexte on peut comprendre les relations globales non seulement comme les liens entre les cultures différentes mais aussi comme ceux qui se nouent entre l'humain et le non-humain, et elles mettent en lumière non seulement les différences et les interactions culturelles mais aussi notre profonde intégration et notre dépendance sur l'environnement écologique. La pensée planétaire défend l'enchevêtrement dynamique entre de multiples peuples et cultures en même

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temps qu'elle insiste sur les liens entre le monde humain et le monde physique. Dans cet article nous considérerons la façon dont la poésie francophone nord-africaine démontre une attention particulière à la fois à l'hybridation culturelle et aux richesses du paysage écologique. Le marocain Abdellatif Laâbi et le tunisien Tahar Bekri sont des écrivains contemporains dont la poésie depuis une quarantaine d'années a lié une passion pour le multilinguisme et l'échange culturelle avec une fascination pour la vie singulière des plantes qu'ils découvrent chez eux et à l'étranger. Ils utilisent à la fois le français et l'arabe, même si la plupart de leurs œuvres sont en français, et ils dénoncent les forces d'oppression laissées dans le sillage du colonialisme en affirmant la transculturalité. Ils évoquent en même temps une communion intime avec l'environnement écologique et le représentent comme une force active pour condamner l'histoire de la destruction écologique. Leur poésie « écocosmopolitique » propose ainsi une communauté salutaire qui répond de façon importante à l'oppression humaine de la différence culturelle et de l'écologie délicate de la planète.

Mots clefs : planétaire, écologie, non-humain, plante, Maghreb, Laâbi, Bekri

In response to the recent flourishing of studies of 'world literature', a number of critics have identified a lack of attention within the field to questions of environment and ecology. 'World literary' studies may demand increased reflection on literary diversity across the globe, but the focus on cultural plurality does not necessarily bring with it a proper attention to ecological diversity and to the threat to non-human species posed by the global capitalist system. Denouncing a model of 'world literature' ultimately complicit with global capitalism, since the works that are most circulated are those sanctioned by European and American institutions, critics have proposed the 'planetary turn' to name the emergence of a mode of thinking that captures our global connectedness but is capable of accommodating at the same time both social and ecological diversity. For Amy Elias and Christian Moraru, for example, attention to the planetary rather than to the global first of all foregrounds relationality rather than uniformity: 'there has been a paradigmatic translation of world cultures into a planetary setup in which globalization's homogenizing, one-becoming is challenged by *relationality*, namely, by an ethicization of the ecumenic process of coming together or "worlding"'.[1] This set-up would be driven by a movement that is centrifugal rather than centripetal, decentring rather than unifying, though this attention to multiple localities rather than to the universalizing global system would nevertheless

1 Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, 'Introduction: The Planetary Condition', in *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), pp. xi–xxxvii (p. xi).

continue to seek and explore our profound interdependency. The planetary turn, moreover, demands attention not only to human diversity but also to ecological diversity, as Florian Mussgnug has noted: 'planetary thinking does not conceive human action as distinct from non-human action, but views it as a major geological force that intersects with other environmental phenomena in a single, volatile temporal force field'.[2] The relationality championed by Elias and Moraru should therefore clearly be understood as that between the human and the non-human, and the connectivity foregrounded by the planetary turn must emphasize not only cultural differences and interactions but also our deep embeddedness in and reliance on the ecological environment. Planetary thinking champions the dynamic entanglement between manifold peoples and cultures at the same time as it insists on the connections between the human and the physical world.

Planetary thinking in this way implies that attentiveness to cultural diversity comes hand in hand with care for biodiversity. Critics such as Aamir Mufti and Pheng Cheah have argued that the generalizing sweep of 'world literature' and its complicity with global capitalism necessitates a better understanding of our interconnected but infinitely variegated cultural world.[3] Yet if the world-economy is at the same time a world-ecology, then to be complete this critique must seek to preserve ecological diversity and contest the damage done by globalization on social, cultural, economic, and ecological levels. Whilst this 'planetary turn' has emerged and gathered force over the last ten years as the ravages of environmental destruction have become ever more evident, it is revealing that some postcolonial literatures have signalled an awareness of this dual imperative for some time. Colonialism in many cases involved not just the appropriation of political and economic power but the seizing, restructuring, and often brutal management of the land. Moreover, colonial conceptions of landscape were highly contradictory, on the one hand promulgating an exoticist vision of the colonized landscape, on the other fuelling a politics that relied on the sapping of its resources. The landscape was constructed by a paradoxical colonial fantasy so that it fulfilled the role by turns of an exotic pleasure garden and of a bearer of economic profit.

The complicity between colonialism and environmental destruction is perhaps seen nowhere more extensively than in the Caribbean, where

2 Florian Mussgnug, 'Planetary Figurations: Intensive Genre in World Literature', *Modern Languages Open*, 22.1 (2018), 1–12 (p. 6).

3 See Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

the plantation system rested on a flagrant disregard both for the rights of enslaved people and for the ecological environment. Michael Niblett has analysed the connections between the world-economy and world-ecology, and has for this reason focused most extensively on the Caribbean, which serves as a prime example of a setting where capitalism relied on the exploitation of the landscape and brought with it devastating ecological damage.[4] Malcom Ferdinand has also explored how the Caribbean is the site of a 'double fracture', arguing that 'environmental fracture' here most intensively accompanied modernity's 'colonial fracture'.[5] Concomitantly, Caribbean writers such as Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, and Édouard Glissant infuse their anti-colonial writing with evocations of the agency of local landscapes as well as of elemental forces, testifying both to a commitment to the preservation of ecological diversity and to an awareness of the hubris of the attempt to master and domesticate the natural environment so comprehensively. In Césaire's poetry, for example, the lyric subject is frequently connected or blurred with vegetal, animal, geological, and elemental forces, as both human and non-human suffer from colonial exploitation and both conspire in the articulation of anti-colonial revolt. In Suzanne Césaire's essays, moreover, the devastation of the landscape by the plantation system is glossed over by the 'great camouflage' of the image of a tropical paradise, and resistance to this manipulation can be expressed through a better understanding of the mutual dependence and blurring of plant and human.[6]

Less attention has been paid to questions of ecology in North African literature, yet although the territory was not subjected to the rigours of the plantation system in the same way as in the Caribbean, Maghrebi land, particularly in Algeria, was brutally appropriated from the local tribal system and sapped of its resources for the benefit of the colonizer. In 'De la violence' in *Les damnés de la terre*, Frantz Fanon alludes albeit briefly to the exploitation of Algerian land for industrial purposes and to the need for alternative ways of relating to the land: 'il faudrait peut-être tout recommencer, changer la nature des exportations et non pas seulement leur destination, réinterroger le sol, le sous-sol, les rivières et pourquoi pas le soleil'.[7] The resistance of the landscape to colonial appropriation is figured, moreover, in the work of the Algerian writer Kateb Yacine, for whom the

4 See Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017) for a more extensive analysis of this phenomenon.

5 Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. by Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), p. 11.

6 Suzanne Césaire, *Le grand camouflage. Écrits de dissidence 1941–1945* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

7 Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, in *Œuvres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), p. 501.

continual movement of land and cosmos at once drives and figures political and cultural revolution.[8] In *Nedjma*, his celebrated novel exploring the history of French colonialism in Algeria and its ravaging of precolonial history, published in 1956, the landscape of the Nadhor, the home of the lost Keblouti tribe, is a mythical space of belonging before the decimation of the colonial invasion, and the torrents of the river Rhummel represent elemental forces against the precarious colonial enterprise of urban construction.[9] It is in some more recent francophone North African poetry, however, that there emerges a peculiar attentiveness at once to cultural hybridization in the wake of, and against, colonialism and to the expression and agency of the ecological landscape. The Moroccan Abdellatif Laâbi, born in 1942, and the Tunisian Tahar Bekri, born in 1951, are contemporary writers whose poetry has combined, over the last forty years or so, a passion for multilingualism and cultural exchange with attention to the activity of the singular plant life they discover at home and abroad. Both use both French and Arabic, though most of their work is in French, and write against the forces of oppression left by the legacies of colonialism in part by celebrating transculturality. Both also evoke a form of intimate communion with the ecological environment and portray it as a force with its own language and agency in order to condemn the history of brutal ecological mismanagement. These poets stand out amongst Maghrebi writers for the subtlety of their poetic voices and their attentiveness to the ecological environment, as Laâbi's later volumes, together with much of Bekri's work, shift attention away from the legacies of colonialism and towards a more expansive embrace of ethical, ecological relationality. Their writing can be conceived as examples of the 'aesthetics of proximity' described by Cajetan Iheka, who reads African literature to explore representations of the importance of non-human species, the connection and blending of human and non-human, and forms of distributed agency shared between human and non-human entities.[10]

Laâbi's and Bekri's poetry associates openness to cultural relationality with ecological attentiveness and suggests that both are rooted in an ethics of respect. The poetic subject in both is a tentative, self-effacing presence, situated at once in a human community that transcends cultural differences

8 In an interview with Arezqi Amokrane, for example, Kateb describes revolution as 'le mouvement du monde'. See Kateb Yacine, *Le poète comme un boxeur. Entretiens 1958–1989* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 156.

9 Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma* (Paris: Seuil, 1956).

10 Cajetan Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

and in a non-human environment, where he is imbricated in the activity of the elements, of plants and trees. In both cases, the poetic 'je' is not effaced, as it was for example by Mallarmé, or in some of Édouard Glissant's poems most steeped in environmental agency. Rather, the 'je' is at times like that of Verlaine, humble, vulnerable, dependent, and reverential in his address to other human beings, other communities, and non-human ecological phenomena. The evocation of other cultures is steeped in a respectful awe for environmental diversity, and the subject effaces himself in order to capture instead the languages and movements of other spaces. At the same time, the poets' attentiveness to both human and non-human communalities can be understood to anticipate and subsequently reflect the planetary turn in that they express both an awareness of global ecological change and a commitment to capturing local ecological agency in linguistic form. Laâbi and Bekri's respect for ecology is therefore importantly not merely a folkloric attachment to a place of origin, but a much more open, cosmopolitan awareness of the need for a better understanding of the co-dependence between the human and the non-human across the globe. Their focused attention to the environment is often less a eulogy to a specific locality than the result of a broader, ethical attentiveness to the global environment in all its diversity and fragility. Ursula Heise's conception of 'ecocosmopolitanism' can serve as a useful framework for reading Laâbi and Bekri, as she too invents a new form of relationship between the local and the global in order to respond to our contemporary need for environmental protection. Heise shows how a new environmental awareness arises together with our increased cultural cosmopolitanism, and how the dialogue between the local and the global that has been foregrounded in cultural and world literary studies also structures our ecological awareness. Ecocosmopolitanism, as Heise understands it, 'reaches toward what some environmental writers and philosophers have called the "more-than-human world" – the realm of non-human species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange'.[11] It implies a notion of 'imagined communities',[12] this time not bound up in the nation but in a web of both human and non-human planetary connections in which local and global are also inevitably intertwined.

11 Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 61.

12 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

Global and local environmentalism in the poetry of Abdellatif Laâbi

Abdellatif Laâbi's work has always been marked by a commitment to cultural dialogue and freedom from oppression. Laâbi started writing poetry during the 1960s as Morocco was struggling to redefine itself in the wake of decolonization, and as the new nationalist, authoritarian regime of King Hassan II sought to impose a stultifying and atavistic culture that severely restricted creative freedom. Laâbi was one of the founding members of *Souffles*, an avant-garde journal initiated in 1966 and that was subsequently banned in 1972, when Laâbi and some of his colleagues were imprisoned for having spoken out against the oppressive regime. Laâbi was at this stage a communist who vilified the inegalitarianism of Moroccan politics and saw himself as part of an international community of leftist thinkers. Lamenting a sclerotic political culture neurotically attached to the past, he conceived *Souffles* as a dynamic, multicultural, and multilingual space aimed at challenging Morocco's existing national culture and providing a forum for transnational cultural experimentation, as he insists in the prologue to the first issue: '*Souffles* ne se réclame d'aucune niche ni d'aucun minaret et ne reconnaît aucune frontière. Nos amis écrivains maghrébins, africains, européens ou autres sont invités fraternellement à participer à notre modeste entreprise'.[13] Although his own writing is in French, Laâbi seeks to respond to the alienation associated with the language of the colonizer by stretching and reinventing it to accommodate the cultural difference and inventiveness of the North African writer. He is also keen to promote dialogue between francophone Moroccan literature and Arabic, African, and European literatures, and the journal became bilingual with the addition of its Arabic counterpart *Anfâs* in 1970. Laâbi's early poetry expresses a revolt against tyranny through an explosive language that records bodily suffering by fracturing words, experimenting with sounds, and breaking verse.

Laâbi promoted cultural dynamism, idiomatic diversity, and multilingualism from the start of his career. Perhaps less frequently noted, however, is his attention even in the early poetry to environmental forces, which are often enlisted in his first volume *Le règne de barbarie* as a powerful agency that relativizes and belittles petty forms of human tyranny. In *Le règne*, however, the emphasis is on militant revolt against the oppressive regime, whereas by the 1990s Laâbi's tone had become a much more peaceful one of careful attentiveness, both to humans and to the environment. Here, the visceral rebellion against tyranny is replaced by reflections on exile,

13 Abdellatif Laâbi, 'Prologue', *Souffles*, 1 (1966), 3–6 (p. 6).

alienation, and human intimacy, and cultural and human dialogue is again coupled with a humble and intimate address to the non-human world. *Le soleil se meurt*, published in 1992, for example, explores how Laâbi's denunciation of human brutality is expressed both through imagery of human suffering and through clear references to environmental destruction. Poetry such as this presents Laâbi as what Françoise Ascal calls an '*écologiste* avant l'heure', with an 'écologie décentrée, non narcissique, qui ne place pas l'homme au centre de la nature'.[14] And indeed, *Le soleil se meurt* is in no way the reverie of the poet as centred subject contemplating the natural world but a series of images of destruction affecting both humanity and the elements. This environmental destruction is also evoked here without reference to a particular locality, but rather takes the form of a cosmic disaster, as the title of the poem suggests. Laâbi is portraying planetary change here, using imagery that exceeds human attempts to organize and make sense of the disintegration, just as the poet is unable to present such destruction using a stable poetic perspective. The tyranny of attempted mastery over human communities is brought together and is complicit here with that over the non-human world, as again Laâbi laments oppression in all its forms – 'les barbares / nos semblables / ils ont toujours craché sur les merveilles'.[15] And rather than seeking to manage and domesticate either peoples or territories, the poet evokes a more humble awareness of our duty not to appropriate but to respect both the environment and each other: 'qui parle / de refaire le monde? / On voudrait simplement / le supporter / avec une brindille / de dignité / au coin des lèvres?'[16] The line breaks, separating out the words as if to insert space between them for thought, here as elsewhere in the volume support the sense of hesitancy and suggestiveness that defines his aesthetic.

The volume begins and ends with the lines 'le soleil se meurt / une rumeur d'homme à la bouche', clearly linking the waning of the sun with human activity.[17] Here and intermittently through the poems, Laâbi also links his planetary ethics with a certain use of language, as the destruction evoked in the lines above is clearly the result of human speech. At the end of the volume, this is expanded so that the destruction will sweep away 'cette vieille tragédie / racontée mille et une fois / par un idiot / devant une salle vide'; this is a story of human error that will finish by destroying the human, though the 'idiot' could be the poet who speaks his or her own idiom, and

14 Françoise Ascal, 'Une exigence de lumière', in Abdellatif Laâbi, *L'arbre à poèmes. Anthologie personnelle 1992–2012* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), pp. 7–16 (p. 11).
15 Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le soleil se meurt* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 2013), p. 25.
16 Laâbi, *Le soleil se meurt*, p. 15.
17 Laâbi, *Le soleil se meurt*, pp. 11, 62.

the lines emphasize his smallness. Again, the use of line breaks to create brief sense units gives the poem a hesitancy and gestures towards meaning hidden between the lines. And the upshot of the devastation will be silence, the loss of human creativity and poetry: 'ce sera une autre éternité / d'absence trouble / de duel entre masques / et de manque à écrire'.[18] Moreover, the poem also earlier evokes 'la langue archaïque de l'âme', which is then associated with 'ces mots taillés dans les racines / et le bec recourbé de l'aigle / Avec le tonnerre qui ricane / le feu qu'on avale et recrache'.[19] The verse form allows for highly condensed imagery, coupling the elements with surprising and incongruous modes of expression, intensifying the inventiveness of these modes. Multiple images of the elements follow, as if this language could speak in dialogue with these cosmic forces and understand the properties and movements of the earth. Through these references to language, Laâbi suggests both that we need to find a new form to conjure the relationship between the human and the non-human, and that poetry might have a privileged role in articulating ecological life. Having affirmed the importance of multilingualism and idiomatic diversity in the *Souffles* volumes quoted above, here he evokes an awareness of the language of the environment and the cosmos, a vision that again is not explicitly filtered through a masterful poetic perspective but one that effaces itself before forces far greater than it is able to conceptualize and order. In *Le soleil se meurt*, then, not only are political, cultural, and ecological violence portrayed as co-implicated, but also, the embrace of multilingualism as a form of ethical respect for diversity is associated with attention to the language of the non-human world.

If *Le soleil se meurt* figures environmental destruction on a broad, planetary scale, other poems appear to be more focused on local ecological phenomena. *La saison manquante, suivi de Amour jacaranda*, published in 2014, displays its commitment to ecological preservation not only by vilifying global environmental damage but also by seeking to capture the minute and sensory details of particular plants and trees, most consistently the jacaranda tree. The poem that alludes to 'la saison manquante' is a clear reflection on climate change, as it depicts the seasons out of joint, risking giving way to a fifth season of 'la vie ou la mort', the final ultimatum issued by the environment to human meddling.[20] But the poems of 'Amour jacaranda' repeatedly revel in the rich sensory world of the jacaranda tree, dwelling on its textures and its significance in the poet's affective experience

18 Laâbi, *Le soleil se meurt*, p. 62.
19 Laâbi, *Le soleil se meurt*, p. 36.
20 See Abdellatif Laâbi, *La saison manquante, suivi de Amour jacaranda* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2014), p. 25.

in an apt example of Iheka's 'aesthetics of proximity' or even intimacy. These poems are revealing for the present discussion on several levels. First, as the volume's title suggests, this eulogy to the jacaranda tree is enmeshed in the poet's address to his wife, with 'jacaranda' obliquely gesturing towards 'Jocelyne'. Human intimacy is throughout mirrored in the poet's intimate attention to the tree and, in turn, openness to the tree's singular expressiveness reflects the cross-cultural connection between French and Arabic in the poet's relationship with his loved one. Secondly, the attention to the sensory details of the jacaranda works as an important complement to the reflection on planetary environmental change and damage, so that Laâbi's poems powerfully combine the local with the global, sense of place and sense of planet, as Ursula Heise put it. Specific spaces and localities are still not clearly referenced in Laâbi's poetry here, but the poems conjure intimate relationships between humans and plants, to suggest integration not so much into a local community as into an ecological landscape. While *Le soleil se meurt* depicted upheaval in the elements, *Amour jacaranda* demands that we wonder at the tree's texture and movements:

> Tous les jacarandas du pays
> en quelque sorte nous appartiennent
> parce que nous sommes
> parmi les rares
> à les nommer sans hésiter
> en nous délectant de la musique
> de leur nom
> à caresser du regard
> leur coiffe en bataille
> leurs bras déjetés
> leurs jambes malingres.[21]

The tree here is evoked as a living creature, with expressive characteristics that only the poet and his wife seem to understand. This image is an intriguing one in that it also raises one of the questions that trouble ecocriticism more broadly, that of the inevitable imposition of a human perspective on the landscape with which the subject nevertheless tries to communicate. The poet evidently seeks to confer agency upon the tree and to allow its rich textures and forms to communicate themselves, but he also uses anthropocentric imagery and places himself in a privileged relationship with the tree. This tendency is perhaps inevitable, in that we can only ever apprehend the

21 Laâbi, *La saison manquante*, p. 79.

non-human through the prism of the human, and Laâbi can still at least be understood to be attempting to achieve a form of communication while foregrounding the blurring of human and non-human imagery in the tree. The poem finishes by evoking this tension between the search for intimacy with the environment and the inevitable return to the poet's own humanist and subjective perspective.

Lastly, though, if Laâbi seeks the most profound understanding of the jacaranda's biological particularity, it is perhaps surprising that this is not conceived as evidence of the ecology of a particular place. The jacaranda tree is native to Latin America and the Caribbean, and yet it is planted all over the world. In Laâbi's volume, this internationalism is emphasized, as he notes that it originates in Paraguay, but 'notre arbre a essaimé en Argentine, a traversé l'océan pour prendre ses aises en Afrique du Sud, puis s'est envolé vers la Chine. Plus près de nous, il a trouvé une autre terre d'élection au Portugal'.[22] Here, in contrast with the poems made up of brief lines, suggestive of the poet's tentativeness and hesitation, he uses longer sentences in prose to dramatize this wider connectivity. Finally, it appears in Fes and Rabat, as if in search of 'quelque confident, un être pouvant se sentir arbre, rire et pleurer arbre, donner ce que donne l'arbre en ne demandant en retour qu'un peu d'eau, de lumière, de temps en temps une caresse?'[23] The poet evidently elects himself as that confidante, yet in so doing at once foregrounds this intense connectivity with local ecology and reminds us that ecology is a wider planetary system. Jahan Ramazani has described how 'the local poem in the global age' appears to cherish particular localities but often its aesthetics leave that locality more vague than we might have expected in order to display its enmeshment in the global.[24] Laâbi too can be seen to evoke our communality with the ecological world through this simultaneously local and planetary perspective.

Ecocosmopolitanism and non-human resistance in the poetry of Tahar Bekri

Tahar Bekri's poetry is perhaps even more self-consciously steeped in both local and global spaces. Like Laâbi, Bekri has always been committed to cross-cultural dialogue, and writes in both French and Arabic. His writing records movement and nomadism, testifying not just to the meeting between

22 Laâbi, *La saison manquante*, p. 100.
23 Laâbi, *La saison manquante*, p. 100.
24 Jahan Ramazani, 'The Local Poem in a Global Age', *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (Spring 2017), 670–96.

French and Tunisian cultures but also to a broader ethic of transcultural exchange, as Edwige Tamalet Talbayev puts it: 'in his poetic relation to language, Bekri adopts a differential, nomadic sensibility in which the two languages and traditions brought in contact through the creative act of writing engage in interplay and mutual echoing'.[25] Bekri's volume of memoirs, *Le livre du souvenir*, first published in 2007 and revised in 2016, explicitly celebrates cultural diversity alongside ecological diversity, moreover, as the poet here recalls his travels around the world participating in workshops and conferences, recording at once his exchanges with other writers or readers and noting the details of the landscapes and plant life he observes along the way. A return visit to Kairouan, Tunisia, in 1990 triggers, for example, an intensified search for a poetic language capable of expressing the sensory experience and the idiom of the local landscape: 'je veux toucher de mes yeux chaque mètre de cette terre, mieux la reconnaître, mieux l'aimer. Je voudrais nommer tout ce que je vois, tous les arbres, les arbustes, les plantes, remarquer le moindre détail, la moindre couleur'.[26] Far from just yearning for his native land, however, Bekri cherishes locality not as a signifier of origin or identity but as a rich ecology constantly juxtaposed with other ecologies, in a celebration of global biodiversity that could be considered a form of ecocosmopolitanism. *Le livre du souvenir* is a catalogue of memories of diverse localities, each prized for their singular landscapes while also being remembered as part of Bekri's broader ethics of intercultural dialogue and nomadism. And if in the example of Kairouan cited above, Bekri seeks not to glance at and appropriate the landscape to answer human expectation but to translate the idiom of its rich ecology, in a later passage on Brittany he strives to stretch and expand his language to capture the texture of the rain: 'crachin, bruine, ciel assombri, ciel clair, éclaircie, tempête, averse, accalmie, lumière, de nouveau pluie, soudainement, inutile d'avoir un parapluie, le vent souffle à tout emporter et l'océan n'est pas loin'.[27] Bekri's planetary sensibility involves listening to the diverse languages of landscapes across the world and incorporating them into his own, rather than imposing an artistic tableau from the outside.

More consistently than that of Laâbi, much of Bekri's poetry is steeped in the environment, and the poet's commitment to environmental preservation has been clearly evident from his earliest work. His first volume,

25 Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, 'Mediterranean Criss-Crossings: Exile and Wandering in Tahar Bekri's Poetry', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 17.1 (2013), 69–79 (p. 71).

26 Tahar Bekri, *Le livre du souvenir. Dans la beauté du monde et sa fureur* (Tunis: Éditions Elyzad, 2016), pp. 60–61.

27 Bekri, *Le livre du souvenir*, p. 242.

Le laboureur du soleil published in 1983, evokes the sun, trees, plants, seeds, and landscapes and repeatedly laments the destruction that human beings wreak upon the land. Here, too, Bekri represents ecology so as to emphasize its agency and autonomy while also capturing its suffering. In a clear response to Césaire and his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, his 'Carnet du départ du pays natal' alludes to environmental damage in the landscape of the poet's childhood, and also, like Laâbi's *Le soleil se meurt*, maps human social and political struggles onto the non-human world. Exile and a sense of disaffection towards his damaged homeland are expressed through environmental degradation: 'le printemps blessé tes enfants aux ailes / tristes ne regardent plus les étoiles / les amandiers / ne fleurissent que sur les tombes-cimetières-ruelles'.[28] Human and non-human suffering seem to be blurred here as the poet's native land languishes politically, culturally, and ecologically. At the same time, human oppression is countered with imagery of environmental resistance, as the elements remain more powerful than human forces. The poet affirms his embeddedness in the physical landscape and asserts its resilience in the face of human destruction: 'je me transforme en pétale et m'endorme / dans tes océans les bourreaux ne peuvent emprisonner / tes ailes plus fortes que la foudre / aux couleurs de ton défi'.[29] Addressing his country, Bekri emphasizes the power and persistence of the landscape against human mastery while figuring himself, the human poet, as a tiny feature of its ecology rather than as a sovereign subject shaping the landscape according to his human concerns. As with Laâbi, features of the landscape are evoked rather than specific localities, as the poet seeks less an anchoring in place than a connection with ecological life in diverse locales.

In this early volume, Bekri affirms a sense of communality with the human and non-human environment of his native land, and alludes to elemental forces that transcend human attempts at political and environmental mastery. Much more recently, in *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe* published in 2016, the violence unleashed by the Arab Spring in Tunisia is reflected in ecology and landscape, while the country's rich ecological diversity as well as elemental forces are depicted as a persistent presence that at once records and transcends the human conflict. In 'Souviens-toi hiver', the poet addresses the winter in remembering the inauguration of the revolution, and the landscape joins in the revolt whilst the people's dreams

28 Tahar Bekri, 'Carnet de départ du pays natal', in *Le laboureur du soleil* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991), p. 22.

29 Bekri, 'Carnet de départ du pays natal', p. 25.

of freedom are expressed through the movement of the wind carrying pollen: 'tant de collines portées en nous pour féconder ta flamme comme une cime recluse et généreuse / Ils tiraient sur nos rêves de vingt ans le vent bâti par nos souffles chargé de pollen nos cris confondus avec la saison'.[30] The people bring the land with them in their uprising, whilst the pollen they carry on their breath is suggestive of a fertility integrated with ecology that contests the political oppression that stultifies both humans and the environment. Bekri's long, expansive lines of verse emphasize connections between images, contrasting with Laâbi's more telegraphic style, though the poem's punctuation with the shorter insistence, 'souviens-toi hiver', laid out as a stanza on its own, adds a sense of reflective distance as well as of melancholy. The passion of the revolution at the same time brings with it the regeneration of the land: 'le cœur dans le torrent des oueds secs et charriant nos sueurs pour irriguer toute la terre'. Yet the refrain 'souviens-toi hiver' suggests that the season too was violated, whilst spring and regeneration are at the end anticipated with 'la promesse de bourgeons'. In 'Retour à Tunis', the poet addresses the mimosas as victims of human devastation and his return to the city is conjured through his sense of companionship with its plant life: 'et je marche sous la pluie d'avril / Le geste des acacias berçant mes pas dans tes rues / Ruelles impasses portefaix taxis en attente et fruits / Lent et pressé je pourchassais l'espérance'.[31] Here the acacias do not merely reflect the poet's sentiments in a pathetic fallacy but seem to communicate with him, actively participating in the memory and sharing the experience of oppression and rediscovery. Moreover, in 'Mûrier dans le printemps arabe', violence is expressed through the natural world running awry, as the dawn seems to represent both promise and bloodshed, and hopes for rebirth are quashed with imagery of the caterpillar devouring the butterfly: 'Dis mûrier / C'est d'aube écarlate que tu te nourris / Ou de chenilles dévorant tous ces papillons'.[32] The poetic 'je' is mentioned only once in this poem, as the poem captures the tree's experience of destruction rather than placing human experience at the centre.

If the opening poems of *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe* evoke the revolution from the perspective of trees, plants, and the elements, however, the later poems in the volume move away from the focus on Tunisia to sketch rich and diverse landscapes around the world, so that the Tunisian revolution is situated in relation to this larger ecosystem. The

30 Tahar Bekri, *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Al Manar, 2016), p. 9.
31 Bekri, *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe*, p. 11.
32 Bekri, *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe*, p. 17.

changes demanded by the revolutions of the Arab Spring are reflected in other settings where freedom has had to be fought for, and in each case the particularity of the local environment is evoked alongside references to the power of the elements and signs that the local also opens out onto the global. In 'Casablanca, Riadh Salam', for example, what announces itself as a eulogy to a specific location is in fact packed with imagery of the immersion of the poet in the larger, global landscape: 'Il regarda l'océan infini immense mouvant / Je ne suis ni mouette pour caresser les vagues / Ni barque pour aider la traversée des errants / Mais le grain de sable au large de tes écumes'.[33] The subject shifts from 'il' to 'je' here, and each line situates him in relation to other elements in the landscape, finishing by emphasizing his smallness in relation to the landscape and seascape he evokes. Several poems are also addresses to other poets, such as Nazim Hikmet, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Aimé Césaire, and in the latter in particular, fraternity between poets is associated with complicity with the non-human world: 'ma main ouverte comme une palme pour saluer les frères / Peut écrire la fierté du rocher gravé dans la mémoire'.[34] Here again, as in Laâbi's and Césaire's poetry too, the language of the poet communes with the language of the environment and attempts to listen to the elements so as to situate the poetic voice in relation to these vast natural forces. Similarly in 'Versets pour Haïti', references to Haitian history and ecology are mingled with 'le tourbillon des cyclones', and specific imagery of local trees is juxtaposed with that of cosmic forces. And again, the poetic subject is integrated, and in communion, with the Haitian landscape: 'je renais de la terre confuse / En dépit des tisons ensevelis / Mon amour est ton limon prodigue et raffermi'.[35]

Laâbi's and Bekri's poetry is in this way highly attentive to local ecology and to elemental forces, and both writers betray a fascination not just with a place of origin but also with the rich diversity of different locations across the world. Their writing testifies to an attentiveness to local detail at the same time as an awareness of planetary diversity, as well as a commitment both to place and to nomadism. It is in this sense that their poetry can be read as a eulogy to multiple forms of communality. They express an ethical attentiveness to human communities on both a micro and a macro level, in that they respect local specificity while continually seeking contact and dialogue with other cultures. And this ethics of respect is also directed towards the non-human environment through the poets' intimate dialogue

33 Bekri, *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe*, p. 38.
34 Bekri, *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe*, p. 41
35 Bekri, *Mûrier triste dans le printemps arabe*, p. 60.

with plants and trees particular to certain locations and through their awareness of the magnitude of elemental forces affecting the globe. In all cases, the poetic self is depicted as humble, rejecting the demiurgic stance found intermittently in the work of earlier postcolonial poets such as Césaire, where ecological forces are addressed and summoned. Rather, in Laâbi and Bekri the poetic 'je' is tentative, maintaining a dialogue with other cultures and ecologies but also self-effacing, as if the human subject is no longer a secure and sovereign position but rather a tentative voice given over to the cultures and ecologies in which he is immersed. The lyric 'je' is still intermittently present in these poems, but it is a relational, at times evanescent subject. These poets clearly contest poetic individualism and a lyric stance that assumes the subject retains the stable position of an observer of an environment from which he is detached. Even if at times the poet cannot help but infuse the non-human world with his anthropomorphic vision, the poetic 'je' is always in relation, listening, communicating, and effacing the self before other cultures and ecologies. With its extraordinary delicacy and self-awareness, Laâbi's and Bekri's 'ecocosmopolitan' poetry proposes a salutary communality that responds in important and far-reaching ways to human mastery and oppression as it acts both on cultural difference and on the delicate ecology of the planet. Using quiet and suggestive poetic language, they explore new ways of listening to, if never fully capturing, the autonomous expression of the non-human world and of relating the human and the non-human in ways sensitive to the diversity and vulnerability of both.